

A History of the Activity Based Learning Movement in Tamil Nadu

An Independent Report submitted to
Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan Tamil Nadu

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30 December 2011
(Revision submitted 7 July 2012)

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This project was funded by
The Spencer Foundation
Chicago, Illinois, U.S.A.

This report is available at the following URL:
<http://docs.ehhs.kent.edu/ABLinTN.pdf>

Cover photographs courtesy of Ramchandar Krishnamurthy.

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Preface and Acknowledgements

In early 2010, one of us, Ramchandar Krishnamurthy, found himself in conversation with a local shopkeeper in the village of Nemiliyagaram in the South Indian state of Tamil Nadu. Having just spent several hours observing classroom activity in a small, government-run primary school in the village, he and a colleague were waiting for the last bus back to the capital city of Chennai. To pass the time he bought a soft drink from a small shop near the bus stand. Obvious to the shopkeeper that he and his colleague were not locals, the shopkeeper initiated a conversation with them. When informed that they had visited the local school to observe classroom processes, the shopkeeper began to rattle off a litany of complaints. These were not, however, the usual criticisms about the functioning of government schools. Instead, the shopkeeper explained how his job had become much more difficult in the last couple of years. The children from the school were constantly asking him questions. They talked to him boldly, questioned the prices, and even attempted to bargain with him. This was not the way it used to be, when the children were meek and unquestioning in their interactions with him. The shopkeeper blamed all of this squarely on the new system of education introduced in school.

Activity Based Learning (ABL) methodology, in place in all of Tamil Nadu's government schools since 2007, is an approach to primary education (grades 1–4) that aims to shift the focus of the classroom from teaching to learning through pedagogy that conceptualizes and treats the child as an autonomous, active, and engaged learner. The social relations and interactions within the classroom reflect this orientation, with teachers no longer at the front of the class but on mats on the floor working with individuals and small groups of children. Children move around the classroom freely, gather learning materials independently, and work on activities either alone, in groups, or with the teacher.

What immediately strikes most visitors to the ABL classroom is a perceived change in the independence and confidence of the children. Indeed, the shopkeeper's story was not unlike others we heard throughout our recent research documenting the history of the ABL movement in Tamil Nadu. Repeatedly we were told that where children once were hesitant and interacted with adult visitors to the classroom in formulaic, ritualized ways (e.g., exclamations of "Good Morning Sir" in unison), they now share their work confidently with visitors or ignore them altogether, engaged as they are in classroom activity. One teacher told us that she used to have to plead with children to speak at an assembly. "But now it is not like that. A first grade child will hold the mike and speak comfortably" (*Translated from Tamil*). Alone, this perceived change in young children's autonomy and confidence represents an impressive transformation. However, when we consider that the majority of

children who attend government schools are the poorest in the state¹ and are from Scheduled Castes, this apparent cultural change is all the more stunning. What accounts for such a dramatic transformation of everyday practice and social interaction in schools?

In the spring of 2010 we set out to answer this question through the development of a historical case study of the ABL movement in Tamil Nadu. We developed this case study from oral histories and other interviews along with an analysis of documentation and artefacts of the movement. The project was inspired by stories of ABL in Tamil Nadu that reached the mid-western United States. Tricia Niesz had heard of this initiative through Dr. Joanne Arhar, who, with a group of American teacher educators led by Dr. Janaki Rajan, had visited educational sites throughout India. The ABL classroom was striking to the American visitors, as it is to most visitors. Even having heard of ABL in Tamil Nadu from afar, Tricia was intrigued by the radical nature of the change in classroom practice, as well as the speed with which the initiative transformed over 37,000 schools. Hearing of an interest in having the early history of this movement documented, especially in light of the increasing attention ABL was receiving from both inside and outside India, our project was conceived as a way to both provide a historical record of the ABL movement and study it as an exemplar of education reform.

In this endeavour, we are grateful for the support and help from many individuals and organizations. We can hardly imagine a project so dependent on the gracious goodwill and assistance of others. *Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan* granted us permission to study the history of ABL in Tamil Nadu and assisted us in many ways throughout the study. The Spencer Foundation generously funded this project through their research grant program. We are also thankful to all of the individuals who generously spent time talking with us, cheerfully and sincerely explaining their histories and experiences with the ABL movement. The insights offered by the individuals we interviewed provided us powerful illustrations of the unique attributes of this movement. From teachers to administrators to individuals outside of the ABL project to children who wanted to read to us in Tamil and English, the gracious welcome we were offered was remarkable.

We are particularly grateful for the assistance and support of three renowned educators who advised us at different stages of the project. Dr. Janaki Rajan offered early assistance and advice that got the project off the ground. Her insights on the broader historical and socio-cultural contexts of the ABL movement were extremely valuable in guiding us to look outside of the education system to understand this reform movement.

¹ Middle-class children in India have been moving into private schools in increasing numbers over the last couple of decades (Gupta 2006; Mehrotra and Panchamukhi 2006; Pai 2005). Government schools today are widely viewed as schools serving the poorest children. Mehrotra and Panchamukhi, among others, attribute the growth in private schooling to India's market-oriented reforms of the 1990s and the broader "growing global influence of neo-liberalism" (2006:421).

Dr. S. Anandalakshmy generously spent time with us, sharing her home, her sharp insights, and her supportive guidance. Her scholarship on the ABL movement in Tamil Nadu provided both information and inspiration for our project. The respect she garners among administrative agencies and educators opened many doors for us. Ms. Amukta Mahapatra served as a key consultant on the project, and became so much more. It is no exaggeration to say that the project could not have moved forward without her assistance. In this regard she became a key team member, one whom we relied on excessively. In addition, Amukta's warmth and friendship throughout the project was a welcome gift. We could not be more grateful for the assistance, support, and advice of these three exceptional educators.

Tricia Niesz would like to thank Joanne Arhar for introducing her to ABL in Tamil Nadu, for helping her take steps to develop the project, and for providing intellectual and emotional support throughout. Tricia would also like to express special gratitude to research collaborators and co-authors, Ramchandar Krishnamurthy and Vaishali Mahalingam. These research partners were the lifeblood of the project and taught Tricia much throughout our work together. Their contributions made the project what it is in the very best sense. Tricia takes full responsibility for any errors of fact or interpretation that may remain in this report.

It is our hope that readers find in this report a valuable history of the ABL movement in Tamil Nadu. We must emphasize, however, that this is only one history among many that could be written about this complex movement. Our particular history reflects an interest in viewing the history of ABL in Tamil Nadu through lens of cultural change in educational settings. Through collecting the narratives and oral histories of key reformers and many others within and without the education system, we have sought to understand how meanings of learning and schooling have changed in some settings, and how these particular meanings have been promoted such that the ABL reform was successful. We hope that this contribution proves valuable to those who want to learn, share, or otherwise reflect on the history of ABL in Tamil Nadu.

INTRODUCTION

Tracing the History of a Radical Reform Movement

An initiative of Tamil Nadu's 'Education for All' office, *Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan* (SSA), Activity Based Learning (ABL) has created classrooms that bear no resemblance to the state's government school classrooms of only a few years ago. ABL is an approach to pedagogical practice in the early elementary grades that has replaced teacher- and textbook-centred instruction with students' independent pursuit of active and child-friendly learning activities. In ABL, students are conceptualized and treated as autonomous, active, and engaged learners. Classroom practices are oriented toward children's independent pursuit of learning activities. In multi-age/multi-grade classrooms, young students move around the classroom freely, gather learning materials independently, and set to work on their activities. Their time is divided by their independent work, their work with small groups of peers, and their work with the teacher. Gone are rows of silent students, replaced by the movement and noise of children's activity.

Piloted in Tamil Nadu's capital city of Chennai in 2003, ABL has since transformed over 37,000 government schools, most of which serve children from high-poverty communities. Interestingly, the ABL reform is thought by some to be the most rapid transformation of schooling at this scale in world history ("Sibal to visit..." 2010). Yet, the increasing attention from inside and outside India appears to have resulted not from the speed of the transformation but of the unlikely nature of the transformation.

To be sure, many would suggest that ABL is an unlikely find among Indian government schools. Sociologist Patricia Jeffery has recently written that, based on a set of recent research studies, she sees

little evidence that knowledge acquisition through active and creative learning is widely favoured by teachers and adults in India, perhaps even less so that in other parts of the world—perhaps because it seems to undermine textual authority and teachers' expertise or threatens to produce a wayward and uncontrollable learning environment in which 'proper' hierarchies are overturned. (2005:29)

Yet, it is ABL's active learning (and indeed, the overturning of hierarchies) in the government school classroom that has generated such interest from other Indian states and other nations. Of course, policy rhetoric in India has long lauded active learning approaches, but the gulf between rhetoric and practice has been gaping (Jeffery 2005). Tamil Nadu seems to have bridged this gulf. The study reported here sought to understand how this happened.

What is the ABL method?

ABL in Tamil Nadu aims to engage the child actively in learning activities that can be completed at her or his own individual pace. In multi-age/multi-grade classrooms, students work independently and in small groups through carefully-designed learning activities referenced on a learning ‘ladder.’ Children consult the ladder independently to guide their activity and access the attractive, child-friendly materials to be used in their learning activities. These materials are predominantly cards that describe activities, although three-dimensional mathematics manipulatives are also used. A chalkboard at the child’s level extends around the perimeter of the ABL classroom, providing each child with a work space of her own. Teachers work with individuals and small groups, promoting and assessing children’s learning at their current ‘step’ in the learning ladder. The state has provided supplementary readers that are designed to be attractive and engaging to children. Interestingly, in a country with a strong ‘textbook culture’ (Gupta 2006; Kumar 1988), ABL pushes textbooks out of the classroom altogether, making them available primarily as reference texts.

The ABL method has a long and interesting history consisting of the adoption and adaptation of several models of education that share a constructivist, student-centred pedagogical philosophy. ABL’s prototypes were developed by committed rural school teachers and leaders working for an NGO in Rishi Valley, Andhra Pradesh. The NGO, now known as the Rishi Valley Institute for Educational Resources (RIVER), developed and promoted this pedagogical method to bring engaging and high-quality education to low-resourced rural schools in India. The prototypes were inspired to varying extents by the education philosophies and innovations of not only the leaders of the NGO but also Maria Montessori, Indian philosopher J. Krishnamurti, and RAF officer-turned-rural educator David Horsburgh, among others. By the time Tamil Nadu decided to adapt these prototypes for its own government schools, key players in the ABL movement had already attempted to institutionalize several other learner-centred innovations in the government school classroom, including those called “Joyful Learning” and “Self Learning Methodologies.” This report revisits these overlapping histories in the pages to come.

The scaling of ABL across the state was an initiative to improve quality in government schools under the auspices of SSA, a federally-funded, state-administered organization. SSA is the Government of India’s flagship program for the pursuit of Universalization of Elementary Education (UEE), formed in response to the Education for All declaration at 1990’s Jomtien conference. Funded by the federal government with slowly increasing participation from the state governments, SSA’s focus was on infrastructure improvement in its early stages (late 1990s and early 2000s), providing funds for school and classroom construction. More recently the SSA in Tamil Nadu, having

achieved school enrolment targets, has focused on improving the quality of school education. It was in this context that from 2006-2007, SSA-Tamil Nadu implemented ABL in the state's over 37,000 primary-level government schools.

Virtually overnight, ABL fostered the transformation of government school classrooms such that they look almost nothing like their predecessors. Gone are the sessions of textbook-driven lectures and recitations, replaced by a system of self-directed engagement with curricular materials. It is too early to tell whether ABL has substantively improved the quality of government school education, but initial signs are promising. Although assessments of learning have been controversial and somewhat mixed, Tamil Nadu has seen enhanced school attendance, achievement test scores, school attendance, gender parity, caste parity, and matriculation rates since the implementation of ABL (SchoolScape 2009; Akila 2011). Akila reports that schools that model ABL best practice are also those that are showing the best learning outcomes. Teachers report that students simply learn more and better under ABL. As noted above, the novel practices of the ABL classroom have increasingly garnered national and international attention for Tamil Nadu.

Of course, ABL is not without its critics. Nation-wide learning achievement surveys show Tamil Nadu at fairly average levels of performance. As for the pedagogical method, critics charge that the peer-learning and group-learning activities in the classroom are ineffective, and that the teacher has to repeat the same instruction to each student individually. The most significant criticism, one that we heard from outsiders to the system, indicts ABL for being a top-down bureaucratically-imposed change that has resulted in uniformity and rigidity in pedagogical processes enforced across all schools. This, critics claim, severely limits the teacher's autonomy.

Our goal in this project was neither to evaluate ABL as a method of instruction nor to evaluate it as a program of school improvement. As we describe in the next section, our intent was to document the cultural history of ABL in Tamil Nadu as a movement for education reform. As such, we leave in-depth description of the method and evaluation to others (see, for example, Akila 2011; Anandalakshmy 2007; SchoolScape 2009). Indeed, we cannot emphasize enough that our goal was *only* to analyze the history of this reform movement, not its efficacy or its value. We describe our research approach in the next section.

The study

This research project is grounded in socio-cultural understandings of formal and informal education and policy contexts. Social practice theories, which focus on how cultural forms, practice, identities, and ultimately new 'worlds' are produced in situated activity (Holland et al. 1998; Holland and Lave 2001; Lave and Wenger 1991), inform how

we conceptualize small- and large-scale change in educational practice. Specifically, our analysis of the history of the ABL movement draws from recent applications of social practice theory to anthropological studies of social movements (Allen et al. 2007; Holland 2003; Holland et al. 2008). This literature suggests that movements open up so-called ‘figured worlds,’ which are ‘realms of interpretation’ in which movement identities are produced, shared meanings are generated, and collective action takes shape (see also Holland et al. 1998). Integral to this view is a conceptualization of movement actors as cultural agents and reform activity as cultural process. As such, a primary goal of this study has been to trace how ABL knowledges and practices travelled through space and time, gained legitimacy and proponents among diverse stakeholders, and were realized in communities. Additionally, recognizing that movements are situated in broader historical, cultural, and institutional contexts that powerfully influence their success, we explored how these nested contexts both supported and constrained the reform movement.

