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REFLECT with children

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• Introduction

“Children are not a popular group with development workers. They do not provide ‘valid’ feedback in evaluations, and almost never bring credit to development organisations by speaking out in wider forums. We are often happy to wait until these children are grown up and see them enrol in empowering adult literacy classes, and engage in participatory development activities - with the aim of social change. Is there any reason to wait for social change?” (Frema Osei-Opare, personal communication, 1998).

On this basis, can REFLECT make a contribution in the area of children’s participation in development, (an interesting area explored in *PLA Notes*, Number 25, Special Issue on Children) and what is the difference between REFLECT with adults and children?

REFLECT with children starts with the assumption that most children from low-income households make significant economic and social contributions to their families; both girls and boys take responsibility for tasks in such areas as farming, herding, selling, looking after younger children, collecting fuel and cooking. From an early age many have life experience and skills to share with their peers and with interested adults, but often have no voice. In particular, in development planning their specific needs often go unrecognised. It is often assumed that they will benefit from interventions directed at more powerful members of the household, but this may not always be the case. For example, a credit scheme may be designed to help parents with school fees but in fact the money is may be

used to pay dowries for earlier marriages for their daughters. Thus, the objective of REFLECT with children is the greater empowerment of children: the starting point is their existing role in the socio-economic-cultural context in which they live (see Figure 1).

What is REFLECT with children?

As with adults, REFLECT with children is an education intervention based on discussion of relevant issues using participatory techniques. It provides a space where children can relate the new information and skills provided by their teacher (who has a different role to that of a facilitator for adults) with their own life experience. This is true whether REFLECT activities takes place in a formal primary school or a non formal education centre. Real learning can take place, but even more than with adults, must be integrated into, and recognised by, the formal system of children’s education in the countries concerned. If this is not done, there is a risk that children already marginalised by poverty, will be further excluded by their perceived lack of schooling. This poses certain challenges and it is important to analyse how the learning outcomes of REFLECT can fit into a standard curriculum. Some general examples are given in Box 1.

In addition to its complementarity with the formal system, there are other educational objectives for REFLECT. One of the main objectives is to provide a simple way for primary teachers to become more child-centred in their teaching methods and less authoritarian in style. In REFLECT, their role is as much to listen and give value to children’s contributions as to teach an agreed body of knowledge. There is consensus about

the desirability of child centred teaching in the world of teacher training colleges and this is often practised in more expensive schools, but is hard to find in the education available to the poor. PRA training for teachers is a major input but there is no need for the costly teaching aids or audio-visual equipment so

often thought to be necessary for quality teaching. It is also a methodology which children enjoy enormously, and this is itself a selling point for use by teachers - particularly when they have experienced this fun aspect for themselves.

BOX 1

NATIONAL CURRICULA AND REFLECT WITH CHILDREN

Skills-based approach

Many national curricula identify core skills rather than information that has to be rote-learnt and reproduced in exams, and REFLECT is particularly suited to developing skills in: self expression and articulating ideas (oral and listening skills); writing skills, especially independent writing based on a meaningful discussion rather than copying notes from the blackboard; problem-solving skills based on group analysis and actions decided upon with the teacher; mathematical skills which can be linked to the commercial activities of children; drawing skills, e.g. transferring three-dimensional graphics from ground to two-dimensional paper; and reading skills based on texts generated from the graphic and discussion and permanently displayed on the classroom wall.

Integrated approach

At primary level, many countries aim at an integrated approach to the subjects on the curriculum and REFLECT is one way to work on subjects such as geography, history, language and maths around the topic of a REFLECT unit. For example, a weather calendar could involve geography, history (as homework, children could ask older relatives about changes over the years and this local history could be presented as a timeline which in turn, could be compared with national history in the text book), reading, writing and mathematical skills (e.g. bar chart of rainfall).

Revision

In the same way as integrating subjects for more effective learning, there is room for REFLECT activities to be carried out after certain topics have been covered, in order to revise and reinforce what has been taught. For example, the teacher might have introduced kilometres as a way of measuring distance, but a mobility map would provide relevant examples from the children's lives to practise calculating kilometres walked or perhaps cycled over a period of time. Another example might be the twenty four hour clock, which is a notoriously difficult topic. The daily routine charts for girls and boys would enable children to match their usual way of telling the time with the twenty four hour system. A third example (used in Uganda) is to develop the food preference matrices for follow up work on a balanced diet with different categories of food, such as protein and carbohydrates being introduced.

