ANALYSIS OF PARTICIPANTS' PERCEPTIONS OF REFLECT APPROACH IN THEIR LIVES AND WORK: THE CASE OF BOTSWANA

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Abstract

This manuscript documents the perceptions of teachers and learners towards the Regenerated Freirean Literacy Empowerment and Community Techniques (REFLECT) approach in the delivery of literacy in Ngamiland District, Botswana. It suggests that REFLECT changed the perceptions, lives, and work experiences of learners and teachers. REFLECT caused teachers to recognize learners' knowledge and experiences. It enabled teachers to experience professional growth and engage in democratic practices and encouraged learners to make personal and group choices and take action against certain undesirable practices, such as alcoholism and the sale of beer to minors. The study argues that, compared to REFLECT, the current national literacy program is centralized and has minimal impact on participants. However, as implemented in the pilot project, REFLECT also had limitations, such as failing to generate practical solutions, demanding too much time from participants, and using poorly qualified teachers. These challenges could be addressed and REFLECT should be adopted to train regular literacy teachers nation-wide.

The Government of Botswana has sponsored a traditional National Literacy Program for the past two decades. It is treated as part of the national effort to facilitate development and intended to enable individuals and communities to experience personal and collective growth (Maruatona, 2004). The Botswana National Literacy Program (BNLP), launched in 1981, is the largest state-sponsored literacy education provision since independence. It falls under the Department of Non-Formal Education in the Ministry of Education. This centralized control enables the state to aggressively mould and regulate people's actions, beliefs, ideas, and well-being and, hence, aids the state in asserting its hegemony or control over their lives (Bauman, 1998). In 1987, the program was evaluated, and this evaluation recommended that the literacy materials or primers be reinvigorated to make them more responsive to the needs of the learners (Gaborone, Mutanyatta, & Youngman, 1988). The primers, which are used as the primary sources of information in the program, were first developed in 1980 and have since not been substantially revised.

Ten years later Youngman (1997) indicated that the current BNLP subscribed to the dominant ideology, to the views of the ruling elite, which explains why the state continued to sponsor it without any substantive changes to the curriculum. He noted that the program needed to be decentralized and diversified in its decision-making in order to involve district and local staff and to create awareness about cultural diversity, gender, and need for social action.

Youngman (1997) also concluded that the program "as presently conceived and implemented has reached the limits of its effectiveness and needs to be re-conceptualized and revitalized" (p. 13). There were no changes in the planning of literacy education curriculum – in spite of the evidence that it failed to meet the needs of the learners – and learning materials ossified, due to lack of revision. The evaluation of the BNLP focused mostly on self-reported ability to read and write, which was supplemented by a limited set of competency-based tests. The limitation was that these did not show the use of reading and writing skills or measure the impact of literacy on the lives of the learners (Chilisa, Maruatona, Nenty, & Tsheko, 2005).

Available empirical studies point to several problems, such as materials being outdated and in need of review and reinvigoration, limited government funding, and the program's limited focus on individual development goals – such as reading and writing – rather than social transformation (Meissenhelder, 1992). Other studies found it to be ineffective because it failed to respond to the needs of minorities or to foster gender equity (Youngman, 1997). The way literacy education was conceived and implemented in Botswana enabled government to engage in planned development change, equating growth with efficiency. Literacy curriculum is carefully defined, by technocrats, in terms of what is to be taught; the methods and materials to be used are centrally developed (Weber, 1999). The goal of such a state-sponsored literacy program is to impart the state's attempt to facilitate "orderly" personal and national development. Literacy content is pre-packaged and provided to participants as a gift. It has a minimum focus on involving learners in the planning of the program. In spite of the above-mentioned challenges, government remained indifferent to experimenting with alternative delivery modes, such as the Regenerated Freirean Literacy Empowerment and Community Techniques (REFLECT) technique, which has been in existence for a decade. The purpose of this study, therefore, was to determine the perceptions of teachers and learners on the impact of REFLECT in their lives and work. The study was guided by the following research questions:
  (1) How did learners and teachers use skills from REFLECT in their lives and work?
  (2) How does REFLECT compare with the BNLP?
  (3) What are perceived strengths and constraints of the REFLECT approach?

The Theoretical Framework of REFLECT

The study used Freire's (1990) critical theory as its theoretical framework or basis to assess the perceptions of learners and teachers on the use of REFLECT to develop and use literacy education materials in Botswana. Freire's critical theory has its roots in Christian humanism and Marxist ideology. Critical theorists view literacy as intended to transform people's lives. Literacy facilitates critical reflection and problem-solving through dialogue between teachers and learners (Freire, 1990). One critical theorist, Foley (2005), challenges providers to recognize that learning occurs in many forms and, therefore, literacy education is shaped by political forces beyond the participant's immediate control. Literacy should help participants to critique *discourse maps* of society in order to transform or change it in very profound ways (Gee, 1996; Posner, 1998). Freire frames literacy as part of the process of raising human consciousness and not simply the gaining of technical skills of reading and writing. It is more than a psychological and mechanical acquisition of reading and writing skills (Freire, 1990). He views literacy as a tool to demonstrate that society is not fixed and unchangeable; but,

rather, it is structured and has institutions that need to be challenged and transformed through assisting the powerless to empower themselves.

Viewed within this perspective, literacy education is intended to facilitate critical reflection and problem-solving through encouraging dialogue between teachers and learners (Freire, 1990). REFLECT, just like critical theory, assumes that literacy education should empower learners. The theory views education as a joint process, between teachers and learners, to explore ways to facilitate consciousness-raising, transformation, and learner empowerment (Freire & Macedo, 1995). UNESCO (2002) concurs that literacy not only provides a basis for basic education, but also helps to create literate environments in societies, which makes it essential for the attainment of such goals as "eradicating poverty, reducing child mortality, curbing population growth, achieving gender equality…and democracy" (p. 2). Consequently, critical literacy depends on social practice in which knowledge is constructed, through the development of the power of thought, based on a systematic dialogue (Freire, 1990).

