

Imaginal Education in El Bayad, Egypt: Women Become Preschool Teachers and Health Caretakers

told by Ronnie Seagren

Few people would deny that education is a key part of any development process. The main issue is, what type of education will most effectively release the potential of people to develop themselves and their communities? This chapter describes the process of "Imaginal Education", an approach to learning based on the premise that images govern our behavior and hence, changing behavior demands changing images. It is illustrated with a case study of how this approach was successfully used with women in an Egyptian Village.

We all have our self-image, defining our sense of identity. That image also delimits our potential as human beings. What would it mean for education to be a process of human development through revitalizing images of who we are and what we are capable of? The Institute of Cultural Affairs has experimented with such an approach to education for over thirty-five years. Called "Imaginal Education", it has been adapted in diverse situations with well over a million people from all kinds of backgrounds in more than fifty nations.

Imaginal education is a whole-person approach to life and learning that can be applied to any subject matter. As an alternative to the present day functional emphasis on intellect and pragmatism, it creates a way to recover the dimension of meaning in the learning process, resulting in deep purpose and motivation. It aims to release the boundless potential of an individual or the members of a group so they can act creatively in their situations. People are assumed to be capable of operating intelligently and are given tools and practice that enable them to do that. Learning is seen as a life-long, every moment reality, including all dimensions of a person's life. The method is not expensive, but it does take an investment of thought and energy.

This chapter presents the imaginal education approach and its application in the preschool and health caretaker programs of an Egyptian village. It portrays the potential of imaginal education to change women's roles in a very traditional setting and illustrates how imaginal learning events can provide leverage on thorny development issues.

Theory of Imaginal Education

The imaginal approach rests on Kenneth Boulding's understanding of images:

- Everyone operates out of images;
- Images govern behavior;
- Images are created by messages that can be designed and communicated;
- Images can change; and
- Changed images lead to changed behavior.

Such images change through additional data that may simply clarify an old image, may add to it in a way that extends it, or may challenge it by conflicting with old information. A person's images are supported by a screen of values based on past experience

through which new messages must pass. As any teacher can attest, it is not possible to change students' fundamental images for them. However, it is possible to send messages that enable people to become more aware of their own images and to make their own decisions.

Curriculum Theory

In imaginal education, process and content are considered equally important. The curriculum is seen as an ever-expanding spiral, with material taught in an appropriate way for the age and learning-stage of the learner. Experience has confirmed Jerome Bruner's assumption that any person can learn anything if it is presented within the framework of her/his life experience so far. To reveal the interrelated nature of life, curriculum disciplines are related to each other whenever possible (such as sociology and history, or psychology and art).

Teaching Strategy

The spiral journey of learning is carried on in several ways:

- 1) *Expanding the context* beyond the self as the primary frame of reference. A perceived connection to the broadest possible perspective of time, space and relationships enables the learner to operate out of hope for the future rather than fear.
- 2) *Stimulating the imagination* by encouraging the learner to view a situation from a variety of opinions and perspectives, and to "see" reality not yet created.
- 3) *Beckoning participation* by creating opportunities for active involvement. When ideas are connected with people's real life questions, meaning and motivation are awakened.
- 4) *Encouraging critical thinking* by guiding the learner to relate information to inner resolve, will and values. Ethical reasoning empowers an individual to operate responsibly and independently.
- 5) *Touching the deeps* in order to build self-esteem and release human potential. As Jean Houston put it, "We're living in the attic of ourselves. We don't use the first three floors, and the basement is locked, until it wells up in an explosion." Imaginal teaching gives tools to unlock the basement and relate inner and outer space.

Imaginal education uses both right and left-brain modes and techniques to enhance the effectiveness of message reception and creation. It also systematically uses various teaching approaches to help the educator effectively communicate to learners with a variety of learning styles. Tools for doing this include imagery, metaphorical thinking, inclusive myth, specific learning techniques, and approaches suited to the various kinds of intelligence represented in an individual and in a group (for example, Gardner's work on verbal, visual, body, musical, logical, interpersonal and intrapersonal intelligences).

How imaginal education works in El Bayad, Egypt

In 1975, following intensive experience in three pilot projects – a Chicago ghetto, an Australian tribal aboriginal community, and the Marshall islands – the ICA initiated development partnerships with villages in many parts of the world, representing a diverse range of socio-economic settings and regional issues. Each project applied methods of imaginal education to enable communities to respond to their self identified needs. One of these projects was in the thirteen village administrative unit around Bayad el Arab, an area of roughly 20,000 people, 140 km south of Cairo. Until recently these villages on the eastern side of the Nile River were not completely connected internally by roads and were quite isolated. Access to the provincial center on the West Bank, the seat of health and social services for the area, was by sailboat. Agricultural land met the desert only 500 meters from the Nile, landholdings were relative small and other economic opportunities had been limited by the isolation of the area. In 1985 a bridge was opened across the Nile, occasioning a great upsurge in communications with the city, where there had been only a trickle before.