Perhaps one of the contributions that REFLECT could make is turning some of the excellent standards set in curricula into reality in poorly-funded government primary schools. Currently, many of the standards described above may only be seen in private primary schools for the middle classes.

Alongside the educational objectives, are the empowerment objectives of REFLECT with children. Clearly the kind of activities associated with REFLECT develop children's confidence, awareness of their rights. For example, they can discuss such issues as drug abuse, sexual harassment, low or no wages, or teenage pregnancy. These skills can become part of the analytical equipment which pupils acquire, keep and use for life¹.

With REFLECT, children may have to lead a discussion in a large group of pupils but even the most shy child can participate by putting an object on the ground to represent something that is being discussed. This is good preparation for life as an adult but where does it lead in the lives of children at the time? Is it vital for children to be able to express their views to the managers of the school (or non-formal centre) or to their parents, or to the community? Or does their powerlessness in relation to adults make this a dangerous activity? Perhaps more acceptable activities are 'Action points', such as starting an income generating project for the school, which might be a more appropriate way forward. The programmes currently using the REFLECT approach with children have not yet addressed these empowerment issues systematically.

How has REFLECT with children been used so far?

Since 1996, REFLECT with children has been used in Uganda and Nepal. In Nepal, there are five ACCESS (non-formal education) centres who decided to switch to REFLECT by asking the teacher to use PRA alongside literacy. These teachers have knowledge of PRA because it is used extensively in the area. In the Uganda pilot, the main transfer of the methods from REFLECT was the use of syllable cards and flash cards (with picture and word for reading practice). In Nepal, however, these ACCESS teachers have been using the PRA graphics, such as Household Maps and Gender Workload Calendars with the children, whose ages range from six to fourteen years. Apart from being more participatory, and motivating the children to learn, the gender

workload calendar for girls' work and boys' work has provoked discussions at family level. This is particularly interesting because it fits with other programme initiatives on children's participation by ActionAid Nepal. Literacy and numeracy continue along conventional lines and are not linked to PRA, but despite this, the PRA method has caught the interest of two local headmasters, who have visited the centres.

In Uganda, REFLECT units have been integrated into the national non-formal curriculum, COPE (Complementary Opportunities in Primary Education), which is being piloted in Mubende District by ActionAid and the District Education authority. One hundred and twenty five non-Formal Education Centres have been set up in rural and urban areas and are attracting teenagers who do not feel comfortable taking advantage of the free universal education recently made available in the country.

The units have been designed as revision of subject teaching in Uganda, English, Mathematics, Science and Social Studies (see Box 1) and are included in the 'Instructors' Guide' under the following titles: People and Animals Map; Daily Routine Chart; Work Preference Matrix; Food Preference Matrix; Games Preference Ranking; Mobility Maps; Weather Calendar; Health Curative Matrix, and Health and Hygiene Map. These have been linked to subjects, and there are also units on causes of drug abuse and a calendar of celebrations. One outcome observed in Uganda has been that the role of the teacher has shifted as a result of facilitating PRA, reinforcing the use of the other child-centred techniques recommended in the instructors' guide and training. (e.g. peer teaching, group discussion etc.) Another interesting outcome has been that graphics are labelled in both English and Lugandan, giving a clear structure to bilingual teaching, which may be lacking where teaching is supposed to be in English but for practical purposes the teacher translates everything into the mother tongue.

¹ R. Chambers' Trip Report India, International Thematic PRA Training Workshop, Ranchi 12-22 April, 1998.

Figure 1. 'Listening to smaller voices' - children in a non formal education centre in Daloche, Ethiopia (Photo: D. Archer)



- **What is the future of REFLECT with children?**

At the time of publishing this article there is more theory than practice about this approach. And yet with governments all over the South concerned to provide basic education for all their children, there is a real need to find low-cost, low-tech alternatives to providing quality education. Field practitioners committed to Children's Participation are invited to contact us if they are interested in experimenting with the approach, and pooling and analysing the results on an international basis for general publication. This seems the best way of learning from the process of developing REFLECT for adults, and therefore, of overcoming some of the obstacles at an earlier stage. We need to address issues such as

concepts of childhood as perceived in different cultures, gender issues for girls and boys and child-focused indicators for monitoring and evaluation amongst others. Finally, we need to be clear about the nature and extent of our empowerment objectives in using REFLECT with children, steering a midway course between the welfare-oriented approaches often associated with children's education and culturally inappropriate children's rights lobbying. We also need a new name, emphasising the difference between adult and children's participation, and avoiding future confusion.

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