

# ACTIVITY BASED LEARNING

## *A Report on an Innovative Method in Tamil Nadu*

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### **Preamble**

This is year 2007. India is completing its sixty year cycle, since Independence. A time to reflect. A time to take a critical retrospective scan of the education of children in the country. A time to acknowledge that the country has failed to provide a satisfactory education to the millions of children, who look to the State with hope and anticipation. Dozens of studies have substantiated the failure of the system on the whole, even while there are some pockets of successful pedagogic efforts. Innovative methods which engage the children and enable them to achieve mastery over school- related competencies and skills can be located here and there. However, they are small in scale and number.

Obviously, there is not enough pressure on the different State Governments to set up and run an adequate school system. As recent publications show, the levels of achievement in primary school enrolment and completion vary a great deal across the Indian sub-continent. Even in the 'star' States, many schools lack the minimum infrastructure: classrooms, blackboards and chalk, clean drinking water, toilets for boys and girls and some safe playing space. Another serious problem across the country is the non-availability of teachers in the schools. Many rural schools are constrained to manage with only one teacher or two. This means that the teacher, who has no specific training for multi-grade teaching, could at best, do serial teaching. Invariably, the younger children are somewhat neglected and the older children are found unfit, because they reach Standard III after two years of neglect. We cannot expect that children, who leave school out of boredom or because they are punished, would be literate; those who stay back in school may have just a marginal chance of becoming literate. For both categories of children, literacy is like the proverbial pot of gold at the end of the rainbow: always out of reach. The children enter the labour market a few years later, with low skills and no assets and continue on the treadmill of poverty.

In Activity-based Learning, a Tamil Nadu initiative, which has drawn upon several resources, we have the possibility of a system which can succeed in keeping children motivated and fully occupied, while they are mastering the fundamentals. Ideally, every classroom should have a teacher. However, even if all the vacant teaching positions are not filled, the lessons can proceed. ABL offers solutions to two major problems: multi-grade classes and inadequate staffing. It provides the learning material for several children to be working on, while the teacher is busy with one group. ABL appears to be a system where the teacher can facilitate learning, without dominating the classroom or intimidating the children. Since the child learns in a self-directed way, from the systematic materials provided, teacher absence or occasional unavailability may not be a tragedy.

This report traces the long history of the method and delineates the main aspects of the ABL. Suggestions for its improvement and strengthening are also made at the end.

### **Opening Scene**

A visitor walks into a Corporation school in Chennai. The children sit in groups on four or five mats on the floor. Each child is engaged in some academic task. The teacher is also at the floor level, with seven or eight children around her. She is looking into the notebook of one of the children and checking the written work. There are several blackboards at the level of the children. The shelves are neatly stacked with colourful materials for learning and children's drawings and paintings, suspended on high strings across the room, flutter colourfully. The children do not shout "Vanakkam" in unison or even take much notice of the passing visitor.

The visitor talks to a 9- year old boy and asks him if he can read Tamil. When the boy nods confidently, he takes the current Tamil newspaper, *Dinamani*, and hands it to the child. The boy reads the headlines clearly, without errors, and returns the paper. The visitor asks him how he learned to read. He hears the boy say that he has studied in the same school for the last four years and he has gone step by step on the Learning Ladder.

**How did the children learn to read? Who taught them? What is the ladder? Where can one find out more about the system? Why cannot all our schools follow this method?**

The first four of these questions are answered in this document. The answer to the last question is dependent on three major factors: 1) the openness to change of teachers, trainers and supervisors, 2) administrative machinery and clout and 3) political will and financial support.

### **Early History**

In 1944, towards the end of the Second World War, an Englishman called David Horsburgh came to India as part of the Royal Air Force. He was posted somewhere in Bengal, in what is now part of Bangla Desh. He fell in love with the complexity of the culture, the openness of the people and the beauty of the countryside. When the war was over, he went back and enrolled in courses in Indian history and culture and studied Sanskrit and Hindi. He came back to India to teach and worked in Rishi Valley School and Blue Mountain School for some years. He joined the British Council and worked in Madras and Bangalore for twenty years. Taking retirement voluntarily, he located a 7- acre site in Kolar District and opened his school, *Neel Bagh*. For him, the school was the fulfillment of a dream.

