



### Reflections from a Seasoned Researcher



The day after yesterday, after another lifetime of research, the research is ending. It is a bittersweet moment, a little sad, but also a day of hope and new beginnings.



**"Research, at its core, is an act of love."**

Stephen Kangwa Chilobwa



### Let the Community Shape Your Question

As the researcher, it is important to let the community shape the research question. This is not just a matter of ethics, but also of practicality. The community has the most knowledge about their own needs and challenges.



**Key considerations:**

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### Ethics is Not a Form to Be Approved

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What they say	What they don't say
They are happy and satisfied with the research.	They are sad and dissatisfied with the research.
They are interested in the research.	They are not interested in the research.
They are willing to participate in the research.	They are not willing to participate in the research.
They are grateful for the research.	They are angry and resentful of the research.

**Ultimately, research is an act of love.**  
Love for any people true for me motivates me to carry.

### A FINAL STORY



This is the story of a woman who has lived a long and full life. She has seen many changes in the world around her. She has seen the good and the bad. She has seen the hope and the despair. She has seen the love and the hate. She has seen the beauty and the ugliness of the world. She has seen the meaning and the purpose of life. She has seen the truth and the lies. She has seen the light and the dark. She has seen the end of the world.

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Dedicated to the parents, teachers, community members, and especially the grandmothers who hug us who research truly means.



# Beyond Methodology: Field Lessons from Deafblind Research in Zambia

## ADVICE FOR ASPIRING AND CURRENT RESEARCHERS

Based on my experience completing this study on deafblind education in Zambia, I offer the following advice to researchers at various stages of their journey. This wisdom is earned through the challenges, unexpected discoveries, and humbling moments that field research inevitably brings.

### PART ONE: BEFORE YOU BEGIN

#### 1. Let the Community Shape Your Question

**My mistake:** I arrived with clear objectives already written. I thought I knew what the problem was.

**What I learned:** The first month should be spent listening, not asking. Sit under trees. Attend community gatherings. Let people tell you what matters to **them**. My original focus was on "enhancing partnerships" - a noble but abstract concept. Communities told me: "First, help us find our children. Then we can talk about partnerships."

**Advice:** Build in at least 4-6 weeks of unstructured community engagement before finalizing your research instruments. Your literature review tells you what academics think. Community engagement tells you what reality is.

#### 2. Ethics is Not a Form to be Approved

**My mistake:** I viewed ethical approval as a bureaucratic hurdle to clear.

**What I learned:** Ethics is a continuous, living practice. The form you submit to the committee is just the beginning. Real ethics happen when:

- A grandmother tells you her deepest shame, and you must decide how to hold that story
- A headperson asks "What will my people gain from this?" and you must answer honestly
- You photograph a child and must consider their dignity forever
- You leave a community and they ask "When will you come back?" and you don't know

**Advice:** Develop an "ethics journal" alongside your research journal. After each day, write down one ethical question that arose. Over time, patterns will emerge that teach you about yourself and your practice.

#### 3. Translation is Interpretation, Not Transcription

**My mistake:** I thought hiring translators would solve language barriers.

**What I learned:** Every translation is an interpretation. When a Tonga-speaking mother said "Mwana wangu wakyalwa bubi" (literally "my child was born badly"), my translator initially rendered this as "my child has a disability." But the mother's meaning carried moral weight - she felt blamed. The literal translation captured her experience better than the clinical one.

**Advice:**

- Train translators in research ethics and the **spirit** of your questions
- Have back-translation checks (someone translates back to original language independently)
- Include translators in debrief sessions - they often notice things you miss
- Budget for translation as a core research cost, not an afterthought

### PART TWO: DURING FIELDWORK

#### 4. Your Plan Will Fail. This is Normal.

**My mistake:** I created detailed timelines and felt anxious when they slipped.

**What I learned:** Research in real-world settings is unpredictability magnified. In my study:

- A chief called a funeral on the day of scheduled interviews (three days of mourning)
- A school closed unexpectedly due to teacher strikes
- Rains made rural roads impassable for two weeks
- A key participant's phone was stolen, losing our contact

None of this appears in methodology textbooks.

**Advice:** Build in 30-40% "buffer time" to your schedule. Have contingency plans for transportation (always have backup transport contacts). Keep a "fieldwork flexibility fund" in your budget. And most importantly: breathe. The research will happen, just not on your original timeline.