Critical theory also posits that different classes have varying and conflicting interests and the differences are reflected in political, cultural, and economic institutions. Hence, there is a constant contest that occurs between curriculum development and what actually occurs in literacy classes as learners work to transform their livelihoods and empower themselves (Freire, 1976, 1978). He notes that literacy is much more than just a psychological and mechanical experience of acquiring reading and writing skills. Learners should be involved in the planning, implementation, and monitoring of the program, if it is to empower them. From a critical theory perspective, literacy education should be people-centered and people-driven, in order for it to be sustainable (Okech, 2006). In agreeing with this view, Torres (2003) notes that effectively organised literacy impacts people in more profound ways, beyond economic improvements. It also facilitates the enhancement of human dignity, self-esteem, autonomy, and participation in decision-making and critical thinking-skills, beyond the improvement of their material conditions. She argues that measuring the impact of literacy on individuals, families, and communities should be extended beyond narrow economic frameworks.

The approach to literacy delivery is best conceived as part of social practices that are observable in the life events of learners and, therefore, framed by social institutions and power relations. Incorporating social practices would help learners to explore, critically, what they do with the acquired reading, writing, and numeracy skills (Hamilton & Hillier, 2005. Critical literacy is intended to challenge the hegemony of the dominant culture and assist the disadvantaged and minorities to articulate and act on their situation (Maruatona, 2006). The most interesting aspect of this approach is that it views education as a lifelong and dialectical process, where learners manage to make connections between their lives at home and in classroom activities. From this perspective, literacy is embedded in the cultural, social, and economic context in which it is offered (Hamilton & Hillier, 2005). This makes critical theory a crucial tool to in systematically assessing the perceptions of teachers and learners towards REFLECT in their lives and work.

The Evolution of REFLECT

International studies and reports on REFLECT show conflicting results on its impact as a literacy delivery tool intended to facilitate change, empowerment, and transformation of the learners. Some argue that it is empowering, while others feel there is a lack of evidence to substantiate the assertions about how it empowers learners (Archer, 2000; Archer & Newman, 2003; Fiedrich & Jalleme, 2003; Labuaschagne, 2001). For example, in Southern Africa, Labuaschagne (2001) concluded that REFLECT addresses issues of development, participation, and sustainability and, in the process, questions the dominant role of the state in literacy provision. She observed that REFLECT discourages the use of primers and uses tools to generate learner-centered materials to link literacy with power and development issues in order to help empower the learners. Fiedrich and Jallema (2003) did an extensive critique of REFLECT projects in Uganda and Bangladesh and concluded that the empowerment claims about REFLECT were largely exaggerated.

Between 1993-1995, Action Aid, an international development agency based in Britain, recognized the limit of using primers and other literacy materials and began to experiment on marrying the philosophy of Paulo Freire and the methodology and tools of Participatory Rural Appraisal (PRA), to work with learners and teachers to develop context-responsive literacy materials. REFLECT was formed as a result of perceived weaknesses of conventional approaches to literacy education. Fiedrich and Jalleme (2003) define REFLECT as an adult-education participatory methodology that aims to stimulate a wider process of change in individuals and communities. It mobilizes underprivileged communities, providing them with tools to design, implement, and monitor their own projects, and enables participants to analyze their own problems and find appropriate solutions (Blackburn & Holland, 1998). The tools, such as graphics, maps, sticks, and pebbles, generate a basis for discussion and analysis of issues by the learners, enabling participants to use their knowledge of the environment to develop a community action plan that spells out the tasks and the stakeholders who should carry them out. It functions through *literacy circles*, which are groups of learners using REFLECT methodology to identify issues in their communities.

REFLECT is now being used by 350 organizations in over 60 countries. It has, largely, attracted a dedicated following of adult educators, development workers, and community activists (Fiedrich & Jalleme, 2003). One of its assumptions is that, regardless of the circumstances, each person has the capacity to be a subject of his/her own history and the power to experience change. Labuaschagne (2001) indicated that literacy alone will not bring about empowerment; adult educators have to weave it into an empowering development-agenda, related to the realities of their participants. It integrates learning and life by tying what was learned to the learners' experiences, which permit its immediate application (Okech, 2006). REFLECT enables participants to critically assess their lives, take control of their future, enhance their literacy and numeracy skills, and transform themselves into lifelong-learners (Archer & Newman, 2003). Okech (2006) observes that an important fact about REFLECT is that it does not have textbooks or literacy primers, nor any prescribed materials other than a teacher's guide or manual developed by trainers, teachers, and the learners. It develops the learners' capacity to search, identify, and use information, building self-confidence that encourages them to participate in the social and political life of their communities.

An external evaluation of 13 REFLECT projects concluded that it enabled communities to engage in meaningful participation in decision making, challenged accepted gender roles, improve their health and hygiene practices, and increased their involvement in community development programs (Riddel, 2001). Archer and Newman (2003) suggest that it enables members of the community to communicate by whatever means is available to them. Participants ascertain their rights, challenge social structures, and, in some cases, change their individual positions in society, thereby helping the marginalized to develop voices. While all these sound plausible, what is lacking in the current REFLECT discussions is qualitative documentation of the experiences, views, and perceptions of teachers and learners, regarding the impact of REFLECT in their lives and work. This study fills this critical gap. Below is a brief discussion of the methods and procedures used in the collection process.

