

Participation, Literacy and Empowerment

Reflections on REFLECT

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• Introduction

This edition of *PLA Notes* describes a series of initiatives by literacy practitioners around the world to make the ideals of participation, literacy and empowerment a reality at field level. All these practitioners have been basing their work on the REFLECT approach to literacy and social change; an approach that evolved out of three pilot programmes run from 1993 -1995, and that has today spread to over twenty five countries through ninety five different organisations. It also contains conceptual articles by writers who have been part of the learning process during this period.

This edition represents the shared learning from the problems and successes of the past two years, and is the first serious international compilation of articles on REFLECT. It could be described as a snapshot in the process of adapting and innovating the new approach; a constant process of renewal that recognises that participation at all levels, from local to international, is essential for social change, and central to the REFLECT process itself.

There is a rich tradition of adult literacy and empowerment that has developed inspired by the work of Brazilian educator Paulo Freire (see Phnuyal, this issue). It is hoped that the experiences described in this issue show how REFLECT builds upon the most positive aspects of this tradition. REFLECT also draws on best practice in the world of Participatory Learning and Action. REFLECT has built on the principles, tools and techniques developed by practitioners of Participatory Rural Appraisal. REFLECT generates an intra-community dynamic, removing the external facilitator, and handing over the direction of

the process to local people. As with the shift from RRA to PRA, REFLECT rejects any on-off, occasional or extractive processes. Rather, REFLECT involves using participatory approaches within an extended educational process, self-managed by the community. It involves widening our understanding of literacy, and reveals the intimate connections between literacy, power and powerlessness at all levels. REFLECT is no longer an approach rooted exclusively in local level action; increasingly it involves addressing the relationships between micro and macro power structures, emphasising the need for institutional as well as individual change.

The articles in this issue show the diversity of present REFLECT programmes, and the constant evolution of the approach. But how did REFLECT begin? Below is how we originally defined and introduced REFLECT, followed by a brief summary of the original pilot projects.

• The original definition of REFLECT

REFLECT is a radical new approach to adult literacy and empowerment, developed through field experimentation in Uganda, Bangladesh and El Salvador. The REFLECT approach seeks to build on the theoretical framework developed by the Brazilian Paulo Freire, but provides a practical methodology by drawing on Participatory Rural Appraisal techniques.

In a REFLECT programme there is no textbook - no literacy "primer" - no pre-printed materials other than a guide for the facilitators that is produced locally (preferably with the input of the facilitators themselves). Each

literacy circle develops its own learning materials through the construction of maps, matrices, calendars and diagrams that represent local reality, systematise the existing knowledge of learners and promote the detailed analysis of local issues.

These “graphics” (from the PRA basket of tools) might include maps of households; land use, or land tenancy; calendars of gender workloads, illnesses or income; matrices to analyse local crops, credit sources or ratings of local organisations. Each graphic is initially constructed on the ground using whatever materials are locally available (sticks, stones, beans etc.), and the discussion is facilitated by a local person selected as literacy facilitator.

Participants use simple pictures to label their map and help them transfer it from the ground to a large piece of paper - the first step to literacy. Words can then be introduced in places where their spatial location helps to reinforce recognition. As the REFLECT process progresses so the range of graphics helps produce a wider range of literacy and numeracy activities. A range of participatory approaches can be integrated into REFLECT, including the use of real materials, song, drama, poems, proverbs etc.. There is an emphasis on writing and the active construction of texts rather than passive reading.

By the end of the literacy course, each circle will have produced between twenty to thirty graphics representing a detailed analysis of their environment, and each participant will have these in their own exercise books together with the phrases they have written. The learners are thus able to produce a real document instead of copied scribbles. The graphics become a permanent record for communities, giving them a basis on which to plan their own development. As participants construct their own materials they take ownership of the issues that come up and often take local action, change their behaviour or their attitudes.

• **The pilot projects**

There were three action research pilots in Uganda, Bangladesh and El Salvador - supported by ActionAid and funded by the UK

Overseas Development Administration (now Department for International Development, DFID). In Budibugyo, Uganda, the pilot was in a multi-lingual area where neither of the two main local languages was previously written. In Bhola, Bangladesh, the pilot was with women’s savings and credit groups in a conservative Islamic area, and in Usulután, El Salvador, the pilot was with COMUS, a grass roots community-based organisation run by ex-guerrillas. All the pilots were evaluated against traditional literacy classes using “primers” (a special type of text book designed for teaching adult literacy). The results were published in the ODA (now DFID) Education Paper, Number 17 (1996).

This paper concluded that the REFLECT approach proved to be more effective than primer-based methods both at teaching people to read and write (60-70% of those enrolled learnt to read and write) and at linking literacy with empowerment. In respect of empowerment, the major outcomes were: self realisation - most participants spoke of an increased ability to solve problems as well as to articulate ideas; increased participation in community organisations e.g. 61% of learners in Usulután took up positions of responsibility; community level actions in agriculture (e.g. food stores), health (growing medicinal herbs), and management of natural resources (e.g. tree planting); changes in gender division of labour - in Bundibugyo, men took on some household chores to free women for more farm work; enrolling children in school and starting non formal education centres, and health awareness.

