

Uttara Vahini...
Contribution of Teachers of The School KFI
to
State Education in Tamilnadu - SSA and DTERT in Tamilnadu
May 2007- Oct 2009 continuing

Varanasi is an ancient city. The river Ganga flows by, as it has done for over 3000 years. It is customary for rivers in India to flow North-South, from the Himalayas towards the oceans. At Varanasi the river, on its journey to the oceans, starts flowing Northward for a short distance. This movement is against the tide of a larger pattern. In the flow of human civilization change is difficult, change is slow or caused by cataclysmic changes in the environment. New beginnings meet much opposition. Individuals cannot do much. There is a tide against which it is difficult to work. Things rarely improve, decay is the order.

The northward flow, an unusual direction may contain different elements. All things are possible, unseen things are possible. Change is possible and rapid change is possible. Things can improve. Individuals can make a big difference. The larger system, usually unreceptive, can be hugely receptive.

Teacher led initiatives rarely stretch beyond the frontiers of their classes. Here is an example of initiatives led by teachers that possibly has not been seen before... Uttara vahini is a tentative metaphor attempting to capture a rare journey of teachers from a small school, contributing to vast change.

School Education and Change

School education does not lend itself easily to change. Teacher led initiatives stay local, within a class mostly, extended to school on rare occasions at best. Therefore it is quite remarkable that the work of a small band of teachers from The School in Chennai has touched the lives of over 200,000 teachers and 10 million students. These teachers, as a band, are part of a major thrust to give education a new turn in the State of Tamilnadu. (details available on request)

School Philosophy - J Krishnamurti

J Krishnamurti left a legacy of teachings, that he says are "nothing but common sense." He also founded 4 schools and created the Krishnamurti Foundation India that runs these schools and disseminates his teachings. The mandate of these institutions is to communicate to students, teachers and parents "a wholly different way of living" and "the awakening of intelligence".

The School is founded by Shri J. Krishnamurti and governed by Krishnamurti Foundation India in Chennai. Functioning in the landscape of a teeming metropolis, The School has about 30 teachers and 350 students. Some aspects of the Teachings of J.Krishnamurti that are relevant to schools are:

- the freedom to question - to question, everything
- freedom and responsibility go together
- an absence of hierarchy - authority is functional
- understanding 'what is' transforms 'what is'.

Working together & questioning: - What can you do alone? J. Krishnamurti

Krishnamurti's teachings point to 'working together' and 'questioning everything' as important elements. While working together is widely recognized as necessary in institutions, questioning everything is not an obvious direction. Questioning everything confuses, derails and makes decision making extremely difficult.

These teachings have had a profound influence on the school. Teachers have experienced an invitation to "be responsible for the whole school", to be immersed in learning, to take roles and to shed them. They have also made sure that there is an openness to configurations that serve the intentions more closely than the ones we have inherited. Teachers have always had the freedom to innovate and stretch beyond the givens.

The staff body of the school comprises a group of educators who work as equals, feel responsible for the whole school, and who question everything. Teachers teach, but also hold roles other than teaching - roles such as coordinators of the Junior, Middle or Senior sections of the school, coordinator for admissions or serve as members of interview committees. Roles are not permanent and teachers rotate in and out of roles. All decisions, including admissions, appointment of teachers and the school budget, are transparent to teachers. The growth of teachers has been

carefully supported and the right to participate in the educational and administrative discourse, carefully protected. The School has welcomed *'the lean and hungry look'* and embraced questions and questioning.

Ideas such as Mixed age classes in junior and middle school, the Junior Resource Centre, the radical programme for class 11, **were born of a process of careful consideration, intense and transparent questioning** and a **process of careful decision making**. If the school was taking a step, it had to be responsible to all the children, parents and the management. Ideas could not be half hearted or poorly thought out. **The discovery of efficient and meaningful processes for school education was the result of concerted work over 2 decades by a band of teachers.**

School Programmes

In its 36 year history The School has never failed a student, a direction that is now endorsed and part of the new Right to Education Act 2009. The school started teaching Environmental studies to children in class 7 in 1994, long before it was made mandatory by the Supreme Court. In fact the school teachers went further and created a **syllabus for classes 11 and 12 in Environmental science** in 1997 because students showed an interest. The school also was part of the movement that tried to ban dissection in school biology exams - it held 'alternatives to dissection' workshops for teachers from Chennai schools and came up with a list of alternatives.

