

## **Participatory Learning and Action as Tool for facilitating Teachers' Education during the Pandemic: The TEN-G project in Perspective**

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### **Abstract**

This paper examines the Participatory Learning and Action (PLA) tools used in facilitating teachers' education during the Covid-19 pandemic. It uses the Teachers Network for Girls Education (TEN-G) project, a Commonwealth of Learning (COL) initiative that trained teachers on open educational resources and Mobile Learning with Multimedia, as a premise to argue for inclusive space where knowledge is shared between facilitators and learners. In this study, we use Methodological Conversation as a functional tool that opens up spaces for active participation across diverse methodological processes so much so that the participants are empowered through living out the lessons learnt. We draw our population from the teachers of Government primary schools in Sabon Gari and Zaria LGAs. We use Focus Group Discussion (FGD), matrix and pair wise ranking as research instrumentations to get data on choice issues around note-making, chunking and module-to-module contents in podcasting. Our study found out that the TEN-G project offers teachers diverse opportunities to explore different educational options in reaching rural girls in the time of global health crisis as in the pandemic. It concludes that the PLA methodology deployed in the implementation of the TEN-G project offers an enduring sustainability plan that is anchored on sharing and change forecast.

**Keywords:** PLA, Teachers Education, TEN-G and the Pandemic

## **Introduction**

First detected in the Hubei Province of China, in December 2019, COVID-19 is a viral disease caused by the severe acute respiratory coronavirus 2 (Centre for Disease Control 2020), a virus strain that belongs to a family of coronaviruses found in animals and is transported via human contacts with the carrier agent. The European Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) in 2020 declares the virus as a “public health crisis without precedence in living memory that is causing large-scale loss of life and severe human suffering” (OECD, 2020:1). The United Nations Development Programme (UNDP, 2020) admits that the virus will most likely increase poverty and inequalities at a global scale.

Until recently, transmission of the virus to developing and crisis-affected countries was limited. However, as the OECD (2020) and World Health Organization (WHO 2020) confirmed the outbreak has reached levels of a global pandemic, so much so that diverse variants have been recorded with transmission occurring on large-scale. In Africa, even before COVID-19, developmental strides in the region had stagnated and the needs for vulnerable population [women/girls] were already facing diverse challenges not far from economic inequality, access to education, gender-based violence, domestic violence, attacks on rights of women and dwindling socioeconomic opportunities which COVID-19 exacerbated. The Centre for Disease Control (2021) lends credence to this claim by noting that a growing body of reporting and analysis confirms that COVID-19 disproportionately brought about striking gender-specific challenges identified in contexts of crises such as meeting the needs of healthcare services, economic needs, interrupted access to sexual and reproductive health, increased gender-based violence and protection risks and importantly, setbacks to access to education for girls.

In Nigeria, as with many other African countries, the Covid-19 pandemic brought about complete shutdown of many public institutions as well as redefined how human society relates with one another. Many governments and international organizations came up with diverse coping and survival strategies to curtail the spread of the virus. Some of these strategies included complete lockdown, social distancing, compulsory wearing of face masks amongst many others. The complete lockdown of social lives and places of interaction forced people to work from, or, sit at, home.

One of the institutions hit by the sit-at-home policy was the education sector. School girls were compelled to sit-at-home as a result of lockdown. This policy greatly affected the achievements of girls' education and took many interventionary programs to ground zero. Government efforts to engage girl-children through radio programs did not do much to reclaim all that has been lost as the teachers were mostly estranged or failed to connect with the psychosocial configuration of the population of girls being taught. The situation needed participatory engagement pedagogy where both the student/pupils and teachers are co-creators rather than a ‘banking system’ of education where teachers only deposited knowledge without getting the required feedback. To ensure girls continue to learn during global crisis as in the pandemic, the Centre for Girls Education (CGE) with support from the Commonwealth of Learning (COL) trained teachers on open educational resources; and further used the training outcomes to argue for inclusive space where knowledge is shared. PLA was used as a tool to engage 200 teachers. This study examines the deployment of Participatory Learning and Action (PLA) methodology in facilitating the Teacher Network for

Girls Education (TEN-G). To proceed, it is important to provide a conceptual clarification on PLA instrumentation as well as background and methodology of the TEN-G project.

