

Reflections on Activity Based Learning in Tamil Nadu, India

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Abstract

Activity Based Learning (ABL) introduced in the primary schools in Tamil Nadu, India has attracted wide interest among educationists. In November 2010, a team from the Institute of Educational Development, BRAC University had the opportunity to go to Tamil Nadu and observe ABL in practice. The team observed the program and spoke with people at different levels who have a role in the change making process. The team was on the lookout for elements that could be relevant for and reproduced in Bangladesh. The article presents reflections of the team about ABL in Tamil Nadu and suggestions are made about trying out the approach in Bangladesh.

Introduction

Activity Based Learning (ABL) introduced in the primary schools in Tamil Nadu, India has attracted wide interest among educationists. The pedagogic approach was pioneered at Rishi Valley in Andhra Pradesh by David Horsburgh, a British Officer, after the Second World War. The approach is founded on some of the popular learning theories which claim that children learn best when learning is linked to the surrounding environment and is aimed at providing optimum opportunities to learn (Gauthama, 2008). The Tamil Nadu education authorities did some tailoring to make the approach workable in their context. A number of teachers intensively worked as a core team for some years to shape it, develop necessary materials and train all the teachers. The initiative was launched to upgrade the quality of elementary education and to guarantee education for all (Anandalakshmy, 2007).

Some of the features of ABL are innovative and have proven to be effective tools for meaningful learning. A large number of appraisal reports indicates that the initiative became quite successful in the state. To outsiders, ABL became known as the Tamil Nadu Model.

In November 2010, a team from the Institute of Educational Development, BRAC University had the opportunity to go to Tamil Nadu and observe ABL in practice. We arrived in a cyclone battered afternoon in Chennai. For the rest of the days of our trip, the weather was pleasant, as were the people we met. They were generous in sparing time for us and in responding to our countless queries. We spent time inside the classroom observing

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the activities, talking separately with children and teachers, and in open discussions with training providers and top level administrative officers. One name that we must mention is Ms. Malathi, one of the consultants of ABL, ever smiling and friendly, who accompanied us to all the schools, resource centers and the offices we visited and was a source of valuable information all the time.

Purpose of Our Visit

In recent years the term active learning/activity based learning has been frequently discussed in Bangladesh. The traditional pedagogic practices in our school education have been questioned by experts, teachers, parents and policy makers. They have felt the need for a pedagogic shift towards a learner friendly approach that would be appropriate for sustainable learning for children at the elementary level. The Tamil Nadu initiative certainly generated a lot of excitement due to the fact that the pedagogic tradition there is quite similar to ours. Before the visit we read some writings on the ABL program. On paper the approach seemed to us to be quite radical. We were eager to observe the program and talk with some key role players in the change making process. We were on the lookout for elements that could be reproduced in our country. We wanted to know more about the pre-ABL context in details from people who were and still are involved in the reform process. We also expected classroom observation to help us comprehend better different aspects of the approach.

Key Findings

We had the opportunity to visit three primary schools in Chennai, Kancheepuram and Thiruvallur Districts. We observed Math, English, and Science classes. We talked with both children and teachers. We had an informal discussion session with a group of Teacher Educators in a Block Resource Centre (BRC) at Chitlapakkam in Kancheepuram district. Moreover, the State Project Director of Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan (as EFA is known in India) running the ABL program shared his insights and experiences with us. During our visit we kept field notes and journal to register crucial information. We elaborate below some of the features of ABL in the way we have seen these in real classroom situations and what we came to know from some key informants:

1. ABL has been in practice at the primary level. It covers at present grade I- IV. The total ABL package is used in teaching-learning practice from grade I to IV. Though grade V is within primary level, ABL has not been used for this grade. In Tamil Nadu, grades VI to VIII are regarded as the upper primary level. For upper primary they have devised what is known as the Active Learning Methodology (ALM), which has the same theoretical foundation as ABL. Grade V is considered a transitional phase when children get prepared to attain higher level skills.
2. ABL is intended to instigate a major departure from conventional classroom organization and learning process. The classrooms are multi-grade, that is, in a

