

A paradigm shift in pedagogy: ABL and ALM

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The stereotype image when the school bell goes at the end of the day is that of children rushing out with shouts of joy. They seem to celebrate a release from the routine and tedium of classes. This was always a contrast to their body language when they walk into school.

Today, there is a dramatic shift in the scenario.

Introduction by Dr. A with an outline of the main changes and the rationale for an interview.

Ana: Mr. Vijaya Kumar, thank you for agreeing to answer the questions I want to ask about the changes in the educational scenario in Tamil Nadu. I know I am not the first to ask you for a long interview, which may run into several sessions.

V. K. In the last couple of years, I have been asked formally and in casual conversations, to explain the changes we brought about in Tamil Nadu schools, through the introduction of Activity based Learning (ABL) and Active Learning Methodology (ALM). They have been apparently successful. The next question, naturally, is what is different?

Ana: I hear that some interest in the pedagogy has been expressed by school administrators from Singapore and even from China. But let us begin in Chennai. We see that the schools run by the Government of Tamil Nadu have been virtually transformed. How did it all start?

V. K.. Many factors have been responsible for the success of the new methods. In some ways, it is like a rocket launch from Sriharikota, where different sections have to be meticulously coordinated. However, a school system can never be as dramatic in effect, or as precise in the detailing. I use the simile here, only to indicate that it was not the work of one person, but that of a team. There were many people who walked along with me.

Ana. A collective effort of this kind will perhaps be termed 'historic'. What aspects of this can be observed at first glance?

V.K.. Walk into any Government or Government-aided elementary school in Tamil Nadu. You will find a complete transformation of the classroom. Nowhere will you see any teacher lecturing to a set of students for more than 10 minutes. You will see children sitting in groups, completely engrossed in studying, and not distracted by visitors.

Ana. Is there a sense of real freedom in the classroom?

V.K. Yes. Children are happy to be involved in learning. The teachers are cheerful and seem to like what they are doing. There is a noticeable level of participation of everybody in the class room.

Ana. We seem to have entered a country which has no tyrants and no slaves. Incredible! It is very different from the stereotype of a government school.

V.K.. Yes. Many visitors have said so. Further, the classroom is filled with a great variety of materials. The laminated Ladder Cards, which we developed from the Rishi Valley Rural Schools, for each level and every domain of learning, are stacked away neatly in open shelves. Picture books, with shiny, attractive covers are on display, strung on a line at the children's eye level in the class room. Children are found running up to this 'mobile library', picking up books and turning the pages with great interest.

Ana. When I came to see the schools in 2007, there were no picture books for children. When did you add them?

V.K.. We acted on your suggestion that children needed to have story books to read. It took a couple of years for us to complete the first phase. We have now put more than 250 colourful and attractive books in each primary school. They have been written and illustrated by our own teachers, after some initial guidance from the experts we consulted.

Ana. The conventional distance between the teacher and children seems to have vanished. How was this achieved?

V. K. Nothing happens overnight. It has taken time. Every small step adds up. For one thing, children and teacher are seated at the same level -- on the floor! The pupils find that they can come up to the teacher, without fear, to get a doubt cleared or to have some written work checked.

Ana. There must have been some resistance from the teachers to give up the chair, the veritable seat of authority!

V.K.. In the beginning, yes. But even then, not in all cases. There was a murmur that sitting on the same level as the children would reduce the teacher's control over the students. But when the children's active participation in the learning process became obvious, even the skeptics were silenced.

Ana. One teacher said that even the visit by the Inspector is not prepared for elaborately, as in the past.

V. K.. The visit of the Assistant Education Officer, conventionally 'handled with care,' is now just another regular event. The teacher is not tense or worried and her mood is conveyed to the children, who go about their work as usual.

Ana. It sounds too good to be true. How did SSA-TN bring this about?

V.K. I would sum it up in one sentence: Change is possible.

Ana. But we all know that change is possible and is happening all the time. But change for the better is difficult, although that IS the constant hope.

V. K. The popular perception is that Government departments are slack and inefficient; that view has been thoroughly demolished! The innovative methods that have been adopted in the Primary Schools (ABL) and in the Upper Primary Schools (ALM) have shaken up the entire system.

Ana. It is not usual for a change in pedagogy to revitalize the whole system. Is there more than pedagogy that changed?