### **Conceptual and Theoretical Clarifications**

PLA is a growing family of approaches, tools, attitudes and behaviours to enable and empower people to present, share, analyse and enhance their knowledge of life and conditions, and to plan, act, monitor, evaluate, reflect and scale up community action (Mohammed & Ihidero, 2018). It originated in developing countries as a method of consultation and engagement with disadvantaged communities. It grew partly in reaction to the top-down planning methodologies popular in the 1960s and 1970s. As a methodology, it developed on the principle that poor and exploited people can and should be enabled to analyze their own reality, and to examine their own problems, set their own goals, and monitor their own achievements (Okwori, 2004:19). In essence, it was based on empowerment, that is, the commitment to helping people take more control over their own lives (Ihidero & Elisha, 2019).

PLA as a methodology branched out of Participatory Rural (or Rapid) Appraisal (PRA) and became popular in the 1980s and 1990s among programmers in non-government organizations as a result of the need to facilitate participation in decision-making process (Chambers, 2008:283; Gupta, 2010:5). Jegede (2016:9) notes that PLA: “can be used at any stage of project cycle – design, planning, facilitation, monitoring and evaluation, review and ‘change forecast’. The name was changed to Participatory Learning and Action (PLA) to reflect its broader application, and to emphasize that the process is designed to help set in motion locally-led action (Mohammed & Ihidero 2018).

Okwori (2004:16) notes that PLA can be described in two different, complementary ways. Firstly, as a:

...Philosophy and a way of thinking that emphasize reversals in power relations between communities and outsiders (such as researchers, evaluators or programme planners); and secondly, as a term that covers a range of participatory tools and approaches that can be used to work, plan and reflect with and alongside communities.

Okwori Jenkeri’s assertion implies that PLA is located within a broader field of participatory approaches, which can be described as “a family of approaches, methods, attitudes and behaviours to enable and empower people to share, analyze and enhance their knowledge of life and conditions, and to plan, act, monitor, evaluate and reflect” (Okwori, 2004:28). It is a type of qualitative research that can be used to gain an in-depth understanding of a community or situation. In its pure form, PLA is a philosophy which emphasizes the need for outsiders to learn about situations from insiders. This philosophy, Okwori (2004:32) seeks to reverse power relations between communities and outsiders.

The fundamental idea of PLA is to support people within communities to analyze their own situation, rather than have it analyzed by outsiders, and to ensure that any learning is then translated into action (Gosling and Edwards, 2003:17). To put it clearly, PLA combines an ever-increasing toolkit of participatory and visual methods with natural interviewing techniques with a view to satisfying a process of collective analysis and learning (Gana 2013:115). PLA thus appears to be in itself a convergence of approaches towards participatory information gathering and sharing similar to what PLA tries to achieve by its appropriation of the imaginative and cultural forms such

as play, digital storytelling, and sharing (Okwori 2005), which ensures that people become involved in the process.

PLA has divergent tools and techniques in getting and reflecting on data. Tools and techniques such as Transect diagram (usually drawn from transect walk), Social maps, Mobility maps, Daily routine diagrams, Livelihood analysis diagram, Flow diagrams (sometimes referred to as 'Stream of consciousness'), Venn diagrams, Preference ranking, Pairwise ranking, Direct matrix ranking, Wealth ranking, Problem-tree or Tree of life, Timelines, Time trends, Seasonal Calendars, Daily schedule, role play and drama amongst other participatory tools. These maps or diagrams are developed in a participatory way that actively involves members of the community or research group.

Apart from the diagrammatic tools, ranking systems such as preference, pairwise ranking, direct matrix and wealth ranking are also used depending on the nature of the intervention project. In Preference ranking, people vote to select priorities. For example, a few issues or options are listed, and people allocate a score out of 10 for each one. This is different from Pairwise ranking where a matrix is used to compare different options against each other to identify which is the preferred option and the reasons why. Here, scores are then aggregated to find out the overall favorites. Conversely, direct matrix ranking is used to generate different criteria for decision-making and to score different options against these criteria. It can be used as a means of understanding the reasons for local preferences. On the other hand, role play involves a performative situation where a scenario is painted and played out by members of the community. For example, different groups (women, young or old people) may role play the same situation from very different points of view for people to compare how different groups see the same problems or challenges. Of these divergent PLA tools, this study deployed matrix and pair-wise to select the preference of the teacher-participants on the areas of Open Education Resources to be learnt. Using these tools require good handling of theory. To this end, this study deploys Methodological Conversation as a theoretical foundation to examine the TEN-G project.