The imaginal education process aimed to involve all members of the community, especially those who usually missed formal education because they were too busy working to supply basic needs. Bayad people defined the content of the educational program based on their needs. They wanted to learn about skills and technology that could help to improve their living standards, and expand their options for development.

Potable Water

A "learning by doing" approach was used to help people develop skills for changing people's images from impossibility to possibility. The first priority of the Bayad villagers was the availability of potable water. In upper Egypt where almost no rain falls and all life depends upon the availability of water from the Nile, water is a major symbol of life. So too in Bayad.

In spite of the overwhelming desire by all the residents in Bayad for clean drinking water, the community as a whole perceived it as impossible to do anything about themselves. With much intrigue and equally great skepticism, meetings were held in each area of the village to organize the villagers in digging water wells, excavating pipe trenches, laying pipelines and installing a motor and pump. Few of these skills were present in the village; but as the project proceeded, the villagers became very efficient at threading and laying pipe, repairing broken pipes, installing and cleaning wells, and operating and organizing the work necessary for the water system operation.

As one villager, Sayed Ahmed Amin, said, *"We knew that it was impossible to have clean drinking water in the village. We knew that we could not really do anything about our needs ourselves. But, we thought that we have nothing to lose and some good could come of trying to do something. We got our clean drinking water. We also got something*

much more important, and that is the idea that we really could do something if we really want to.”

The Preschool

Early in the project, a preschool was started. Its initial objectives were to involve the women and deal with infant nutrition. These objectives have since changed significantly towards early childhood education as the villagers clarified their needs. The teachers were illiterate, but they built the curriculum based on their experience and taught as a team guided by ICA staff. At first the villagers were intrigued with the novel idea of sending their three to six-year-olds to preschool. After half a year, the first ‘graduates’ went on to public school; and the teachers could not believe their level of confidence. Pressure grew on the teachers to teach the alphabet and the Koran, which is central to traditional Arab village education. Samia and others also began to feel the need to write down their own plans, so they asked for a literacy class. At first the class was taught by an ICA staff person; but later a young woman who had received some education took over. As the preschool teachers began to realize their capacity in other areas, they were quite eager to learn reading.

Some learned very quickly. Within a year she was able to lead weekly curriculum planning sessions, draw pictures, and write key words on the board. In addition to the basic curriculum focusing on reading and numbers, the teachers added social and individual learning experiences. Using a comprehensive palette for involving the children in the lessons physically, mentally, and emotionally, the teachers designed an event for each topic. One week’s theme was the family. No child in the village had a doll, so the teachers went down to the clay pit on the Nile and dug clay. The next day, making dolls was so much fun, that it was hard for the teachers to let the children participate. After a few days in the hot desert sun, the dolls were as hard as brick. Hours and hours of intensive play followed, in which the children learned concepts and how to use their imagination.

Sometimes the class went into the fields to discuss the plants that were growing. One day they went by boat across the Nile to the town of Beni Suef, the outside world beyond where most of the children had ever been. They looked at a mural depicting local history on the wall of a government building. The conversation was incredible, as both preschoolers and their teachers began to see their geography and history in a wider perspective. They wrote a song to celebrate: *“The universe is our home, Egypt is our country; Beni Suef is our governorate. Bayad is our village; We love her, she is dear to us; we will make her as beautiful as a bride for her wedding!”*

The preschool was very simple. There was so little money that the children shared an inch of crayon and used both sides of a quarter of a sheet of paper for writing and drawing. But creative activities like drama, song, stories, sculpture, games, drawing and local field trips cost almost nothing and taught much about life. Constant reflection about what was going on deepened the learning of both children and teachers.

Across the various activities in Bayad, the staff use the approach of an eventful learning experience followed by surface-to-depth process of group conversation, to give ways for new experiences to reshape old images. This process was an open-ended way of teaching critical thinking; there was no one right answer at any level. After a presentation, meeting or field trip, the discussion was structured thru four levels with questions such as these:

- *Objective*: what happened in the course of the event, who attended, what was said, sensory data;
- *Reflective*: how people experience events feelings, high points, difficulties encountered, emotions, associations;
- *Interpretive*: tentative conclusions, indications, intuition;
- *Decisional*: how the experience would make a difference for them in the future, practical applications of new skills or insights.