The Study

This section provides a brief discussion of the methods and procedures used to collect and analyse the data. It, therefore, provides an overview of the participatory action research method and describes the participants and the rationale for their inclusion. This section ends with a discussion of data collection and analysis procedure.

Methods and Procedures

Participatory action research was used to generate and analyze the data. According to Kemmis and McTaggart (2001), action research occurs when people want to think critically about where they are and how things might be changed in practice. The authors argue, "It transforms reality in order to investigate it… about the day to day lived reality of the participants in their ordinary work and lives" (p. 592). It engages educators in critical reflection of issues they find pressing and enables them to attempt to facilitate social action (Makhanya, 2003). The data gathering process entailed working with learners and teachers in Ngamiland to develop, teach, and establish the impact of curriculum content on both learners and teachers. The process started with teachers, field staff, and the researcher being trained on the REFLECT approach by two facilitators from South Africa for 10 days. After that, community meetings were held in different areas to determine broad social issues through discussion. The issues were narrowed through the process of prioritization to determine the primary issues that would form a basis for class discussions. Eight issues comprised the 8 units of the Teacher's Guide: high illiteracy rates, alcoholism, lack of community involvement in tourism, gender workload, poverty, health challenges, the roles of existing organizations in development, and income-expenditure patterns in the community.

REFLECT sessions were conducted in each of the areas in order to identify and include location-specific problems in their curriculum. The teachers and learners took part in both public and class discussions. The information generated using the REFLECT tools helped teachers to conduct classes in three different areas within Ngamiland District. As the researcher, I was actively involved in generating issues, facilitated teacher training, and conducted participant observations. According to Noffeke (1995), action research establishes connections between the research process and the desire to bring learner involvement into the learning process. This approach assumes that understanding reality is an emergent process, as opposed to the

conventional or scientific approach, which starts with a question, collects data, analyzes it, and draws conclusions.

The Participants

Based on the action research design, the participants for the study were selected as follows. The initial process of identifying participants began with the training of available literacy teachers and then working with them to identify community members and learners to work with us in identifying issues for discussion in the REFLECT cycles. Fourteen participants, including teachers, learners, and their supervisors, were interviewed to determine what they perceive was the impact of the REFLECT approach on their lives. To protect their confidentiality, the names used here are not their real names.

The participants included two female literacy supervisors, Dede and Tshepho, aged 40 and 30 respectively. They were interviewed because they were trained in the REFLECT method and oversaw literacy teachers in both the regular literacy program and the REFLECT project. They kept records of the teachers' challenges and progress over the duration of the study. Additionally, six literacy teachers were trained in the REFLECT method: one male, Jerry, and five females, Kagiso, Sarah, Gaone, Fingi and Dorcas, whose ages were between 19 and 35. These teachers taught alternately in both the regular literacy program and REFLECT project. They were later interviewed to share their perceptions of the impact of REFLECT on their work and lives.

Finally, 6 learners out of the 35 individuals who participated in the REFLECT classes were interviewed. Each teacher had an average of 10 learners per class. The selection criteria for learners was for each to have attended all of the 20 sessions organised for each group between November, 2003, to March, 2004. The six learners interviewed were randomly selected from the teachers' daily register and who were regularly there when I visited the projects. They consisted of four female and two male learners, Sabone, Jane, Nkane, Tom, Lorato, and Kago, and were between 34 and 74 years old.

It should be noted that the 6 learners who were interviewed generated data that could not be generalised to all 35 learners. However, I also conducted group interviews with other learners, which helped both to generate additional data and to authenticate the assertions of the six learners in the study. The combination of data from the individual and group interviews, and my field notes and observations, gave me the assurance that the themes, discussed below, were authentic. According to Merriam and Associates (2002), all these categories were presumed to have sufficient experience to discuss the impact or lack thereof of the REFLECT approach in their lives and work.

Data Collection and Analysis

Data were collected through semi-structured interviews schedules, participant observations, and document analyses. The semi-structured interviews of the learners and teachers, with 16 open-ended questions, centred on establishing the participants' perceptions of the impact of REFLECT in their lives and work. The conversations of the learners were

conducted at their home to ensure that they did not feel intimidated by the presence of the teachers or other learners. The interviews lasted an average of 45 minutes for the learners, to 1 hour and 30 minutes for teachers and their supervisors. The conversations were in Setswana (the national language). After transcribing the tapes, the transcriptions were given to teachers and supervisor to read, before I translated them to English. I used the member-check technique to ensure validity. I gave initial draft of the analysis and interpretation to teachers and their supervisors, to get their feedback, before I wrote the final report (Gall, Gall, & Borg, 1999). I also held discussions with some of the participants after transcribing and completing a preliminary analysis, which enabled me to remove or correct some comments. Participants added some points and modified others. I enhanced validity by triangulation, through conducting group discussions with learners not selected for in-depth interviews sharing emerging themes with them and soliciting their comments and suggestions. The group interviews increased the number of information sources. In addition to the individual and group interviews, I also examined selected documents, such as teachers' preparation books, students' exercise books, and the teachers' and the supervisors' records of class attendance. These were considered valuable because they represented a trail of participants' activities and, therefore, supplemented gaps in their verbal submissions.

I ascertained reliability through conducting an audit trail through a detailed description of how the data were collected, categories derived, and decisions on data interpretation made (Merriam, 1998). In order to create the trail, I kept a field-note book, recording my reflections on each of the interviews, including detailed descriptions of the settings and events that could influence participants, such as a death in the village or in the family. Teachers were asked a number of questions, such as what they viewed as the impact of REFLECT in their work and how it influenced their interactions with learners in classrooms. The interview schedule was designed to address critical content issues and the teaching process. I conducted numerous observations of class sessions. Finally, I conducted intense exit interviews with supervisors, teachers, and their learners. Two major limitations should be noted. First, as I was committed to teaching at the university, I could not have frequent classes for observations as much as I would have liked to have done. Second, I could not find qualified teachers with at least 12 years of schooling; I had to work with teachers who had only Standard Seven and 10 years of school experience.