Methodological conversation is a term put forward by Oga Steve Abah used to describe a synergizing process and interface between PLA and other participatory methods to engage local communities in a constructive process of social change. Abah (2005) conceived this term within the contexts of research in the development practice. In his own experimentation, he describes methodological conversation as an "exploration of how one may move between techniques, how one may combine tools to aid information-gathering and analysis and the development of action strategies" (Abah 2005:127). With this, one can claim that methodological conversation is the combination of different tool and techniques working together to achieve a desired goal. What this entails is that methodologies or techniques can work together in unison once their operational tenets agree to promote and achieve a common goal. (Gana 2014:113). The principles underpinning methodological conversation as a frame of analysis are that; PLA and other methodological forms build pictures of issues, of problems and of life stories while also providing locally-driven solutions to identified problems. Secondly, is that PLA generate participation through writing – transect, social mapping, matrix, pair-wise ranking etc; and performative forms such as play, spect-acting, and facilitation. The conversation among these diverse forms gears towards one goal, participation. For the TEN-G project, the common goal was to equip teachers with OER skills using PLA.

## **The Project: TEN-G**

The Teacher Network for Girls Education (henceforth to be referred to as TEN-G) was a 12-month tenureship project funded by the Commonwealth of Learning (CoL). The project sought to engage female classroom teachers with a view to building their capacity to become mentors for girls in safe spaces as well as establish a network of female teachers who are skilled in Technology Enabled Learning. To achieve this, the project undertook several activities one of which is building and strengthening the capacity of 200 female teachers to become mentors by providing trainings on mentoring methodology and skills. Participatory Learning and Action workshop was one of the many activities put together to equip the participant-teachers with hands-on knowledge across different technology-enabled resources.

The PLA training ran for 5 days involving 200 teachers [participants] selected from government primary schools in Zaria and Sabon Gari LGAs of Kaduna State. Other participants in the training included, Teacher Educators from different departments in Federal College of Education, Local Government Education Secretaries, Implementation Officers from Zaria and Sabon Gari LGAs, the Quality Assurance Officer and Education Observers from Federal College of Education, Zaria.

The purpose of the training was to improve participants' knowledge on open, distance and technology-enabled learning and, also establish and nurture a network of female teachers for knowledge sharing on Open Educational Resources (OER) using mobile technologies. Teachers were also exposed to OER and accessing technology-based resources using mobile phones which afforded participants to become familiar with a diverse range of resources available on line. The essence of all these were to reinforce core academic competence, strengthen teaching skills and generally, to improve the quality of learning outcomes in girls.

## **Methodology**

This study deployed qualitative research methodology. It used qualitative research instrumentations such as Focus Group Discussion, (FGD), PLA tools, *a la* matrix and pair-wise ranking, and participant observation to get data. Anchored on purposive sampling technique, the study got its research population from female teachers in Zaria. 200 Female teachers from Sabon Gari and Zaria (100 each) were selected and trained across a pool of Open Education Resources areas. The age distribution of the teachers was from 24 to 50 who are teachers in government-owned schools. Four (4) FGDs with select participants were conducted along with two (2) Matrix and pair-wise sessions in the two LGAs. The data collected using these instrumentations were triangulated and presented for discussion/analysis. For purpose of ethical consideration, the study sought the permission of the participants to share [their] photographs of the sessions in the presentation and analysis of data.

## **Discussion/Analysis**

The analysis of the data of this paper is built around three objectives which are to: appraise the PLA process in facilitating the TEN-G Project; appraise the outcome of the project vis-à-vis its sustainability; and suggest ways vulnerable population can respond to global health crisis during a pandemic. To begin with, even though the project had its clear-cut objectives in facilitating OER, it needed to facilitate the teachers to map and prioritize subject areas they believe should be core for girls.

## **The PLA Process as Outcomes**

This aspect of the study responds to the objective of this paper which is built around appraising the PLA process in facilitating the TEN-G Project vis-à-vis its outcomes. During the FGD sessions, five core subjects were identified by the teachers across the two LGAs. These subjects were Basic science, Computer, Mathematics, English language and Social Studies. Their respective choices conform to the curriculum for primary schools in the State's Primary Education Board. However, on the choice of priority, the teachers disagreed over which subjects should be given preference in podcasting. As one of the discussants note;

It is not much about preference but aspects of particular subjects that are difficult to teach. While we cannot do away with the difficulty associated in teaching mathematics for example, there exists parts of English Language, social studies and basic sciences that are difficult to teach. We need to also give considerations to such areas (FGD session with teachers at Sabon Gari LGA).