## 5. The Most Important Data is Often Unplanned

**My mistake:** I stuck rigidly to my interview guides.

**What I learned:** The richest data came from moments when I put the guide down. The community meeting that erupted into passionate debate. The grandmother who pulled me aside after the formal interview. The teacher who called me at 9pm because she couldn't sleep and needed to talk.

**Advice:** Create "planned spontaneity" in your methodology:

- After each formal interview, ask: "Is there anything else you'd like to tell me, off the record?"
- Build in unstructured observation time (just sitting, watching, being present)
- Keep a field notebook in your pocket at all times - you never know when insight will strike
- Follow unexpected threads - sometimes the detour is actually the path

## 6. Listen for What is Not Said

**My mistake:** I focused on transcribing words.

**What I learned:** Silence speaks volumes. When parents lowered their eyes. When teachers changed the subject. When communities fell quiet when certain families were mentioned. These silences told me about stigma, shame, and exclusion more powerfully than any words could.

**Advice:** In your field notes, record:

- Body language and posture
- Who speaks and who remains silent
- Topics that create discomfort or avoidance
- The atmosphere of the space (tense? relaxed? fearful?)
- Your own emotional responses (they are data too)

## 7. Protect Yourself, Not Just Participants

**My mistake:** I focused entirely on participant welfare and ignored my own.

**What I learned:** Research on trauma, disability, and poverty takes an emotional toll. I cried after visiting the grandmother keeping her grandchild in a dark hut. I had nightmares after the community meeting where a woman shared her dead child's story. I felt hopelessness creeping in.

**Advice:**

- Schedule "decompression time" after difficult interviews
- Have a debriefing person (supervisor, colleague, therapist) you can call
- Set boundaries: you cannot save everyone, and trying will break you
- Practice basic self-care: sleep, eat properly, take days off
- Recognize signs of secondary trauma in yourself (irritability, numbness, intrusive thoughts)

## PART THREE: ANALYSIS AND WRITING

### 8. Analysis Begins in the Field, Not After

**My mistake:** I separated data collection from analysis, planning to "do analysis" after fieldwork ended.

**What I learned:** The most insightful analysis happens while you're still in the field, when you can test emerging ideas with participants. When I tentatively suggested to a teacher that "maybe poverty is the real barrier, not culture," she responded: "Poverty and culture are the same thing here. We cannot afford to change our beliefs."

**Advice:**

- Write analytic memos weekly during fieldwork
- Share preliminary interpretations with participants and ask: "Does this ring true?"
- Let emerging themes shape subsequent data collection
- Keep a "themes notebook" alongside your field notes

### 9. Numbers and Stories Need Each Other

**My mistake:** I initially leaned toward qualitative methods, viewing statistics with suspicion.

**What I learned:** The quantitative data gave me credibility with policymakers. The qualitative data gave me depth with communities. Alone, each was incomplete. Together, they became powerful.

Numbers told me	Stories told me
83% of parents can't afford transport	The grandmother who walked 12km carrying her child
93% of teachers have no deafblind training	The teacher who cried describing her helplessness
68% believe in witchcraft causation	The headperson who changed his mind after a community meeting

**Advice:** Learn basic statistics even if you're a qualitative researcher. Learn narrative analysis even if you're a quant person. The most important problems sit at the intersection.

### 10. Your Participants are Co-Analysts

**My mistake:** I assumed I, the researcher, would make sense of the data alone.

**What I learned:** Participants understand their world better than I ever will. The grandmother who developed her own tactile communication system. The teacher who improvised materials from bottle caps and maize sacks. The headperson who explained cultural resistance in ways no textbook could.

**Advice:**

- Hold "member checking" sessions where you present findings and invite correction
- Include participants in interpretation, not just data provision
- Ask: "What do you think should be done?" - their solutions are often wiser than yours
- Consider participatory analysis workshops where community members analyze data alongside you

### 11. Write for Multiple Audiences

**My mistake:** I wrote my first draft for my supervisor and examiners.

**What I learned:** Your research must speak to at least three audiences:

- Academics (journal articles, conference papers) - theory, methods, contribution
- Policymakers (policy briefs, executive summaries) - clear recommendations, costs, evidence

- Communities (summary reports in local languages, radio programs, community meetings) - accessible, respectful, useful

**Advice:** Before writing a single word, ask: "Who needs to know this? What do they need to hear? How will they best receive it?" Then write each version separately. A policy brief that works for a District Education Officer will likely fail for a village headperson, and vice versa.

