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SOL 2007

Research Template #1 with Critical Reflection Report #1

## **Part One: Defining and Refining Your Research Question**

### **1. What is your research question?**

“How can RESPECT-Ghana facilitate better attendance at its SMART Kids leadership and educational enrichment program?”

There are two parts to this question: investigating barriers to attendance for school-age refugee children and their parents (who often control attendance), and researching possible measures that RESPECT can take to encourage better attendance, such as changing program dates.

### **2. Why is this a worthwhile question? By investigating this question, what problem will you be helping your community partner to address?**

RESPECT-Ghana is a chapter of the international NGO RESPECT Refugees, based in Canada. (RESPECT stands for Refugee Education Sponsorship Program: Enhancing Communities Together.) Although it's an international organization, RESPECT's on-camp volunteers are all Liberian refugees. RESPECT runs a pen-pal program between kids in the Buduburam Refugee Camp and American students, and also has two youth leadership and enrichment programs specific to Buduburam Camp: SMART Kids (for younger children) and the RESPECT Intellectual Club (for older youths). However, both programs are relatively new, and attendance has dwindled since their opening meetings. The SMART Kids program has had a particularly steep drop-off— there are technically 70 children enrolled, but only 20 or so show up to each meeting, even though it is a free program and children receive food and other “perks.” RESPECT wants to make this program successful and eventually expand it, but they cannot do so if their first “class” of students doesn't show up. Investigating what RESPECT can do to facilitate attendance would help ensure the program's success.

### **3. What do you know so far about your research topic:**

#### **a. From your own experience or from your community partner?**

I have had lots of practical experience with this topic, as has my community partner. I tutored at a refugee resettlement center in St. Louis for several years, and my students often had trouble attending class sessions regularly because of the demands of their job, home, and family. I have also spent time studying barriers to girls' education in Kenya, and listened to women describe cultural, familial, and especially financial obstacles to their education. However, my community partner has had more experience than I have in dealing with barriers to education for refugee *children* and their families, especially since the volunteers are all refugees themselves. In particular, RESPECT often deals with financial and familial barriers to education, and they have raised funds to sponsor

some children on the camp. One of my fellow volunteers has already done basic research into this topic (and thus has an idea of what barriers families face), but surveyed only a handful of people, and wants a more extensive, rigorous investigation.

**b. From the scholarly literature?**

Unfortunately, my academic expertise on this topic is limited to very general knowledge, mostly gained from articles about barriers to counseling and medical treatment programs. My scholarly knowledge has a global health focus rather than an education one.

**4. Critical Reflection on your research question:**

**a. Is it clear, specific, and feasible for you to answer adequately in the time available?**

I believe the question is clear and specific. I will be surveying and interviewing a very specific group of people, all of whom are known by my organization, so I believe my question can feasibly be answered in the summer's short timeframe.

**b. What kind of question are you asking?**

I am asking a more exploratory question, although one of my fellow volunteers has already asked some parents about attendance, and so she has hypotheses about why children don't attend the SMART Kids meetings. My question is very open-ended, however, so I am exploring more than I am testing.

**c. By the way you have framed your question, is it clear that you understand the distinction between research and advocacy? Will your research protect the principles of open inquiry?**

Yes. As stated above, my question is very open-ended, so I'm not seeking a specific answer that will be used by RESPECT for advocacy. The organization will be able to use the research regardless of what I find, since they will be tailoring their program according to findings and suggestions from my report.

**5. Who else is on your project team?**

- a. **Faculty Mentor** - Prof. Kate Whetten
- b. **Community Partner** - RESPECT-Ghana, specifically volunteers Alfred Kayflee, Shetha Koon, and Fred Ayifli
- c. **Others** - SOL Support – Seema Parkash and Alma Blount

**Part Two: What is your Research Design? What steps will you follow to answer your question?**

**1. What data do you need to collect? How will you decide the parameters of this data?**

I need to collect answers from SMART Kids and their parents about why they do or do not attend SMART Kids meetings. Therefore I will be interviewing two

groups: those SMART Kids who are older than 8 years, and the parents or guardians of *every* SMART Kid. (I will only need answers from *one* parent or guardian, not both.) There are approximately 70 SMART Kids (although only 60 or so are older than 8), and nearly all of them live with their parents, so I will also survey and interview approximately 70 adults.