I conducted verbatim transcriptions of the 14 tape-recorded interviews. After transcribing the tapes and translating them to English, I read and re-read them, to immerse myself in the data and understand the phenomena from the participants' worldview or emic perspective (Merriam & Associates, 2002). The data analysis process was based on reading transcripts of interviews and observation notes of both the researcher and supervisors. Data analysis was somewhat iterative, in that it resumed as soon as some data emerged, even during the training of facilitators. The analysis included my tracking the connection between the lives and work activities of learners and teachers to help me understand their perceptions and insights about REFLECT. After reading the transcripts several times, the data were coded and categorized according to the research questions and the common issues raised by participants. In order to code as accurately as possible, I read the transcripts and other archival sources to generate codes, which enabled me to compare the data from supervisors, teachers, and learners, and based on key questions. It also helped to generate categories and comparisons of incidents with categories, which depicted

similarities and differences among incidents. Categories determined emergent structures in relation to other categories, leading to the generation of matrices (Miles & Huberman, 1994).

Categorization enabled me to establish those themes consistently expressed by different participants. The data were checked and verified against my observation notes. The focus was on their views regarding the perceived value of REFLECT in their lives and work, with the process involving interpretation and constant construction of codes and categories to generate data-based themes (Hamilton & Hillier, 2005. In addition, I looked at how REFLECT responded to the contexts of the learners, in terms of what they perceived as its methodological strengths and constraints. In the process, the data were allowed to sustain certain issues as they were mentioned by all interviewees, regardless of their social or professional position. For example, the learners constantly mentioned that teachers experienced professional growth, participants learned to make decisions and executed them without recourse to higher authority, and REFLECT raised issues but was not very versatile in providing solutions. These, then, became the themes of the study and I assembled them to allow data to tell the story or to speak for itself (Merriam, 1998). Therefore, the coding, categorizing, and thematization enabled me to explain the participants' perceptions of the impact of REFLECT on their lives and work. It also enabled me to compare REFLECT to the current literacy program and establish the benefits and constraints of the REFLECT approach. Based on these processes, the following findings were generated.

Findings

The study found that REFLECT changed the participants' perceptions towards the teaching and learning of literacy education in Botswana. For example, it enabled teachers to experience professional growth and view their learners as knowledgeable as opposed to ignorant. Teachers engaged learners in democratic discussions; REFLECT encouraged teachers and learners to make bold choices and take action in their communities. Teachers and learners observed that the implementation of REFLECT presented several challenges. With only six learners interviewed, their data can not be generalised to all 35 learners, even though it was substantiated through the group interviews conducted. The combination of group-discussion data and those of the extended interviews with learners and the teachers authenticated these findings. I concentrated on generating in-depth descriptions of how REFLECT impacted on their lives as learners and teachers. In order to ensure that the findings could be applied beyond the context, I provided rich, thick descriptions to enhance user-generalizability of the findings (Geertz, 1988). Generalizability depends on the potential user's understanding of the described situation to determine how they can use the findings in their context. The extended application of findings in other contexts is guided by the preponderance of evidence provided (Kvale, 1996). According to Merriam and Associates (2002), the intention of qualitative research is not to generalise the findings but to describe them sufficiently to inform potential users on how best to use them in their situation. Below is the presentation of the findings based on the four themes that emerged from the data analysis. As much as possible, the themes were presented according to the language used by the participants.

Teachers Experienced Professional Growth

For the first time, literacy teachers experienced professional growth because REFLECT required them to prepare for their lessons and not use primers. Dorcas, a female teacher who was soft-spoken but very witty, observed, "The lesson plan helped me to better understand what I intended to do with the group." Also, REFLECT changed their work ethic, as one female teacher commented, "I would say it would be almost impossible for me now to go and face the group if I have not prepared a lesson plan." More importantly, it changed the teachers' views about their learners. Teachers began to appreciate that, though illiterate, learners were not ignorant and could engage in fruitful discussions. REFLECT, therefore, made teachers realize that learners are knowledgeable and need to be helped to share their knowledge and experiences. As Jerry, the male teacher (who was the most educated, and led the group in most activities), puts it, "One of the greatest things I learnt from REFLECT is that inability to read or write. . . does not mean that learners do not know anything; illiteracy is not the same as ignorance."

In addition, REFLECT convinced supervisors that teachers are capable of making independent decisions. Dede, a very outspoken female supervisor indicated, "The ideas of making a bakery, approaching different departments, inviting health educators from the Total Community Mobilization without my approval, convinced me that these teachers experienced considerable growth as professionals." Teachers independently planned and delivered basic literacy and income-generating projects, which attest to their professional growth. It also caused teachers to rethink their approach to their work as literacy teachers. Some transferred their newly acquired skills to the national literacy program. Sarah, a thoughtful female teacher from the remotest village, explained, "I find myself trying hard to apply some of the techniques and skills I acquired here when I teach my regular literacy classes." It could be argued that the transference of skills by the teachers bears testimony to the positive impact of REFLECT on their work. It also enabled teachers and learners to engage in democratic discussions.