With these goals at the forefront, we sought to develop a detailed case study of ABL’s history in Tamil Nadu through in-depth interviews, oral histories, and reform artefacts. As suggested above, the case study focused on (a) the specific history of the movement, including the strategies used, the obstacles faced, the support generated, and so on; (b) the broader social, political, and institutional histories that contextualized the movement; and (c) how reformers, educators, and outsiders experienced, described, and ascribed meaning to the movement in context. To generate descriptions of key events in ABL’s history and accounts of individual and collective experiences within the movement, our team of one American researcher (Tricia Niesz) and two Indian researchers (Ramchandar Krishnamurthy and Vaishali Mahalingam) met with over 45 individuals in a variety of positions and roles in Tamil Nadu and Rishi Valley in Andhra Pradesh during May and August of 2010. Informed by oral history and ethnographic approaches, together the three of us conducted in-depth interviews with key players in the ABL movement, including administrators and other leaders in SSA and the Department of School Education, educationists who served as their consultants, and teachers and teacher support personnel. For example, we met with a number of ‘block resource teachers,’ who serve in a combined teacher education/teacher support role. We also interviewed individuals who were outside the formal administrative and school education sectors, including university professors, NGO leaders, volunteer teachers outside of the government school system, and an education journalist. When lengthy, in-depth interviews with teachers were impossible (as when we visited teachers in their schools during the school day), we conducted focus group discussions or brief interviews with them. Interviewees were free to converse with us in either English or Tamil, as Krishnamurthy and Mahalingam are multilingual and fluent in both languages. Ultimately, approximately half of the interviews were conducted in English and half were conducted in Tamil. All were transcribed, and Tamil-language transcripts were translated into English.

To supplement these interview accounts, we collected dozens of artefacts related to the reform movement, including official documents (e.g., government orders), media coverage of ABL, classroom materials, evaluation studies, and internal documents (e.g., feedback on reform progress, documents produced for informational purposes, etc.). We also visited and observed in several classrooms in both rural and urban settings to better understand the nature of classroom practices under ABL. Our analytic work has focused both on developing a chronological history of ABL from oral histories and artefacts, and on developing understandings of key themes within this history as related to how the movement succeeded and how it was experienced in social context.

In what follows, we describe our findings. Following seven chapters that alternate chronological descriptions of the ABL movement's history with thematic discussions, we conclude the report with a brief presentation of themes that we argue are important to the success of the movement.

CHAPTER 1

The Vellore Years: The Emergence of a Network and a Movement

What accounts for such dramatic change in Tamil Nadu's government school classrooms? We argue that a large part of the answer to this question is the network of social movement and education movement actors serving in and through the administrative arm of Tamil Nadu's education system. In this chapter, we describe the emergence of the ABL movement in Vellore District, which took place many years prior to the development of ABL. We argue that central to the later success of the ABL movement was the influential education reform network that formed over time through partnerships of educators and activists from literacy and people's voluntary science movements, progressive education movements, and the state's administration. This network, ultimately bridging the state with institutions and actors in civil society, brought the education knowledge of both people's popular education movements and progressive education circles to bear on reforming government schooling. Highlighting shared understandings of learning and learners, along with activist orientations to work in and through the state, we argue that this network formed a figured world, a "realm of interpretation and action generated by the participants of a movement through their shared activities and commitments that imagines the terrain of struggle, the powers of opponents, and the possibilities of a changed world" (Holland et al. 2008:97).

A movement built from movements

Tamil Nadu has a rich history of voluntary people's movements, grassroots education initiatives intended to popularize science and literacy in underserved communities. The story of the ABL movement begins with the partnering of an Indian Administrative Service officer with leaders of people's movements in the Tamil Nadu district of Vellore. As early as the 1980s, then-District Collector, Mr. M.P. Vijayakumar, called on activists from the Tamil Nadu Science Forum and a literacy movement called Arivoli Iyakkam to help him address the problem of out-of-school child labourers. The partnership between Vijayakumar and these educators (and movement actors) marked the beginning of the ABL movement network, which, for the past two decades, has continued to grow, spanning the border between the state's administration and advocacy groups in civil society.

Literacy and science voluntary people's movements

The Tamil Nadu Science Forum (TNSF) was inspired by the successful Kerala Sasthra Sahithya Parishad (KSSP), a people's movement that popularized science throughout Kerala, Tamil Nadu's neighbour to the west. Organized at the grassroots, TNSF drew college professors, school teachers, activists, and other citizens who joined this people's movement to bring popular science education to communities throughout Tamil Nadu. As KSSP had before them, TNSF adopted song, dance, and drama as media through which activists would carry out science education. Activists in these people's movements viewed meaningful learning as a highly active process in which participants feel comfortable and engaged.

According to Cody (2009), founders of TNSF organized another grassroots people's movement, Arivoli Iyakkam, "a social movement to spread literacy and Enlightenment rationality" (2009:351). Soon, however, it was "taken up as a joint NGO-state program under the National Literacy Mission," becoming a voluntary movement adopted, funded, and backed by the state.² The National Literacy Mission (NLM) was organized in 1988 with the objective of promoting full functional literacy for the adult population in India. Recognizing the success of people's movements like KSSP, NLM used the "Arivoli Iyakkam idea and model of mass literacy through volunteerism" to achieve their goals (Cody 2009:351). An outcome of this state-civil society partnership was the Total Literacy Campaign (TLC), which resulted in a sharp increase in adult literacy through a pedagogical approach that engaged learners in contexts familiar to them and made literacy activity interesting, enjoyable, and relevant for learners (Athreya and Chunkath 1996; Karlekar 2004; Rao 1993).

In these ways, Tamil Nadu's people's movements not only brought popular education to communities underserved by state schooling, they also introduced pedagogical practices that differed dramatically from what was seen in Indian schools at the time. Of course, these voluntary movements also had highly political aims; KSSP's motto, for example, was "science for social revolution." Cody writes of how the Arivoli Iyakkam activists he studied were heavily influenced by Freire's *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, arguing that such programs "increasingly frame pedagogy itself, the production of an enlightened consciousness, as the real work of development" (2009:353). This politicized view of learning and learners, along with the pedagogical forms that resulted, reached new audiences through increasingly widespread popular education activism. Among these

² This phenomenon, that the state partnered with people's movements to achieve its goals, is quite interesting and worthy of discussion, although it is outside the scope of this article. For treatments of the intriguing formations of state-movement partnerships and their implications, see Pai (2005) and Cody (2009). Cody, for example, notes that "many of the functions of governance and development that were once assumed to fall under the responsibilities of the state have been privatized or otherwise automatized, that is, formally shifted into the nongovernmental sphere in the context of neoliberal socioeconomic reorganization" (2009:351).

audiences were Tamil Nadu school teachers, who participated in TNSF and Arivoli Iyakkam in high numbers. These teachers gained years of experience experimenting with alternative, ‘active’ approaches to education through their movement activities while they were still engaged in ‘regular’ school teaching. Several of these activists from Vellore have gone on to play crucial leadership roles in the ABL movement.

The emergence of a new network

During his tenure as Collector (administrative head) of the Vellore district in the early 1990s, Vijayakumar noticed a number of children attending the literacy movement programs, which were intended for adults. He soon learned that these children were working in local factories. To get them back into school he worked with both employers and parents, threatening the former with legal action and providing the latter opportunities for income generation. Vijayakumar also created a ‘bridge’ program to help the children transition back into schooling. With some funding from UNICEF, this project became the Child Labour Abolition and Support Scheme (CLASS). To develop and support CLASS, Vijayakumar recruited active volunteers from TNSF and Arivoli Iyakkam, including Mr. Shanmugam and Mr. Pitchaiah, both of whom were also school teachers. Shanmugam was appointed the director of CLASS, responsible for the bridge program in 60 schools in the district. He worked closely with Vijayakumar during this time: “I was like a right-hand to him” (*Translated from Tamil*).

The pedagogical methods used in the CLASS bridge program developed directly from the work of TNSF and Arivoli Iyakkam, and included songs, dance, stories, and games, along with other active learning methods. About his participation in TNSF, Shanmugam explained,

We were members [of TNSF], trying to see how to teach children in easy manner, to attract them. When they come from the outside world into the school they feel a pressure, a heavy load. When they come to school itself they feel as if they are coming to a new world, to be confined. When children feel the same way in school as they feel at home, then they will learn easily. This is their [TNSF] thought.
(*Translated from Tamil*)

Ultimately, many TNSF and Arivoli Iyakkam participants became trainers for the volunteers who would teach in the CLASS program.

Soon after the emergence of CLASS, the collaboration among voluntary people’s movement actors, UNICEF, and the bureaucratic leadership of the district fostered the birth of what came to be called the “Joyful Learning” method. Joyful Learning is often described as a precursor to ABL in Tamil Nadu. Influential to Vijayakumar’s thinking about education during these years was an inspirational UNICEF Education Project Officer named Ms. Elke.

Elke, a German, was an advisor who guided district officers on a specific plan of action for improving elementary education. Vijayakumar became friends with Elke and recalls that, "It was her constant guidance and motivation that initiated me in to basic education during early 1990s. Even though she was from Germany, her knowledge of the Indian education system was thorough." He noted that Elke taught them about the weaknesses in the educational system and provided clarity about what needed to be done to improve schooling. Her influence, along with those of the people's movements, work on CLASS, and many others, informed the development of Joyful Learning.

Although Joyful Learning was developed for child labourers who were out of school, it quickly made its way into mainstream government schools in Vellore. A story frequently told about Joyful Learning is that when it was practiced in the bridge program on government school premises, 'regular' government school students and teachers observed what was happening, grew interested, and demanded to be included. The program eventually grew beyond Vellore. Tamil Nadu's Director of Elementary Education was so impressed by the Joyful Learning method that ultimately 120,000 teachers across the state were trained in the approach. Elke facilitated financial assistance from UNICEF for this large-scale teacher education effort that took place in 1995-96.

The Joyful Learning training was an interesting experiment in the history of Tamil Nadu government schooling, but its impact on classrooms was limited because it was not supported by the policies, practices, textbooks, and other teaching and learning materials in place at that time. Additionally, Vijayakumar was transferred to a different post in the state administration and support for the program ceased. Yet, important to our analysis, the network that emerged in Vellore grew in numbers and influence over the two decades since the initiation of CLASS. This network was central to developing ABL and scaling it throughout the state, and it remains active today in the areas of teacher education, professional development, administration, and the continuing revisions of ABL materials and methods. Much of this was made possible by Vijayakumar's movement into roles in which he could pull members of this network into the work of the state, something he did as Commissioner of Chennai (where ABL was first piloted) and then again as Director of SSA. For example, Shanmugam and Pitchaiah, the two voluntary movement activists who became leaders in CLASS, remain key figures in this network and, at the time of this study, were currently active in ABL education and support throughout Tamil Nadu. Next we discuss a third important source of network members: progressive educators from NGOs and elite schools.

Progressive education movements

Not long after the Vellore Joyful Learning network emerged, it grew to include leaders in progressive education circles in South India as well. As he had done with TNSF

and Arivoli Iyakkam, Vijayakumar called on educators involved with the network of elite schools designed around the education philosophy of J. Krishnamurti and with schools influenced by Montessori methods in the region. From these circles, which were centres of education knowledge that countered the status quo of Indian government schooling, several well-respected educationists became resources, partners, and proponents of ABL. In this way and others, the ABL network grew larger, developing another bridge between the state and, in this case, fields of education knowledge outside the state system.

The pedagogical methods developed by Maria Montessori, who had spent many years in Madras in the 1940s, have been influential in a few isolated pockets across southern India for generations. Some early initiatives of the emerging network drew on Montessori's philosophy and methods. In fact, the current approach to mathematics instruction, featuring manipulative Montessori math materials, has been in use in Tamil Nadu since before ABL emerged on the scene. Perhaps even more prominently, an initiative called Self-Learning Methodology (SLM) not only introduced a Montessori-inspired approach to classroom teachers, but also fostered learner-centrism in teacher education itself. Despite that, outside of the new math materials, it had little long-term impact on classrooms (facing the same obstacles as did Joyful Learning), the SLM initiative actually had lasting influence on teacher education in Tamil Nadu. Specifically, teacher education became active and learner-centred rather than lecture-based. As we were told by the director of the state's teacher education office, "We are totally against lecturing in all interaction. Even in training, even for the pre-service training, or even when the director is conducting a review meeting. One-way talking will not yield the [desired] result."³

Montessori, J. Krishnamurti, and other pedagogical theorists influenced the Rishi Valley Education Centre, an acclaimed practicing site for innovations in school education in an Indian context. Located in the Rishi Valley of Andhra Pradesh, the multi-organization campus is home to a well-known elite boarding school based on the education philosophy of J. Krishnamurti and sponsored by a foundation that bears his name. The boarding school focuses deeply on the learner and the learning process rather than on transferring content to students. The campus also houses the RIVER NGO, a rural education development and training centre that developed the basic design and structure of ABL methodology. In contrast to the elite youth served by the boarding school, the campus's RIVER program works to transform the schooling experiences of poor children in under-resourced rural schools. Informed by earlier Rishi Valley initiatives to promote, extend, and improve rural education, teachers and leaders working under the auspices of RIVER developed the initial prototypes for what would become Tamil Nadu's ABL program in the late 1980s.⁴ Their effort was heavily influenced by the work done by David Horsburgh who had taught at

³ Throughout the report, some direct quotations have been edited slightly for readability.

⁴ RIVER calls their methodology "Multi-Grade Multi-Level Methodology" (MGML). In the years since developing MGML, RIVER has gone on to become an award-winning organization with international reach.

Rishi Valley's boarding school much earlier. Horsburgh ran a small school called Neel Bagh, as well as a small teacher education program; the practices of both bore no resemblance to school-as-usual in Britain or in India. In his school, rural children independently and actively engaged in learning activity in a multi-age environment.

A centre for program development, school outreach, and professional development, RIVER was a resource to Vijayakumar as early as the Vellore years when he sent CLASS volunteers to observe their model in practice in satellite schools. Later, government school teachers throughout the district observed RIVER's program as well. Because the approach featured its own learning materials and a structure that could replace textbooks and lecture, RIVER's methodology appeared to solve the problem encountered when Joyful Learning and SLM were introduced but not supported by resources and practices of the classroom. This made the method attractive to Vijayakumar and his team, but as he was transferred to other administrative posts in Tamil Nadu, their early attempts to adapt the methodology stalled. As we will discuss later in the report, however, by the beginning of the 2000s, however, RIVER became a key partner in the development of ABL in Tamil Nadu.