**2. What methods will you use to collect data?**

I will use a combination of questionnaires and one-on-one interviews to collect data. I will deliver a questionnaire (along with a consent form) to each child's parent or guardian, and then I will follow up with a one-on-one interview (meant mainly as a clarification) when I collect the questionnaire. However, I will also have an option for parents/guardians to drop the interviews off anonymously at the RESPECT office if they do not want their answers known.

I will deliver a questionnaire for the children themselves at the same time I drop one off for the parents.

**3. What is your project timeline? What are the 'lock-in' dates for your project to ensure that you are able to leave a research product with your community partner before you leave?**

- a. Lock-in Date #1: Finalizing your research question and research design: **July 2<sup>nd</sup>, 2007**
- b. Lock-in Date #2: Completing your "data collection" phase: **July 23<sup>rd</sup>, 2007**
- c. Lock-in Date #3: Completing your "data analysis" phase: **August 3<sup>rd</sup>, 2007**
- d. Lock-in Date #4: Completing your research synthesis, conclusions, and recommendations and giving your research product to your community partner: **August 10<sup>th</sup>, 2007**

**4. What logistical issues do you need to think about in collecting your data?**

The primary logistical concerns I have are the number of people I'll be interviewing and the process of finding my subjects. The refugee camp where RESPECT is located isn't set up like most communities—there are no neighborhoods or postal addresses, only zones and local landmarks. Finding my subjects to deliver surveys and conduct interviews will only be possible with the knowledge of my fellow RESPECT volunteers, who know many of the parents' locations and who know the layout of the camp better than I do. Their knowledge of camp geography will also help me manage the number of people I interview—by making a map of all the interview subjects' locations, we can plan to interview "clusters" of people each day, and in that way avoid traipsing around the camp. A minor logistical concern is the lack of electricity, which will be a problem when I need a computer to type research surveys, IRB forms, consent forms, and research summaries/products. If I cannot charge my laptop on the camp, I will have to take it to a nearby internet café or to town, and I will need to plan this in advance so I can take someone with me. (Security reasons...)

**5. What ethical issues do you need to think about in collecting your data?**

Although the SMART Kids program accepts children as young as five, I decided not to survey them because I feel that they're too young. I will ask for parental permission for each student I survey (which will be facilitated because they had to have parental permission to be involved in SMART Kids in the first place), but I will only survey those older than eight. I will be interviewing students that I also teach during SMART Kids programs, so I must make sure that students don't feel pressured to give me certain answers because I am their teacher. By having students fill out surveys rather than do interviews, I hope to avoid this problem. Since I'm an outsider to the camp community, parents might also be unwilling to tell me sensitive information about their personal finances or social situations. However, my fellow RESPECT volunteers have assured me that parents might actually feel *more* comfortable with me, since I won't judge them as peers in their community might. For a similar reason, it will be important for me to ensure confidentiality in my questionnaires and interviews.

## Critical Reflection Report

More than anything else, my SOL experience thus far has been a lesson in flexibility. Not only did my research question change rather drastically from my original plan, but I've also had to be flexible during the entire question-drafting process as I talked with members of my NGO and community.

At the beginning of the summer, I was interested in investigating cultural orientation programs and practices for preparing refugees for resettlement. Since my partner organization, RESPECT-Ghana, deals mainly with education (emphasizing cultural education), I expected my question to change a bit. However, the question has shifted entirely away from cultural concerns, and into education ones: my question is now "How can RESPECT-Ghana facilitate better attendance at its SMART Kids leadership and enrichment program for refugee students?" This shift is primarily a factor of RESPECT's current focus on the SMART Kids program, which just began three months ago. RESPECT also runs cultural exchange programs through schools on the camp, but because they've just begun the SMART Kids program, my role as both a volunteer and a researcher is to ensure its success. Eventually, the program will focus on empowerment, leadership, and cultural awareness, but for now my fellow RESPECT volunteers are most concerned with the immediate problem: the number of students attending each week has dwindled from the 70 who are enrolled. In the first month, almost all students attended the weekly meetings, which are held on Saturdays. Since then, however, only 25 or so have attended faithfully. The coordinator of the program has already done some preliminary investigations into reasons why students don't attend, but she's interested in having me interview *all* of the students and parents to determine barriers to attendance and possible remedies RESPECT can facilitate.