Learning Encouraged Democratic Participation

It was revealed that using the REFLECT approach helped teachers to conduct class sessions democratically. It enabled teachers and learners to share their views on a variety of social issues, such as improved health practices, which empowered learners to participate effectively as co-discoverers of knowledge in the learning cycles. Kago, a middle aged female learner, who spoke very slowly, noted, "Look, in REFLECT, the teacher made sure that we used our brains and drew from our experiences. REFLECT was about things that are important to my life." The extent of democracy was confirmed by Tshepho, the slim and ever smiling supervisor, who noted, "Teachers coached the learners well enough that, at the end, they moderated their own discussions and controlled those who dominated others in discussions." In a sense, learners took responsibility for their learning. Also, it was observed that REFLECT gave learners a unique chance to demonstrate their knowledge about issues affecting them. A female teacher named Gaone, who was a skilful bread maker, explained, "In REFLECT, I expected to learn from the learners and teach them whatever I can; we learnt from one another. In the past, I never expected them to talk about issues with such clarity and depth." REFLECT provided learners with a platform to address issues which affect them. An elderly male learner, called Tom, who lived alone, observed, "We were all given a chance to voice our views on each issue that was

discussed." REFLECT encouraged learners to talk freely and to do something about their situations. It could be argued that REFLECT was effective because it allowed learners to work with their teachers cooperatively. As Kago put it, "Reflect makes learning easier, in that it derived examples from the experiences of the learners. It also used pictures, to help illiterate ones to tell what is happening." Using REFLECT methodology, therefore, facilitated democratic practice and the building of consensus among participants. As Jerry indicated, "We collectively discussed and agreed on issues before we wrote them down as our resolutions."

REFLECT was democratic because it accorded learners the opportunity to share their social expertise and experiences on certain topics. Learners were, at times, asked to lead discussions on topics in which they had expertise. They took turns leading discussions on familiar social problems, such as the causes and effects of alcoholism. A learner named Sabone, who was always drunk, indicated, "In this class, we participated more since we were the ones who brought materials which we used for our discussions." Fingi, a slender female teacher with dark hair, elaborated, "Each person was given a chance to speak or contribute an idea, which helped to enrich our class discussions." As a result, teaching, in these classes, was not a one-dimensional relationship but involved all stakeholders. Learning became a democratic process that involved all the learners, regardless of whether they were literate or not, which enabled teachers to tap into their learners' previously unknown experiences and talents.

Learning to Make Choices

There was a consensus among all participants that REFLECT gave participants an opportunity to make choices. For example, in each context it accorded them the chance to select and engage in income-generating activities of their choice. A teacher called Sarah observed, "My group and I decided that we were going to start a bread making project because people in our location needed it." It should be noted that, in the regular BNLP program, they could only start a project with the approval of the supervisors. Dede concurred, "Some classes independently developed income-generating projects…Learners in our regular program are now pressurizing their teachers to also start projects." Teachers acknowledged that, under REFLECT, literacy addressed problems in their communities. Jane, a 74 year old and very intelligent female learner said, "I leant about the effects of alcoholism on us … I decided that I will not drink too much beer from now. I also decided to stop smoking."

Other than for personal choice, it also encouraged the learners to make collective choices as members of their communities. Tshepho noted, "Learners value how REFLECT addressed issues in their social circumstances such as participating in community activities as members of VDC [Village Development Committee]." Kago agreed, "We would say REFLECT talked about things that are happening in our daily lives, such as HIV/AIDS infections among the youth and people of our age." It therefore exposed them to useful health information and suggested solutions. Tom observed, "It talked about diseases and other social activities such as keeping our environment clean … we discussed how to prevent diseases such as malaria." These statements suggest that participants made life choices and took actions, such as the woman who decided to quit smoking, because of REFLECT.

Learners Took Action in Their Communities

Participants agreed that REFLECT enabled them to discuss social issues and take action about them. In one case, learners blamed alcoholism for destroying families and asked their local representative on the Village Development Committee (VDC) to ask the committee to reduce business hours for the sale of local brews. They also questioned the sale of beer or alcoholic beverages to minors. The fact that they raised these issues in the first place suggests that they were now willing to play a more active role in the community. Jerry indicated, "In REFLECT, learners participated in addressing community challenges and suggested some solutions." Gaone added, "We discussed diseases because people here face a lot of health problems, but, most importantly, we planned to take action to reduce their incidences." Dorcas concurred, "When we talked about HIV/AIDS, they mentioned that there was a home-based care patient nearby and decided that they would help his parents, now that they know what to do." Participants, therefore, transferred the acquired skills to other life activities, such as getting involved with home-based care, which they were not part of before. It could be argued that REFLECT spurred them to take action in their community. This did not only result in learners taking action against social problems: They also resisted carrying out what they perceived to be unfair exercising of authority by the teacher. For example, some learners refused to bring learning materials because they felt it was the teachers responsibility. As Nkane, a hefty built woman, who always complained about the class taking too long, put it, "We expect her to bring materials to class; that is part of her work, not ours." Gaone, a teacher, complained, "They said that they came to class to learn, and cannot be expected to bring materials for me." These are indications that learners have begun to take action against some issues in their classes and communities. Participants were also asked to compare REFLECT to the regular literacy program because they attended both of them.

REFLECT Versus the National Literacy Program

The project was predicated on BNLP, the regular Government sponsored program, which has been in operation since 1980. Learners were, therefore, asked to compare and contrast the two approaches, after 8 months of exposure to the REFLECT approach. Learners and facilitators agreed that both approaches had a primary focus on the provision of reading and writing skills. They generally acknowledged that BNLP strongly helped them with basic skills of reading, writing, and numeracy. However, there was a consensus that the two programs differed in two significant ways.