Over the many years before and since, educationists from Rishi Valley, its sister schools, and other Montessori-influenced organizations (including those involved with the SLM initiative) have continued to work on the ABL initiative as key members of the network. One important example of the continued growth of partnerships between SSA and these sites of alternative educational knowledge is an outreach initiative of The School (Krishnamurti Foundation India) in Chennai. In 2009, educators including Ms. Sumitra Gautama, Ms. Suchitra Ramkumar, and others from The School conducted an extensive voluntary review of ABL materials. Through this review and other activities, they also contributed much to the revisions of materials that followed. This voluntary effort on the part of The School-Outreach promoted the shoring up of ABL both theoretically and practically as Ms. Gautama, Ms. Ramkumar, and others brought knowledge from years of experience teaching in a Krishnamurti school to bear on the work of review and revision.

Ultimately, the ABL network bridged alternative fields of education knowledge with state agents (who, at the time of our research, included not only Vijayakumar and his staff but also leaders and staff of other offices within the state's education sector). What were these alternative education knowledges? The people's movements, TNSF and Arivoli Iyakkam, worked to promote engaging, meaningful, empowering, and often political learning through song, dance, and games, in settings that were familiar and comfortable. The progressive education movements were steeped in the theory and practice of engaged, active learning in which the learner makes choices, asks questions, follows her interests, and expresses her voice. Perhaps it goes without saying that such orientations to learning and learners do not reflect the everyday experience of children in conventional government schools in India (Gupta 2006; Jeffery 2005). When actors from these existing movement networks partnered with Vijayakumar and state organizations, they produced a

new movement network characterized by activist orientations and alternative education knowledge.

Opening the state to alternative education knowledge

Interestingly, although the network generated knowledge for government school change from outside the state's formal channels, it was positioned to pursue this change through the state's administration. This pursuit became possible through the movement's success at opening the state to alternative education knowledges. Reflecting on the impetus for the ABL movement, Vijayakumar stressed two things to us repeatedly: "There is enough proof to show that the existing system does not produce results. And alternatives are available." He continued, "May not be in the government system, but we looked beyond. We did not just confine ourselves to the government system, not just the public school system. There are a lot of NGOs who are practicing excellent methodologies elsewhere." By looking to the voluntary people's movements and to progressive education circles for knowledge and leadership, Vijayakumar noted that they found new sources of knowledge for use in government schooling. He stressed that the team did not limit themselves to the state's existing education knowledge. "We have the wherewithal, we have the resources, and we have the will and mind look out. See, we did not confine ourselves to looking for solutions in [state offices]."

Building the ABL movement's knowledge base from outside the system did not mean that all of the leadership came from outside of the state. Working in State Coordinator positions (key leadership roles) alongside Shanmugam and Pitchaiah were Mr. Ratinavelu who had served as a professor in the state's teacher education sector, and Ms. Malathi, who was a former Head Mistress and Supervisor of several schools. Many leaders within SSA, knowledgeable and fierce advocates of ABL, had always worked in the state system. Yet, although key players in the ABL movement network came from both within and outside the state, the education knowledge informing the movement was deliberately sought from multiple sources. In later chapters we describe some of the ways in which the ABL movement team worked to open the state to these alternative knowledges. In the next chapter, we describe the nature of the knowledges that underpinned the figured world of the ABL movement

CHAPTER 2

The Figured World of the Activity Based Learning Movement

'Figured Worlds' is a concept developed by anthropologist Dorothy Holland and her colleagues (1998) to articulate how cultural worlds are realms of interpretation, jointly-produced over time by the people who populate them. These authors write that new figured worlds are created "by recombining elements from those we know" (1998:237). This history of a school reform movement that drew its members from voluntary people's movements, progressive education circles, and the state's education system (from teachers to IAS officers), represents the emergence of a new figured world that both imported and produced anew cultural knowledge for educational change. Education researchers have used the figured worlds construct to analyze how particular worlds in formal education make particular identities possible for youth and adults, how agents are positioned and position themselves along lines of power in figured worlds, and how these agents 'author' themselves within those worlds (see for example Bartlett 2007; Blackburn 2003; Ma and Singer-Gabella, 2011; Rubin 2007; Tan and Calabrese Barton 2008; Urrieta 2007). Our aim is different in that we are interested in how the figured worlds construct conveys both the historical nature of and distinctiveness among worlds as realms of interpretation. Holland and colleagues, noting that "figured worlds are historical phenomena...which themselves develop through the works of their participants" (1998:41), describe how new figured worlds are created through movements (1998; 2008). They also pay close attention to how figured worlds have their own "cultural knowledge" (1998:66) and "specialized discourses and practices" (1998:235) that distinguish them from other worlds. Understanding the ABL movement network as a figured world, developing taken-for granted cultural knowledge and articulating visions of the future that counter the reality of the present, illuminates how cultural worlds of schooling develop and shift over time.⁵

Particularly interesting in the ABL story was the extent to which individuals in different roles with different backgrounds appeared to share views on how learning happens, how children should experience school, how school practice should proceed, and so on. Movement networks create 'horizons of meaning' through their work together (Allen et al. 2007). Despite diverse backgrounds, as network members engaged in dialogue and practice, developing and promoting ABL over time, they appeared to generate collective frames of reference. In this chapter we discuss the horizons of meaning that countered the status quo of government schooling in Tamil Nadu.

⁵ To be clear, we are not arguing that the ideas we discuss below are unique to this network.

The nature of learning and learners

"It is not a rocket science to know that we don't know to teach the children in the manner they learn. That is, [the conventional] classroom is not conducive for the children to learn." In this statement, Vijayakumar espoused a sentiment that we heard over and over in our conversations with key players in the ABL movement. In the figured world of this movement it was taken for granted that conventional schooling as practiced in India's government schools does not reflect what we know about learning and learners. Several central discourses of learning and learners in the ABL movement network aligned with those of the voluntary literacy and science movements and the progressive education circles. These included but were not limited to (a) learning is a natural human activity that occurs regularly in our everyday lives, (b) children should feel comfortable and free in learning environments (and not be controlled authoritatively), (c) learning environments should be oriented around the learner, not the teacher, and (d) children must be actively engaged to learn. A corollary to these ideas about learning was the argument that conventional schooling fails because these conditions of optimal learning are not met. Shanmugam, formerly active in Arivoli Iyakkam and TNSF, captured these sentiments: "The child, before coming to school, learns a lot of words. With their parents, peer group, uncles and all those things. But when they come to the school, the child is so quiet. Why? The teachers are well trained. The system is very good. And children are ready to learn. But nothing happens in the classroom" (*Translated from Tamil*).

The impossibility of passive learning was frequently mentioned in our interviews, as when Vijayakumar said, "What do we do in conventional schools? We make children sit in rows and columns and make them observe. That doesn't work." Malathi, one of the State Coordinators of ABL, contrasted the conventional classroom with that of ABL, highlighting the child's independence and freedom to engage with learning materials. "Before...when the teacher is teaching, no child is participating...'Sit tight, listen to me carefully,' that's the volume by the teacher. But now, any child can do any activity. Whoever in whichever position, they are doing, not expecting the teacher for all activities." This view was often discussed in terms of "child-centric" versus "teacher-centric" education.

Another central construct in the figured world of ABL was that all children were viewed as having "imminent capacity to learn," although individual children may need more or less time to learn particular material. An ethic of equality among children was frequently present in descriptions of children as learners. At one point in our conversation, Vijayakumar said, "Nobody is better or lower here. Nobody is superior or inferior here. Some children learn faster, some children learn slower. Some children may be fast in English, some children may be faster in mathematics." Because children were viewed as capable learners if provided engaging environments and their own timeline, whole-group examinations were not given. Instead, regular, individualized assessments were part of the

daily activities in the ABL classroom. Written documents and interviewees frequently asserted that ABL eliminated the failure that pushed children out of conventional schools.

The convictions that, on one hand, every child can learn, and, on the other, children are equal irrespective of their success on school tasks, were clearly at odds with what we heard about conventional views of learners in the government schools. One explanation from a teacher who, despite initial resistance, helped develop ABL materials and pilot them in her classroom powerfully highlights this difference. She explained that prior to ABL she could only reach some of the children in the class: "About five of them read to some level. The rest of them were 'dumb.' I couldn't do anything." In contrast, with ABL, "I made all children read well. All 34 children have completed the English ladder. The maths ladder—completed. The reason for that is this method. That is very interesting for me, no? I have made all of them read. When I go back home and think about it, I feel happy" (*Translated from Tamil*). In the new system, no longer could some children be constructed as "dumb."

Much less explicit in our conversations with ABL reformers were the transformations of the social space in the classroom, but these are worth highlighting for what they indicate about constructions of learning and learners. Teachers' move from standing at the front of the room to sitting on the floor with children was initially controversial, one of the only aspects of ABL contested by the teachers' union. Yet, with some slight modification for teachers who were physically uncomfortable, this aspect of ABL was retained and is a visible reminder of the symbolic and material shifts in social interaction in the classroom. The teacher quoted above remarked upon these shifts, saying, "If we sit on a chair we can ignore children, no? We can keep them aside. In this [ABL] there is no choice. We have to go across to all the children" (*Translated from Tamil*). Also striking, especially in comparison with the conventional classroom, were the accessibility of the learning materials and the ownership with which children approached these materials. Malathi, noting that the textbook had been the focus of teaching in the conventional classroom, explained, "Previously [the book] is the only material, and even if the teacher draws anything, they will place it on the board. Only one chart on the top of the class... Children won't touch 'because they will tear,' the teacher will say... But now everything is at the reach of the students." Our visits to a range of government school classrooms confirmed Malathi's statement as we observed children moving around freely, accessing materials confidently, and explaining their work to us knowledgably and with a sense of ownership.

One high-ranking SSA officer framed the classroom activity as "healthy" democratic practice.

Normally in the regular classroom, it is "kindly sit down." "Don't talk." Like that. Now there is no such discussion going on. Now the teacher and student always sit together and now [there is] discussion in the classroom. And the classroom is very noisy now, and once upon a time the classroom was very calm... But noisy is related

to the learning, not the jumping and not the playing. So that is the difference. It is a healthy democratic classroom we created.

Later, this officer alluded to another implication of the active ABL classroom, noting, “Now the entire classroom is mixed with all the boys and girls. Previously it was boys separate, girls separate, and boys and girls would sit in rows, columns, et cetera. Now there is no caste, no creed—all the children are sat together.” Although caste and gender were mentioned infrequently in our interviews, other participants alluded to the sense of equality reflected in the officer’s statement. Indeed, the child’s freedom of movement in the ABL classroom, her ownership over the classroom learning materials, her noisy activity, and the nature of her interactions with the teacher and other children all suggest a sea change in how children are viewed—both as learners and as social agents—in the figured world of the ABL movement.

Duty of state agents

Other collective frames of meaning in the figured world had less to do with learners and learning, and more to do with the activist sensibility of state agents and their partners in civil society. An important undercurrent in the ABL movement network appeared to be a commitment to the education of children living in poverty. Although we rarely heard this sentiment expressed directly, key reformers who worked for the state spoke forcefully of their responsibility for the improvement of government schools. Vijayakumar, for example, frequently framed this responsibility in reference to the salaries provided by the state, once noting, “as managers of educational institutions, educational system, we felt that we were responsible for making children learn. And if children don’t learn, we also realized we don’t earn our salary. And we are paid heavily for this.”

The activist-style commitment of the range of actors in the ABL network appeared to run deep. There was certainly a sense of moral duty, which was framed by a critique of the state’s general negligence to the education of children in poverty. “All along, nearly 70% of children were not learning mathematics after five years of schooling. And 30 to 40% of children were not learning language, even to read, to write, even after five years of schooling.” As with Vijayakumar here, other key reformers had such numbers on the tips of their tongues, frequently citing statistics indicating the failure of the government schools historically. Vijayakumar continued, “Who bothered? Why it is nobody’s botheration? It’s nobody’s loyalty. It’s all there in black and white in paper at the national level...Nobody ever bothered to look at what happens in this classroom.” The ABL movement network constructed itself in response to these failures.

In the ways described above, the figured world of the ABL movement promoted counterhegemonic discourses of the child, of learning, and of the role of the state in the

education of all of its young citizens regardless of their background. Of course, much more could be shared about the figured world of the ABL movement; our description of collective frames of reference is necessarily cursory. What we have attempted to articulate, however, are several prominent horizons of meaning, at once taken for granted within the network yet also radical departures from those informing government schooling historically. It is these taken-for-granted yet counterhegemonic meanings attributed to education in the social world that strike us as helpful to understanding the fundamental change that has taken place in Tamil Nadu's schools.

CHAPTER 3

The Chennai Years: Adapting and Piloting a Portable Pedagogical System

The Joyful Learning and Self Learning Methodology (SLM) initiatives were quite important in breaking ground for ABL. Both left their mark on the future ABL initiative in multiple ways, from the introduction of Montessori math materials to learner-centred teacher education to cascade models of teacher training. Both of these initiatives mobilized and focused the work of the growing ABL network, and they inspired the enormous amounts of commitment, time, energy, and innovation that have come to characterize the ABL movement. Most importantly, perhaps, these initiatives introduced constructivist, child-centred, active-learning ideas and practices to Tamil Nadu's teachers. In a sense, these precursor initiatives began to push the focus from teaching to learning in Tamil Nadu. Yet, as we have indicated, Joyful Learning and SLM faced an uphill battle in the classroom. Although the training provided to teachers was likely stimulating and eye-opening, practices associated with these initiatives clashed with what was happening in the government school classroom. The culture, structure, resources, and expectations of conventional government school education stalled the hard work of these precursor initiatives. The team needed a 'portable' pedagogical system that could transform existing classroom resources, structures, practices, and expectations. They found this in the Rishi Valley prototypes.⁶

Chennai as a site for ABL development and piloting

As we have noted, even during the Vellore years, members of the ABL movement network along with classroom teachers had worked with RIVER in Rishi Valley. They visited to observe RIVER's program, participate in professional development, and even begin to develop ABL materials for use in Tamil Nadu (in 1998-99). When Vijayakumar was transferred to another position, these early efforts to adapt Rishi Valley materials stalled. When Vijayakumar began his tenure as Commissioner of Chennai Corporation in 2003, however, he had found a place to continue the work of changing government school education. As he began taking steps toward the ABL initiative, Vijayakumar brought members of the Vellore team to Chennai Corporation. They quickly began the work of developing ABL.

⁶ Although we did conduct research into the pedagogical history of the Rishi Valley/RIVER prototypes, we leave that discussion to others (see Anandalakshmy 2007; Krishnamurthy 2011), focused as we are on the Tamil Nadu story. However, it is important to note that it was the insight and hard work of RIVER leaders, the Raos, and their team of committed teachers who developed the ABL prototypes.