In 1997 the school introduced a special programme for class 11 with travel to different parts of India to learn from grass-root movements, visiting places of Environmental struggle and the option of studying non exam subjects such as General Studies, Design & Health studies. The school has tried always to practice a child friendly and flexible pedagogy to empower students.

During the last decade of the 20th Century The school also took significant steps in the larger arena. It hosted seminars for **Child Sexual Abuse prevention** for Chennai school Principals, teachers and for Corporation school teachers and Principals in the year 1998. This led to the seeding of Thulir in Chennai and to the emergence of 'safety education'. This brought the school into contact with a community it would not have otherwise encountered. The central concern was the well being of children, children everywhere. This contact was later expanded to workshops on "conversation classes with children".

A major turn in the school's journey happened in 1999 when the **classes 1-4** adopted a **Mixed age configuration (MAG)**. This redesign followed a careful study of such models - Montessori, Rishi Valley rural schools, Vikasana etc.. An internal review conducted by teachers and administrators from other Krishnamurti Foundation schools called this an *'outstanding example of planned change'*. 8 years later, this was followed up with a similar **planned change in structure for classes 5, 6 and 7** in 2007. In the same year The school also generated a **3 month teacher training programme** for supporting this direction.

From one school to thousands of schools ...

But why should the journey of a small school with 300 children suddenly become significant for a state, 200,000 teachers and 1 crore children? What created the context for such a contribution from the teachers of this school? What were the crucial steps that made this relationship blossom and grow? How and why was the context receptive?

Shri M.P. Vijaykumar worked tirelessly, with the band of administrators, trainers for almost 15 years to see that every small child in the state of Tamil Nadu would receive a decent education up to the primary level. They engineered a miracle - **37,000 state primary schools transformed in structure and pedagogy using Activity Based Learning in Mixed age classes**. ABL became the norm and the classrooms a scene of joyful and fearless learning.

At The School, the winds of change gathered energy just as the century ended. In 1999 The school transformed 4 classrooms to Mixed age environment in the Primary section (classes 1 to 4).

The state schools, through SSA, had transformed 37000 schools between 2003 and 2007 commencing a slow movement. This was already a stupendous task. SSA could have rested on their laurels, particularly with its term slated to end in 2010 and Mr Vijaykumar due to retire in July 2008.

But a question haunted him - "If activity based learning can be so good for primary children, is there something possible for older children? Are there approaches that would see older children being actively engaged?"

In 2007 The School transformed the middle school (classes 5,6 &7) into 3 Mixed Age groups (Mahanadi, Amravathi and Godavari) using an Active learning Pedagogy.

SSA was exposed by teachers of The School to Active Learning Methodologies for upper Primary classes. SSA embraced these with great energy and determination and took them to over 16500 schools (over 50,000 classrooms) by 2008. This meant that over **1,00,000 teachers and 20,00,000 students** were using this approach within a year!

The School had discovered a process through rigorous in-house checks. To pick up an idea, assess its real worth, and then throw all one's energy to make it work, is the stuff of which changes are made. The transformation of school education in Tamilnadu is a tribute to Shri M.P Vijaykumar and the band of administrators, trainers of SSA for their remarkable sustained effort.

Uttara Vahini - Do such things happen?

16 th to 26th May 2007, in the middle of a blazing summer, Teachers from The School conducted workshop sessions for trainers of SSA. Since these were organized with a short 2 week lead time, there was only enough time to share what existed, directly and simply. All 60 trainers, who participated, in one voice, communicated to Mr Vijaykumar and other Directors, Mr Elangovan, Mr Kannapan and Mrs Latha, that this was an approach worth taking forward.