## 12. The Appendix is Not an Afterthought

**My mistake:** I treated appendices as a place to dump materials I couldn't fit in the main text.

**What I learned:** The appendices are where your research becomes \*usable\*. Other researchers need your instruments to replicate your study. Practitioners need your training modules to implement your findings. Communities need your translated materials to act on your recommendations.

**Advice:** Make your appendices as rigorous as your main text. Include:

- Complete datasets (anonymized)
- All instruments in original and translated forms
- Training materials if you developed any
- Policy briefs
- Ethical approval documentation
- Contact information for follow-up

Your appendices may ultimately be more read than your thesis.

## PART FOUR: AFTER THE RESEARCH

### 13. Dissemination is a Responsibility, Not an Option

**My mistake:** I thought my job ended with submission.

**What I learned:** Communities gave me their time, their stories, their pain. They did not give these so I could get a degree. They gave so that something might change. When I returned to the village where the woman had shared her dead child's story, and I showed her the policy brief that mentioned her experience, she wept. "Then she did not die for nothing," she said.

**Advice:** Build dissemination into your research plan from day one:

- Budget for community feedback meetings
- Plan for translation of summaries into local languages
- Schedule radio appearances, newspaper articles, community gatherings
- Stay in touch with key participants (with their permission)
- Follow up on policy briefs: call officials, request meetings, track responses

### 14. Prepare for Discomfort When You Return

**My mistake:** I expected to feel relief and accomplishment upon completing the research.

**What I learned:** Returning to "normal life" after immersion in poverty and suffering creates profound discomfort. Hot showers feel obscene when you remember families carrying water for kilometers. Your comfortable bed haunts you with memories of children sleeping on bare floors. This discomfort is not pathology - it is appropriate response to injustice.

**Advice:**

- Find community with other researchers who understand
- Channel discomfort into advocacy and action
- Recognize that your discomfort is a tiny fraction of what participants experience daily

- Let it fuel you, not paralyze you

## 15. You Will Never Be "Done"

**My mistake:** I imagined finishing the research and moving on.

**What I learned:** The research never truly ends. Participants call months later with updates. Policy windows open unexpectedly. New questions emerge from old answers. The grandmother who learned tactile signs? She is now training other grandmothers. Your research becomes part of a living process that continues without you.

**Advice:** Embrace incompleteness. Your study is a contribution, not a conclusion. Leave threads that others can pull. Document what you would do differently so others can learn. And when you must finally step away, do so knowing that the work continues through those you leave behind.

## FIVE FINAL PIECES OF WISDOM

### 1. On Power

You hold power as a researcher - power to frame questions, interpret responses, represent others, make recommendations. Use this power lightly. The most important voices in your research are not yours. Your job is to amplify, not to speak over.

### 2. On Humility

You will be wrong. Often. Your assumptions will shatter. Your carefully designed instruments will fail. Your interpretations will miss the mark. This is not failure. This is learning. The only true failure is the inability to say: "I was wrong. Teach me again."

### 3. On Time

Research takes the time it takes. Relationships cannot be rushed. Trust cannot be scheduled. Insight cannot be forced. Give yourself permission to let the work unfold. The academy's timelines are artificial. Human reality moves at its own pace.

### 4. On Contribution

Your research matters if it makes one person feel seen. If one policy shifts slightly. If one teacher tries a new approach. If one child receives one hour of attention they would not otherwise have received. Do not measure success in publications alone.

### 5. On Love

Ultimately, research is an act of love. Love for knowledge. Love for justice. Love for the people whose stories you carry. Do this work with love, and it will sustain you through the difficulties. Do it without love, and it will hollow you out.

## A FINAL STORY

In my study, I met a grandmother who cared for her deafblind grandchild alone. She was 67 years old. She had no income. She carried water from a borehole 2km away. She had never been to school. And she had developed, entirely on her own, a communication system of touches and pressures that allowed her grandchild to express hunger, thirst, fear, and love.

When I asked her how she learned this, she looked at me with pity, as if I had missed the most obvious thing in the world.

"I love her," she said. "When you love someone, you find a way."

That grandmother taught me more about research than any methodology textbook. She taught me that knowledge lives in unexpected places. That expertise is not confined to universities. That love is a research method.

Go into your research with your methodology, yes. But go also with your heart open. The grandmothers will teach you. The teachers struggling alone will teach you. The children hidden in dark huts will teach you.

Listen to them.

**Stephen Kangwa Chilobwa**

Livingstone, Zambia

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**This advice is dedicated to the parents, teachers, community members, and especially the grandmothers who taught me what research really means. May your wisdom guide those who follow.**