V.K. What has happened in Tamil Nadu, through the intervention of SSA in the last few years can be described as unparalleled. It is a combination of a new pedagogy with a revitalised management.

Ana. What is the exact scale of the school system?

V.K.. It is gigantic in size. There are 37486 schools in the Primary Section and 12500 schools in Upper Primary Section, reaching 70 to 80 million children and employing 200,000 teachers.

Ana. That is an impressive number. It is still a little difficult to figure out what exactly was done. Give me some details.

V.K.. Generally in the past, the diagnosis for the poor performance of children in schools has been attributed to “missing teachers” and the lack of accountability of teachers and their low motivation. These are generally cited as the critical reasons, though there are others, like poor infrastructure. The innovative methodology, now adopted, has shaken this theory to the roots. We still have the same teachers, the same children and the same schools and yet there is a dramatic change, both in the learning outcomes of children and the motivation of teachers.

Ana. How could the attitude of thousands of teachers be changed? A common observation is the lack of commitment of teachers in government service.

V.K.. No specific training for attitudinal change was undertaken. In the corporate world, we find courses on visioning, team building and so on. Our teachers received no such training. Yet, you will find them positive in their approach, and without cynicism or despair.

Ana. I still need to find out about the process by which this change was possible.

V.K.. It is a long story.

Ana. I have all the time. So begin at the beginning.

V.K.. Normally when a problem comes up, the tendency of government officers is to look for a solution within the Government. For most people in the bureaucracy, maintaining the system and following the rules is the primary duty. Hence, perceiving non-performance as a problem is a rarity. In this case, I found that children's poor learning was a major problem. The current classroom processes were failing to teach large numbers of children. The logical course was to seek for information wherever it was available, from NGOs, educational experiments and individual thinkers.

Ana. And is that how you came upon Activity based Learning (ABL)?

V.K. Rishi Valley School in Madanapalle, A.P. a highly renowned residential school run by the Krishnamurthi Foundation of India, had also been running schools in small rural hamlets for over 25 years. Called RIVER, they had devised an ingenious methodology for single teacher rural schools. Our teachers saw the programme first and were highly impressed at how much learning was taking place. We decided, collectively, that a group of them should be trained for the specific pedagogy. I will give you some of the details later.

ABL and ALM have come from two schools of the Krishnamurthi Foundation of India. ABL was functioning in the village schools of the rural extension wing of the Rishi Valley school in Madanapalle. ALM has been practised in "The School" located in Chennai. Looking for new ideas outside the Governmental system was a major step forward. The lesson learnt here was that our problems can be tackled, provided we are willing to go off the beaten path. More of this, later.

Ana. Perhaps you might wish to put the next part in writing, at your leisure.

V.K. If we want experts to come and work with the Government, we must know how to give them respect. Normally, the attitude of Government officials tends to be one of superiority, with an expectation of gratitude and compliance from the public, even from the experts they consult. Experience however, shows that only

genuine concern, interest and respect for people will help in getting their cooperation and good will. That has been my experience.

I will begin here with a first person account of the experiment. I find it is near impossible to write an authentic narrative of the SSA experience in Tamil Nadu, without bringing in my own participation in the process, from the very beginning.

A brief retrospective account: First Phase—1996

Genesis- Total Literacy Campaign

While I was the District Collector of North Arcot, we were implementing the Total Literacy Campaign (TLC). We noticed that many children were part of the child labour force. Our early attempts to release them from being bonded and get them into school were futile. Most of them had unhappy schooling experiences and hated going to school. After some time, the children we had released would go back to work. Or a new batch of children would enter the labour market. We realized soon enough that unless learning was made more attractive, our intention of getting children into school would be fruitless. We were constantly on the search for alternative methods.

(((Shanmugam and Pitchia, with whom I had worked with when they were volunteers from the literacy movement in Tamil Nadu, were assisted by a group of 25 teachers. In the later part of 1990, one team went to an NGO called “Thread” in Orissa, another to some NGOs in Delhi and a third team to “Ekalavya” in MP. The main objective was to locate a pedagogic model that could be tried in our Government school system. The transformation of primary education was the ultimate aim.)))

