

ABL Reform in Tamil Nadu – An evolution not a revolution

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– written by Ramchandar Krishnamurthy

When I enter any classroom of the 37,000 or so primary schools run by the government of Tamil Nadu, I immediately notice something very different from our traditional perceptions of a classroom. For one, the children in these Activity Based Learning (ABL) classrooms don't get up and shout "good morning sir" in unison like robots in a factory. They are busy doing their activities and barely even notice the entry of the visitor. This indicates at least two changes, both positive. The children are actively engaged in the learning process and the school is no more a site for reproduction of the obedience culture of a traditional society. Similar visible changes achieved through the ABL program have been well reported both in the Tamil and English press. They term it as a silent revolution in Tamil Nadu schools. But if we look at the history of school education in Tamil Nadu we will understand that this is not a revolution but an evolution.

The ABL reform has taken very important steps to move away from teaching to learning. Traditional school classrooms are teaching environments where the teacher is the authoritarian figure who transfers knowledge to the students. The students acquire this knowledge in an unquestioning manner. The ABL classroom is a learning environment where the focus is on the student's learning. The student is considered to be an autonomous individual and is allowed to make her or his own efforts towards learning. The teacher is there to help the student in this process. This is a subtle but very significant shift.

How did this transformation happen? Is there a revolution going on right under our noses? Who are the people responsible for this revolution? When we dig deeper into the history of this reform we realize that this was no revolution, but only a natural evolution based on a foundation created by almost a century of effort. A big tree in its growing phase spends most of its initial energies on setting up a network of roots under the ground. Only on the success of this root system the tree flourishes later. What is visible to us is only the tree above the ground and not the roots. Let us look at some of the important roots of the ABL reform. We can broadly categorize these roots into pedagogical influences, educational movements and administrative/political influences. Each of these roots has a history indicating a process of evolution.

Evolution of Pedagogy

Children are designed by biological evolution to learn, there is enough evidences in natural sciences to indicate that. They learn their mother tongue even before they enter school. What kind of learning environment a school should provide? Wouldn't it be most effective if the school environment taps the natural learning potential of the child? Suggestions for changes to pedagogical methods so that the school environment is as close to the natural learning environment of the child have a long history.

One of the earliest such child-centred learning environment was created by Maria Montessori in Italy in 1907. She believed that “education is a natural process spontaneously carried out by the human individual, and is acquired not by listening to words but by experiences upon the environment”. In her school the children learnt at their own pace through a variety of equipment and activities that encouraged them to spontaneously interact with the environment and in that process learn.

In India, Mahatma Gandhi recognized the inappropriateness of the mainstream schools established by the British colonial administration. In 1937 he proposed a Basic Education philosophy and encouraged setting up of schools with that philosophy. The basic philosophy in his system of education was – education is best attained through action, education should be concrete and interconnected and not abstract and isolated, education must be in the child’s mother tongue and integrated closely with the child’s social and cultural environment. In the Basic Education schools a lot of emphasis was laid on activities and children learning through doing these activities.

There was a lot of commonality between Montessori and Gandhi though each of them had come to the same conclusion about the learning method from very different perspectives. She was invited by the Theosophical Society of India in 1939 and she had to stay longer than intended (7 years) due the Second World War. During this time she conducted 16 training courses and laid a strong foundation for the Montessori movement in South India.

Rishi Valley School was established in 1926 in Andhra Pradesh and it was one of the several schools started by Krishnamurthy Foundation India (KFI) based on J.Krishnamurthy’s philosophy of education. The philosophy emphasized human relationships along with technological ability as core of school education. The school emphasises on cooperative learning environments where students learn from each other rather than a competitive environment.

Even before we got independence in 1947, learning methods based on activities as proposed by Montessori, Gandhi and Krishnamurthy was practiced in South India.

David Horsburgh was an English army officer posted in India during the Second World War and he had a second calling in school education. He spent a few years in Rishi Valley and then started his own village school, Neel Bagh, in Andhra Pradesh in 1972. This school emphasised on children’s autonomy in the learning process and activities as the basis for learning. The teacher recognized that each child learns differently and at a different pace. The school allowed for these differences to encourage each student to achieve their full potential. Neel Bagh was also a centre for in-house teacher training and several of the current leading lights in school education in India are products of this training. Neel Bagh’s experience showed that for rural students in India a more active approach to learning was far more effective than the traditional passive approach.

