



### **Pictorial Learning Aids for Third World Schools**

Health Images recently helped to facilitate a 5-day workshop for schoolteachers and trainee teachers in Liberia. At the workshop participants learnt how to make and use low-cost, pictorial learning aids (PLAs) suitable for pre-school and primary level children. They also practised using their PLAs in ways that encourage pupils to participate and interact with each other and the teacher.

The broader context for this work relates to the widespread absence of visual stimulation for young children in Third World schools. Stimulation of all the senses, including the visual, is generally thought to be beneficial for brain development in young children. Many African classrooms, though, look more like sensory deprivation chambers than stimulating and interesting learning environments. All too often there are no books, no pictures on the walls and no teaching aids. The children sit in rows at their desks and copy into their exercise books what the teacher has written on the blackboard. At other times, they may chant phrases or sentences together as a class. While this didactic approach can sometimes be appropriate, it frequently fails to engage children fully. Combined with the absence of visual stimulation in the classroom itself, this approach to teaching can be extremely dull and unchallenging for the pupils. A few colourful pictures on the walls, a mural painting or some simple, attractive home-made PLAs can, on the other hand, transform the classroom - and it really need not cost much!

The PLAs produced at our workshop were all made from paints, paper and other basic art materials purchased locally in Monrovia. Between them, participants created a wide range of PLAs which could be used for learning right across the curriculum. One set of picture cards was made to help children learn about the stages in the growth of a fruit tree from seed. During use, the pupils are asked to place the pictures in the correct sequence, while their classmates can voice their agreement or disagreement with any decisions. Another set of pictures had different numbers of objects drawn on them - these were intended to help children develop numeracy and learn some simple arithmetic. Picture cards and letter cards, in another PLA, could be matched to help with learning the alphabet. In this case, the picture cards are placed on the floor, while the cards with letters on them are handed around the class. Pictures of different types of local foodstuffs could be placed into categories by the pupils, for learning about nutrition. Large maps of Africa were made into jigsaws, which children could use in a geography class. One participant made a rather sophisticated board game for learning about the circulation of the blood. Another made an extremely simple game in which young children were required to place a cut-out shape such as a triangle onto a sheet on which various shapes had been outlined. Other pictures were designed to encourage discussion about topics such as war, HIV and AIDS, palm oil production methods, transportation and religious education.

n all cases, PLAs were intended to be used in a participatory and interactive way, with the children, not the teacher, taking an active, hands-on role in using them. The job of the teacher, with resources like these, is not to be didactic but to encourage the pupils to ask questions and discuss topics.

Using simple pictorial learning aids has several benefits. Pictures can, for example, stimulate discussions through which children learn to make causal connections and develop their analytical and problem-solving skills. Pupils become more self-confident through increased interaction with each other and their teacher and are less likely to get bored or distracted. Consequently, they learn more and have more fun doing so. PLAs will, inevitably, help pupils to improve their visual literacy skills which, in turn, will make them better able to extract useful information or meaning from other images that they encounter.

Only one of the 25 workshop participants had previously had any training in drawing or painting. This did not prevent them from making useful PLAs. In one of the workshop sessions my colleague Petra showed participants some basic guidelines for drawing faces, figures and animals. During the week, we, as facilitators, provided further advice on drawing as and when participants needed it. By the end of the fourth day, all participants had managed to design and make at least one PLA, and most had made more than one. On the last day they had the opportunity to practise using their materials. In this session they each demonstrated to the group how they would go about helping pupils to learn by using their PLAs. As they did so, the workshop group was able to provide feedback and suggestions on how to promote participation and interaction.

The teachers and student teachers at this workshop quite clearly saw the usefulness of these materials. Training of this sort is already being given in Liberia by workshop organiser Topiyoo Nya Blimie, who teaches at one of the few teacher training colleges in Monrovia. He is planning to spread the word about “visual education” to other training colleges outside the capital. Indeed, there is no reason, in principle, why this kind of training should not be more widely available throughout Africa and other parts of the Third World. Schoolteachers everywhere, with a little help, are capable of producing their own pictorial teaching aids at low-cost, using locally available materials. There is enormous scope for this work and great potential for the invention of innovative and stimulating image-based learning resources. With some experience, teachers can go on to show their pupils how to make PLAs of their own. Children may then be able to develop resources for use with their peers.

More widespread use of these types of materials can help to make learning more fun. Schools can become more creative as pupils gain the confidence to ask more questions and play a more active role in their own education. PLAs, if used in a participatory, interactive and lively way can help children to develop thinking skills that are carried through to adult life, with all the implications that may have for society as a whole.