Neel Bagh constituted the nucleus for a host of creative methods in teaching and a vast quantum of well-planned learning materials. David was a charismatic leader and a born teacher. With his wife Doreen and his son Nicholas, David developed a diverse curriculum, which included music, carpentry, sewing, masonry, gardening, as well as the usual school subjects, English, mathematics, Sanskrit, and Telugu. He had vertical grouping in the classroom and the children worked on the material on cards, at their specific level. These pedagogic materials were systematically planned, with sketches and drawings and an occasional touch of humour. Fresh materials on cards would be added frequently, to emphasize that the sources for lessons were not finite. David endowed Neel Bagh with a magnificent library that was accessible to teachers and students.

As one example of what the curriculum contained, we may consider music. Children were taught to sing melodiously and in harmony. They were taught folk and classical songs from different cultures and in different languages. It was a treat to the ears. And what is more, the music period would be the first one every morning. Like music, drama also was an important feature of the curriculum. The Horsburghs had talent in theatre, acting, direction and production and scenes from Shakespeare or the *Panchatantra* would be staged, with the acting and production by the *Neel Bagh* children, from *Rayalpad*. The plays would be first put on boards in the school, with the

headlights from David's Austin providing the light for the stage. Later, the plays would be taken to Bangalore, to the delight of their thespian friends and the thrill of the actors.

David Horsburgh also planned and managed a rigorous and unique course for teachers. A great deal of theoretical material was part of the reading for the trainees, while the school provided the setting for teaching practice. Many of those trained in this course have set up small schools in different parts of the country: Faith and John Singh from Jaipur, Malathi of *Vikasana* in Bangalore, Amukta Mahapatra an independent consultant in Chennai, Rohit Dhankar of Jaipur, Usha and Narasimhan, who set up *Sumavanam* on the Neel Bagh model and Indrani, who worked in Madanapalle, are some of the well known names who took his training working and are currently working in innovative small schools. The training included several hours of craft work, as working with the hands was an essential part of the syllabus. Most of the learning material used in their own schools are designed and made by the teachers.

When David Horsburgh passed away in 1984, the soul force of *Neel Bagh* declined and the family found it difficult to maintain the school. Rishi Valley School acquired *Neel Bagh*, and got some support from the HRD ministry at Delhi. Anil Bordia, Secretary in the Ministry of Human Resource Development, sanctioned a project linking *Neel Bagh*, *Sumavanam* (a school run by Usha and Narasimhan) and Rishi Valley. However, without David's energy, sensibility and talents, *Neel Bagh* could not be sustained.

Radhika Herzberger, Director of the RVS continued to have the dream of offering relevant education to children in villages adjoining Rishi Valley, while also preserving the strengths of their specific culture and conserving the natural environment. She set up the Rural Education centre, consulting Rajeev Sethi about sustaining folk culture. In the early phase, she had the help of Usha and Narasimhan in developing Telugu and Science curricula. The teachers and students of Rishi Valley helped to create materials, For materials in Mathematics, Alok Mathur and Padmapriya Shirali, teachers of Rishi Valley contributed significantly. But the early initiatives were fragmentary. At this time, Padmanabha Rao and his wife Rama Rao came to Rishi Valley. They had strong roots in folk theatre and poetry in Telugu. With their talent and enthusiasm, they were able to propel the movement.

They consulted widely and learnt from a variety of persons: artist, writers, teachers and theatre people. Arvind Gupta,(renowned designer of toys) P.K. Srinivasan (a committed and gifted spokesman for Mathematics) and mime and puppetry experts from Andhra, Karnataka and West Bengal were among the resource persons. Ganguli's programme called "Theatre of the Oppressed" offered ways to win the confidence of the local people.

The Raos worked out the concept of the learning ladder. The Learning Ladder and its organization of the learning process into small steps has become an enabling tool for barefoot teachers. Its rule-governed flexibility makes for confident and involved teachers. At the same time, it makes the students less teacher-dependent. The ladder also serves as a monitoring tool for school administrators.

The task of conserving the plants and the trees in the vicinity was built into the curriculum. The children learnt to water the trees and to develop a green island around each school.