BNLP Failed to Address Relevant Issues

According to participants, the differences between the two programs stemmed from their conflicting views about the purposes, approaches, and the intended outcomes of literacy education. Firstly, the Government sponsored program did not address issues that were immediately relevant to their lives; it hardly addressed national calamities such as HIV/AIDS or alcoholism and poverty. REFLECT, on the contrary, addressed those issues and went some way to enhance their ability to communicate ideas and, in some cases, take action to resolve the challenges. Fingi explained, "I guess REFLECT helped the learners to understand the importance of learning about various diseases in their lives and those of their relatives who are now infected.

In non-formal education, we did not talk about these issues." A very jovial female learner named Lorato, added, "REFLECT provided us with information on various social issues such as alcoholism and diseases, which we never discussed in the other program." REFLECT, therefore, enabled participants to share ideas on possible development issues and tried to relate class discussions to broader community issues. The two systems of literacy development also differed in terms of the process and content of teacher training and the teaching process.

Flexible Versus Rigid Methodologies

In the BNLP, the process of training involved learning rigidly-defined methodologies, as prescribed by the Department of Non-Formal Education supervisors. REFLECT, on the other hand, relied largely on the use of participatory tools, which were used, by learners, to identify issues. In the REFLECT approach, as Jerry reflected, "In the [REFLECT] training, we were exposed to a set of participatory tools, which we later used to discuss issues, mostly drawn from the community – unlike in the other program, where learners depended on us as teachers to tell them everything." In a sense, REFLECT used participatory tools to focus the attention of teachers and learners on problems in their communities. There was also a marked difference in the focus of the training; in the BNLP teaching was prescriptive and did not accommodate the diverse needs of the learners. Sarah noted, "In the BNLP I learned one method of teaching, in spite of the fact that we taught different groups at the same time." The other difference is that, in BNLP, teachers did not have a variety of strategies or tools to choose from in order to make teaching interactive and, hopefully, tap into learners' experiences. The REFLECT approach used tools to discuss problems affecting their communities – such as the causes and effects of alcoholism – and this did not materialize in the regular BNLP classes. Another finding is that REFLECT enabled teachers to gain access to the services of local experts in health and community services, who were invited to share their expertise with the group on a given topic, as resources persons.

Challenges of the REFLECT Approach

Participants were also asked to identify problems that they associated with the practice of REFLECT. It was found that, contrary to popular perceptions, REFLECT presented several challenges in relation to both teaching and learning. Available literature has seldom presented the pedagogical challenges of this approach. Some of the identified challenges included addressing practical problems, providing practical gains, discussing potentially sensitive issues, demanding too much time, and recruiting teachers without adequate preparation.

Addressing Problems

Participants agreed that one of the major constraints of REFLECT was that it encouraged people to engage in critical analysis of their situation, but offered very little in terms of practical suggestions for resolving them. Participants observed that it lacked clear guidelines on how to implement some of the decisions emanating from learning cycles. It was found to be strong on rhetoric and short on action. For example, they observed that, although they got some help to start some income generating projects, REFLECT coordinators/the researcher largely failed to provide resources in time to start and implement the projects identified. It left learners without sufficient confidence to establish sustainable projects. As an outspoken female learner, Kagiso,

candidly observed, "While people liked REFLECT, they felt that it only dealt with problems but did little in terms of suggesting clear solutions to resolve problems discussed." Unlike the regular literacy program, learners in REFLECT felt that they did not depend on the teacher to provide the knowledge they needed. Participants also felt that REFLECT was too demanding for them in terms of time spent collecting learning materials without any immediate rewards.

Providing Practical Gains

The participants observed that, because of its lack of practical gains, they would rather have engaged in other daily activities such as farming. It did not provide them with many prospects to better their lives. Sabone, a shy female learner from the remotest village, summarized these concerns, "The problem is that, while we recognize the importance of learning, we can not depend on it alone. We just have to farm; we do not take literacy very seriously because on its own, it cannot create employment for us." This observation points to what participants viewed as the disparity between rhetoric about the prospects for improved life through REFLECT and the reality of poverty and lack of basic means to realise the ideals discussed in REFLECT learning cycles.

Discussing Sensitive Issues

Some of the learners felt that during REFLECT they were made to openly discuss sensitive issues such as sex. Traditionally, sex issues are not talked about in public, especially among younger members of the group. Dorcas surmised, "Some of my learners felt that some topics were vulgar, and they could not use some words in the presence of younger learners in the group . . .They observed that, culturally, sex is a private subject and would not want to talk publicly about it." In the long run, the teachers could not find appropriate words to avoid sounding vulgar. In spite of that, some learners advised traditionalists that the discussion was not profane. They argued that, nowadays, there is no secret because even priests at churches are encouraged to talk about practicing safe sex to minimize HIV infections. Nkane said, "We cannot say certain topics – like being taught about condoms and other preventative measures – are vulgar. We should rather openly question why certain people still engage in unprotected sex, while HIV is on the loose. These are not insults, but facts of life." The basic argument she raised was that, as learners, they should listen to advice on issues of sexual behaviour and need to change their sexual behaviour in order to survive the HIV/AIDS scourge. In addition, they were taught to act with caution if one is HIV infected. As Nkane put it, "The class taught us to live with your HIV so that you do not infect others." These differences signify changes in the perspectives of REFLECT learners towards discussion of sex and sexuality in Botswana.