Central to this process were visits to Rishi Valley to observe schools and engage in professional development. Chennai-based educators in a range of roles, from classroom teachers to artists working on learning materials to officers in the highest ranks in the education administration, received extensive professional development at Rishi Valley. Foreshadowing the future of the ABL movement, there was an egalitarian ethos to this experience; classroom teachers sat beside career IAS officers, activists sat beside teacher educators, all treated as equals.

As important as this professional development was, identifying a pedagogical system (in the form of the ladder and cards) that could completely transform the government school classroom was the boon to the ABL movement. This system was portable, by which we mean it could easily move to classrooms in the form of the ladder, cards, low-level blackboards, and other materials. With a curriculum completely developed into the cards, this was not a supplementary system but a holistic system. Although they found the methodology at Rishi Valley, the Chennai-based team did not simply adopt RIVER's materials. They essentially rewrote every item to adapt the program to Tamil Nadu's schools.

Adapting Rishi Valley's prototypes for Tamil Nadu's schools

Using the Tamil Nadu curriculum, which since 1994 had been based on the 633 competencies identified in MLL, a team of teachers and teacher leaders painstakingly adapted the ladder that children use to guide their learning activities and the cards that explain these learning activities. Not only were Telugu materials translated into Tamil, but entire subject areas (including Social Science and English) were developed into the card and ladder system. The earlier Montessori Math materials were integrated into the program (see Anandalakshmy 2007). Pitchaiah, one of the leaders and later an ABL State Coordinator, explained, "We took the pattern of the method only. Not content." Shanmugam, another adaptation leader and later State Coordinator, also stressed that "We did not take what they had provided as it is. We modified it for our language requirements and our local context. We changed all that" (*Both quotations translated from Tamil*).

Adapting this system to Chennai's curriculum took many months. Importantly, classroom teachers were the ones who developed these learning materials for the ABL pilot. Working closely with leaders like Shanmugam, Pitchaiah, and several others, teachers volunteered hours of their time daily to work together, discussing and developing hundreds of learning activity cards over a period of six months. One teacher explained the painstaking work of developing multiple drafts: "It is very difficult. We will write, we will tear it up. See, it is not that we have high educational qualifications. So we will write something, tear it up, write something else, tear it up. Then we would finalize it" (*Translated from Tamil*). Even once the first set of cards was finalized, the work was not

done. There were several waves of development of the ABL materials. After the first set of cards was developed and simply photocopied in black and white, they were piloted in the participating teachers' 13 schools, which became model schools. After some initial piloting, there was a second six-month round of material development consisting of major changes to the cards, especially those proving difficult for teachers and children. This major revision also included adding colour to the cards and making them more professional-looking and more appealing to children.

From here, the Chennai team was ready to extend the reach of ABL. From the original 13 model schools, ABL was extended to all 264 government schools in Chennai Corporation in 2004. Three teachers from each zone were selected and trained as resource persons. The teachers involved in adaptation and piloting trained these resources persons, who then went on to train the teachers in their zone. Yet this was no ordinary teacher training; instead, teachers experienced a novel form of education in the ways of ABL.

Activity based teacher education

Active and participatory teacher education had begun in earnest with the SLM project. This was taken to a new level when teachers were taken through the actual experience of a six-year-old primary school student. One of the teachers who developed and piloted ABL explained the early training of the resource persons this way:

Just like we make the children sit, we made all the teachers sit. There were 30 teachers in total from all 10 zones. These 30 teachers were 30 students. First what we will do is arrange all the trays with the cards. We will hang the ladders. When each teacher comes, the first stage is like they are joining the first grade. [They complete] the first six-week set of activities for the new students... The children need to know how to sing, to speak, to draw pictures, to use clay. There are a lot of these activities—there are 16 such activities. We will take 6 students. We will show how to arrange them into groups. So we take them to the ladder to identify the card and pick the corresponding card. I know that this card is in the second group, but I will not let that be known to the teachers. I will have them see all the groups and then identify which group they belong to. It was like that for each group that we showed them how to use the ladder and form groups...Arranging the groups, making them read, using the low-level blackboards. What we would expect a student to do, we made all the teachers do the same thing actually. That is how we provided training. (*Translated from Tamil*)

Indeed, observation and participation were important to both the education in and the promotion of ABL. Mr. Vijayakumar referred to this as “one of the critical development models...Let people see for believing you. Don’t lecture, don’t speak theory.” Parents, too,

were not lectured but instead shown ABL in practice at Open Houses on Saturdays (Anandalakshmy 2007). As we discuss later in this report, this principle of showing, not telling, permeated the work of the ABL movement. The power of seeing and experiencing a transformed learning environment seems to have worked well for the Chennai team and, later, for the SSA team.

Another, perhaps related, theme of teacher education in ABL was that it was conducted by peers, not by so-called experts, and it included asking teachers for their thoughts on what they were seeing. Ms. Latha, a high-level SSA official, explained this to us.

Initially we showed them all model schools, how they worked. And we showed them all the cards in the training. “See these are all the new cards which they are practicing in the model schools. If you want to try it out, what do you say?” So their opinion was asked, cards were placed before them, and [the method] has been demonstrated. The ABL classroom has been demonstrated, then [their] opinions were asked. “How do you feel about it? Do you think that this done will work? This is working in all ten schools in a block so if you want to, go and see. How many of you want to?”

[...]

A teacher of his own capacity, her own capacity, who comes and says that, “I have been trying this for two or three years. This is working well. And why don’t you try?” Definitely they accept it. From their peer group, their acceptance is more.

As we shall see, these themes of teacher participation in the ABL movement remain prominent, even through ABL’s scaling across the state. Such participation in the work of the movement created grassroots leadership and expertise, promoted learning and change, and highlighted the administration leaders’ respect for teachers. The next chapter discusses how teachers were viewed and treated as trusted participants in reform activity.

CHAPTER 4

Teachers as Trusted Participants in Reform Activity

We have never said, "You do this." We have never told anybody that you will have to change, you will have to do this. We just developed thirteen schools. Even in those 13 schools, they are all volunteers. We told them we have a proposal to innovate, try something new. Who are all willing?

--Mr. Vijayakumar

Education reform in India has historically relied on a rigidly 'top-down' model of policy implementation (Dyer, 1999). Dyer's work (1996, 1999; Dyer et al., 2004), for example, emphasizes how neglected teachers' local knowledge has been in the pursuit of educational change in India. Yet, as we have suggested, this was not the case for the ABL initiative. In addition to the reformers' responsiveness to teachers throughout the reform activity, a good number of teachers were involved much more fully in reform activity. Indeed, we argue that many were trusted partners working alongside administrative officers and their teams. Prior to the Chennai pilot, for example, classroom teachers were members of the teams that explored the potential of the Rishi Valley prototypes for Tamil Nadu and were trained in them alongside administrative officers and teacher educators. As we have noted, it was classroom teachers who adapted the Rishi Valley materials to the Tamil Nadu context.

Vijayakumar's statement, above, about asking for volunteers among teachers continued with him highlighting the centrality of this initial cadre of teachers in the early spread of ABL in Chennai.

So about 40, 50 teachers volunteered. They were trained, they developed the materials, they practiced it in their schools. Then other teachers were brought here, shown these schools, "look at this." We allowed them to interact for a day or two. "Are you convinced? If you are convinced that children learn better here, children are confident here, there is democracy in the classroom, all that you have learnt in your theory, it can be seen getting practiced here. If you are willing go back and practice we will support you." This is all from 13 to 264 schools we have done. Once Chennai Corporation is changed, then I moved over to this office [SSA]. I did the same thing. There are 400 blocks, so we had some model schools, 5 schools in a block, so 40,000 teachers, so we brought the teachers here. All 40,000 to Chennai. In

fact this allowed them to interact, showed them. "If you are convinced, go back and practice. We will support you." And we meant it by saying that we support you.

The inclusion of teachers; the centrality of their learning, practice, and 'modelling' of ABL; and the support they were provided by the reformers were vital to the success of the ABL pilots. Not only was this participatory approach effective in convincing teachers of the value of ABL, it also showed them a different face of the education bureaucracy, one that engaged with them in dialogue about changing government schooling. They were seeing a changing bureaucratic practice.

In our conversation with the four ABL State Coordinators, Ratinavelu explained that this participation created confidence among teachers, both in the method and in the administrative support.

[Vijayakumar] organized a meeting every Saturday. It would happen in different schools each time. He would get all the teachers together and discuss the problems they faced. He would come around 10:30 and be there till 2:30. We will discuss all the problems faced during that week. Like that it continued for around 11 weeks. From September 2003, it continued for 11 weeks. After these 11 weeks, these teachers became excellent, like gems. They were confident and said they would show that it is possible to do this method.

[...]

When they raised their problems we accepted it. We just listened to their problems without telling them how to solve them. That itself was liked by the teachers. When he (Vijayakumar) listened to their problems, confidence grew in them that he was for them... Initially the teachers who earlier said they could not do this—after 11 weeks all of them said they could implement this method. (*Translated from Tamil*)

The Coordinators acknowledged that this approach created ownership among participating teachers. "The teachers from here went to the blocks and shared their experiences," Ratinavelu continued. They became visible emissaries of ABL. We saw an example of this in another meeting a couple of months later. We were interviewing Ms. Latha, joint-director of SSA, when Ms. Chitra, a school teacher, entered the room. Latha's face lit up as she introduced her: "She is one of the excellent teachers, Chitra. Come here. She is a very excellent teacher, very inspiring teacher who practiced ABL for some time, but she now moved to middle school. Teachers like her are the ambassadors of ABL." Indeed, Chitra, who had begun teaching prior to ABL, provided us an impassioned explanation of how and why ABL is superior to the teaching practices in place before. Interestingly, however, she also spoke to the way in which the administrative officers worked with teachers. "Actually this is a very good system. And another thing is that, because of people like this," referring to Vijayakumar, Latha, "and all. They give a lot of freedom to us. We are very free to speak."

Indeed, the top-ranking SSA officer during the time of our research referred to the teachers as the “experts.”

As can be seen in reformers’ description of teachers as “gems,” “experts,” and as “excellent,” central to this inclusionary, participatory, and responsive approach to teachers during the ABL initiative appeared to be a deep respect and trust for teachers. We found this striking because Indian teachers, like teachers in the U.S. and elsewhere, often bear the brunt of blame for the failures of government schooling. This was not the case in the ABL movement. “We never, never blamed anybody,” Vijayakumar said. “We told them that we trust you. We trust teachers. If teachers have not been able to produce results, if they have been failing earlier, that was not their problem. That was a system problem.” He went on to explain to us that

When somebody tried to blame teachers, saying that teachers’ accountability is the issue: “They don’t attend schools. They are indifferent. Their motivation levels are low.” I don’t agree. Our experience has been that their perception is wrong. Teachers are motivated.

Teachers even shared in the attention and accolades ABL generated, which was something that made a strong impact on one teacher we met. She was one of teachers who developed the original ABL materials for Chennai’s pilots. She told us of the high-ranking officials from the government who lauded the work of the teachers.

The District Collector, the CEO, they all gave us very hearty welcomes. They did it very well. They would take us and introduce us. If the Collector introduces us, isn’t it a big deal? They gave us cars [to use], they took care of all our expenses. We went there with a lot of respect and came back with a lot of respect. (*Translated from Tamil*)

Later in the interview this teacher remarked on how these kinds of accolades were unusual for teachers.

When we went initially, teachers like us knew only about our immediate surroundings and context. We remained within that only. When we were sent from here, we thought, “What are we going to write? Would it be useful?” We started working on this with that attitude, without too much interest. What M.P. Vijayakumar did was to bring all the important people from the Secretary onwards, Minister and all of them. When we got an opportunity to meet all these people, we ourselves got the feeling of responsibility, that we should do this properly according to a proper method. When we observed that all these people are looking at this and when we knew that this is going to spread all over Tamil Nadu, an interest automatically got created within us. [...] When these important people, a lot of IAS officers were there, that was a good experience for us. All of them now know [me]...

So that makes me happy, no? Having been born in a small village and come here. So because of that we became like volunteers (laughter). (*Translated from Tamil*)

As this teacher suggests, these kinds of experiences contributed to the movement ethos among teachers. On one hand, they conveyed the importance of the work they were doing. On the other, that teachers were involved alongside the bureaucratic activists who were promoting ABL suggested a grassroots orientation to the reform movement. Teachers saw that they were key participants in government school change, that they were respected by administrative reformers, and that they were getting credit for the work.

CHAPTER 5

The SSA Years: Bureaucratic Activism for Scaling Up

This is our actual thirst. So without any, before we got the government order and other things, we are continuously planning how to promote this methodology to schools. In government schools especially, this is very difficult. So [this is] our thinking, our thought, for very long period, for two years or three years or five years. We are not worrying about even our family... Actually I forgot my family within 3 years... [It is] like that for each and every one. But we are always thinking that, how this process has to be promoted.

--Mr. Kannappan, State Official

So it was in 24 into 7 we worked. In fact, we should not say we 'worked.' We lived in ABL.

--Ms. Latha, State Official

Our blood is ABL blood.

--Ms. Malathi, ABL State Coordinator

These statements, made by key members of the ABL team, suggest the movement-like nature of the promotion of a reform that has been called revolutionary. Although it is the transformation of pedagogical practice in primary-level government school classrooms that has earned the ABL initiative the 'revolutionary' label, equally stunning for those of us who study educational change is how rapidly this reform has been scaled up throughout the state. Indeed, the ABL movement is fascinating because it is so unlikely. As scholars of reform have noted for decades, radical transformations of classroom practice are rare because reformers fail to recognize that change is complex, non-linear, and reliant on meanings made in cultural context (Fullan 1982, 2005; Sarason 1971, 1993). Reform in India has been particularly vulnerable to these limitations because, historically, the state has relied on a tightly-controlled 'top-down' model of policy implementation (Dyer 1999) and has been burdened with excessive bureaucratic red tape (Gupta 2006). Yet, in the ABL case, many of these limitations have been exploded.

Once the ABL initiative moved from Chennai Corporation to SSA under the directorship of Vijayakumar, the scope of the movement grew dramatically. Working with schools numbering in the tens of thousands, the ABL network pursued the movement

within the state's education sector. Much continued from the Vellore and Chennai years, including the participation of key members of the ABL team. Prominent members of the movement network were strategically placed in key roles within the organization to lead teacher preparation, learning material development, and other responsibilities associated with taking ABL to scale. Other network members located outside of the state system continued to work on the ABL initiative through consultancies and informal roles. Ultimately, however, the knowledges and orientations of the network's figured world had to interface with new publics and generate broader political and administrative support.

