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An action research study of the REFLECT approach in rural Lesotho

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ABSTRACT

Development, literacy, empowerment and participation are timeworn words that have been woven together in varying constellations over the last few decades. A recent approach to adult education and social change, REFLECT[1], has brought these concepts together in a new manner.

This study, conducted over a five and a half year period, (June 2000 to December 2005), set out to investigate whether REFLECT was responsive to the needs of adults in two rural Lesotho contexts: an income generating co-operative, and a village context. I enquired into participants' experiences of REFLECT, asking whether it could strengthen participants' practices and livelihoods. What benefits were gained? Did literacy practices change? Were participants empowered? What were the challenges experienced?

The theoretical framework of this study has been informed by critical and post-modern theory. These theoretical lenses have shaped my investigation and critique of concepts relevant to the study, namely development, power, participation, and literacy.

Using an Action Research design, data was collected and analysed using participatory and collaborative methods, including focus groups, interviews, document and photograph analysis, observations, as well as journal and field notes. Results are reported as case studies providing a rich description of the project within the two contexts of the study.

Results show that communities which used REFLECT benefited on personal and communal levels. Participants implemented their own learning and development agendas and took action to improve their livelihoods. Human and social capital were fortified; people increased their participation in meaningful decision making; and engaged more extensively in development initiatives. Participants became more self-confident, strengthened their capabilities and took action to access resources and

[1] Regenerated Freirean Literacy through Empowering Community Techniques

make substantial changes in their lives. In sum, REFLECT stimulated a positive change process.

However, it was noted that implementing REFLECT is a demanding process. Ongoing support is required to sustain effective learning and change, particularly where facilitators are not highly literate and operate in resource poor contexts where development related needs are perceived as more critical than the need to improve literacy skills. The challenge is to create a context where literacy and development are integrally related in practice, with new norms developed to foster sustained learning around development related action.

Keywords:
REFLECT; Literacy; Development; Empowerment, Participation; Cooperatives, Ecotourism; Social capital; Lesotho