

Reflect: Adult Literacy For Development's Sake

Debbie Fox

FROM royal circles to literacy circles, REFLECT is causing a global stir. Following this month's visit to a REFLECT circle in Tikkapara, Mohammadpur, Prince Charles is to invite ministers from twenty countries to London in July for a discussion of this empowering approach to adult literacy. A forum for REFLECT practitioners begins in Dhaka next week, at which experiences from implementing the programme in Africa, Asia and the Pacific will be shared.

Why the enthusiasm? What distinguishes REFLECT from other programmes which, over the last twenty five years, have brought Bangladesh's adult literacy rate to only 35% (Population Census, 1991)?

REFLECT has been developed by ACTIONAID in the last three years and piloted in Bangladesh, Uganda and El Salvador. Evaluations of the three pilots showed that a much higher percentage of REFLECT participants achieved basic literacy than those who learned by more traditional methods (ODA, 1996). REFLECT circles are now held in nine districts in Bangladesh and twenty one other countries. They use participatory methods to link literacy with development.

Up to twenty adults sit in a circle and create a graphic — a map, chart or calendar — on the ground from their local knowledge. They may use natural materials to represent components of the graphic. For example, stones may symbolise ponds on a map showing the natural resources of a village. (If already familiar with holding drawing materials, participants may use chalk straight away to draw simple pictures). They use the map to discuss ideas for activities to improve their daily lives, such as cleaning a contaminated water source. Participants copy the graphic on to a large sheet of paper on which the facilitator writes down key

words, perhaps for 'river' and 'tree.' These may be broken down into syllables then letters. Circle members then form new words from the syllables, which may be written on separate cards and recombined. With each progressive circle, more vocabulary is introduced. Participants learn to write simple phrases and sentences which they discuss, helping each other to learn. While a facilitator's manual gives guidelines for constructing thirty or so graphics, the products are thus tailored minutely to each circle's conditions.

"The visual element is crucial in REFLECT," says Habibur Rahman, UNESCO consultant for Bangladesh. "Cities are crammed with signs and posters. Even keeping simple accounts can involve tables and charts. Previous literacy programmes

"The participants all have specific goals in their learning. Maybe it's to write letters, maybe to read the labels on files so they can get a job as an office help."

For Najma Ara Khatun, REFLECT could help win a twenty year old court battle. As with most participants, she already belonged to an ACTIONAID savings group when she joined one of the Tikkapara circles last July.

"When my father died, he left me his house in his will. But some relatives produced a false will claiming it was sold to them. We've been fighting to keep our home ever since." Her husband gave up work as a car mechanic after suffering a heart attack, forcing her three daughters to drop out of school. "I desperately

she arrives at the Tajmahal Road community centre to sit with 17 or so women in a REFLECT circle for an hour. "My husband doesn't want to learn himself. But he's so proud of me. He reminds me every day not to miss my class. "I really love the circles and my teachers — they help me forget my problems."

In eight months REFLECT has transformed Najma's life. The challenge now is its expansion to empower millions of other illiterate experts in local knowledge. ACTIONAID is already working with ten NGO partners to implement REFLECT throughout the country and the Government's Department of Nonformal Education is interested in the programme. It could play a key role in achieving the Government goal of literating the population within ten years. Problems and setbacks are inevitable as REFLECT expands, but its winning card must be adaptability. From city slums to coastal fishing villages, it can help people channel their own experiences back into improving the community.

Past programmes have often diagnosed the 'disease' of illiteracy and prescribed the 'cure' using primers which may be of little relevance and therefore little interest to a community. REFLECT participants select their own medicine: what they need and why. Literacy is nothing more than an enabling tool to boosting self-reliance, problem-solving abilities and community responsibility. This in turn creates more uses for literacy in participants' lives. And, in Bangladesh, it provides an opportunity to draw on the vast development expertise of two thirds of the population.

★ REFLECT—Regenerated Freirian Literacy through Empowering Community Techniques—combines the theory of Paulo Freire and the practice of Participatory Rural Appraisal for adult literacy.

Past programmes have often diagnosed the 'disease' of illiteracy and prescribed the 'cure' using primers which may be of little relevance and therefore little interest to a community. REFLECT participants select their own medicine: what they need and why. Literacy is nothing more than an enabling tool to boosting self-reliance, problem-solving abilities and community responsibility. This in turn creates more uses for literacy in participants' lives. And, in Bangladesh, it provides an opportunity to draw on the vast development expertise of two thirds of the population.

have often taken spatial understanding for granted. In REFLECT, participants become familiar with working in two dimensions before they even see a pen."

Ownership is a huge motivator. "They create all the materials and shape their own learning. Because there are no lectures or textbooks, there's no danger of boredom from irrelevant materials. The graphics and phrases they learn are directly applicable because they're drawn and chosen from their own experience."

In Tikkapara and surrounding slums, Anjuman Ara Lipi has trained facilitators for five REFLECT circles over the last year in the wake of the Bangladesh pilot.

needed a job to support the family and fight the case. But who'd take on an illiterate housewife? I never went to school. I could only write my name because my daughter showed me how."

Najma proudly tells how six months after joining REFLECT she passed an interview and test in reading and writing to become the senior ayah at the daycare centre in Tikkapara. Everyday, from 7.30 a.m. to 2 p.m., she looks after the children of working women. The job involves keeping a record of the small daily fee paid by each family for their children's food and accommodation and writing shopping lists to buy their lunch, skills she has learned through REFLECT. At four thirty