In this chapter we describe how ABL was taken to scale and the multiple types of bureaucratic activism that characterized this pursuit. Certainly, the bureaucratic activism we describe here began during the Chennai years. Yet, with a larger scope came a larger challenge for administrators during the SSA years. The style of bureaucratic activism engaged by the team included both more conventional approaches and approaches that resembled social movement activism. Put another way, institutional activists engaged strategies for change that combined both movement-building tactics and the conventional tools of administrative power.

Bureaucratic activism in Tamil Nadu's education administration

'Bureaucratic activism' has been empirically and theoretically explored in several social science disciplines although not to a great extent in education research. The construct has been conceptualized in myriad ways capturing differing levels of analysis, including the politicization of formerly politically-neutral bureaucracies of recently-independent states in the postcolonial period (Simmonds 1985); the functioning of specific "administrative agencies as change agents in the policy process" (Lambright and O'Gorman 1992:176); the work of groups of federal bureaucrats aiming to build an informed and democratically-active citizenry (Zwarich 2009); and individual "mavericks within the state bureaucracies organizing the grassroots" outside of the system (Morone et al. 2001:133). Zwarich uses the term to capture, "the contradictory nature of an enterprise that actively and optimistically sought (and sometimes secured) social change from within the confines of the status quo" (26). Indeed, many analysts of bureaucratic activism highlight the apparent contradiction of the construct, referring to the taken-for-granted assumption that "polity members and social movement activists are distinct entities" (Santoro & McGuire 1997:503). Santoro and McGuire suggest that idea of bureaucratic activism challenges this assumption, focusing on insiders working on outsider causes. They lament that, "Unfortunately, social movement theory has yet to conceptualize actors who are located within political institutions but who pursue outsider goals" (503). This is indeed what we found in Tamil Nadu's education sector.

To some extent, our own conceptualization of bureaucratic activism reflects that of Santoro and McGuire (1997), who write, “We view institutional activists as social movement participants who occupy formal statuses within the government and who pursue movement goals through conventional bureaucratic channels” (504). In what follows we explore the nature of bureaucratic activism in SSA’s promotion of ABL. In so doing, we suggest that in working to grow their movement within the state’s education sector, the institutional activists ultimately transformed the nature of bureaucratic work itself.

Use of the conventional tools of bureaucratic power

As we will argue later in this chapter, SSA’s approach to bureaucratic activism was distinctly movement-like in nature, and was characterized by a striking egalitarianism. Yet, SSA could not rely on goodwill alone to take ABL to scale. They had to couple their movement-like tactics with the strategic use of the power of the bureaucracy, which included top-down approaches to the institutionalization of ABL. Using their power strategically was a key form of bureaucratic activism, and one way to address resistance. The movement faced early resistance from teacher unions and from parents and communities. Unions demanded and were granted smaller class sizes. They were also concerned about teachers sitting on the floor as we discussed earlier in this report. This type of resistance was overcome at least partly through using the tools of bureaucratic power. This was put starkly to us by Vijayakumar.

Initially there was some resistance, but then in a government system as I mentioned to you, the hierarchy. See, when the director wants—whatever he asks whether it is sense or nonsense, it will happen. Even if it is nonsense things will be done, implicitly obeyed. No questions asked. That is the hierarchy in a government system. So why [don’t] we capitalize on it. That’s the strategy. When they say strategy in the government system, hierarchy works. What the director [wants], whether he talks sense or nonsense, it happens. So you become the director.

Indeed, we were told by one interviewee that Vijayakumar requested a directorship at Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan even though the government wanted to place him in a more prestigious post. An administrative officer told us that the Chief Minister asked Vijayakumar, “Why you are asking for the director post? I’ll give you the secretary post, but you are asking for a small *chotta* post.” But he says, ‘I want to become a director to implement my project.’ The Chief Minister relented and placed Vijayakumar in the directorship. He was now poised to take ABL to scale.

The traditional tools of bureaucratic power used by the reformers included encouraging government orders and making strategic hiring decisions. Vijayakumar and

his team also worked to lobby government officials to support ABL, as one leader described:

We personally, both Mr. Vijayakumar and myself, personally met the 30 collectors. That is all the collectors. In the evening, when we visit a district, after the meeting is over with the education authorities, we met the collector because the collector is the chief administrative officer of the district. If he imposes or he says anything, it is the order for the entire district. That's why we personally met the collectors: to motivate and explain, what is ABL and how it is useful for rural children.

This leader went on to explain how they generated interest and a high profile for the reform through ensuring that the inauguration of ABL was attended by the highest-level government officials in the state.

Several leaders noted their extensive efforts to create support in the government, explaining that teachers could not be compelled to practice ABL without such political and administrative backing. The government orders mandating the use of ABL methods and materials in all primary-level government schools were particularly important to the ABL movement's success. "Without that order we cannot compel the teachers to do ABL," we were told by one administrator. "Otherwise they will simply refuse. Because then, following the G.O only, we could get grants on various accounts like developing low-level blackboards." Although the ABL movement had generated support from many teachers involved with early stages of the initiative, up-scaling required the participation of over 150,000 teachers and their unions. A top-down approach had to complement reformers' more egalitarian forms of bureaucratic activism.

Not only was this a top-down mandate, it also required approximately 37,000 schools to adopt ABL at once. The administration was met with initial resistance by teacher unions and has since faced criticism for the rapid pace of up-scaling. We talked with several outsiders to the system who wondered why it all had to happen so quickly. What we soon learned, however, was that the quick scale-up was strategic. Vijayakumar understood the importance of timing, given the nature of bureaucratic life spans. He knew he had a short window of time to transform the schools. He and his team proceeded strategically with the plan that once ABL was in place in schools they would address the problems that resulted from the rapid scale-up. This is indeed what has happened, as we describe in more detail below.

Vijayakumar was also strategic in finding ways to keep the members of his closest network in key positions in the administration. Over time, individuals in the network moved into different roles. Some early members from Vellore continued to work closely with the ABL movement as key educational leaders involved with teacher education and support and program revisions. Those who had always been outside the state, such as educators at some of the elite, progressive schools, consulted with the team within SSA and

other state organizations. Such consulting took the form of participation in teacher education, work on curriculum revision, meetings for problem-solving, conducting research, and so forth. Over time, some key members of the reform team within the SSA moved into other state institutions in the education system. One former SSA officer was in a directorship position in the primary teacher education organization when we met him. "Since I got [this institution], I could convince a big wing," he told us. Referring to this individual, Vijayakumar noted how important it was that this member of the initial team that implemented ABL was now in charge of teacher education for the state. Keeping members of the network in influential positions was part of the strategy for sustaining ABL.

Interestingly, although conventional tools of administrative power were used, strategic movement-building within the administrative arm of the state's system reflected particular social and educational ideals of the ABL movement. To put it simply, top-down and grassroots approaches to institutionalizing ABL were engaged simultaneously. Reformers' bureaucratic activism included the issuing of government orders at the same time that it promoted a shared vision for education through participatory, inclusionary, and egalitarian practices.

Changing roles and changing practice: Pedagogical specialization in the bureaucracy

Amita Gupta (2006) notes that, "In the mid-nineteenth century, the colonial administrators implemented a new bureaucratic format for the educational system in India. The new system would be governed by a bureaucracy tightly controlling all aspects of schooling" (46). The bureaucratic system of which Gupta writes has continued to dominate government schooling into the 21st century. Given our research team's understandings of Indian bureaucracies, we expected to hear technocratic explanations of the achievements of the administration when we first met with administrative officials to discuss the ABL initiative. To our surprise, what we often heard instead was substantive conversation about education theory, which seemed to run through day to day activities in the SSA administration building. Dewey, Thorndike, and even Socrates were mentioned in our interviews with administrative officers. One top-level bureaucratic noted to us that the conventional education "system is wrong, not for the individual's fault. So the system has to change. So how [can it] be improved? This kind of discussion is everywhere and anywhere." And indeed, we did observe and participate in such discussion during our research activities. Top-level administrators in diverse roles in the education system shared thoughtful pedagogical conversation with us and, we could see, with each other. Throughout our interviews, we heard enthusiasm for the educational substance of the reform and commitment to the principles of ABL. We also noted that administrators themselves were engaged in active work on the development of new ABL learning materials. All of these observations were early clues that SSA was no standard bureaucratic

organization. What we heard and observed on our regular visits to the SSA building suggested a transformation of the nature of bureaucratic work itself.

One aspect of this transformation was the shifting roles of administrators, from bureaucrats to pedagogues. Even early in his career as an IAS officer, long before serving in any formal roles in the education system, Vijayakumar's interest in improving schooling led him to develop expertise in education theory. He attributed much of his interest and involvement in education to the guidance of his friend and UNICEF Education Project Officer, Ms. Elke. Vijayakumar recalled that even though Elke was from Germany, she taught him a lot about educational issues and what should be done to improve Indian elementary education. Once his interest had been sparked, Vijayakumar became a student of educational theory. "I went through the books on child psychology. Books on teacher training, on the principles of teaching, theories of teaching and learning, the philosophies of education."

Given his elite status in the administrative service, this commitment to understanding education in order to improve schooling for children in poverty impressed many of his colleagues. In our meeting with State Coordinators, one who had worked with Vijayakumar since the early days in Vellore noted,

Now the fact that the low income group does not have access to good quality education has been a long-time bugbear for Vijayakumar. That good quality education should be given to them also was a long-term thinking for him... He was applying various strategies. If we do like this will it work? If we do like that will it work? Like that he asks everybody. (*Translated from Tamil*)

Colleagues noted that even when Vijayakumar was not in administrative positions related to education, he remained interested and connected to the cause of education for poor children. Another Coordinator, Mr. Ratinavelu, explained that this interest even predated the Vellore years.

Ratinavelu: When I was in [another organization], Sir [Vijayakumar] would discuss education with me. He would take me home for discussions. This was in 1980s. In 80s he was the Personal Assistant to the Chief Minister... He always had his focus and thoughts on education. That something needs to be done, that spark was always there within him. 83-84, he would take us home and discuss about what can be done for the children of the poor... He would ask us, "What can be done? What methodologies can be followed?" Like that he used to talk with us. That we need to do something good for these children.

Malathi: Even though he was in the top position there, his mind was always on the primary school children.

Ratinavelu: His full concentration was on education. He was interested in what we were doing. What were the projects we were doing? What was being done in curriculum development? What good things are happening in curriculum? These thoughts were always there within him. (*Translated from Tamil*)

Although many with whom we talked pointed to the novelty of this for some of Vijayakumar's role, we found that many officers in SSA and in other state education organizations were highly engaged in pedagogical discussions and activities, including the development of new ABL learning materials. In response to a question about why this was, one administrator said, "Vijayakumar is a role model for us. He is an IAS officer. Why was he very interested in education?" Perhaps partly because of Vijayakumar's inspirational model and partly because of the broader cultural shifts in the nature of administrative work during the ABL movement and its precursors, theories of learning were raised frequently in our interviews and across many topics of conversation. We heard frequent indications that key members of the ABL movement network, even those in the highest positions in bureaucratic institutions, shared not only understandings of learning theories but also particular commitments to actively applying these theories to educational planning. As such, they were discussed frequently in their everyday work lives. Although these officers did not come from the people's movements or progressive education movements as far as we know, their understandings of teaching and learning suggested collective orientations across the entire ABL movement network, even for those who had not been a part of the precursor initiatives.

In summary, our observations of dialogue about learning, shared knowledges about learning, and active work to apply these knowledges to practice indicated a shift in the nature of bureaucratic practice. One humorous and telling story that we heard was of a group of education professors who visited Tamil Nadu on the bequest of Vijayakumar. One interviewee shared, with laughter, "they spoke about constructivism for two and half hours non-stop" (*Translated from Tamil*). In contrast, another reformer, the chief officer of a state organization, explained to us that lecturing is avoided in all aspects of their work in the organization and is prohibited in teacher education. As we will discuss later in this chapter, the reformers' particular orientation toward learning not only transformed the government school classroom, but it also transformed their work with teachers and other stakeholders. What we saw in the SSA building in 2010 were movement meanings, practices, and identities-in-practice, all pervading the work of the bureaucracy.

Struggle, effort, and commitment: Building the ABL movement within the state sector

"We struggled a lot, like a big movement." This statement was shared by an administrative officer who had worked closely with Vijayakumar and others to prepare the

ground for the scaling of ABL across the state. Indeed, ‘struggle’ was a word we heard frequently in conversations with administrators about their experiences with the ABL initiative. Their descriptions of the enormous amounts of time and effort expended to engage others in considering ABL did not present a picture of bureaucratic business-as-usual. Kannappan, whose comment about forgetting his family during the early years of ABL promotion introduces this chapter, went on to explain the strategic thinking behind generating support for ABL.

How do we convince the teacher? How to convince the district administration and implement? ... How to convince the education minister? And how to convince the education secretary? Because it is a real fruitful methodology... Vijayakumar is a very senior man, so whatever he says, there is some acceptance level in the government system, in the higher level. That support has to reach to all the levels.

When we asked him why other states that had experimented with ABL or similar programs had not been successful, Kannappan made it clear that putting in years of effort was not characteristic of government systems. “But here, it has been a process of nearly more than ten years. It is one decade. It is not a very easy thing. This has to be developed step by step.”