When SSA discovered The School and visited the Mixed Age classroom, the principles were not easily visible. The ground lay fallow for almost 2 months after Shri MP Vijaykumar and senior colleagues from SSA visited The School. Serendipity brought The School and SSA together again.

The School had begun to consciously reach out and share, collaborate and extend itself under its newly established Outreach wing in 2005. Workshops on Life Skills Education were planned for teachers from many schools. It was at this time that Sumitra M Gautama, Coordinator Outreach programmes, met Mr Vijaykumar with a request to send SSA teachers. Mr Vijaykumar asked if The School could do a series of workshops for SSA trainers (BRTes) to communicate new approaches to learning. Sumitra readily agreed.

In consultation with colleagues, it was decided to focus on ACTIVE LEARNING METHODOLOGIES (ALM) as an approach in middle school processes. Under this umbrella, The School teachers shared with SSA trainers, in May 2007, what they had learnt, practiced and what they considered important. Using the insight 'one learns to play the cello only by playing the cello' the trainers were exposed to the principles of ALM through the processes being suggested. The participants were in the role of students using ALM, using relevant content.

Each step could have been the last. When 60 trainers were given the task of running a pilot in 2 schools, they were asked to back their perception, that ALM would work. Each trainer said 'yes'. The 120 schools and their teachers were asked to back their conviction by sharing it with others. The teachers did.

In retrospect, the iron was hot, and this was the moment. This was the last year of Mr Vijaykumar's service. There was a palpable urgency. If things were to move it had to be now. And the idea, any idea for change, had to be such as to have wide acceptance. The history of poorly thought out or implemented ideas is only too well known. And school teachers are weary of each new promise that is brought to them with administrative zeal.

And soon 100,000 teachers were walking the road to learning and practicing ALM in their classes. Everywhere, the hum of children reading, underlining words they didnt know, colourful mind maps, discussion among children and presentations... and happy watchful teachers, teachers in over 50000 classrooms, seeing the emergence of something new, something different from their daily experience. Children meaningfully active in the classroom, active ≠ disruptive.

ALM was positioned in the 'same text book, same teacher, same student' zone, only different classroom transaction, like a new programme in the existing hardware. What worked for students and teachers in a small private school worked for students and teachers in every village middle school.

Material preparation

This was only the beginning. Much work had to be done, material had to be given to teachers to support them in their movement and for the classes. But who was to do this? The state and SSA has people and resources, but who has the the taste the experience to make ALM a reality? The School teachers could support the state but they were part of a running school, each with a full teaching load. How was this to happen?

A bold and synergetic step was found. A space in school was found where SSA trainers could work on creating sourcebooks. Teachers from the school, in the cracks in their school day, and after school, supported this endeavour of the BRTes. Transfer of skills, understanding happened in this atmosphere of hard work by

the trainers and guidance by teachers. A new relationship grew, as people worked together, shared meals and cups of tea, and the sourcebooks rolled out. The common bond of empowering teachers to deliver an active learning, the common concern that school should be meaningful to children brought people together in an atmosphere of sharing and respect.

The Government supported this journey by issuing G.O. No:260 ;dated: 12.10.2007

Child centered education is emphasized by National Policy on Education 1986 and The National Curriculum Framework 2005. On that basis only, Activity Based Learning (ABL) was implemented for classes I to IV in all the schools and the results have prompted the Child centered education being extended to all the schools for classes VI to VIII, says Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan's State Project Director.

The methodology, developed jointly by the Department and Chennai based The School (Krishnamurti Foundation India), is aimed at equipping students to read, comprehend and recall information with a good understanding of the fundamental concepts, articulate and converse with fellow students. The ALM has been tested in about 120 schools across 12 districts in the State last month as part of a pilot project, with the child as the focus and accent on bringing out the thinking and creative abilities of children. "With several effective learning and retention techniques, like mind map, group discussion, group learning and questioning, each and every child gets the space for reading, comprehending, recalling and, more importantly, articulating what he or she perceives. Children have tremendous potential. This methodology unleashes the learner in every student. The class is more interactive and participative.