The general observation is that children work because their parents want them to start earning. Our investigation revealed that most of the children who had started working had not opted to work in the first instance. They were initially enrolled in school and dropped out, when they were branded as dull students and

the school was not welcoming. It became obvious that unless we retain children in school, the initiative to abolish child labour will fail.

I realize that this is not usually accepted that unrewarding school experience is an antecedent to child labour. People think that children are sent by the family to earn money as child labour, hence no attendance at school. I realised that bad schooling pushed children out of school and into the labour force.

This exploration gave us some insight into the system. We found nothing wrong with the children or the teachers. The schools were open and working, but something was impeding the children from learning.

At this time, one person who made me think critically and thrash out ideas was Elke Crause of the UNICEF. I was constantly mulling over the problems of making education more effective. So I talked to her and to many other people: activists and social workers in the NGO sector.

The Tamil Nadu Science Forum (TNSF) in the State had been started by a group of idealistic scientists and mathematicians, who decided to strengthen and enrich the existing school system with new materials and methods. They had produced a lot of literature at that time on appropriate methodology. They had also developed a number of activities that could be tried in the classrooms. Since many of the teachers in the Government schools also happened to be TNSF volunteers, we sought their help to develop a module which could be tried in the non-formal settings. We tested some of their methods in a few non-formal schools run under the Child Labour Abolition Scheme. We met with some success and got enthused to take the activities to all the non-formal schools. There was no funding available initially. We started in a small way, but later came across regular government schemes for running non-formal schools, under the Non-Formal Education Directorate.

Dearth of resources not a problem

Another important lesson I have learnt from my service in the government was that there is no dearth of resources in the government. The real problem is a shortage of ideas and lack of knowledge, commitment and awareness on how to use the available resources. Interpreting the existing provisions to our advantage was a strategy we had to teach ourselves. Everything was already available in the

system and in most cases, some government scheme could be found to meet the need.

In my years of service in the government, I have noticed that most schemes get implemented mechanically and superficially. It is like a ritual. Seldom did the officials see the people for whom the scheme was planned or understand the spirit of it. Showing expenditure was in most cases the only criterion for assessing progress or performance.

My tenure as a Collector of North Arcot district was a turning point in my life. My own experience as an average student who had suffered humiliation at the hands of teachers and peers for poor performance in studies was an unpleasant memory. I had developed a sense of inferiority. And yet, inside me there was a gnawing thought that I was never given the kind of education which could have helped me to do better. This insight into the system helped me to attack it. The awareness that children are not at fault for the poor quality of education was triggered by my own school experience. I resolved that I would devote the rest of my life to the transformation of elementary education. I was driven by the conviction that children would benefit from education, and need not be victims of an apathetic system.

My experience as a civil servant in the last thirty years has made me realize the power of the bureaucracy. I could see that the governance of the country is in their hands. Political masters may ultimately give their approval, but the role of the civil servants in the framing and implementation of schemes is so critical, that success depends largely on their performance.

Non Formal Centers – offered clue

Non-formal education centers run in school premises with alternative methodology proved to be a tremendous success, not only in making children learn, but also in arousing the curiosity of children and teachers of the regular schools. The fun, the freedom, the sheer joy that prevailed in the classrooms of

non-formal centers could not be matched. In these centres, children were learning actively and there were no dropouts.

This experiment reinforced our belief that a change in the classroom process in our schools was needed urgently. Making it happen was a real challenge. Since that time, my daily prayer was that I should have a post in the education department. I was confident my prayers would be answered. But this was not just a wish or a hope. I did not wait for an offer. I worked for it constantly, whenever I got an opportunity to talk to the Minister or Chief Secretary. I had served as Collector of North Arcot district for three years. I was very fortunate to have two sets of excellent young IAS officers who served as additional collectors. Most of the regular work was attended to by them, giving me time to focus on education.

Teachers of the regular schools evinced a lot of interest in the alternative method that was used in the non-formal classes. Actually, what we used was not structured by experts or validated by specialists. It was just a rough and ready kind of pedagogy, where a series of activities listed in the HRD's Minimum Levels of Learning (MLL) were taken up by the teacher one at a time. There was some flexibility to change the order of the activities.