Several reformers told of their tireless efforts “convincing” people of the value of adopting ABL through a particularly time-consuming process of organizing visits to ABL model classrooms, engaging in long discussions about what was observed during the classroom visits, and responding to teachers’ and other stakeholders’ questions and concerns. Although Vijayakumar and his team certainly used the tools of bureaucratic power accorded them, as we have discussed, their primary mode of bureaucratic activism was a movement-like persuasion of those at the grassroots to rethink primary schooling. To do this, the team asked them to observe and reflect on the practices of the ABL classroom. This combination of strategy, effort, and grassroots participation is apparent in the following description of early reform work by one of the ABL State Coordinators:

For taking ABL to all levels, a lot of effort was made. Vijayakumar adopted several tactics. Like he picked teachers who were practicing ABL in their schools to come and visit the ABL schools in Chennai to observe. Then he picked “educators,” good teachers, around 100 of them in the Chennai area. He sent them all over, to find out how those schools were. What are the changes that would make them better? To create those model schools, the struggle this team had to undergo was enormous.
(Translated from Tamil)

As we have suggested, the bureaucratic activism of Vijayakumar and his team was informed by the educational and social ideals underpinning the ABL movement. One aspect of introducing and generating understanding of ABL that was stressed to us repeatedly was that the team never lectured nor introduced ABL theoretically initially. As Vijayakumar told us, “We never spoke theory. Not that we never spoke theory at all. We spoke theory after

showing the working models. After having seen [ABL in practice], then we explain to them the logical philosophy." This approach was strategic on one hand, underpinned by the knowledge that seeing ABL in practice was undeniably persuasive. On the other hand, however, the reform team's approach to change reflected their theories of learning. As we have discussed, the ABL movement network was steeped in constructivist, learner-centred philosophies of learning. This was captured nicely when one top-ranking official described with a smile the Socratic way in which they facilitated discussions with teachers post-classroom observation: "Myself and Mr. Vijayakumar, we met [with teachers] in the evenings, 4:30 to 5:30, like that. We give a 1-hour talk just like Socrates and motivate the teachers. That gives a lot of impact. Each and every teacher has left assured in the evening." Kannappan suggested that teachers left these meetings with their questions answered. This same approach was used with everyone in the system, not just teachers. Vijayakumar explained the process for communities and parents: "We brought the community into the classroom. We brought the parents into the classroom. 'You see for yourself after three months of trial.' The parents were taken into the classroom to see how children learn. That convinced them."

In summary, the team worked to persuade stakeholders across multiple roles, and for all, introductions to ABL avoided didacticism. Educating others about ABL was active, participatory, egalitarian, and provided learners opportunity to think critically and speak their mind. These tenets were not only behind ABL methodology but also behind the precursor movements that informed the network. The style of bureaucratic activism adopted by Vijayakumar and his team, while certainly strategic, appeared in many ways a reflection of these movement principles and the dedication and struggle of education activism.

Responsiveness to teachers

Although there were many dimensions of reformers' efforts, most often mentioned were those related to the team's responsiveness to teachers and others in the education system. When ABL was piloted and again after ABL was implemented state-wide, teachers' problems with and criticisms of the program were elicited in multiple forums. After every teacher training experience and at every school visit, feedback and concerns were collected from teachers. These were regularly addressed through correspondence, problem-solving, and, as noted above, substantial revisions of ABL materials. Importantly, it was not lower-level staff members who were sent to work with teachers; it was Vijayakumar and his team who travelled around the state to listen to teachers' concerns and critiques. Several key players in the reform movement described this work:

We visited nearly all the districts from Chennai to Kanyakumari at least one time or two times, and we met the people directly in the school, not in any meeting ground.

[We asked,] “What are the difficulties you have faced when implementing the ABL process?” Then we have kindly noted down everything from the teachers. Whatever the teachers tell us. Then we come back to the headquarters and we sit with the state resource person. “These are the difficulties as raised by the teachers, and what are our solutions?” Then the interaction is continuous. Then we got the solutions from the state resource meeting and this solution has to be immediately sent to teachers through circular and email within a flash of time. [...] We continuously meet the teachers. And we continuously meet the district officials. (A high-level official)

Every evening, we all meet together with the participants. And then the SPD [State Project Director, Vijayakumar] will ask them what they observed there. “What about your feeling? What do you want? Something more?” So once we return, that is not the end. We want everybody’s suggestion, and we will make it. We will modify every year. We are doing that work. So he asked everyone, “What is your suggestion? What’s your idea? What’s your opinion?”... After that, everybody has got a mind of doing this. (An ABL State Coordinator [*Translated from Tamil*])

An officer from a different department in the education system described three-hour long meetings with teachers, non-teaching school employees (teacher educators, teacher support personnel, etc.), and administrative officers, noting, “We ask all the teachers to speak, whatever they want to say... Then teachers came out with new, nice ideas. Then they spelt out whatever the difficulties they were facing. Then, all of the issues were taken care of.”

A State Coordinator explained to us, “Usually what happens is, we say child-centred and leave the teacher out. But in this the teacher also seems to be supported. The teacher is also centred in this approach. Both are kept in the centre, one is not left out” (*Translated from Tamil*). We want to emphasize again the participation of top-ranking officers in this process. Vijayakumar himself attended most of these meetings. It perhaps goes without saying that this is not bureaucratic business-as-usual.

One story makes this point clearly. Several teachers shared with us how Vijayakumar provided his mobile phone number to all of the teachers he met. He invited them to call him if they encountered any problems with ABL. Indeed, one enthusiastic teacher we met told us that she called him more than once. As Vijayakumar noted, all members of the reform team shared their phone numbers:

We have given our telephone numbers to all 200,000 teachers. We told them, “this is my telephone number; you call me anytime, whatever problem you have.” In fact... when they went back and started practicing, they encountered a lot of problems. But we were there to support. A team was sent from here. Whenever we received a call, immediately we will attend.

In addition to the steady responsiveness to teachers, this approach introduced a dynamism and flexibility into the reform movement. Although their goal was to convince teachers in the value of ABL, reformers accepted substantive input from the grassroots.

As we have suggested above, we view this approach to bureaucratic activism as having two dimensions. On one hand, the specific ways in which reformers generated understanding, acceptance, and ownership of ABL among teachers (and, importantly, positively influenced their unions) was sometimes referred to as strategic. Although these approaches reflected theories of learning and change that undergirded the ABL movement, they were still considered strategically. On the other hand, the respect and trust for teachers appeared to run deep and be heart-felt. One administrator referred to Vijayakumar's approach to reform as "humanitarian." A key consultant put it better, perhaps, in noting that "the system appreciated the egalitarian approach." Indeed, we would argue that although strategic thinking was central to the bureaucratic activism of the reformers, their egalitarian partnership with teachers was authentic. As with reformers' theories of teacher learning and change, a deep egalitarianism went beyond strategy as an underlying principle of the ABL movement. In the next section we explore this egalitarianism in more depth, and discuss how it played a role in transforming bureaucratic practice by subverting the hierarchies inherent in the state's educational system.

Subverting traditional hierarchies through egalitarian bureaucratic activism

In the previous chapter we described how teachers were key participants in reform activity, including developing ABL materials, piloting the ABL method, and showcasing ABL in their classrooms. Revisiting this participation, we want to suggest here that it was often undertaken in ways that subverted hierarchies between teachers and administrators. Teachers were elevated in status through participating in reform activity (and receiving the associated credit and accolades) *alongside* administrative officers, suggesting major breaks to traditional hierarchical relations in the practice of the education system. Likewise, reform leaders in the administration subverted traditional hierarchies by working alongside teachers in roles that were quite unusual for elite administrators. According to Kannappan, "When we meet the teacher, we fall down to the teacher level, not the director or joint-director level. So we are just like one of the teachers." Just as the oft-repeated story of Vijayakumar providing his mobile phone number was symbolic of the broader transformation of the role of an official leader, so was Vijayakumar's constant presence at teacher trainings. Referring to some of the precursor work in the 1990s, one of the State Coordinators explained,

The special thing about this is, whichever training Vijayakumar was involved in—for example in Vellore, if we had given training to 7000 people, he saw every one of them. If he came in the afternoon, if the others picked up plates to eat lunch, he

would also go and pick up a plate. If all of them sat on the floor, he would also sit on the floor. In 1996, parliamentary elections happened. He was the returning officer, even on that he did not concentrate. He was more focused on schools and training. He would talk to us, talk to the teachers. If he visited a school he would spend one or two hours with the children. (*Translated from Tamil*)

We were told that Vijayakumar even slept on a bench for 10 days, just as participating teachers did, during one training session in the early days in Vellore. Vijayakumar's and his team's breaking from expectations associated with bureaucratic hierarchy were striking to many of the educators we met, who recounted stories such as these with a sense of surprised admiration.

Vijayakumar himself appeared to be a symbol of egalitarianism and commitment to change. As the top officer and leader of the ABL initiative, Vijayakumar's example was the one often highlighted with reverence. Several with whom we talked referred to him as a "great man." One member of his team even compared him to Gandhi.

We used to say Mr. M.P. Vijayakumar [is like] a Gandhiji. Previously, Gandhiji fought for freedom. At present, Mr. Vijayakumar is fighting for students' education. Full quality education he wants. So we used to call him, "Nowadays Gandhiji." So we are all followers. Only because of that, even after my retirement in 2004, I am still continuing in the same thing.

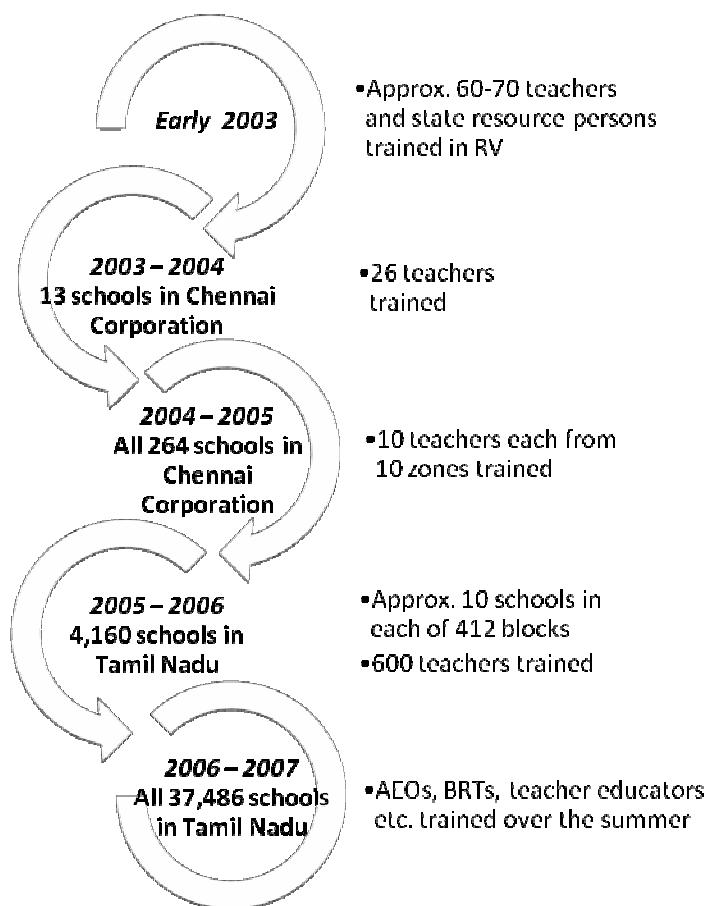
Yet, although Vijayakumar's leadership and example were central to promoting the movement-style bureaucratic activism we have described, we want to emphasize that this principled commitment and egalitarian practice extended to all of the education leaders whom we met. It was not embodied in one charismatic leader but instead permeated the ABL movement leadership entirely. Egalitarianism, along with other principled social commitments, was central to the ABL movement. Just as ABL in the primary school subverts hierarchies in classroom interaction across categories of caste, class, and age, bureaucratic practices subverted hierarchy in the administrative work to promote ABL.

This egalitarian and principled approach to bureaucratic activism generated a moral authority for the reform movement—and perhaps also a sense of authenticity as reformers 'walked the walk' in their promotion of ABL-related learning and change. The moral authority and good will built by the reformers helped legitimate the push for such a quick and dramatic shift in the government school classroom. Although the pedagogy itself soon won teachers over, or so they told us, the egalitarian and participatory approach taken by the SSA appeared important in inspiring others and growing the ABL movement among classroom teachers and other important stakeholders in the education system. It also appeared to soften the blow when the SSA administration scaled ABL across the state, taking the initiative far beyond its immediate supporters, and used the traditional tools of bureaucratic power to do so.

Taking ABL to scale

It was in the 2006-2007 academic year that ABL was taken to scale across the state. First, however, building from the Chennai piloting, over 4000 ABL model schools were developed. In the 2005-2006 academic year, ten ABL model schools in each of the 412 blocks were operational. Only a year later, all of Tamil Nadu's schools were practicing ABL (see figure 1 and appendix).

Figure 1: Steps in Scaling, 2003-2007



CHAPTER 6

Historical Contexts: Generating Political and Administrative Will in Tamil Nadu

We do not want to suggest that prior to the reform efforts the ABL movement was somehow disconnected from other fields, nor that publics outside the network embraced what insiders would call ‘conventional schooling.’ Lest we give the inaccurate impression that the ABL movement operated in a vacuum or that its tenets represented an isolated break from the status quo, we now turn to a discussion of several historical trends that provided supportive contexts for taking ABL to scale. Specifically, education and social justice discourses, generated at different times and in different fields in the political, social, and institutional histories contextualizing the ABL movement, appeared to pave the way for the generation of political and administrative will in support of ABL. Of course, neither empirically nor in terms of space can we address all of the discursive and institutional fields in dialogue with the ABL movement. Instead, our aim in this chapter is to address, albeit briefly, a few historical and contemporary movements in the areas of politics and education that introduced discourses and institutionalized practices that, in our view, produced shifting terrain on which the ABL movement could generate support, allies, and all-important political and administrative will.

National and global education discourses

Well before Gandhi’s critique of British colonial schooling and push for an experiential, practical “basic education” (see Gupta 2006; Saini 2000), one can find the coexistence of competing purposes for and practices of Indian education. As we have already discussed, the voluntary popular education movements alone popularized active learning experiences among both volunteers and participants. One can also find many innovative experiments in experiential Indian schooling, some of which (like Neel Bagh near Rishi Valley) have inspired and informed the ABL movement. These experiments tend to be isolated and located outside of government schooling, but like Gandhian basic education and voluntary popular education movements, they make the language of active learning familiar to many.

In the contemporary era, we can point to the language in 2005’s National Curriculum Framework (NCF), including that recognizing “the child as a natural learner, and knowledge as the outcome of the child’s own activity,”⁷ as evidence of a discursive shift in

⁷ See chapter 2 of the NCF, http://www.ncert.nic.in/rightside/links/nc_framework.html.

the realm of government education that favoured constructs of the ABL movement. Some critique this language, new to the 2005 NCF, as rhetoric without action. Yet rhetoric matters as it serves to prime contexts for initiatives like ABL. If, as Jeffery (2005) has argued, there is a gulf between active learning rhetoric and everyday practice in schools, the ABL movement has effectively capitalized on the rhetoric to promote action.

Institutionalized education innovation in India and Tamil Nadu

Moving well beyond rhetoric is the manifestation of the national and global Universal Elementary Education (UEE) movement (active in India long before the Jomtien Conference) as SSA at national and state levels (see Pai 2005). Institutionalized as a formal project and invested with power and funding, SSA in Tamil Nadu operated with a good deal of autonomy. This meant that when universal elementary education was achieved in the state (with 97-99% of children enrolled in school by 2001), the SSA office was free to promote ABL as a way to improve the quality of education in government schools.