The Rishi Valley Rural Education Center took the work of David Horsburgh and started working with the village schools in Madanapalli area in Andhra Pradesh. Since early 1990s

the Center has been working on methodology for making school education easily accessible for first generation rural learners. This methodology has been experimented in government schools in Andhra Pradesh and also in Karnataka in the last decade of 20th century.

The pedagogical approach for learning through activities has seen a steady evolution from the days of Montessori and Gandhi in 1930s to the activities of Rishi Valley Rural Centre in the 1990s. It also has to be noted that while these child-centred methods had been established several decades back in India, they were still operating only in isolated pockets. Neither the mainstream government schools nor the competitive private schools deemed it fit to adopt as the learning method within their environments. In the coming paragraphs we will trace how these isolated efforts came to influence mainstream schools.

History of Education Movements in Tamil Nadu

The earliest education movement in Tamil Nadu that operated on a large scale was the adult literacy program, Arivoli Iyakkam. Arivoli Iyakkam in the late 70s and 80s, was designed to encourage adult learners to acquire literacy through contexts that were already familiar to them. The objective of universal adult literacy of these programs made it imperative that the learning process was made interesting and exciting for the learner; otherwise it was difficult to get adults to acquire literacy. Arivoli Iyakkam also brought together teachers and educators participating as volunteers in a large scale engagement.

The next big education movement in the south were the people's science movements in the late 80s and early 90s. Both Kerala Shastriya Sahastha Parishad (KSSP) and Tamil Nadu Ariviyal Iyakkam (TNSF) adopted song, dance, drama as the medium through which they would transact science education. They emphasised learning as an active process with students actively engaged in learning science concepts.

Both Arivoli Iyakkam and TNSF were voluntary in nature and included people both from the teaching community as well as NGOs and educators. These movements also had the blessings of the political and bureaucratic setup of the state.

Bringing together the pedagogical changes and large scale education reform

With the school education environment in the Tamil Nadu saturated with several individual pedagogical experiments and wide spread education movements, the time was ripe for a significant shift in the learning environments of the mainstream schools. But these essential ingredients needed a catalyst for the reaction to take place. It has to be said that Tamil Nadu is lucky to have found that catalyst in Mr. M.P. Vijayakumar, IAS. Through his own experience he was strongly convinced in effective school education as the tool for social transformation. All through his career as a government servant in various capacities, whether as a P.A. to Chief Minister or Collector of a district he had shown special interest in school education. When asked what made him take these initiatives his answer is simple and modest, "As a public servant I am paid to make schools run effectively. If all indicators show

that the learning level of children is only 50% then 50% of my salary is a waste! I just did my duty as an officer”. During his tenure as Collector of Vellore district in early 1990s he noticed several children of the school going age attending the adult education programs. He found out they were children working in the factories in that area. To get them back to school he created a bridge program Child Labour Abolition and Support Scheme (CLASS) funded by UNICEF. He brought in experienced teachers like Mr. Shanmugam and Mr. Pitchaiah of Vellore district. They were not just school teachers but also had been active volunteers in Arivoli Iyakkam and TNSF. They had already experienced the different pedagogical methods. The CLASS program was conducted in government school premises and it was done through active learning methods and included songs and dance. The regular government school students observed these classes and were attracted to it and in turn the teachers of the regular government school program wanted to have similar training with these new methods. This was the birth of “Joyful Learning Method” in Tamil Nadu schools. But this training was only for the teachers and was not supported by restructuring of the classroom or the textbooks. They remained the same. This was a limitation of effectively executing “Joyful Learning”. The teachers and trainers of CLASS program had also visited Rishi Valley rural centre to observe the classrooms there.

To have active learning environments the teachers have to understand through experience what is an active learning environment. But most of the teacher training programs themselves were instruction oriented and students of this training, who were the future teachers, were passive recipients of knowledge. This contradiction was thoroughly understood by Mr. Vijayakumar who was then the Additional Secretary in the Tamil Nadu School Education department. With the help of Ms. Amukta Mahapatra of SchoolScape, an NGO based in Chennai working in the area of professional development of teachers, a new method of training teachers in an active and participative manner was developed. Ms. Amukta herself was directly trained by the legendary David Horsburgh in Neel Bagh. This attempt established a new training method for the teachers and also showed that such training was possible in a large scale.