Demanding Too Much Time

Closely related to the above challenges, participants felt that REFLECT demanded too much of their time. Some members felt that, compared to the other program, REFLECT demanded too much time because its sessions lasted for about two hours and took up time they needed for other social activities. Supervisors and teachers agreed that preparation for REFLECT needed a lot more of the teachers' time compared to the primer-based literacy program. It required them to read and visit extension offices to collect materials or invite officers as

facilitators. Tshepho reflected, "This demanded a lot of time, some of which was not paid for in this arrangement, we only account for their teaching time, not organizing." The process took too much time because, unlike the conventional literacy program, REFLECT did not provide ready-made materials. Gaone added, "As a REFLECT teacher, I was forced to prepare in advance before going to class. I had to ask for materials from resource persons and institutions . . . it demanded more time." The teachers saw their teaching as going beyond their regularly scheduled teaching hours. Jerry observed, "REFLECT hours are not factored into their remunerations." Teachers felt it was too demanding of their time.

Recruiting Teachers with Inadequate Preparation

Another frequently mentioned problem was that teachers did not have the requisite qualifications – which should have been 12 years of schooling – to handle *REFLECT* tools effectively and to engage in fruitful discussion of issues. Most teachers, though very dedicated, had very low qualifications, ranging from Standard Seven to 10 years of schooling or Junior Certificate. This level of education was perceived to be inadequate for articulating abstract issues. Sarah noted, "REFLECT needs someone who can speak English fairly well to cope with its training and teaching. I honestly do not think it's good for just Standard Seven holders, as some of our teachers are . . . . It requires that we should understand key concepts in order to adapt them to our context." The problem of low education also manifested itself in the choice of topics from the Teachers' Guide. Teachers chose less complex topics and avoided those that required a higher level of abstract thinking and reading, such as gender issues and poverty. On being asked why they did not discuss such issues, Dede observed, "I guess they probably did not understand these topics." It could be that teachers lacked both the confidence and ability to discuss such complex topics. It could then be argued that some of them lacked in-depth understanding of issues, partly because of their low level of education.

Discussion

The findings indicated that REFLECT had profound impact on the lives and work of teachers and the learners. Exposure to REFLECT techniques enabled them to make independent decisions. First, it demanded teachers to do session preparation for their literacy classes, as opposed to being dependent on primers. Creating session plans, before starting to teach, was not part of their regular work as teachers of the BNLP. It exposed teachers to the use of a series of techniques or tools, such as trees, calendars, matrixes, maps, and Venn diagrams, which teachers used to help learners to demonstrate their knowledge and share their life experiences during class. The curriculum was largely based on the contexts of the learners that enabled them to reveal their abilities as they contributed to decision-making in class. REFLECT allowed teachers and learners to discuss needs they identified during their discussions cooperatively. It enhanced their skills in resolving social responsibilities.

The acquisition of these new skills suggests that REFLECT was empowering to the learners because it went beyond just focussing on basic reading, writing, and numeracy skills. Learners began to engage confidently in discussion of issues affecting them and their communities. As Freire (1972/1990), observed, literacy should assist the powerless to empower themselves. Teaching using REFLECT techniques demonstrated that learners are resourceful and

knowledgeable people; they are not ignorant and have enormous oral knowledge and skills that are often not reflected in regular primer-based literacy programs (Archer, 2000; Maruatona, 2004; Riddel, 2001). Consequently, REFLECT triggered the world-view of the teachers. For example, it changed their attitudes towards their learners. Some teachers openly acknowledged the capabilities of their learners for the first time. The major implication for literacy practitioners is that teachers trained in REFLECT would begin to value the experience and the knowledge-systems of their learners, regardless of how different it is from their own knowledge.

The learners also changed their attitudes towards such anti-social practices as excessive drinking, selling of liquor to minors, and living in unclean environments, because of their discussions in class. Literacy learners experienced what Mezirow and Associates (2000) referred to as perspective transformation because, for the first time, they began to discuss subjects such as sex and sexuality in class openly. Sex and sexuality are traditionally considered private and not to be discussed in public. They discussed what they could do to help halt the spread of HIV/AIDS infections and help home-based-care patients in their communities. These were far-reaching changes in their lives. It could be argued that REFLECT not only enabled learners to participate in class but also to relate what they learned to their civic responsibilities (Apple, 1999; Gillette, 1999). As Archer and Newman (2003) noted, it enabled learners to reflect on their lives and take control of their futures and enhanced their literacy and numeracy skills. To this end, the International Council of Adult Education (2003) argued that there is need to establish a connection between literacy practices and the social context of the learners for it to make an impact on their lives. It further argued that literacy has to be viewed as part of the broader socio-economic and cultural inventions. It should help to create a literate environment and learning societies, and impart life-skills to the learners. In agreement, Archer (2000) pointed out that REFLECT furnishes teachers with the skills needed to work with learners to independently establish projects of their choices.

As elsewhere, REFLECT in Botswana created democratic and open spaces by enabling teachers and learners to take responsibility for contacting extension staff and experts to facilitate discussions on health and other issues. They also independently decided to carry out income-generating projects, such as gardening and baking, within their learning cycles. Being involved in the REFLECT cycles empowered teachers and learners and encouraged them to hold social structures, such as VDCs, accountable for alcohol use and abuse (Freire, 1972/1990). For example, they approached village leadership to do something about the long hours that the sale of alcohol is permitted and demanded that it should not be sold to under-aged individuals. Some learners reduced their alcohol intake and smoking. In a way, they demanded social action to reduce the impact of alcoholism, thereby challenging aspects of their current social practices. According to Hernández (1997), collaborative teaching turns learners into agents of change. Such an approach approximated the principles of learning to know, to do, to live together, and to be, as such, enabled learners to tap their personal talent and potentials and develop their personalities so that they can improve their lives (Torres, 2003).