### **The Tamil Nadu Initiative**

In this State, as in many, there have been interesting pedagogic experiments and projects. However, it is only when somebody within the establishment takes the initiative to look into education, a new page is turned. In 1994, when M.P. Vijaya Kumar IAS was the Collector at Vellore, he came upon children working as bonded labour and got them released. The children had literally lost their childhood and the opportunity of schooling. In collaboration with colleagues, Supriya Sahu and Murugannandam, he had special schools opened for these children. To capture the attention of the children, the learning methods which were introduced were child-friendly and joyful. The new school was in a building adjoining the regular school and the new methods used attracted all the children, The teachers and students of the Panchayat school wanted to know why they could not also have more activities and enjoyable classes. To begin with, 60 Head Masters came for the training. That was the beginning of the extension of Joyful Learning. Ultimately, about 7000 teachers were trained on the methodology and a Teachers' Guide called "*Karpathu Karkandey*" was published. Later, with the assistance of UNICEF, '*Katralil Inimai*,' a compendium of songs, stories and games, was brought out.

Groups of teachers and some personnel of the BRCs and the DIETs went to *Ekalavya* in Madhya Pradesh and to Siddharth Village in Orissa, to study the methods and materials being developed there. About 30 teachers and some supervisory staff went to Rishi Valley Rural Education Centre for a training programme of three-months. The teachers were quick to absorb the principles of systematizing the learning processes. They adapted the Telugu materials to Tamil and researched into suitable folk and local cultures to include in the curriculum. Some of the trainers for the Activity based Learning have continued from the nineties. Some young teachers of Class I and II have also understood the methods so well, that they are also sent to be the trainers for the rural schools.

All the schools in the Corporation of Chennai are functioning on the ABL since 2003. An independent team of researchers, who were also experienced teachers, visited the schools in May 2007, and a collective report was prepared. A revised and edited version of the report now follows.

**Activity-based Learning** is the method of education followed in the Corporation schools of Chennai, from 2003, when M.P. Vijay Kumar became the Commissioner of the Chennai Corporation. But story starts earlier.

The "Joyful Learning" experiment of the mid-nineties had started as an effort to provide special schools for children who had been freed from being bonded labour. Methods and materials, which were devised to help the children catch up on the lost years of childhood, seemed both appropriate and attractive to **all** children. Added value to pedagogy came from the visits of teachers and trainers to innovative educational schemes in India, like *Ekalavya* in Madhya Pradesh. From Tamil Nadu, faculty members from the DIETs and personnel of the BRCs and teachers were sent to the **Rishi Valley Rural Education Centre** to study the methods and materials developed for their rural schools. They had a residential training for about three months.

The Tamil Nadu team's visit to Rishi Valley was a **turning point**. Not only had REC given a lot of attention to the curriculum in Mathematics, Telugu and Environmental Science, but the textual material had been broken up into small units, which could be mastered one at a time. The entire material was put into small incremental units, to be completed serially. This organization of the material into ladders was a veritable stroke of genius. The **Learning Ladders** provided structure to the curriculum and allowed every child to proceed at a self-selected pace.

In the ABL kit in Tamil Nadu, the subjects covered are five plus one. **Tamil** Language is the first area, where the lesson begins with illustrated cards and short words that are easy to write, rather than with the alphabet sequence. A similar method is used for teaching **English**. **Mathematics** is learnt through using the attractive Montessori materials, designed systematically, for the fundamental principles of addition, subtraction, multiplication and division. **Science** and **Social Science** cards are largely based on the textbook, with a variety of activities attached to every chapter. The sixth area is that of **puppetry, story telling**, reading of story books, paper craft, drawing, collage and many kinds of group games played outdoors.

In the ABL, there are **significant departures** from and improvements on the Rishi Valley materials. Firstly, **English** has been added to the curriculum in the ABL. The children learn both Tamil and English. The second difference in the Tamil Nadu adaptation is the inclusion of both Science and **Social Science**, while the REC had included only Environmental Science. The third innovation is the introduction, into the Primary curriculum,, of **three-dimensional materials in Mathematics**. The Montessori system has proved to be a tremendous enrichment to ABL. The materials now available in ABL are colourful, easy to handle, hardy and meticulously developed and enable children to understand place value (units, tens, hundreds) and the basic mathematical processes.