Mr. Vijayakumar was then posted as the Chennai commissioner and he saw a real opportunity to reform a large system comprising of almost 300 schools. He remembered his earlier Rishi Valley visit and went back to Rishi Valley and decided to adopt their methods for Tamil Nadu schools. Rather than making the reform a top down approach he made the reform itself a more active process. He asked for volunteers in the Chennai Corporation Schools for experimenting a new method and chose 13 schools for the experiment. The method was now called Activity Based Learning (ABL). The method used learner centric pedagogical concepts organized through a systematic learning structure devised by Rishi Valley. It also made it possible for multi-grade schools environments function effectively. The teachers from these 13 schools visited Rishi Valley and saw the process for themselves and learnt it actively rather than through instruction from trainers. They went back to the schools and adapted to their environments not without struggle. Ms. Vijayalakshmi, an enthusiastic primary school teacher of Manthope School in Saidapet, relates that experience

with interest. After some effort in this process she was not convinced. The team had the freedom to express their opinions openly. When she confronted Mr. Vijayakumar, he asked her to go back to her school and try it and come back with reasons of why it will not be effective. She took it as a challenge and went back and tried and to her surprise found the method worked extremely well.

Vijayakumar was now ready to scale this effort to all corporation schools in Chennai. A core team included teachers from the 13 schools was formed to create material. It is interesting to note that the efforts were largely by the school teachers. Mr. Vijayakumar believes strongly in the capability of the school teachers. He understood that teachers were the most crucial component of a school system. He wanted them to play a central role in this reform. Ms. Vijayalakshmi says that he used to bring all the high officials from the government and show them the teachers' work. This made the teachers not only proud, but also takes ownership of the reform. The program was soon scaled to all government schools in Chennai Corporation.

It is not clear whether it was destiny or it was by design that Mr. Vijayakumar was made the Project Director for the Sarva Sikshya Abhiyan for Tamil Nadu. He now had the resources to implement a state-wide program. He was convinced of the method. He had a team of dedicated people starting from the Vellore team to the teachers of Chennai schools. He also had very good working relationship with educators like Amukta Mahapatra and Prof. Anandalakshmi. He also roped in teachers from another Krishnamurthi Foundation school, The School, Adyar, Chennai. He carefully chose his own team in the SSA. The Joint Directors, Ms. Latha, Mr. Kannappan and Mr. Elangovan were all extremely enthusiastic and energetic about school education. He formed a team of consultants getting Mr. Shanmugam and Mr. Patchiappan from Vellore, Ms. Malathi an experienced and enthusiastic retired HM and Education Officer of Chennai Corporation and Mr. Rathnavel an old friend from DTERT. The diversity of this team in terms of teaching experience, educational theory and administrative experience was unified through their enthusiasm and energy. Putting together a strong team and reposing confidence in them was a key aspect to the success of this reform.

The program was ready to be scaled to the whole state. Initially model schools from each Block were selected for implementing the new method and then quickly the program was scaled to all government primary schools in Tamil Nadu. In a large reform like this it is important not just to introduce it but also support the teachers to continue the program. The core team was made very accessible to all teachers. Their cell phone numbers were published and the teachers were encouraged to call them any time. The teachers are getting support from the system like never before.

When we talk to all the senior officials responsible for this reform they are unanimous in their opinion that it would not have been possible without political support. Both the major political parties of Tamil Nadu whole-heartedly supported this reform. The current School Education Minister Mr. Thangam Thennarasu visited a school and was impressed with what he saw. Mr. Ravi Kumar, MLA, Viduthalai Chiruthaigal, likens this reform to fundamental social transformation. The confluence of administrative will and political will made it

possible to bring in such a significant transformation in such a large scale in such a short period of time.

It is also important that such a reform is dynamic and adapting to new challenges and not remain static. A system has been put in place for constant revision of the content and structure based on teacher's feedback. In the initial years it would appear to an outside observer that there are too many changes and it is ad-hoc. But if we probe deeper it would be clear that this is a healthy system changing dynamically based on the feedback of the practitioners.

The ABL reform has been one of the rare instances of significant changes in a government function brought about through bureaucratic activism. The unique aspect of this reform is that it utilized the knowledge and experience of other experiments in school reforms and evolved it to suit the conditions of government schools. The functioning of the ABL team also indicates that this reform has set in a process of dynamism with changes based on feedback and mechanisms for continuous evolution. If we look at the history behind this reform and its current functioning it is only appropriate that we terms as an evolution.