The state of Tamil Nadu itself can be seen as on the leading edge of education reform in India. Tamil Nadu was the first to introduce midday meals in the schools, an innovation that later became a nationwide program. The state also adopted the practice of opening a primary school in each village before it became a national norm. Innovations in teaching and learning practices include the mid-1980's initiative giving Tamil Nadu classroom teachers the responsibility of creating educational materials. Prior to that shift, the development of materials was outsourced to parties external to the system. A member of the ABL movement network explained this change, saying, "When practicing teachers are preparing [materials], then they will be even more appropriate for children" (*Translated from Tamil*). We see this line of thinking continued in the ABL initiative.

Another reform mentioned frequently in our conversations with officials was the nation-wide decentralization of teacher education and professional development. As early as 1986 plans were developed to take teacher training, we were told, "to the grassroot level," locating it in communities rather than only at the state level. This initiative, institutionalized in the mid-1990s, made the scaling of ABL possible.

When tracing the history of pre-ABL education reform movements in a conversation with the State Coordinators of ABL, we were provided a picture of the slow sedimentation of change oriented toward better addressing the needs of government school students. As one of the Coordinators noted, "In each period we had done one [additional] thing" (*Translated from Tamil*). This statement suggests that over time, shifts in education discourse, policy and practice in the state's education sector introduced both structures and cultures that likely helped foster administrative support and cooperation for the ABL movement when it was needed.

Political movements and political will in Tamil Nadu

Alone, such administrative will, though vital, could not garner success for the ABL movement. Vijayakumar told us that although he knew the problem, solution, and strategy for change, and although they had the administrative will, capacity, and an excellent team, “all these things would be of no use if not supported politically.” It was the “matching up of administrative will and political will” that he credited for the success of the reform. Yet, although the team worked hard to convince government agents across the state of the value of ABL, ultimately the generation of political support for ABL did not appear difficult. Since the 1920s, Tamil Nadu’s radical political movements have oriented the political sphere toward discourses of social justice that, as we shall see, dovetailed nicely with the goals of the ABL movement.

A “state known for its vigorous identity politics articulated by the Dravidian movement” (Racine and Racine 1998:6), Tamil Nadu has had a remarkable history of powerful anti-caste movements, which emerged long before Indian Independence (see Anandhi 1994; Geetha 1998; Harriss 2002; Hodges 2005; Pandian 1994; Pinto 1999; Racine and Racine 1998). Although not quite the bastion of leftist politics as is Kerala (Lukose 2009), beginning in the 1920s the Self-Respect Movement “introduced a programme of non-Brahmin uplift in Tamil south India that consisted of a radical critique of social, political and economic relations” (Hodges 2005:251). E.V. Ramaswamy Naicker, referred to as Periyar (the great one) in Tamil Nadu, entered politics by joining the Indian National Congress as part of the freedom struggle in 1919 but soon quit, finding it dominated by Brahmin interests. Opposing the traditional caste and gender hierarchies in Congress and throughout the society, he initiated the Self-Respect Movement. The Self-Respect Movement, constructing Dravida identity in opposition to brahminical dominance, later became the Dravida Kazhagam (DK), which not only opposed brahminical hegemony but also superstition and even religion itself. Several shifts in the movement’s ideology took place in the early years, as Hodges explains:

The Self Respect movement was initially forged in the mid-1920s both in emulation and in critique of a Gandhian Congress Party. By the 1930s, however, it was heavily informed by Leninist socialism, atheism and a Bertrand Russell-inspired rationalism. By the late 1930s it was further preoccupied by a set of particularly Tamil identity politics, or Tamil nationalism. (2005:252 n. 2)

DK eschewed electoral politics as Periyar believed power would corrupt the organization and prevent it from following its social reform agenda. Eventually, however, DK’s second-in-command split from the organization to form Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam (DMK), which entered the electoral arena in the mid 1960s. The revolutionary ideas of opposing caste hierarchy and questioning superstition became part of mainstream discourse in

Tamil Nadu, with DMK “calling for equality down to the remotest village” (Racine and Racine 1998:8).⁸ DMK and its splinter, Anna DMK, have held power in Tamil Nadu since 1967, and the politics of empowerment have been a mainstay of the political agenda since then.

It is within this historical context that the political support for ABL makes sense. A case in point is the embrace of ABL by a Tamil Nadu Congressman and member of the Liberation Panthers Party, which, at the time of our research, was in a coalition with the DMK. In a collection of essays about education published by the People’s Education Forum, the Congressman likens ABL to the methods of Paulo Freire, whose work has informed his own. He writes, “Freire’s ideology heavily influenced our politics; our ideas on oppression and liberation also got sharpened. Even our conferences were held in circular form and lectures were replaced with conversations. We are conscious of authority and oppression in all our activities.” He continues, suggesting that if Paulo Freire had an opportunity to visit a local government-run school,

He would be very pleasantly surprised. I strongly believe that he would want to introduce this method in Brazil too. The stress laid by Freire on reciprocal relationship and absence of ‘authority’ in a teacher-student relationship is implemented in ABL. It changes the attitude that teacher knows everything and students know nothing. (*Translated from Tamil*)

Other more mainstream politicians have also embraced ABL. Both major political parties of Tamil Nadu have whole-heartedly supported this reform. As we discussed in the previous chapter, the Minister of Education has issued a number of government orders in support of ABL. In fact, many reformers stressed to us the importance of the Minister’s support and the gratitude they felt for it. They also explained that high-level political and administrative figures visit the schools frequently. Common were stories of government officials being stunned by the confident and enthusiastic explanations that young children provided them in the ABL classroom. As the ABL story became more widely-known throughout and beyond India, the interest generated among other states and nations brought more visitors and attention to the schools, something that we assume has only bolstered political support.

In summary, we are arguing that although the ABL movement network is singularly responsible for the transformation of Tamil Nadu’s government schools, precursor

⁸ It is important to note that many scholars have suggested a fairly rapid decline in the most radical impulses of Tamil Nadu’s political movements. Anandhi, for example, argues that as early as the 1930s, DMK’s turn toward Tamil nationalism at the expense of Dravida identity politics had the effect of “obfuscating the ideology of representing non-brahmans, dalits and women” (1994:62). Commentators have noted that electoral politics have diluted the most revolutionary messages of these movements over time, with the Hindu revivalism of the late 1980s and 1990s dealing an especially hard blow (Anandhi 1984; Harriss 2002; Pinto 1999).

education reforms and political movements shaped local and national contexts in ways that made scaling up possible. We take these historical administrative and political movements as sites for the production of ABL-friendly discourses and practices in different times, across different fields, and with different publics. Although we cannot present these multilayered histories in detail here, we have pointed to shifts in education discourse and to social justice-oriented political movements as examples of histories that matter. Political and social fields are contested terrains, and particular discourses gain traction in particular historical moments. In the early 21st century, the ABL movement benefited from the availability of particular social and educational ideas that informed the political, bureaucratic, and civil society fields in which it operated.

CHAPTER 7

ABL in Tamil Nadu Today: A Dynamic Program of Reform

There has been no rest among ABL reformers and associated administrators since the scaling in 2007. As we saw on our frequent visits to the SSA building in the spring and summer of 2010, ABL materials were constantly being revised, improved, and supplemented. Of course, as we have indicated, there were multiple revisions of ABL materials and processes during the pilot stages in Chennai. In their work to address teachers' problems and difficulties and the suggestions of other interested parties, ABL problem-solving continued in the three years post scaling.

This work to improve ABL took place in the context of continued partnerships between SSA and centres of educational knowledge outside the state. In 2009, for example, educators including Ms. Sumitra Gautama, Ms. Suchitra Ramkumar, and other consultants from The School [KFI]—Outreach, Chennai had a particularly important role in the examination and revision of ABL. They were asked to conduct an extensive review of ABL materials and contribute to a major reworking of ABL materials. Drawing from their extensive experience at The School and beyond, these educators worked with teachers and key resource personnel to facilitate a six-month effort. Unpaid and continuing with their full teaching loads, the consulting educators were happy to be involved with the SSA's efforts.

Their close and comprehensive review began with an examination of ABL materials and a synthesis of reams of feedback from teachers from each of 30 districts, as explained by one of the consultants:

We first looked at the materials in detail. We did this with a team of teachers and with a few BRTs and we looked at every single milestone. We got feedback from, they were, they were kind enough to give us the feedback from the 30 districts so what we did was actually look through the feedback that first came and actually see what people were saying. So, the first thing we reported was what teachers were saying, you know, what they wanted changed, what they wanted added, what they wanted removed.

Through this initial review, they organized and documented the difficulties and problems with these materials, down to individual cards. Yet this was only the first step. The review was multi-faceted as The School—Outreach consultants not only examined individual cards, milestones, and ladders, but also took on a review of a large sample of student workbooks from across the state "to get a sense of how the children are moving in the ladder." The review continued in multiple directions, with evaluation in ABL as another key

area of examination and ultimately revision. Additionally, this effort included a detailed study of the NCF 2005, which was used as “lingua franca” through much of the work.

The painstaking revision of ABL materials (at the level of individual cards and beyond) and development of new materials and frames took many months. The consultants worked in close collaboration with teachers, BRTs, and others to ultimately both streamline and shore up ABL. New cards and new ladders were developed. Importantly, new ‘whole class’ side ladders were built to accommodate and encourage whole class activities in the mornings and afternoons.

Interestingly, consultants like Ms. Sumitra Gautama and Ms. Suchitra Ramkumar were invited to conduct the review and revision because of their expertise and perspective, yet they explained to us that the process was very egalitarian. The consultants developed presentations and brought resources to the work. For example, they shared their library: “There were times there were a hundred books, you know, maybe 150, 200 in various subjects lying around.” Yet while their particular expertise and extensive efforts contributed much, the ownership remained in the hands of teachers, resource persons, and SSA. With the ABL framework firmly in place, they could raise important issues and questions for classroom practice and teacher education:

How do you engage with teachers? How do you invite them into a deeper journey into a fairly amazing framework? So then we were saying that you needed to look at classroom dimensions, you know: transparency, dynamic of teacher-student relationship, facilitation, listening, facilitating a discussion, how do you facilitate a small group discussion, how do you facilitate a large group discussion. So, how do you facilitate knowledge construction? You have cards, but how do you construct knowledge with those cards?

In these ways, we can see insight and expertise linked to the KFI setting informing the continued revision of ABL. As with the early years of the ABL movement, partnerships with educators from alternative sites of educational knowledge outside the state’s education sector contributed much to the developing practice within the ABL government school classroom.

By the time of our research in 2010, most of the kinks of the pedagogical approach had been worked out. Much effort at the time was going into developing attractive, teacher-authored (and art-teacher illustrated) primary-level books, as a top-level officer explained.

We are doing some enrichment. For example, last year we printed around 77 supplementary readers in English. This year we are also going to print supplementary readers in Tamil for science... [For] Tamil, small, small story books. These are all enrichment activities.

We saw many of these kinds of books hanging on lines from the ceiling in the classrooms we visited.

The administrator who explained the enrichment development with us was fairly new to the ABL initiative, not having been a part of the initial ABL team. Coming into the SSA organization post-scaling, he was struck by how the energy around this movement was not waning: "After three, four years there seems to be a continued energy. One of the reasons must be that there are a lot of new activities coming in... Usually after a few years it dies down. The energy, enthusiasm goes. This is something that has been alive for quite a few years." We were struck by the same thing on our visits to the SSA building, a building brimming with energy and activity. We frequently walked into meetings where new elements were being developed or discussed. Even though ABL was practiced in every school in the state, the work was not ending.

One SSA employee who sat in on a group interview expressed admiration, even astonishment, about the extent to which the State Coordinators responded to schools and teachers.

This system is amazing... We are monitoring continuously. The whole credit goes to these people. They monitor. They go to schools, always appreciate them. They go to the school and give one-to-one training. Not whole class training. They go there, sit with the teacher. "What is the difficulty?" ... They rectify all mistakes on the site. Not just implementation, systematic monitoring.

When facing resistance, this dynamic approach dovetailed with the positive, problem-solving way in which the team handled critique. Kannappan explained,

We will take everything as a positive only. Whatever the hesitation by any people, we take only the positive point: how to improve once again... So based on all the collection of points, we are continuously working together, working with so many people, and modifying a lot of things.

This kind of flexibility aided the team's goals of institutionalizing ABL in Tamil Nadu.

Modifying, transitioning, and examining on the way to institutionalization

At the time of this writing, we know that many are still working to revise ABL, this time modifying the curriculum due to new national requirements. The administration's built-in capacity to always be working on ABL seems to have been institutionalized. This is despite the fact that the SSA has been slowly transitioning responsibility for ABL to administrative organizations with permanent status in the state. SSA is, after all, a project with a limited life. The director of one of these more permanent organizations in 2010 explained this transition to us.

The role of [this organization] in this process initially was less. Now we are involved in this process. I have given all the resources to be involved in this process. Now [my staff members] go to schools, they train the teachers, they monitor the process. Now, 100 percent involvement is there.

When we talked with administrators in other state departments, we heard universal commitment to ABL. Interviewees in different positions within and outside SSA suggested that it was unlikely that the state would return to conventional practices. ABL seems to be well on the way to institutionalization.

Today is also the time for examining emerging outcomes of ABL in the classroom. As some of the state's children who have only known ABL are moving into the 5th standard and out of ABL, the time is ripe to examine learning outcomes of this initial cohort. The state has taken on this challenge. SSA has solicited evaluations since the beginning of the ABL project (see Anandalakshmy 2007; SchoolScape 2009), and the most recent looks closely at learning outcomes, comparing them with classroom processes (Akila 2011). Interestingly, a key finding was that there was a strong correlation between learning outcomes and the fidelity of classroom practice to "ABL expected practices of teaching-learning" (21). The evaluation also raised concerns about children lagging behind expectations. These evaluations (Akila 2011; Anandalakshmy 2007; SchoolScape 2009) have always identified areas in need of improvement in the practice of ABL. With characteristic effort and energy, the ABL movement network pushes forward to address identified concerns, institutionalizing ABL through continued listening and continued problem-solving.