By bringing the **blackboard** from the teacher's eye level to the child's, and by increasing the blackboard space, two more learning aids have been created: a specific space for each child to write and a large space to read each others' exercises. Every child can proudly own a part of that blackboard.

The learning materials are not only systematically stacked on the shelves, but they are colour-coded, for each class level. Also logos of animal and insect forms are used for different aspects of the curriculum. When the child completes one set, there is a card for **Self Evaluation**. This can be administered by oneself or with the assistance of another child.

In building in the opportunity of recall of learnt material at each stage, evaluation has become part of the process. For the children, there is no

failure and therefore, there is no fear of failure. In the conventional school system, so many children drop out of school because they fail! The need for an **examination** at the end of the school year is made redundant in this system. So easily, has the *asura* called "Annual Exam" been vanquished!

If we pause for a second, to think of how children are generally given ranks for their performance in school subjects and how ranking becomes a subtle way of indicating the "value" of a child, we have a sense of **liberation from ranking** here. No child is "better than" or "worse than" another. The teacher keeps an eye on the levels attained by every child and sometimes helps by pairing an advanced learner with a slower one, for specific exercises. This kind of **peer teaching** works well.

It must be noted that the entire system allows for diversity and differential rates of progress. The **Achievement Chart** clearly shows the positions of the children in each area. Thus the teacher is enabled to track every learner's progress. Monitoring of progress by the teacher is subtly combined with the child's freedom to select the pace of learning.

The ruthlessness of ranking and peer competition is further reduced by mixing the age groups and classes. In a room of 40 children, there could be ten each from Classes 1, 2, 3, and 4. This **vertical grouping has several advantages**. It recreates a family model, where the older child automatically becomes a guide and helper for the younger one. It encourages cooperation between children, rather than competition among them. We are told that a multi-grade classroom is a problem which many rural schools confront. ABL is a simple solution to that complicated issue. The system absorbs different age groups and different ability levels within the same age group.

Taking the daily **attendance** is a ritual in most schools, with the teacher calling out the names and the pupils responding. In the ABL method, this process is made child-friendly. There is an **Attendance Card** for each child, to be filled up everyday **by the child**. Children love the sense of trust that this procedure implies. When they assemble in the morning, one student from each class level in the room distributes the Attendance cards and collects the filled up ones. The entire process is orderly. It puts the responsibility for marking attendance on the child and not on the teacher.

We have all heard about teachers losing their voices because of their shouting and screaming, to keep the children quiet. In the schools with ABL, there are **no apparent discipline problems**. The structured learning materials have their own logic, which supports the children's involvement in reading, writing and calculating. Children find that they can learn at any speed, without being taunted by classmates or scolded by the teacher. Also, there is no scrambling for adult attention. **Discipline is intrinsic to the material and internalized by the children.**

The **text book** is not the only source of knowledge, just as the teacher is not the sole authority. The text book is integrated into the materials. For instance, one of the steps of the ladder contains an instruction to read a specified page of the text book. Clearly, when a child goes step by step on the ladder, his steady progress gives him the skills to read the connected page in the text book. Of course, if he needs help, he could ask the teacher when he is in the teacher-assisted group, or just go across to where she is sitting. Students appear to have no fear of being reprimanded by the teacher. The conventional distance has been bridged here.

Generally, one of the constant problems of schooling is **absenteeism**. For example, if a child is sick for a week, he cannot follow the lesson when he gets back. He has the feeling of running a race he can never win. However, ABL has a simple strategy to take care of missed classes. The mastering of a skill is not a collective exercise. The child's work is individual. Therefore, he goes to the points on the ladders, where he left off and starts learning from there.

In rural areas, harvest time is when children are needed on the farm. Their **short-term absence** from school is no longer a problem. Time away from school can be made up. Fairs and festivals can be enjoyed without their seriously disrupting a child's learning activities.