Under the Umbrella of ALM, more sprouts... A rare educational journey of hope and hard work took place from July to December 2007. There is more to this journey.

ALM 5

It was not surprising to see SSA wanting to bridge class 5 using ABL and ALM. A gesture of interest came from the State Education Department to see if ALM could be extended into classes 9 and 10. But here was a bottle neck. How could teachers of exam going classes learn from Primary school teachers? What could they have to learn from them? This attitude and impasse had to be breached.

ALM + for 9 and 10

The School teachers were asked to present the ALM to the State School teachers of classes 9 and 10 since it was more likely to receive a fair consideration. This was well received and beginnings were made so that students in 2008-09 would have ALM elements in their classes in 2009. This work has been dormant and lying low since other questions and priorities surfaced. In 2009 it promises to surface again with the common syllabus venture.

ABL cards review - pedagogical scaffolding, time restructuring & improvement of material

SSA expressed a desire to translate the ABL cards into English in the February 2009 since many Government schools

have English medium classes. The School was approached for support, to check the translation of cards. It was pointed out that any effort of translation rarely remains just such and often improvements cannot be avoided. This turned out truer than anticipated. The School Coordinator Outreach invited senior SSA people to introduce the teachers of The School to the logic, sequence and scheduling involved in the use of ABL cards. 3 senior people, Mr Shanmugam, Mr Pitchai and Mrs Mangalam conducted these sessions.



The study of the ABL system gave new insights and pointed to the need for improvement. Some pedagogical scaffolding and time restructuring were considered important.

Unfortunately, this direction stirred a hornet's nest. None had anticipated that the translation effort would cause a review of the ABL cards. The feedback from the SSA teachers confirmed all the points made by teachers of The School. It is not difficult to understand that the experienced people who had been facilitating ABL material in state schools, found new thinking difficult to accept.

To the great credit of SSA it must be said that they **found the will to choose movement over staus quo**. SSA's seized the opportunity behind this unexpected turn. It was decided to withhold The translation into English could not proceed without acceptance of the changes proposed by The School teachers. SSA took a courageous and major decision - **the review modifications would be implemented and these would go to all the 37000 Tamil medium schools first**. English medium cards could wait. Thus the ABL cards for classes 1 & 2 saw a refreshing renewal and dramatic improvement in quality, in pedagogy and time structuring. In the year 2009 the primary schools will also be receiving new cards for classes 3 and 4 as well.

DTERT and Teacher Education:

With sweeping changes taking place it became quite clear to the educational administrators of the state that, without attention to teacher training, all change would be short-lived. Therefore it was decided to review the curriculum and methodologies being used in teacher training colleges.

DTERT, the teacher education body in Tamilnadu, invited the school to offer perspectives, clues, suggestions for improvement of the teacher education processes. The Director at DTERT was familiar with Active Learning Methodologies, thanks to his stint as joint director, SSA. It was but natural for him to consider Active Learning Processes in Teacher Training Institutes. Teachers from The School have been involved in drawing up a syllabus for the DTERT for Pre Service Training of teachers. As has been mentioned earlier, the school runs its own teacher training program. Many suggestions for refreshing the transactions, based on the experience at school, have been offered.

The parallels & some reflections

The parallels are quite striking. That which alters the macrocosm has its seeds in the microcosm. A small school shifting to a mixed age environment found it necessary to start a teacher training program. The state system making a move towards an active learning pedagogy, ABL and ALM likewise, found it necessary to refresh the teacher training environment.

It was refreshing that an exchange was possible and the State machinery was willing to seriously consider processes and approaches that had developed in a small school. Not only is this unusual given India's bureaucratic history, it is almost unheard of anywhere. For this pragmatic and farsighted openness all credit must be given, again, to the leadership of SSA. Seeing a plausible direction SSA did not let anything come in the way of learning, effective transfer, and speedy implementation. This was a mandate for movement, clearly spurred by a sense of urgency. A rare gesture of hope, keeping in mind the education of One crore children.