The above discussant exposes other areas of concern which the project did not take into consideration at the pre-planning stage. The exposé meant that the project implementers needed to factor-in all subjects into the pool. Nevertheless, in order to prioritize the subjects as well as topics to be podcast, the facilitators deployed the PLA instrumentations of pair-wise and matrix ranking. The pool of 200 teachers was divided into select small groups in order to capture the voice of all the participants. Report from the groups identified English Language, Mathematics and Social studies as the top three (3) subjects where they needed OER intervention. These team of facilitators encouraged the participants to share aspects or topics in other subjects they perceived as difficult. They identified computer application, parts and use as difficult areas to teach; elementary/basic science application amongst others as difficult are



MPEG  
Sample Podcast.mpeg

**Plate 1: Participants standing with the snapshot of Matrix and Pair-wise ranking**

The group was divided between two core subjects, Mathematics and English Language. When the facilitator probed into the language of instructing their pupils, it was discovered that Hausa language is the lingua franca use in instructing the pupils. The discussants identified this as a challenge across the subjects in that it is difficult to teach Mathematics or English language with Hausa. To ensure learning, *EngHausa* (mixture of English and Hausa languages) were used in the classroom to engage pupils. This situation may be responsible for the reason the teachers prioritize English language over other subjects. While this poses a challenge, findings from the focus group discussion show that the teachers were also caught betwixt choices of language in diverse classroom situations and podcasting. One of such is how to simplify certain mathematical or computational signification for children. Even though the choice of *EngHausa* is effective, it places the children on a disadvantageous position considering the fact that they may find it difficult to compete with pupils who are taught primarily with English language. To navigate this, the facilitators put the teachers through a two-staged “Message Train Test” where ideas were transmitted firstly from one person to a group using English language, and having same translated into another language and passing same to the group.



**Plate 2: Participants being facilitated in the two-staged MTT**

It was discovered that aspects of the communication were lost in translation. Through this process, the group learnt that using English language to instruct the pupils is imperative as it is needed to set the pupils on a path towards comprehending other subjects. Feedback from one of the focus group discussants after the workshop revealed that the barriers language placed on instructing school children is being blurred as the PLA process has helped her to use diverse pedagogical techniques to relate her course subjects to her pupils. She says:

I was assigned Basic Science under the Ten-G program. The very first challenge was language barrier because most of the pupils only understand Hausa, so it was a very big problem having to explain the lesson in Hausa for them to understand. We've learned how to bring things to the classrooms or use materials within their environment so that they can



understand. The problem is not that these pupils are unintelligent it is just the language barrier. Now I am noticing a trend among them; they are striving to communicate using English even though they still make mistakes. It is a good way to start. I started using the two-staged Message Train Test for them. They learn in English and transmit amongst themselves in Hausa and vice versa. This has really helped their comprehension (post-Focus group discussion with Ten-G Teachers conducted February 21<sup>st</sup> 2022 at CGE).

The above statement dispels two classroom's myths in public schools; first, that indigenous school pupils hardly communicate with English language due to environmental influence; and that primary school teachers in public schools should use traditional pedagogical tool for instruction. What the TEN-G project has done is to alter the ways public primary school teachers instruct pupils using open educational resources. The project has entrenched podcasting into the primary school system in Kaduna State. Before now, only secondary teachers deploy open education resources *a la* mobile phone to engage students. No one thought primary school teachers can use; or pupils for that matter, can benefit from open educational resources. One of the teachers during the post-workshop FGD notes thus:

For the first time we saw the potentials in OER. We never knew we could use it to. The way we were facilitated to use it was even more interesting. We learnt it through participation. It was more like a hands-on training where we were given the opportunity to learn by participating. It was so easy. Now we know that the best way to teach school pupils is by opening up the spaces for participation so that no one single pupil is left behind (post-Focus group discussion with Ten-G Teachers conducted February 21<sup>st</sup> 2022 at CGE).