**Repetition** of a lesson acts as reinforcement. That is accepted **pedagogy**. But instead of sing-song chanting of tables or whatever, the child in ABL writes on the blackboard first, his notebook next and finally in the workbook. Since he writes the same material three times, the pattern (be it spelling or grammar), gets well established. Whatever the lesson (names of animals, masculine and feminine nouns or singular and plural words), the strengthening of the connections by repetition, is certainly achieved.

With so many materials directly accessed by the pupils, one would worry about the displacement of the learning cards. However, the pupils have understood that any disorder in the stacking of material is a problem. Each time the materials are returned to the shelf, they are checked out by the child who used it, sometimes helped by another child. It is like the practice of putting their school bags and their footwear neatly on the verandah, which has become second nature to the children. **Order and structure in the materials seem to result in systematic habits in the children.**

**Gender equality** seems to have been achieved rather effortlessly. Girls and boys sit at the low desks or on reed mats together and share their work, without any awkwardness. This is particularly important in a culture, where the girl child needs to struggle for equal rights in home and school.

**Inclusion** is the word that defines an equitable education system, where all children are together in the same school. Children, with disability are admitted into the school and can be seen wearing calipers and participating in the activities. They are fully part of the class and their peers accept them as friends.

Once the ABL system has been mastered by the teacher and the pupils, the **burden on the teacher is reduced**. Even though the teacher needs a period of un-learning and re-learning, when moving from the conventional system to the ABL, the end result is very satisfying. She is justifiably proud of her mastering the administration of the new system and of the children's achievements.

Furthermore, up to Class IV, there is **no homework**. This reduces the teacher's work considerably and frees the young children to continue learning a variety of things from the family and community and from Nature. Knowledge can be garnered from many sources.

In this system, **the time table** is in units of half days. If Mathematics is on the curriculum, the children will be involved with the materials from the beginning of the school day until lunch time. This is done so that the children can concentrate on one subject without the intrusive bell breaking up their lesson. In the conventional school, this would have been tedious for the

child, but in the ABL, there is a lot of movement and activity, exchange of ideas and group work. There is **no question of boredom**.

In the beginning, many **parents were skeptical** about classes where children of all ages were mixed. It did not look like a school to them. Could the pupils learn well, when they seemed to be enjoying it so much? The parents were invited to come and sit in the classroom. Gradually, as they watched their **child's reading skills** and general knowledge develop, most parents were convinced that the system worked. The tangible achievements impressed the parents.

Many **PTA meetings** were also held to explain the new methods to the parents. There was Open House on Saturdays, when parents could find out how the system worked. They were willing to suspend their disbelief then, but it was the child's obvious self confidence and self esteem, as well as demonstrable abilities in the formal skills that won the case. Parents soon became allies of the teaching staff.

The key element in the story of the Silent Revolution is the **competence of teachers and supervisors** in Tamil Nadu, who were exposed to the new system. Some of them, who were trained at Rishi Valley, became the core group. Others were trained by the core group. It was the translation and adaptation of the learning materials that consumed their energy and invigorated them, at the same time. For nearly six months, when a hundred teachers worked on developing materials, working after school hours, from 4.00 pm to 8.00 pm every evening. Their involvement in the process of material development was total. ((Not surprisingly, their sense of ownership of the method enabled them to work for long hours and strengthened their allegiance to it.

The ABL system has some senior teachers who are experts in handling teacher education and are treated like wise elders. But there are also young trainers, selected to do the training for their enthusiasm and communication skills. A teacher handling Class I or II could have demonstrated a tremendous grasp of the principles and procedures of the new system and be asked)) to conduct the entire training for a rural school. One of the by-products is a breaking down of hierarchy and a **dynamic interchange** of personnel, materials and methods.

The ladder is not a mechanical structure with equidistant steps. For each specific academic achievement, different ways of learning are built in. There are several ways of reinforcing learning, while making it enjoyable: song, game, reading, writing and finally evaluating. For the children the most exciting aspect is that they can learn actively and have a sense of fulfillment. The teacher knows the exact level of the child's achievement and can take **remedial measures** for a child who has slowed down.

There are a few blank steps in every ladder. These are intended for any new area the teacher may wish to include. There is **scope for the teachers to be creative**. They keep adding songs that the children sing together and stories for the shadow puppet shows. They use familiar material from their own environment.