classroom, there are learners from grade I to IV. The sitting arrangements follow a certain pattern enabling both vertical and horizontal grouping within a classroom. The class size is restricted to 40. The learners from different grades sit in six circular groups. One teacher oversees all the groups. Group 1 and 2 are teacher supported, where every child learns the given concepts from the teacher on a one-to-one basis. Group 3 is partially a teacher-supported group. Children work with the relevant practice cards but seek teachers' help if needed. Group 4 represents reinforcement activities. This is a partially peer-supported group. Being multi-grade, children in classes 3 or 4 help those in the lower grades to perform the activities mentioned in the cards. So, as the younger children learn something new, the older ones get a reinforcement of what they learnt earlier. In the process, any child may seek the help of teachers also. Group 5 is a fully peer-supported one, where children work in their own pace, but with the help of others in the group. Finally, as children gain mastery of each particular competency, they move to Group 6, a self-support group, where they test their learning. The classroom organization reminds one of a family group in which members engage spontaneously in learning activities. As learning is the sole aim, the environment and teachers' instruction and stimulus encourage coordinated learning efforts from all the learners. Instead of putting the learners in a competitive process in the early years of schooling, the ABL method promotes cooperation among learners to reach the desired learning point.

3. Tamil, Math, English, Social Science and Science are the main subjects at the primary level. In addition, there is the co-curricular area which includes storytelling, paper craft, drawing, collage and outdoor games. A classroom is allocated for only one subject, and the materials, cards, drawings by learners would tell you about the subject being practiced in a classroom. There is no bench or desk; instead the learners sit on the floor. It allows space for free movement and necessary sitting rearrangements. Learners use the walls inside a classroom as black board. The learners, therefore, get a chance to use the blackboard to practice different tasks.
4. Subject-wise learning targets or competencies are organized into learning units (known as milestones) and these units are placed on a vertical scale (a learning ladder) starting with elementary to advanced level learning units. For each of the learning units, separate sets of learning activities are designed and there are cards that carry the proper instructions for the activity. The printed learning ladders are available in every classroom for the learners. The ladders have separate color code and symbolic logos to indicate specific learning activities. We have seen a learner go to the ladder, identify his or her position and select the learning activity for the day. Then he or she goes to the shelf of trays that contain the cards. The student brings out the card and goes to her or his sitting group. The activities may be reading from story books, writing, story telling, drawing, singing, mind-mapping, simple experiments, role play etc. These are purposively designed to serve as introductory, enforcement and evaluative activities for all the learning units. There are some local cultural elements like puppetry, drama and folk song which are included as learning activities considered appropriate in some subjects.

5. Translation of the Learning Materials from Rishi Valley Rural Education Center (REC) was the 1st initiative for developing learning materials for ABL. A core team who earlier visited REC and was trained there was involved in translating the materials. These team members were school teachers where this method was inaugurated. For about six months selected teachers worked hard in developing learning materials after school time. The learning materials used in ABL are meticulously developed, colorful and easy to handle. The learning materials are not only systematically stacked on the shelves, but they are color-coded for each class level. Learning materials include cards, charts, story books, puzzle box, letter box, text books etc. For mathematics, Montessori materials are being used by the learners. These materials help them internalize the mathematical processes. Audio-visual materials are used in some lessons on English. There are textbooks for learners which they use as required. Activity cards for Science and Social Science are based on the textbooks. Children have notebooks and workbooks, which are used to do copy work from the cards, or exercises as instructed in the cards or by the teacher.
6. The daily learning time for the learners is divided into two sessions/slots. For one session, a learner does the activity from a single subject area like the Tamil language. So the daily contact hours are designated for only two subjects. The learners take an extended time to complete the activities and can move to the next unit of learning. So there is adequate curricular weight given to all the subjects.
7. The learners are encouraged to engage in self-learning. For some tasks, the learners do the problem-solving individually after gaining learning experience from participatory learning. For more advanced learners, there are vacant spaces in the learning ladder where he or she can do activities for sustained leaning.
8. ABL enables children to internalize the process of learning. They get the experience of the various learning processes through involvement in activities. Teachers provide the help to learners in concept building and understanding rules and theories. The learners take it on themselves from that point to application of those concepts and rules in real-life situations. .
9. There is nothing like a terminal or annual examination. After the learning activities for a unit are covered, the learners take the assessment card for self evaluation, do the tasks and get evaluated by the teachers. If a learner does the tasks satisfactorily, he or she moves to the next unit. Otherwise, he or she does some reinforcement activities to achieve the specific learning target. For the learners, there is no failure and therefore no fear of failure. Teacher for a subject maintains an achievement chart to keep track of the progress of each of the learners. The teachers do this in the presence of the learners so that learners know about their position. The achievement chart shows the positions of the children in each area. So there is no ranking, and no child is better than or worse than another. The entire system allows diversity and differential rates of progress. Absenteeism doesn't thwart a learner's progress too much, because a learner can resume from the point he or she left off before the absence.

