

## Introduction

*Pebbles in the Sand* is an English as a Second Language (ESL) Literacy programme that was initiated by the Calgary Immigrant Women's Association (CIWA) in July 1999. The President of CIWA's Board of Directors (1999-2000) brought the REFLECT Mother Manual<sup>1</sup> into the agency in order to examine the potential effect the REFLECT methodology could have on addressing the needs of multi-barriered learners. The REFLECT Mother Manual was developed by ActionAid UK in order to increase the literacy and empowerment skills of men and women facing disparity.

CIWA identified the need to find and implement a non-traditional programme to meet the unique needs of new Canadian immigrant women with only up to six years of education in their home countries. This population was identified as having multiple barriers in accessing mainstream programmes and services, which are offered to new Canadians in order to assist them with the integration process. Such barriers include a lack of literacy and ESL skills, having multiple children under the age of 10, family conflict, severe isolation, cross-cultural parenting issues, low economic status, lack of support systems etc. When you do not share the language of the host culture nor have a way of gaining those skills, these barriers become so prohibitive that mainstream service delivery is no longer an effective solution. Therefore development of an appropriate programme needs to reflect and support these issues.

## Adapting the REFLECT approach

After reviewing the REFLECT Mother Manual, a proposal was written to Alberta Learning (a funding source from the provincial government) to secure funding to run a pilot project which would test the adaptability of the REFLECT methodology in an ESL, urban Canadian environment. The participatory, community-based approach was embraced by the pilot facilitators and the adaptation process began. Two pilot classes were set up in two different communities. Classes were held in public libraries and 24 women participated in the pilot study. The information gathered from the study, was documented in the *Pebbles in the Sand Manual*—a manual that is being used internally in order to

train new facilitators, in conjunction with the REFLECT Mother Manual. Table 1 outlines a few of the basic issues identified by the Canadian facilitators

The ESL component of the programme was the biggest issue regarding adaptation of the REFLECT approach. We adopted the strategies and ideology behind REFLECT but the skills we were dealing with were completely different, since ESL literacy and first language literacy are two very different areas. Participants for *Pebbles in the Sand* came from various countries (Sudan, Iraq, Lebanon, Somalia, Eritrea, etc.). Their fluency in the language of facilitation (English) was often very low, and the skills and experience they possessed in regard to ESL varied greatly. Ethno-specific and culturally diverse classes were held in order to determine the effect of the first language in class. In mainstream ESL classes, English becomes the dominant language and the use of the first language is often prohibited. *Pebbles* attempted to find and identify the positive and negative aspects of using both the first language and English in class. Most ESL professionals believe that allowing the use of first language in class will slow down the process of acquisition, or result in a lack of fluency. In addition, no curriculum was set and participants were in charge of developing their own materials and having input as to the direction of the class, as is done in REFLECT literacy circles. Community development was a challenging aspect of the pilot study. As with every aspect of the classes, participants were approached in order to develop community-based change that would be led by participants. The stress of integration, being in an urban environment and having participants from many ethnic communities, were all 'bumps in the road' regarding the implementation of community development initiatives.

Participants were facing so many issues in terms of their daily needs that they contributed more ideas than action in the classes. Therefore, facilitators adopted an approach that would start a community development process from the very development and implementation of the classes themselves. In addition to extensive outreach with mainstream agencies, immigrant-serving agencies, cultural associations, women's groups etc., the community in which a particular class was held was asked to provide resources, support services for participants, referrals to the classes, youth programmes etc., to help participants attend the classes. By involving the community from the start,

<sup>1</sup> Archer, D. and Cottingham, S. (1996), *REFLECT Mother Manual—Regenerated Freirean Literacy through Empowering Community Techniques*. Actionaid, UK.

**Table 1 Outline of basic issues facing the Canadian facilitators**

REFLECT	Pebbles in the sand
Rural/Urban culturally homogeneous environment	Urban multi-cultural environment
First language literacy	Second language literacy
Native facilitators	Canadian facilitators
Homogenous culture	Homogenous/heterogenous classes to be mainstreamed into a Canadian, multi-ethnic environment
Community development related to participatory rural appraisal techniques	Community development related to having basic needs met/development in community of residence/connection to mainstream services
Internal evaluations	Evaluations from funders/community stakeholders/participants etc.
No language assessment	Canadian Language Benchmarks Literacy Assessment (CLBLA)
Community/village as literacy circle	Participants must be recruited
No travel for literacy circle/weather is expected (If you are a native to Calgary, for example, you expect, and are prepared for, temperatures of -30 in the winter. Weather is an issue that new immigrants from tropical climates often find isolating)	Issues of transport/weather
Strong support system in place (in terms of family members, community members, etc.)	Lack of support system/often severe isolation –(many immigrants come with no family and are often isolated from their communities. Immigrant women in particular are often isolated because they are lacking the language skills to link them to members of the community)

facilitators were better able to assist participants stabilise their lives, reach a point where they were ready to participate in their communities, and ultimately be mainstreamed into programmes aimed to assist with integration into Canadian society.

The pilot project lasted 9 months and was a huge success. The *Pebbles in the Sand Manual*, developed by the CIWA, documented the outcomes of the pilot project and is now used, in conjunction with the REFLECT Mother Manual, to train facilitators for the programme. The pilot programme was successfully funded to run as a programme for the 2000–2001 period with support from Alberta Learning, C-CALA, and PanCanadian. Thanks to this, many more immigrant women in many more communities will be able to access *Pebbles in the Sand* classes, which will assist them in solidifying their roles as leaders in their families and their communities.

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**References**  
Lopez, D. (2000), *Pebbles in the Sand Manual* – ESL Literacy for Immigrant Women. Calgary Immigrant Women’s Association, Canada.