Apart from all the Corporation schools in the city of Chennai, there are ten schools in **every rural block in Tamil Nadu**, functioning on this method. They serve as demonstration schools for the entire block. It is expected that the ABL's obvious success in making children competent is the best tool for advocacy.

There is a commonly held idea that children **need** to be motivated by the teacher or parent, to study. This is **not always** the case. Children are naturally **highly motivated** to know and to learn. Most school procedures dampen the enthusiasm of children and suppress their intrinsic motivation. When school methods and materials are devised to be attractive and easy to use, as in the ABL, the inherent motivation of the children is sustained. Learning to learn comes from wanting to learn.

The learning achievements of the children are resoundingly convincing. Indeed, they provide a strong case for the ABL method to be extended to all State-run schools in Tamil Nadu.

## **ANALYSIS OF ABL**

One can examine the ABL method and materials through the following five lenses:

- a) Clarity of lessons

- b) Classroom environment
- c) Children's involvement in process
- d) Teacher's role
- e) Scope for creativity

### ***Clarity of Lessons***

Clarity of the lesson is probably the ABL method's most valued asset. The Learning Ladders provide structure as they are planned in a systematic way. The child knows what must be done next. Each unit of information or process is broken up in such a way that clarity of the lesson is ensured. The method is particularly effective in the fundamentals of Mathematics, as many children said that it was their best subject. However, there is a need for a review of the language material.

The criteria for the selection of the vocabulary is not too the same in ABL as in the REC of Rishi Valley. There they had built up the set of words to be taught, by listening to the conversations of children around them. For the Tamil kit, the teachers selected letters that are easy to write, made small words out of them and then gradually increased the number of words on the same criterion. For making the ABL English language kit, a different rule has been used. The alphabet is not taught directly, of course, but five words (which begin with each letter of the alphabet) are introduced at a gradual pace. This method has resulted in the addition of words, which are not directly relevant to their everyday experience.

### ***Classroom Environment***

Those who have seen the documentary film on the scheme will vouch for the pleasant relaxed, yet disciplined climate of the classroom. There is order in the stacking of materials and in all the procedures that the children follow. The body language of the children shows their enthusiasm. The closing of the physical and psychological distance between teacher and child reflects a very satisfactory feature of the system.

### ***Children's Involvement in the Learning process***

There is absolutely no doubt that the children are truly engaged in the act of learning, though there could be degrees of difference among them.

During the several hours of observation, one rarely came across a child who was not pursuing an academic task or a related task. Watching the children move into the classes after Assembly was a heartening sight. There was an eagerness in their step and a sense of purpose in their deportment. One is left in no doubt that a feeling of mastery is the best reinforcement for the development of competence. It seems to work far better than external symbols of recognition like 'stars' and 'medals'.

### ***The Teacher's Role***

The teacher has a very important role in this system, though it is not obvious to a casual visitor. She has to learn the entire ABL system and work effectively with it. She has to exercise a quiet authority, without becoming authoritarian. An egalitarian attitude may require some un-learning and re-learning for teachers, but when they see it as part of the new culture of education, they are quick to accept it and practice it. They are also able, in this system, to spend some time on children who are slow.

The research team felt, however, that there should be some time allotted to the teacher's voice. For instance, she could read a story or explain a scientific principle. For such an activity, as for sports, it might be necessary to group the children by age. The advantages of the mixed age group have been demonstrated here, but there is also a value for being with peers of one's own age. Some suggestions on doing this will follow in the last section of the report. While teacher domination is not desirable, teacher participation is advisable for at least 30 - 45 minutes a day.

### ***Scope for Creativity***

As we noticed there are some blank slots in all the ladders, for the teacher to fill up. This gives her an opportunity for bringing in new material or for including a locally relevant theme. Clearly, there is here, recognition that knowledge is not a pre-determined set of facts. Changing perspectives, new information, the opinions of students and teachers, views of others in the community - all these can and do constitute knowledge. That there is a provision to introduce a new item for study is to be highly commended. However, a new item is not necessarily a creative addition to the curriculum. Some special monitoring of the items filled in the blank slots would be recommended.

The child's understanding of open-endedness to new perceptions may not get enough emphasis, when the materials are presented as an end in themselves. Other ways of allowing children to be creative must be consciously introduced.