CONCLUSION

Key Themes in the History of the ABL Movement in Tamil Nadu

Despite advocacy to the contrary, Indian government schools at the turn of the 21st century remained mired in conventional approaches, most characterized by lecture, memorization, and recitation, bearing traces of their colonial legacy (Gupta 2006). Today, however, Tamil Nadu government school classrooms feature social dynamics, relations, and practices that were not seen a mere decade ago. Several of the reform leaders we interviewed noted that they were certain that the state could not go back to lecture- and textbook-driven primary schooling in Tamil Nadu. We cannot speculate on the future of ABL in Tamil Nadu, but we have attempted to provide one historical analysis of how this unlikely transformation of government schooling happened. In this chapter we conclude our report by drawing out ten key themes in the history of the ABL movement in Tamil Nadu.

Ideas, ideals, and activism in the historical contexts of ABL

Our case study of the history of the ABL initiative draws attention to the important roles of social, political, and education movements across several diverse fields in developing knowledges, networks, and sympathetic publics for radical school change. In the case of ABL in Tamil Nadu, the fields formed by movements included politics, civil society, elite alternative education, and even the state's education administration. From the historical contexts of the ABL movement, we argue that the following five factors were centrally important to the success of the movement.

1. The long history of public discourse and activism promoting visions of reform and social justice in Tamil Nadu and India

From Gandhi to Periyar to Nehru and beyond, diverse discourses of social justice have permeated Indian politics and civil society. While these ideas and ideals are often highly contested, many seek to break with the hierarchical relations deeply embedded in India's history. Activism in support of greater social justice has been particularly prominent in Tamil Nadu's history, manifesting as anti-caste political movements, voluntary people's movements, and much more. We make no claims for a direct relationship between the socio-political context of Tamil Nadu and the ABL movement. We do, however, suggest that the ideas and ideals of Tamil Nadu's particular social and political histories informed the various fields from which ABL

movement actors, government school administrators, teachers, and other stakeholders came. It is safe to assume that these influenced ABL movement network in some ways as well as important precursor initiatives in the state and civil society. Moreover, these ideas and ideals likely helped to foment political and administrative will, as well as temper the potential for significant resistance to ABL.

2. *The long history of pedagogical innovation in southern India that countered the status quo by developing and promoting active approaches to education*

From J. Krishnamurti to Montessori to Horsburgh to the many, many educators who developed and extended their pedagogical ideas in southern India, the ABL movement could draw on multiple theories and practices of active learning. In elite education networks (like those associated with the Krishnamurti Schools), in voluntary popular education movements and their centres of adult literacy and science education, in NGOs like RIVER that bring alternative education to rural schools, active learning⁹ theories and practices were readily available to the ABL movement. Indeed, the movement's network was comprised to great extent by experts in these theories and practices. It is easy to identify famous pedagogues in South India who have had tremendous influence, but even more important for the ABL movement is its participants' long histories steeped in educational practice and theory. All involved in earlier education advocacy of some kind, these movement actors working in and through the state brought their knowledges to bear on the world of government schooling. Their histories provided the ABL movement taken-for-granted knowledge about learning and schooling. More directly influential than the social ideals of the region's political and historical contexts, these education knowledges and ideals (which, not incidentally, were supported outside the region by national and global education discourses) were undergirding for the ABL movement. They also informed precursor movements within the state's sector, providing familiarity within the state's administration.

3. *The serendipity of an inspirational leader being in the right places at the right times to draw together a powerful network in support of a movement and then pursue the movement within the state's education sector*

We would be remiss if we did not draw attention to the serendipity of Mr. Vijayakumar, charismatic and inspirational leader, holding positions in which he

⁹ "Active learning" is, of course, much too simplistic a phrase to describe the depth of theoretical ideas related to these pedagogical approaches. We recognize that these theories of learning run quite deep, but their complexity is more than we can address here.

was able to pull together the ABL movement network and promote its work in various government capacities. Despite the availability of ideals and activists, Vijayakumar catalyzed their work by drawing educators (from both outside and inside the state sector) together and pulling their work into the state's domain. His movement among various influential positions, some with the power to transform schools, made the reform possible. The right leader being in the right place at the right time to do this was essential to the success of the ABL movement.

4. The long history of the ABL movement network itself

The network that was knitted together by Vijayakumar persisted over time and through precursor movements. Once in SSA, the network only grew in strength. This relatively long history of shared dialogue and shared work among many key players in the ABL movement generated a figured world reflecting specific education knowledges and specific activist commitments. This strong collective with shared goals and shared horizons of meaning was important to the development and promotion of ABL in Tamil Nadu. The strength of the ABL community strengthened their ability to realize their goals.

5. The availability of a portable manifestation of the movement's pedagogical ideals

Although we cannot be certain, we doubt that any ABL reformer would claim that ABL methodology is perfect as currently practiced in Tamil Nadu's government schools. After all, this team has deliberately solicited ABL's problems and difficulties from teachers and other observers, and has spent years addressing these and otherwise improving the ABL system. But the gift of the original Rishi Valley prototype for the movement was that it was a concrete structure that on one hand radically transformed the classroom and on the other hand was portable and scalable. Precursor initiatives such as Self-Learning Methodology and Joyful Learning provided important professional development for teachers and some lasting influence in the classroom. But they could not transform the structure and practice of the government school classroom the way that replacing textbooks and lectures with the learning ladder and card-based activities could. Using ABL requires the practice and the structure of the classroom to change in ways that professional development, particularly when in contradiction to classroom structure and everyday practice, cannot. In addition, the structuring elements of the pedagogy (e.g., the ladder, the cards, the lower-level blackboard) could be provided to every primary-level government school classroom in the state.

Will, energy, strategy, and principles in the promotion of the ABL movement

Thus far we have focused on the historical specificities that we argue were important to the success of the ABL movement. Certainly, however, the ABL movement was successful because of the will, energy, strategy, and principles of its participants. In what follows, we present five factors related to the actions of reformers that were key to the success of the movement.

6. Government agents' willingness to search outside the system to promote change within the system

Perhaps because of their expertise in education theory—an expertise that extended even to career bureaucrats involved in the movement—reform leaders believed that they must look outside the confines of the state's government school system for ways to transform government schooling. To go beyond tinkering, toward a more radical transformation, Vijayakumar and his network searched far and wide for ideas and programs that aligned with their visions of better schooling. The interesting way in which the ABL movement spanned the state and civil society, garnering activists and knowledge from spheres of educational practice outside the state, provided alternative education knowledge, unique partnerships, and innovation. Ultimately, these were essential to the success of the ABL movement.

7. A strategic and principled bureaucratic activism

We devoted much of our report to describing the particular kinds of bureaucratic activism engaged by state administrators promoting ABL. We clearly believe that the principled, egalitarian, and strategic bureaucratic activism we described was vital to the success of the movement. The team was able to continue movement-building within the state system through a bureaucratic activism that was strategic (and effectively so) but also appeared to authentically align with movement ideals, including listening to the grassroots, trusting teachers, and breaking hierarchy through egalitarian practice. This generated moral authority and good will among many teachers and other stakeholders.

8. An enormous energy devoted to promoting ABL

In addition to the ways in which reformers promoted ABL, we must draw attention to the enormous amount of time and energy that was devoted to the movement. Numerous ABL movement participants went above and beyond the call of duty, volunteering much time and effort to promoting ABL in varied forums

among varied communities. It is difficult to imagine the achievement of scaling ABL across the state without this extraordinary commitment.

9. Political and administrative will

As we have suggested at multiple points in this report, the political will and administrative will generated by the ABL movement was viewed as absolutely necessary to its success. We have noted above that historical and social contexts may have led to political and administrative agents' personal support of the goals of the ABL movement, but this does not mean that they would necessarily have the will to support it in tangible ways and face the inevitable resistance. Yet, in the case of the ABL movement, they did.

10. Continued improvement of ABL on the way to institutionalizing it

The dynamic, evolving nature of the ABL over its short life is notable. The flexibility of reformers in listening to all stake-holders and responding to their concerns with more work to improve ABL and solve its problems was essential to the institutionalization of ABL in Tamil Nadu.

See Table 1 for a list of the factors identified above.

In summary, the combination of historical specificities and the talents and efforts of a core group of activist educators and reformers was essential to the success of the ABL movement in Tamil Nadu. In other words, we attribute ABL's success to meanings made and activism engaged in collectives of educators and administrators in specific, nested historical and social contexts, which have been formed by social, political, and education movements. As other states and nations attempt to emulate the ABL initiative in their own local contexts, it remains to be seen whether this reform can be exported and implemented elsewhere. Indeed, even within Tamil Nadu itself, we cannot know the extent to which the ABL movement is growing in the hearts and minds of the tens of thousands of teachers now practicing ABL and in the families and communities of their students. We can say that the teachers we interviewed claimed that observing their students' learning convinced them of the value of the approach. We heard that parents are also increasingly convinced by their children's learning. We also cannot know the extent to which this now-institutionalized classroom practice is producing futures that are historically novel among the Tamil Nadu youth in government schools. Yet visitors to classrooms, struck by how the young children interact with adults (often glossed as "confidence"), suggest that visible change in

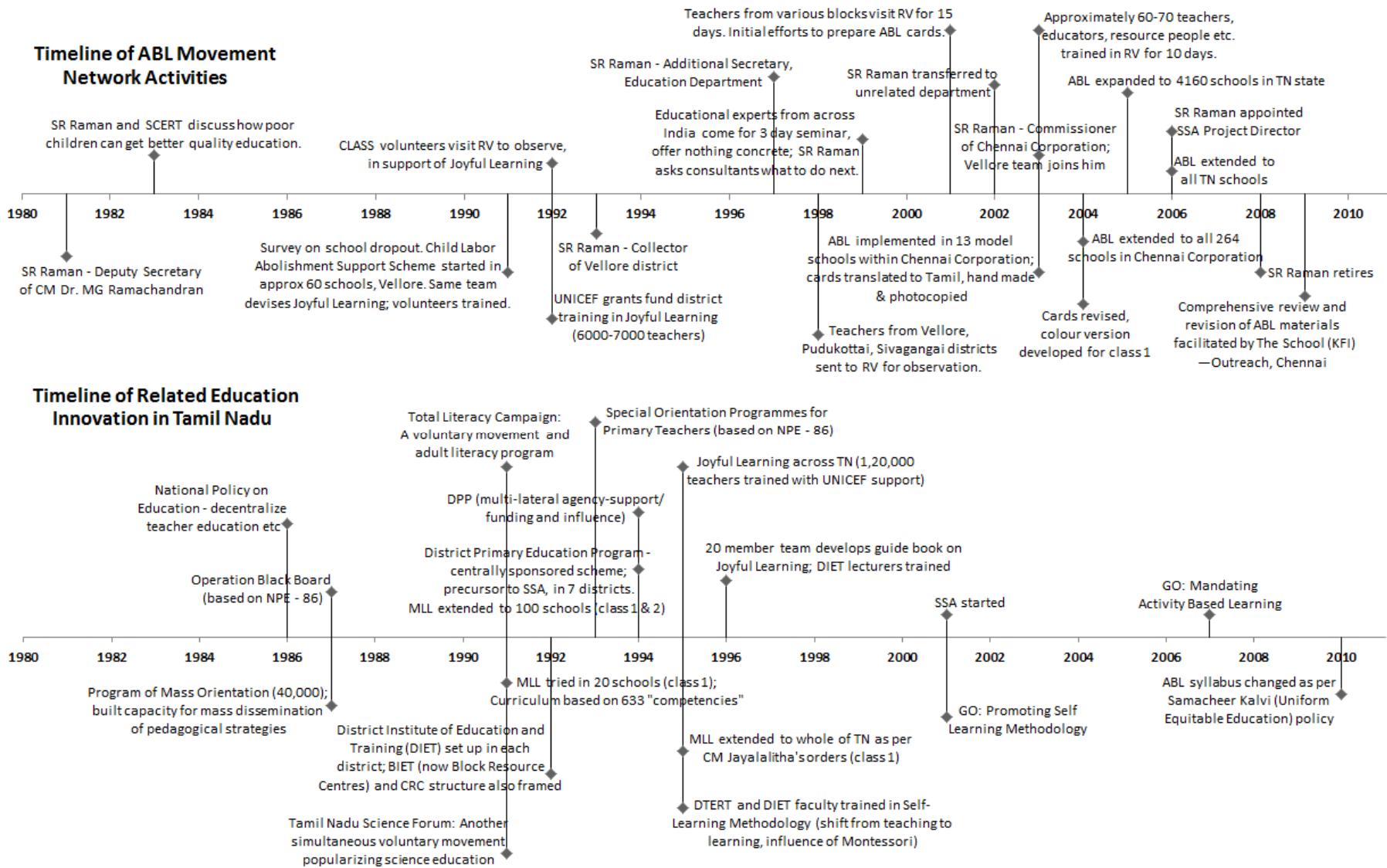
children's identities and social practice has taken place. As such, the ABL movement seems to have positioned the government schools to lead—rather than follow—social change.

Table 1: Ten Factors Central to the Success of the ABL Movement in Tamil Nadu

1	The long history of public discourse and activism promoting visions of reform and social justice in Tamil Nadu and India
2	The long history of pedagogical innovation in southern India that countered the status quo by developing and promoting active approaches to education
3	The serendipity of an inspirational leader being in the right places at the right times to draw together a powerful network in support of a movement and then pursue the movement within the state's education sector
4	The long history of the ABL movement network itself
5	The availability of a portable manifestation of the movement's pedagogical ideals
6	Government agents' willingness to search outside the system to promote change within the system
7	A strategic and principled bureaucratic activism
8	An enormous energy devoted to promoting ABL
9	Political and administrative will
10	Continued improvement of ABL on the way to institutionalizing it

APPENDIX

A Timeline of ABL in Tamil Nadu



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Tricia Niesz, Ph.D., is an associate professor of qualitative research and cultural foundations of education at Kent State University in Kent, Ohio, U.S.A. Her research employs anthropological methods and theories to investigate cultural change in the field of education, particularly as related to schooling and social stratification. Bridging the fields of social foundations of education, school reform, and teacher education, Tricia focuses on how progressive social and professional movements introduce innovation in the field of education. In recent years she has explored how movements generate change through their networks of activist educators in the U.S. and in South India. In addition to the present study of the ABL movement in Tamil Nadu, Tricia's U.S.-based research has focused on teacher professional networks that mediate and mobilize equity-oriented movements in education. She has taught in education graduate and undergraduate programs for over a decade, teaching primarily in the areas of qualitative research in education, social foundations of education, and anthropology of education. Tricia's recent work has been published in the academic journals, *Teaching and Teacher Education*, *Urban Education*, and the *International Journal of Qualitative Studies in Education*.

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