10. All the directorates in the state education department are prompt in implementing quality improvement measures. Teacher grants and training facilities have been on the top in the priority list. There has been a quality support chain that links the teachers, teacher educators and supervisors. Teachers receive mandatory 2 year Diploma in Education as pre-service training. They also receive 1 week basic training on ABL. The master trainers, Block Resource Teacher Educators (BRTes) and the teachers are all trained through direct hands on experience in ABL classrooms with children, allowing for intensive and experiential learning. The training is in a cascade mode, but provides enough checks and balances to avoid message loss. BRTes act as academic supervisor and each BRTe has not more than 6-7 schools in his/her charge, allowing for at least a visit to each school per week. In service, teachers make constant efforts to improve the lesson contents and other materials. Schools arrange one day refreshers every week. BRTes attend these refreshers to offer suggestions. The schools get various support from the Block Resource Centre (BRC), the District Education Office and the Local Education Committee. The BRCs are highly functional with computer facilities, satellite connectivity and most importantly, adequate staffing. Resource books have been provided to all BRCs which are used by BRTes and teachers.
11. Community has been a part of the school management structure approved by the state school education authority. A provision, namely, the Village Education Committee (VEC) has allowed local community to engage in management, monitoring and school improvement programs. VEC is a 20 member body comprising of representatives from teachers, PTAs, local panchayat, administration, local clubs and organizations. This committee monitors academic activity and performance of teacher and student. It assists school in transparent and effective utilization of grants, funds, construction and maintenance work. It also organizes awareness campaigns and events to create awareness among the community about the importance of education.

More Facts and Figures

The approach entails a dedicated effort, and hard work from individuals and all the stakeholders. One thing that helped the process is that there were some ongoing instances of near- similar practices in other states nearby. But most importantly it was a few individuals who felt the need for the shift in approach and worked as the catalyst in the initial preparation and implementation phase. M.P. Vijayakumar, IAS, working in Tamil Nadu School Education Department, was one of the firm believers and an architect of the reform program. He successfully motivated the experienced teachers who extended their hands to prepare all necessary materials. They provided training to other teachers. Along with training, it was crucial to convince teachers that the new method could be an effective way of achieving learning targets for the children.

Assuming a new role on the part of the teacher was difficult. There was reaction from different forums regarding the new pedagogy of learning and the new role of the teacher. It was tried out on a limited scale in 13 corporation schools in 2003, and the result clearly showed that the children's learning achievement was higher than before. This approach was extended to all 264 schools in Chennai Corporation during 2004 and finally to all 37,000 schools in the state in 2005/6 (Ramchandrar, 2010). Whole hearted support from the state government of Tamil Nadu smoothened this large up-scaling task. We had the opportunity to talk with the State Project Director of Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan, Mr. R. Venkateshan, who mentioned that teachers were skeptical about the apparently new method of learning. He reminisced, "It seemed to them full of complexity in contrast to the traditional textbook based lecture method. Again the same sort of response was also shown by local society and the parents' community."

It is natural that when something new is tried out for the first time, there is skepticism. The elements of doubt around ABL disappeared as the teachers got used to the new pedagogy, even though it was not a smooth transition. As visiting observers we felt a bit puzzled to see the classrooms on the first few occasions. With the presence of multi grade students, learning ladder, activity cards, materials, unconventional sitting arrangement, and multi-level groupings in the classroom seemed a bit chaotic at first sight to outsiders. More so to the eyes of those used to see teacher standing in front of the class lecturing from a book and children passively listening. The Head Teacher of a Corporation School in Chennai told us, "It took quite a while and conscious efforts to get used to the new mode of schooling. We gradually realized that young children are very animated and conscious about their role."

A series of research studies carried by external bodies and university scholars found improvement in the achievement level of children. Sample achievement tests revealed that compared to the baseline scores there was an increase in average achievement by 25% to 29% in Tamil, Mathematics and English in Class II and in Class IV (Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan, 2009). The new approach has given children the opportunity to get actively involved in the learning process. The classroom organization promoted learning through hands-on experience and interaction with peer groups. There was tangible improvement in primary completion rate and decrease in the repetition rate. (Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan, n.d.).

Inclusiveness is consciously built into the approach and teachers are encouraged to create and maintain an inclusive environment in the classroom. Teachers within a cluster meet once in a week to discuss issues and problems they encounter and make a constant effort to enrich the approach by applying new strategies and materials. Moreover, a strong support mechanism has been active and a network connects the remotest of areas across the state. Administrative and supervisory bodies are prompt to take necessary supportive measures.