## **SUGGESTIONS FOR ENRICHMENT OF THE ABL METHOD**

1) India is a country with tremendous diversity in every aspect. When one has a generalization about any fact in India, an exception to it will crop up immediately. In the school curriculum, the experiencing of the vastness of the cultural spectrum must find some place. The 'empty slots' must seek to bring originality and variety. Towards this end, the training of teachers should be strengthened.

2) Music, as it seems to be taught, is a collective effort by children to sing rhymes and songs at the top of their voices. In this activity, there is no sign that much has changed from an earlier era. This needs to be modified and moderated. Children can learn to sing softly, to sing in tune and to take turns to sing. One does not get the idea that they understand what they are singing. There is a sense of enjoyment, of course and that is good, but a feeling of competent singing will be a value addition.

3) Flexibility is allowed in pace of learning and this is a boon. A certain level of flexibility must be available for the occasional re-grouping of children. The practice of forcing children to compete and ranking them according to their performance is shunned by most enlightened educators. And the ABL is quite child-friendly in this respect. Here it is important to see that having children of the same age together in an activity does not necessarily entail competition. Also it is possible to introduce a small element of competition without hurting anyone, a strategy which has been tried with success. Children of the same age are divided into two or three groups. The quiz question or alternatively, the athletic task is given to the group. Every child must have one chance, but can get help from others in the group.

4) The shadow puppet stories are good. They are simple enough for all children to know the entire dialogue by heart, as we observe from watching a performance. There is scope for introducing other themes for shadow puppets and also other styles of puppetry and dramatization.

Hand puppets, glove puppets, finger puppets and a host of other kinds of play materials will bring joy to the children. Drama enables them to cultivate the imagination and enhances their ability to speak clearly and articulately, to express feelings and to convey messages directly and indirectly. Expanding the scope and variety of theatre-based activity is strongly recommended.

5) Every school should have a Dictionary in Tamil and one in English. Children should be taught "dictionary skills". Knowing the order of the alphabets is certainly the first step. Likewise, an Encyclopaedia in one of the languages would be a tremendous asset for their learning. In the ABL, it is not clear what a child, who has completed the ladders, can do with his time. In other words, there must be access to other kinds and higher levels of knowledge. The information ceiling must be raised to provide room at the top.

6) Story books for reading in class and out of class must be provided in large numbers. This should be treated as a priority.

7) The Rishi Valley rural schools, which provided the template for the ABL schools, had one very important part of education i.e. being sensitive to the environment and conserving water, growing plants and creating a green space around the school. That aspect has been totally neglected in the city schools which we visited. Just outside the school room, there was rubble and dying grass. No attention had been given by anyone in the system, to keeping it clean or attractive. Since manual labour of any kind is totally absent in the set of school activities, it might be a matter to take up after the first rains.

8) Many of the formal sports, which would be ideal for young children, require space and equipment. And lack of funds may be cited as the reason for their conspicuous absence. But athletics can be introduced at very little cost. A good sand pit and a few metres of rope can take care of High Jump and Long Jump. As for running, one needs only some safe space, preferably adjoining the school.

9) This system is better than any other which one would come upon in India, to handle the problem of understaffed schools. The inadequate

number of teachers in our rural schools is a constant problem. On one hand, there are thousands of trained teachers waiting to get employment and on the other, there are a number of Primary schools which are short of two or even three teachers. The ABL can be used with advantage, but its success in the long run, will be determined by the children's access to a teacher in the classroom

10) Many a time, we open the newspaper and read about an accident at a level crossing. This, in a country, where the youth are facing unemployment and even their right to 100 days of work a year is the end result of a long struggle by activists. Why cannot we have a match between those who need a job and the obvious vacancy? The question one would address to the Railway Minister is quite similar to the question that we would pose to the Education Minister.

11) The educational scene in Tamil Nadu has many positive ratings to its credit. ABL must build on the strengths. There are many achievements to be proud of, but one cannot afford to be complacent. There must be an annual review of the materials, the methods and the learning processes to ensure success and to reach even higher levels. This educational initiative could well be a forerunner for a positive change in educational standards across the country. We are now at the threshold of a silent revolution.