This teaching style changed residents attitudes toward learning. The emphasis on life experience as a basis of education broadened people's perceptions of themselves and their capabilities for informal education allowed individuals to extend their life experience and apply it in new ways

Health Care-Takers

It was not only the children who learned from this experience. Many of the girls now attend the new sixteen-room primary school. The high school educated preschool teachers from six villages in the local unit have begun training to teach a women's literacy program. Perhaps the biggest changes in women's roles can be seen in the innovative community-based system that has begun to communicate primary healthcare messages to the mothers.

Twenty-seven women now work as primary health "caretakers" for the thirteen villages. Initially, many, though not all, of the women nominated by the leaders were widowed or divorced. In 1985 a small loans program was begun with over 60% of the recipients being women. The loans were for income generating projects such as animal fattening, small shops, and sewing machines. The combination of the preschool, health and loans programs seemed to create a new environment for women to participate in the development process. In 1986 women, whether married single or otherwise, began to volunteer as health caretakers and preschool teachers. Previously many visits would have had to be made to them and their families to convince them to play one of these roles. The teachers and healthcare takers are paid nominal stipends giving them the status of 'worker' in the villagers' eyes. This has been particularly important in giving permission for the health caretakers to enter houses and give advice.

Nora Wahid, a young single woman of 27, started with the health caretaker program in 1983 and is now a coordinator. She regularly visits all the families in her area, encouraging people to keep the village clean and treating injuries and common diseases, referring more serious complaints to doctors. She teaches a monthly

curriculum in informal mothers' meetings with five sessions on maternal and five on children's health. She knows the well-being a woman feels in this culture when she is pregnant and the respect she gets when she has many children. She also knows how these factors make it hard for a mother to imagine how things like age, previous complications or diabetes might place both her and the baby at risk. Nora helped develop a sequence of picture cards that conveyed danger, then related the concept to pregnancy.

She found ways to get the women talking as a group and individually about their situation, and helped them see what their choices were. She knew which families were likely to have seen the governments health messages on television, and got those women to help encourage others to follow the messages. As a coordinator, Nora is responsible for training new health caretakers which she does on a weekly basis over several months.

Both men and women are frequently convinced that adults cannot acquire new knowledge and skills though they may place great store by educating their children. They have seen that they can learn, even if it is sometimes slow and painful. Health caretakers participate in public meetings over issues such as the preschool and the repair of the tap water system. They have begun to speak up, shyly at first, and now with more confidence. Village women have been named as some of the coordinators of the program for small loans. They participate in meetings concerning the program. Male village leaders now tell visitors about the roles women play in the village. When six women who work with women's development projects in Jordan came to Bayad for a two-week exchange visit, the village women hosted them and share their experience in primary health, preschool education, and income generation projects.

Like most people in the world, villagers usually find themselves the passive recipients of the values and context in which they live their lives. However, an atmosphere of hope has emerged in the village of Bayad. The confidence and skills building that started with the Bayad water project and preschool have been a foundation for changes in the fabric of people's lives.

Research Edge

The practice of imaginal education in diverse settings has given rise to a number of questions and new experiments. These include:

- What do people need to know, whatever their ages, to be creative citizens of the planet?
- How does one involve learners in objectifying the images out of which they are operating and where they experience those images as an inadequate?
- What are the ways of developing practical multi-modal applications of right brain learning to the process of image change?
- How are people enabled to create an adequate mythology for their lives?
- How does one accelerate the learning of basic skills?

- How does one apply the practical experience of having worked closely for years in a multicultural staff community.
- At the individual and community levels, what is the structure of world paradigms, and how are they related to culture?
- What are the applications of developmental psychology to the life journey, and to planning a spire curriculum appropriate at each stage of development?

These and other questions are being pursued in quite varied settings:

- A Residential Learning Center on a farm near Seattle is the site of a global education experiment with the objective of overseas work experience and recovery of rites of passage.
- In rural Spain, a personal growth program for elders struggling with issues such as alcoholism is enabling people to decide what behavior they want to change and how they can work with their own images to accomplish it.
- Imaginal education applications to social change are being explored in a collaborative program for training of rural development workers in southern Africa.
- A support group of educators in Caracas meets regularly to clarify their vision for widespread teaching of critical thinking in Venezuela.
- Consultations with school boards and community and business leaders in Wisconsin and Illinois are utilizing consensus methods to mobilize a new community interest in education.
- In Korea new applications of the surface-to-depth conversation method are being developed in regular meetings of groups of people from many walks of life who share their thinking with each other.
- In London young people are developing a global context for their work, and some are preparing for practical village development internships.

In these and other programs, and in dialogue with an informal network of educators in many places, the theory and application of imaginal education is being developed.