The review concluded that literacy in itself did not empower people but that the two processes of literacy and empowerment were mutually reinforcing, and that dramatic benefits in the pilots were the result of this. It was also concluded that the approach was reasonably simple to use and cost effective.

• **The REFLECT mother manual**

The best practice from these three pilot programmes was consolidated into a “REFLECT Mother Manual”, published by ActionAid in 1996. This was intended to be a guide for people in other countries and contexts who were interested in adapting the

approach. The idea behind the manual was that it would never be used directly - but would be the basis for organisations to adapt the approach and produce local “facilitators manuals”. These local manuals are usually written in a local language and consist of 20 or 30 “Units”. Each Unit consists of a participatory tool or technique specifically adapted to the local context and some guidelines on how to use the tool to generate discussion and introduce practical literacy and numeracy work.

In the production of the REFLECT Mother Manual, language was used very carefully. Although easy to use, terms such as “teacher” and “learner” or “class” were avoided as they bring with them a range of images and associations which contradict with the principles and practice of REFLECT. Instead, the terms “facilitator”, “participant” and “circle” are used - to emphasise the democratic nature of the REFLECT process.

We have continued this practice in this edition of *PLA Notes* and we hope that the effect is positive. Nevertheless, we are aware that any approach or movement generates its own jargon and wish to avoid this wherever possible. Developing jargon is often an unconscious way of using literacy to construct power and exclude people. To be consistent we have found it essential to reflect continually on our own practice, recognising the need for changes in our own attitudes, behaviour and action - both as individuals and organisations.

• **REFLECT: the next generation**

REFLECT is now a rapidly evolving approach as practitioners in so many different countries and organisations adapt it in new ways. It is therefore appropriate that the first article in this theme issue summarises the latest developments in the REFLECT approach and provides a new definition of REFLECT, together with core principles and characteristics (see Box 1 and Archer, this issue). These are the outcomes from the most recent international REFLECT seminar which brought together fifteen key practitioners from Africa, Asia and Latin America to critique the Mother Manual.

This is followed by an article by Bimal Phnuyl on the organic process of REFLECT, and another by Keshav Gautam explaining the fundamental problems with the Mother Manual and the local facilitators’ manual (a concern often expressed with regard to PRA manuals). Finally in this cluster, Sara Cottingham describes the delicate balance between innovation and distortion in the rapid spread of the approach, and how support strategies have changed over the last two years. Many of these issues and strategies will find resonance with PRA practitioners.

BOX 1

REFLECT - THE RENEWED DEFINITION

REFLECT is a structured participatory learning process which facilitates people’s critical analysis of their environment, placing empowerment at the heart of sustainable and equitable development. Through the creation of democratic spaces and the construction and interpretation of locally-generated texts, people build their own multi-dimensional analysis of local and global reality, challenging dominant development paradigms and redefining power relationships in both public and private spheres. Based on ongoing processes of reflection and action, people empower themselves to work for a more just and equitable society.

These articles are followed by specific case studies from India, Bangladesh, UK, and Nepal, which provide an insight into the diverse nature of the empowerment process in different countries (see Madhusudan, Kanyesigye, Nessa et al., Bhattarai et al., and Norris, this issue).

There is also a series of articles which explore key challenges in moving from a technical input to a more negotiated and inclusive approach to training literacy facilitators - by Maria Nandago from Uganda; Jillian Popkins from UK, and Rahman and Khan from Bangladesh. The importance of fora for trainers and facilitators to share experience is highlighted, and this theme is continued in the article on the resistance and structural changes necessary for REFLECT to be introduced in CIAZO in El Salvador (see Orellana et al., this issue).

The next cluster of articles explores some of the different contexts in which REFLECT has been used: in an urban area (see Jellema and Fiedrich, this issue), with children (see Cottingham, this issue), and the potential challenges and prospects for large scale programmes (Mogre and Adu Gyamfi, this issue).

Lastly, some key themes common to all participatory approaches to literacy and empowerment are explored: the challenge of integrating gender (Gomez and Metcalf, this issue); evolving conceptions of literacy (Archer, this issue); the challenge of adult numeracy (Foroni and Newman, this issue) and the way in which participants appropriate and use literacy (Jellema, this issue). Finally there is an end piece on the greatest contributor to participation, literacy and empowerment, Paulo Freire- who sadly passed away in May, 1997 (Phnuyal, this issue).

It has been a pleasure to prepare this edition of *PLA Notes* over the last few months, but we must ask ourselves whether we have managed to fulfil the aim of *PLA Notes* in creating a democratic space in which men and women from both North and South have an authentic voice. The *PLA Notes* series is a concrete example of the link between literacy and power which is at the root of REFLECT. A review of the authors shows that there are

fifteen male authors, twelve female authors, ten authors from the North, and seventeen authors from the South. We leave the analysis to you!

Finally, we welcome comments on any of the articles included in this edition, either directly to us or to the authors themselves. A list of contacts and resources is included. Anyone who wants more information should join the international REFLECT network or subscribe to Education Action (see the *In Touch* section).

Enjoy your reading!

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RESOURCES

The REFLECT MOTHER MANUAL is available in English, French, Spanish, Portuguese and Bengali from the International Education Unit of ActionAid, £12 each + postage/packing (address as above).

The ODA Action Research Report on the REFLECT Pilots Projects is available from DFID, 94 Victoria Street, London, SW1E 5JL, UK.