In the past, before ABL was introduced, classroom activity was limited to one way lecturing with much emphasis on rote learning. Focus was on teaching rather than learning. Flawed

traditional assessment encouraged rote learning and contributed to poor learner achievement.. A teacher of Thiruvallur District School summed up the situation, “Earlier, even if a child didn’t do well in class, he or she was promoted to the next grade. That’s why, shockingly, even fifth-graders struggled to read a simple sentence in Tamil, their mother tongue.” This is all too familiar to us in Bangladesh. The pre-ABL Tamil Nadu schools are similar to what is still the common scenario in Bangladesh.

Shift towards a Learner Centered Approach in Bangladesh

What are the prospects of a reform program in Bangladesh similar to the one in Tamil Nadu? It is probably the right time for it because we are entering into the 3rd phase of Primary Education Development Program (PROG-3). The PROG-3 has proposed quality intervention measures to lift the standard of primary education. It has identified the need of improved pedagogic practice inside classroom that could guarantee stronger learner participation leading to better learning outcome. It has been said that PROG-3 will consider new perspective on school improvement with focus on the interactions between teachers and students in the classroom through effective instructional strategies that will engage children in activity-based learning (DPE, 2010). Essential elements of the Tamil Nadu model may be relevant for changing the pedagogic approach in the Bangladesh classrooms. All the stakeholders involved in the development and delivery of the primary education sector have to work in co-ordination to detail out a practicable work plan for such a purpose. PROG-3 has kept the option of Public-Private Partnership (PPP), which would allow private organizations and NGOs to play important roles in the process (DPE, 2010). Some necessary steps are suggested below.

- A core working group may be formed to consider the lessons from the ABL approach and how these can be applied in Bangladesh. The group should include subject and curriculum specialists and trainers and teachers from primary school. The group may have sub-groups and share the responsibilities for different aspects of the exercise.
- Curriculum for primary level is now under development. The proposed core working group has to work in coordination with the curriculum development process. The new pedagogic approach should fit in with the new curriculum. Apart from the selection of competencies and subject areas, the question of defining the pedagogic approach is very crucial in curriculum development. The new curriculum should have a clear delineation of the new pedagogic approach for classroom teaching-learning activities. The working group will detail out the approach on the basis of the review reports prepared by the sub-groups.
- Textbooks could be designed in a different manner. The textbook will contain the learning contents as before, but it should also contain instruction for learning activities. In ABL in Tamil Nadu, instructional cards are being used by learners. We can develop instructional cards for the learning activities or can add the instructions for activities in our textbooks. The intention should be to reduce the exclusive dependence on textbooks.

- Learner centered pedagogic approach requires the classrooms to have a learner-friendly environment. The classroom needs to facilitate multi-grade grouping and active engagement of students in the learning activities.

Piloting and Scaling-up. The new approach and methodology have to be tried out in a pilot phase before it can be considered for wider application. A pilot may be undertaken in a small number of government model and other primary schools in 10 Upazilas.

One of the key concerns in Bangladesh would be to limit the class size to 35 to 40 students to permit multi-grade grouping and meaningful group activity. Under the current practice of double-shift schooling, multi-grade grouping followed in Tamil Nadu cannot be applied unless students of all grades are included in both shifts.

Teacher Support System. We have to strengthen our teacher support system for proper implementation of the new approach. The training of teachers and their supervision have to be re-oriented to support the reform. We can bring together government and non-government resources such as expertise, infrastructure and technology to build an effective support system. Besides the teachers, we have to orient our Education Officers (DPEO, UEO, AUEO) to the new approach and the new supervisory role. The training activities themselves must provide the trainees a taste of what the children will be doing in a classroom. The training package may include a general part on the new pedagogic approach as well as subject based content.

Assessment System. For ABL piloting in Bangladesh, special attention has to be given to learning assessment with an emphasis on formative assessment. Effective formative system is an essential complement to the activity based learning pedagogy and practice. PROG3 has also emphasized the need for classroom based formative assessment. Feedback from learners to teachers and from teachers to the school and supervisory authorities as well as parents and responses to these on a continuing basis have to become an active loop of learning for all. The implications for public examinations at the end of grade five and eight introduced recently have to be considered. The main concern is to what extent the public examinations as they are designed now actually measure competencies of students and how they support or hamper activity-based learning.

Conclusion

The pedagogic shift we propose has been long due and is consistent with our goals of educational development including PROG3. It will require resources, imagination, effort and most importantly, support from policy making authorities. Parents and community also have to be involved from the beginning. It is important that the parents accept the new pedagogy.

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