

## Expert Interview

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**Ursula Maria Esser** is *refie*'s senior expert for capacity development (CD) and development of instruments. She holds a PhD in linguistics, focusing on language policy and –psychology. Further she is experienced in the field of quality development and pedagogical diagnostics. Since 1998 Ulla is involved in international cooperation, mainly in the field of educational planning and –reform. In 2008 she founded the Institute BEB, offering capacity building, monitoring and evaluation in the education sector. At the University of Wuppertal Ulla is involved in evaluation and research activities within teacher training.

In March/April Ulla conducted CD trainings in Guatemala and Malawi. In the following interview she shares her experiences in the countries.

**refie coordinator (rc):** Ulla, welcome back from your first two training sessions in Guatemala and Malawi. We are happy to that you will share some of your experience from these workshops. When you arrived in each of the countries, what were your first impressions and thoughts?

**Ursula Esser (UE):** First of all, I really enjoyed to be welcomed so warmly from both teams. In Guatemala, the team already had started working some weeks ago, so there already was a kind of team-thinking established. In Malawi, the members of the team had known each other recently – so the atmosphere was different, perhaps a bit more hesitant. But in both contexts, it was great to observe how much the teams started to build up a new level or status of relationship.

**rc:** Let's talk about the focus of the trainings in the two countries. Did you conceptualize both workshops with the same focus? What was your reason behind your approach?

**UE:** In general, I tried to give both groups the same kind of input, let's say, content, regarding the research instruments, as it will be very important to have comparable data at the end, from both countries. Just the method, how to introduce and discuss this content was different. The challenge of the first day for me was to find out, who are the members of the teams, which are their backgrounds and experiences. What do they need or expect from me and what can we all learn together. I think, I changed my concept for the next day every night and even during the training, many

things went very different from what I had planned. But I enjoyed it – it opened the ground for very fruitful discussions.

**rc:** Apart from considering the country difference – what were the specific aspects of a CD training in the context of research into inclusive education?

**UE:** First of all, we needed a common understanding of the concept “inclusive education”. We didn’t discuss it thus in theory – we gave it a concrete body, bringing together all kind of experience and reflection that was within the group. In a second step I did some team building exercises in order to find out where are all the special competences, the team will need for the field visits. I think the teams very much benefitted from this process and felt more comfortable in the group. As a next step it was important to explain how the methods, instruments and settings of the research had been prepared by the research experts. After I had introduced the instruments, like interview guidelines and observation sheets, we did a lot of practical exercise. We simulated interviews and reflected on how they worked out; so we made changes and tried to adopt them to the specific country context. Another important challenge was the planning and scheduling of the field visits. The competence landscape, which we had produced during the team-building session helped us to define who will do which field visit matching individual competencies with the special conditions of each area.

**rc:** During the ongoing workshops: Were there any differences between both countries in regard to the anticipation of the training and to necessary training measures? If yes, what were the most significant ones?

**UE:** I think it wasn’t the anticipation of the training but more the reaction on my input or on the several research instruments that was different. In both countries we detected several specifications that require adjustments of the instruments, especially regarding the interview questions for the field visits. E. g. in Malawi I learned that it might not make so much sense to interview fathers (in focus groups, as intended) in some of the regions, as they even might not know the names of their children, when they have up to 12 children from four women.... In Guatemala there might come up the problematic that many parents are not available as they migrated illegally to the US. And while in Malawi there are very specific problems emerging from the HIV/AIDS situation, in Guatemala there is the problematic of crime and insecurity. All these differences lead to deep discussions and not only for me, also for the group members it was a challenge to consider all these specific settings in our research procedure. The exciting thing now is to see how far these different conditions might show up similar results regarding the inclusion or exclusion from education.

**rc:** From your point of view: what were the biggest challenges in Guatemala and Malawi?

**UE:** I think in both countries, the biggest challenge was to respect the very specific expectations everybody had and the conditions of their life. I tried to find out which

is the way and rhythm they normally work in and then adopted my acting respectively. Concerning the research itself, the biggest challenge was to adopt the instruments to the specific country conditions without leaving our common research pattern. We discussed this a lot and I am convinced both groups are aware of it.

**rc:** You did workshops with staff of the countries ministries as well. How did the cooperation with the ministries work? What were their main interests in the trainings?

**UE:** We did interviews to ministry staff. For them, I think, it was a chance to explain how they see inclusion and where they see their specific role and task. I was impressed to see that most of them had the same broad understanding of inclusion we have. For the research team it was an excellent exercise to do the interviews with the ministry staff and afterwards reflect on how they worked out. My impression was that they gained a lot of self-assurance from that experience.

**rc:** Did you get any direct Feedback from the participants? If yes, what was is about?

**UE:** One aspect that was pointed out from both teams was the team-building process. They hadn't seen the importance of knowing each other's competence, strong and weak points before and learned how important these are for a common proposition. Another topic were the discussions. They helped a lot to reflect the whole research setting and to get a common understanding of what we want to find out. And one point mentioned by both teams, was the efficiency of the training. In both countries we produced concrete tools and schemes that can now be used during the field visits.

**rc: How do you see this experience now, looking back?**

**UE:** I am really thankful for these two experiences. It helped me a lot to better understand the two countries, their people and their very specific conditions. I really learned a lot, not only for the upcoming analysis of data.

**rc:** Thanks Ulla!