It actually took me quite a while to establish this question. As I learned when I arrived, the volunteers at RESPECT are *very* excited about having me volunteer in the refugee camp. They are more ambivalent about my research, however. It's not that they don't want me to do research, but rather they don't care *what* I research—they assume that the research is for my own benefit rather than theirs. Although we discussed the research before I arrived, and they told me I could work on many projects, once I got here they basically gave me free rein to pursue anything I thought was interesting. This may seem like a researcher's dream, but in a situation where research is supposed to be driven by the NGO's needs, I found it quite frustrating. Talking about my question with *everyone* I was working with was also difficult. There is a RESPECT office on camp, but since the power went out three weeks ago, no one ever meets there. Instead, the various volunteers go searching for the people they want to contact, which can sometimes take the entire day. Email is the best way to contact everyone at once, which seems a bit ridiculous since most of us live within one mile of each other. After two weeks of talking about RESPECT's plans for the future, however, my coordinator finally expressed her desire to find out why so few students were attending the free SMART Kids program. After an online "meeting" with the other volunteers, we decided this would be helpful to the organization's goal of making SMART Kids successful.

Because it took so long to establish a research question, I'm still in the process of refining my methods with insight from my fellow volunteers. Again, this takes awhile, because I have to search out other volunteers or wait for their email replies. However, so

far I know that I will be distributing questionnaires, partially because it's the easiest way to collect information from the 70+ people I'll need to talk to, and partially because it's sometimes hard for me to understand spoken Liberian English. I might follow up the questionnaires with a brief interview, but I don't know if this will really provide me with any additional information. At the suggestion of other RESPECT volunteers, I will distribute questionnaires directly to people's houses, since there are no official mail addresses. The program coordinator will help me make a map of the families involved in SMART Kids and will accompany me to drop them off. My biggest question, however, is whether or not to interview the students who are actually *enrolled* in the program. The other volunteers are ambivalent about this; according to the coordinator, it's usually up to the parents whether students attend a program, but she also thinks the students might have additional reasons for not coming. It could be a conflict of interests to interview students that I also teach (since I lead workshops for the SMART Kids program), but I also think it's important to get their feedback, since the program is catered to their development...

Perhaps most challenging for me so far has been learning how to adapt to conditions on the camp and fit in to the daily workings of RESPECT. It's difficult to find school or office supplies on camp, so planning workshops and printing surveys is an exercise in ingenuity. Furthermore, as I said earlier, few people have postal addresses, and even fewer have jobs or offices, so searching for people to interview or talk to is always an adventure. Since there's no longer an official "working day" at the RESPECT office (thanks to the electricity being out), the other RESPECT volunteers, most of whom are Liberian refugees living in the camp, don't always talk. If I go someplace outside the camp, for instance, sometimes I tell one volunteer and expect him or her to tell the others, only to receive a phone call several days later from another volunteer wondering where I am. It's similarly difficult to talk to the head of the Ghana chapter of the organization (it's an international NGO), who is Ghanaian and lives in Accra. Again, I have to rely on email or call *each* of the ten RESPECT volunteers if I want to make an announcement or set a date. It's been a challenge, but also a valuable experience in the importance of communication.

The most invaluable experience I've gained so far is simply being on the camp, however. I'm living in the midst of people who've been refugees for up to 17 years, and listening to their stories and insights has provided me with a perspective I don't think I would have gained by working in an office somewhere removed from the community I was serving. Because I'm directly on the camp it's been difficult to set up a traditional research project (especially meeting those deadlines ☺), but I also feel like my research will fit more naturally into people's lives.