The journey of Outreach at The School has been much like a river flowing in an unusual direction. It contains seeds of hope and great possibilities. J.Krishnamurti said, "if you know how to rightly relate to one human being, you know how to relate to the whole of humanity." He also said, "the teachings are nothing but common sense." That which is a good educational idea in a small private school, because we are all the same human beings, works in every nook and corner of Tamilnadu. One hopes and wishes that children everywhere in this vast and ancient land will soon have the possibility of an active and empowering education. Hopefully emulating the state endeavours, private schools would also offer active processes in their pedagogy to children and not merely facilities.

The anchors -

No such work is possible without human anchoring - In SSA the work was anchored by Shri M.P.Vijaykuamar and later by Smt N Latha. This work seemed to have its own organic logic and urgency and therefore its uncertainties and questions. Will the school be able to sustain it? How far will this go? Can the teachers stretch themselves so far? Coordinating required working the nuts and bolts with SSA and teachers in the school. At school Sumitra anchored the vision of 'good education for a large number of children', often against very difficult odds, and coordinated the interface with SSA and DTERT.

Prologue -

With the new term given to the Congress government at the center the winds picked up and blew harder. Two major decisions were taken at the Centre. The Right to Education Bill, waiting since 2005 was law in August 2009. One of the elements of this bill is that no child should be failed or withheld till he or she completes the primary education - grade 8. The Minister for Human Resource Development also announced that CBSE schools would no longer have passed - failed in class X examinations. It was decided that students would be given a grade.

School education is an experience and a right for each child and all schools, private or Public must participate in delivering this right. The state aspires to see that no child is disempowered.

Tamilnadu government, in the meantime decided that all four Examination Boards under the State Education Department are to be merged and made into one Examination Board. This meant that a common curriculum and syllabus outlines would be needed.

Common syllabus for Tamilnadu Government schools (Oct 2009)

The School was invited by DTERT to be involved in the process of evolving a common syllabus framework. Having worked with the ABL Primary School Materials and the Upper Primary syllabus for ALM, the teachers at The School were thoroughly familiar with the full syllabus from classes 1 to 10. This knowledge of the State syllabi (usually available only to experts, academics) of NCF 2005 and familiarity with Active Learning Processes, put the teachers of The School in a unique position. For DTERT and for SSA this was a boon.

The School Teachers have now prepared the syllabus outlines. These have been presented to the Directors of DTERT and SSA. The draft syllabi are up on the website for public comments. It is hoped that convergence of thought will emerge, one that takes forward the remarkable experience that Tamil Nadu has had in ushering in an era of Active Learning.

G.Gautama, 2 Nov 2009
Director, The Chennai Education Centre, KFI

In conclusion ... *This piece is penned with deep appreciation for the teachers who brought their depth, vision and energies to make 'an offering for the larger common good' - Akhila, Bina, Ganesh Mohan, Girija, Kaveri, Padmavathy, Ramakumar,, Suchitra and Sumitra. Dr. Srimathi Kaveri, a parent of the school, also worked with immense dedication.*

A gracious letter we received

Dear Sri Gautama,

Please convey my gratitude to Smt Sumitra, Smt Suchitra and all the teachers who worked with SSA for their contribution to ALM and in improving the ABL material and the process. What has impressed us most is not just their thoroughness and soundness of knowledge, experience, versatility, cosmopolitan bent of mind, clarity of thought on what should be done and how, but mostly their mind, willingness and attitude to serve - absolute selflessness, simplicity and humility. I can only say that in them we see a role model for an ideal human being. Our gratitude to their parents and mentors as well for grooming them in such a fine mould as individuals and human beings.

Whatever I say here is not just a feeling of one individual, it is the reflection of everybody in SSA. There is no way we can repay for all that you have done to SSA and our children since you are a team of selfless individuals. All that we could do is to say what we feel about your team's contribution to Society without any expectation of any reward whatsoever as an example of embodiment of virtues. We used to wonder can there be individuals like members of your team? It is not just one or two, every one of them in the same mode and mould. We can only say that all of us will be eternally grateful.

With best wishes

M.P. VIJAYAKUMAR - IAS Retd
Adviser SSA TN

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