The statement above goes to show the extent to which participation works. One of the learning curves the facilitators learnt in the course of implementing the TEN-G project is that people are not empowered by being given handouts; but by involving them in decision-making processes. It is from there they are able to understand their issues and to think out locally-driven solutions to local problems. This is evident in the manners and ways the participants-teachers are currently using OER to reach pupils. Currently, about 32 full length podcasts has emerged from among the eight (8) primary school teachers that participated in the FGD. The number is estimated to reach over 2,500 if the 200 participants-teachers are factored in. The implication of this number is that within the next 4 to 5 years, TEN-G, with support from the Commonwealth of Learning, can be said to have initiated a process that have provided a robust subject contents for public primary schools in north-west Nigeria; that is, if the project is scaled up.

## **Results and findings**

The TEN-G project submits itself as a viable tool for reaching out to both teachers and pupils who are actors in a co-learning process. One of the key results of the project is that it opens up the spaces of teaching and learning for primary school teachers using diverse open education resources; most especially podcasting—something that has become beneficial for many school teachers and children in the project community. Before now, many aspects of subject modules are hurriedly taught; and in most cases left untaught, due to limited timetabling. However, with the TEN-G project, teachers have learnt to effectively chunk their lesson plans and to podcast the nucleus or important aspects of their course subjects. One of the primary school teachers says:

We learnt a lot especially on chunking your lesson plan which has made it easier to accomplish tasks for the week. Usually the topics to be treated in the term are very broad



and it is very tedious to meet up but chunking my lesson plan has made it easier to present lessons within a short period of time. We also learnt how to improvise some of the instructional materials, especially the ones that are difficult to get in the schools. I learnt to make use of podcasts which I play for my pupils and this is a way of arousing their interest in the lesson. I have learnt so much and these learning have helped me a lot in my class (post-Focus group discussion with Ten-G Teachers conducted February 21<sup>st</sup> 2022 at CGE).

Pupils in primary schools in Zaria are no longer shortchanged by the rush-hourly attitude of speed-teaching certain subjects. They now have access to handy podcasts to prepare them before and after every module. During the post-workshop focus group meeting, the project facilitator noticed a growing confidence amongst the teachers who noted that their value amongst other teachers has increased since their participation at the TEN-G project.



**Plate 3: One the teachers sharing her experiences of podcasting during the FGD session**

One of the discussants reveal thus:

The first thing I learnt is how to use my smartphone better. Before now I only used my smartphone to browse or help my kids with their homework but now I have realized that I can use my phone for many things. I now use my phone to research my topics and this has helped me to groom myself before going to the classroom. I do research on how to teach the topics that are difficult because of the problems of language barrier, lack of interest on the part of the pupils and overpopulation but with the use of the smartphone I have learnt

how to manage this problem (post-Focus group discussion with Ten-G Teachers conducted February 21<sup>st</sup> 2022 at CGE).

As far reaching as the above statement may sound, it must be stated that the TEN-G project took learning beyond the conventional classroom as it is mostly perceived in the project community. It made learning a real and on-the-go process.

The Ten G training has helped me to chunk my lessons to smaller units that will help me to express it to them in a way they will understand. The training also gave me the insight to give my pupils homework, so that the learning can also continue at home and be able to practicalize it. I also learnt to allow the learners to explain some topics to me before I do. On the aspect of podcasts, I sometimes record my lessons and play it for the learners then also explain it to them so they will not easily forget and they always remain focus in class (post-Focus group discussion with Ten-G Teachers conducted February 21<sup>st</sup> 2022 at CGE).

With this, the TEN-G project can be said to have taken learning beyond the traditional four-walled classrooms. Early exposure of primary school pupils, especially those in public schools, to this kind of technology and learning process is instrumental. Inasmuch as it may be new to the public school system at the primary level, it challenges pupils to be receptive to new ideas, practice, confident and self-dependent.

## **Conclusion**

PLA has proven to be one of the most effective tools in engaging teachers in open educational resources. While many other approaches are boxed within the particularized fields of enquiry, PLA courts multidisciplinary. It is malleable and can work with any other tool of analysis in facilitating development programs. This is evident in its deployment for the TEN-G project. Although the project is footed in teachers' education, PLA, a tool mostly ascribed to development communication and the social sciences found vitality in the field of education. Such is the adaptability of PLA. Its tools such as matrix and pair-wise ranking as well as MTT proved to be effective in assessing needs of course subjects' priorities, note-making and chunking during podcasting. The tool offered the teachers-participants of the TEN-G project the opportunity to be involved in a process that has built confidence on their trade, increase their value and self-worth and importantly, help primary school pupils in Zaria to be self-confident in different social contexts.

## **Sample Podcast**



Sample  
Podcast.mpeg

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