REFLECT enabled teachers and learners to learn collectively from each other, as opposed to expecting knowledge to be unidirectional (mostly coming from the teachers). The discussion of relevant issues during study cycles enabled learners to be co-discoverers of knowledge, as opposed to being passive recipients (Archer & Newman, 2003). They collectively

identified issues and explored common solutions and actions, which helped to nourish the voices of the learners (Freire & Shor, 1987; Riddel, 2001). Archer (2000) concluded that REFLECT challenges the dominant development paradigms in both private and public spheres. In this respect, learners freely participated in all aspects of learning using various participatory methods. For example, they collected materials for their classes and resisted what they perceived to be unfair treatment from teachers who expected them to be the only ones providing learning materials to class because they, as learners, were not paid to do so (Fiedrich & Jallema, 2003). In a sense, learners and teachers managed to cross the boundaries of teaching literacy in the BNLP, which was characterized by sheepish following of instructions from supervisors. They made key decisions that have hither-to been made only at the behest of supervisors, such as deciding on what income-generating project to do or who to invite as a resource person. The participants' activities were clearly consistent with the observation that in order to develop responsive materials learners have to be extensively involved in curriculum development (Weil, 1998). Therefore, unlike in the regular BNLP, REFLECT enabled teachers and learners to acquire skills for navigating public services in search of information and skilled professionals and to invite them as resource persons. It is argued that such skills are essential and would be beneficial to regular literacy teachers in Botswana.

Data revealed, however, that the REFLECT approach – like any other process – had some limitations inherent in both its conception and practice. Most of the learners felt too much rhetoric and ideas and rather few practical suggestions on how to resolve the social and economic issues identified. For example, while they were given token funds to start up projects, the REFLECT team did not furnish them with clear suggestions on how best to market their goods or services. This supports the argument raised by Fiedrich and Jallema (2003), whose extensive critique of REFLECT projects in Uganda and Bangladesh observed that the empowerment claims about REFLECT were largely exaggerated.

Fiedrich and Jallema (2003) observed that evidence suggests that REFLECT seems good in theory but is not empowering, for both teachers and learners, in practice. For example, its focus has, over the years, shifted from protecting individual rights to giving the learners' voices and engaging them in democratic practice, but it is thin on tangible results. They argue that the so-called "empowerment" does not deviate much from the philosophy of modernity and missionary work, which attempted to civilize those viewed to be backwards. In Botswana, for example, the lack of tangible results was borne out by the fact that participants felt that it was better to engage in drought-relief projects than indulge in fruitless discussions of social and economic issues. As one of the learners, Jane, put it, "It did not create employment for us, so we would rather go to the farms." It also took too much time to prepare for a lesson and actually deliver it. Also, it demands a lot of time from learners whom teachers expected to gather information and other learning materials, without being paid.

REFLECT practice also revealed that literacy cycles, like regular literacy classes, used under-qualified volunteer teachers because it can not afford those who are well trained. The implication is that, in spite of its limitations, the state should strive to hire better qualified teachers from among those who are currently unemployed, train them in REFLECT techniques, and use them to facilitate literacy education in Botswana.

Conclusions

This paper has demonstrated the potential of using the REFLECT approach to tap into the experiential knowledge systems of literacy learners in Botswana. It portrayed learners as knowledgeable individuals who have been accorded a chance to change their lives by making decisions in classrooms and in their communities. The paper illustrates that REFLECT allows teachers to focus on the concerns of learners in their work, which enabled them to serve as effective change agents. It explored the potential for both teachers and learners to make choices about what to teach and what income-generating projects to do, based on their collective decisions. This empowered them to make informed choices about their lives and, also, work with extension officers in their locations to organise responsive projects. Overall, REFLECT changed the world-view of all, participants, supervisors, and teachers, in profound ways. The implication of these findings is that REFLECT enabled participants to respond to contexts, language, gender, and other issues in the planning and management of adult literacy education. It illustrated the limitation of using a traditionally planned program – based exclusively on primers – which did not encourage dialogue in classrooms. More so, the paper revealed the possibility for the use of REFLECT tools in re-organizing the BNLP, to make its delivery more participatory. This is because REFLECT views the broader goal of literacy education as going beyond reading, writing, and numeracy to enable learners to appreciate that social problems are not fixed and unchallengeable. The implication is that this study paved the way for a long-term exploration of ways to re-conceptualize literacy education in Botswana.

Although only six learners were interviewed, the combination of the views of the learners, supervisors, and teachers and, to some extent, group discussions held with other learners, provided robust explanations of their views and perspectives on the process of acquiring skills using REFLECT tools as well as how they were used in their lives and work. It was demonstrated that it also helped teachers and learners to engage in democratic participation, learn to make decisions, and take action in their communities. Also, it showed that the process compared unfavourably with the current BNLP in some aspects. Both offered basic literacy skills, but the BNLP failed to address issues of immediate relevance to participants: It used rigidly defined rote-learning methods, which left limited room for teachers' innovation in addressing the learners' concerns.

Finally, the REFLECT approach was found to present several challenges, the most critical of which was the lack of practical guidelines and material support for carrying out some of the ideas discussed in class. This major implication was that the REFLECT approach has several conceptual and methodological limitations. These challenges are often over-looked in the available literature on REFLECT. The literacy cycle discussions interfered with times available for the learners' other survival activities, such as farming. The most critical problems were the low educational qualifications of the facilitators, which impeded them in discussing controversial issues, such as gender disparities and poverty. These challenges can be overcome by enhancing the qualifications of the teachers and adopting the REFLECT approach nationwide, as part of a strategy for literacy teachers' training courses. The other implication of this study is that further research needs to be done to help document the limitations of REFLECT and, hopefully, further synergize its theory and practice. It is also hoped that, if BNLP practitioners were to use REFLECT tools in future, they would generate plans that could serve as a basis for soliciting

resources from government and other agencies to improve the delivery of literacy education in Botswana.

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