

ACTIVITY BASED LEARNING IN CHENNAI: MAINSTREAMING MONTESSORI

In the periphery of the congress there will be opportunities to visit primary schools that have adopted the Activity Based Learning approach. Montessorians will be delighted to see this approach, so obviously inspired by Montessori and practised across the board in state schools in Tamil Nadu. On January 8 the panel discussions during the breakout session will centre on Activity Based Learning.

Amukta Mahapatra

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If you walk by any primary classroom in a government school in Chennai or Tamil Nadu, the expected scene of a teacher at the head of the class with rows of children in front of her, would be hard to find. Instead, one sees children sitting any which way, working on some task or the other; some working with rapt attention; some fetching materials; some watching others; a few may be talking, one may be looking out of the window. A child may look at you for a minute and get back to his or her work. The teacher could be found, perhaps in the midst of a group of children. A hum of activity may be heard.

Doesn't all this sound familiar to the Montessori educator? Often, this is how a Montessori environment is described. And believe it or not, this is happening not in a privileged, private Montessori school, but in 37,000 schools run by the government of Tamil Nadu, involving 120,000 teachers and reaching about 5,000,000 children from classes one to four. Too many zeroes? Blink again, but the numbers are right. These are children mostly from the poorer families.

As you go into the classroom, to sit down quietly and observe with your notebook and pen, you may see some familiar and some unfamiliar situations and activities. Keep aside the quick judgments, the need to define and arrive at conclusions, for the mind to compare and conclude. Observe and you may see some universal truths unfold in front of you.



What happened to make the Activity Based Learning create such a tsunami of rethinking and manage to actualize some of the ideas that were mere rhetoric for so many years?

In the late '90s, the World Bank supported the District Primary Education Programme, taken up in seven districts in Tamil Nadu. A dramatic review of the system followed—but with one flaw: the majority of the administrators and teachers did not change, and subsequently the problem of almost 50% of children dropping out of primary school did not change. Many left school before they were ten years old.

As it often happens, some individual histories run parallel to larger events. M.P. Vijayakumar, an officer of the civil service administration, was the Additional Secretary of Education in 2000. Faced with many children leaving school to join the work force, he strongly felt that schools should be the solution rather than be the problem and felt that the change had to begin at the helm, at the level of the teacher training institutions.

In his search for trainers able to train the teacher educators, he was introduced to Amukta Mahapatra by the Centre for Montessori Training in Chennai and invited her to do a trial programme, which was done as a series of workshops, from which a core group also developed. The teachers learnt on the job, observing a multiple-age class, rehearsing and preparing their session before training teachers and in the process trained the education community. About 750 were trained from 2001 to 2002. The expanding core group went on to train all the 200,000 elementary school teachers in the state.

Meanwhile one had to crack the problem of learning materials, critical to make the child an independent learner, and move away from continuous teacher-directed activity. One difficulty with making material available to the schools, especially in such large numbers, was the cost. A means to mass-produce responsibly was found and the costs became affordable.

Meanwhile the system used by the rural schools run by Rishi Valley School had been identified as suitable: it had a transparent curriculum and continuous assessment built into it. UNICEF was promoting this method as part of its quality package to government schools. After much hard work, with unbelievably quick results the pedagogy was in place within 12 months. The subjects were Tamil, Mathematics, Environmental Studies and English. The children worked at their own pace, individually or in small groups, with the teacher in a facilitating role. There were no textbooks, only a couple of workbooks. There were low-level blackboards on which they can write or draw by themselves. Montessori mathematics materials were available. Parents were encouraged to observe the class.

In 2006 Mr M.P. Vijayakumar was State Project Director of SSA, an Education for All programme, and decided that ABL could be up-scaled to the whole state: what was successful in Chennai needed to reach all the primary school children in the state.

SIGNIFICANCE OF INDIA TO THE MONTESSORI MOVEMENT

'... Looking back on the chequered life of Dr Montessori... there is a period that looms above the others for its dramatic nature and for the completion she attained in her vast vision... India could be compared to a United Europe for the diversity of peoples, language and mentality that compose the vast country... So we had the privilege of coming in prolonged contact with children in all situations... The children were our universal ambassadors to all... And in my heart the light of India steadily warms the sense of gratitude for the country which showed so great a regard for Dr Montessori, surrounded her with friendship and gave her the support and collaboration of selflessly devoted students.'

Mario Montessori in the article "The Impact of India"