Some of the lessons learnt need to be recorded. There were children of different ages in the group. Some of them had dropped out at seven or eight years of age. Some had never been to school and were non-starters at the age of twelve. The students were grouped according to their learning levels and the pedagogy had to be suitable to handle this diversity. We had to know how to deal with a multi-level group.

Another lesson for us was that that a non-formal setting of this type can only be transitory. Ultimately, mainstreaming all children is the objective. However, when we realized that regular classrooms were also multi-level, we started to consider that the alternate methodology we were using could be successful in the formal schools as well.

Teacher training

The demand from the regular teachers for an exposure to the new approach set us wondering how we could train them. We learnt that UNICEF had some funding and when we approached them, readily agreed to fund the project. The costs included the actual bus fare, lunch and tea expenses. There were nearly eight thousand teachers. I wondered whether I had the authority to train the teachers. When I broached the subject with the education department officers, their response was not very encouraging. The District Collector planning to train teachers on pedagogy sounded very unusual, even strange to them.

My basic tenet was to keep working, without forcing our views on anyone else. We needed the goodwill of people and did not want to be seen as a threat to anyone. If inadvertently, we stepped on someone's toes, we made amends quickly. We were well aware of our strengths and weaknesses and knew that we would need the cooperation of everyone, if not immediately, then surely in the future. We did not get into arguments on the merits of the approach. We ourselves had been convinced only on seeing the results on the ground and were very clear that mere arguments would not be enough. We would make a suggestion just once, initially. If it was received well, we would pursue it. If not, we would try to find alternative ways to continue. In spite of constraints, we pursued our goal relentlessly.

Another lesson I have learnt from experience is that there is tremendous scope and room for initiative in government service. Whenever you want to do something new or try out a new idea, you can go ahead boldly, as no one will ask you why. In case you want to play safe and try to obtain permission from the government, there will be no response, positive or negative. Therefore we went ahead without permission from anyone. As long as it was not illegal and we did not force or compel anyone, we felt that we could carry out our experiment.

Once UNICEF funding was confirmed, we planned to train all the 8000 government and aided-school teachers in the district. Since it was not a training

sponsored by the Education department, we decided to do it only on holidays, so that the trainees who volunteer are not troubled. The team of teachers I had in North Arcot district was so committed and efficient, that within a short time we planned and trained all the teachers of one block. There were 20 blocks in the district. Having seen the positive response, in our first exercise, we trained all the teachers, block by block. All the twenty blocks were covered in a span of 5 to 6 months. The last training was in May 1996, on the eve of my transfer to Chennai. The training of teachers went on in spite of General Election held from Feb 1996 onwards. Normally, when general elections are announced, all other activities in the district come to a grinding halt and the entire district machinery is deployed for election-related work. But in this case, notwithstanding the election announcement and election work, the training of teachers went on unhindered. What was very rewarding was that all the teachers attended the training voluntarily, as all of them apparently sensed its usefulness and found it interesting.

The training was always in batches. In one group, we never allowed more than 30 to 35 teachers. In the premises of one school, there would be three training classes running simultaneously. At the end of the training, we got feedback from the teachers. The feedback covered two aspects: a) the training methods, content and usefulness and b) the quality of food. Even now I have 20 bound volumes containing the responses of the teachers, block-wise and I preserve them as a treasure. Most of the feedback was very positive, encouraging and refreshing. After I left the district, I learnt that the feedback volumes had been dumped in a corner. Before they found their way to dustbin, I rushed to Vellore from Chennai, retrieved them and still preserve them at my home.

We offered teachers only the actual bus fare, lunch and tea. In order to economise and contain the expenditure within the budget, we had hired cooks and arranged to have the food cooked at the premises. Our volunteer- teachers not only helped in serving the food, but also lent a hand in cooking it. There were many unsung heroes, who did even menial work in organizing and conducting the

training for teachers. One single motivation that bound us together was in the creation of a new pedagogy for children. I know that I have received more than enough recognition at various levels, and I think with gratitude of the unnamed volunteers who toiled for the success of the programme, without expecting anything in return.

Normally, when asked to attend training, teachers will insist on TA and DA (Travel allowance and Dearness allowance). In this case when we trained 8000 teachers on weekly holidays with just reimbursement of their actual bus fare and with a working lunch, all the teachers attended the training, without a semblance of protest.

Stop the blame Game

From this experience I learnt that blaming teachers for not taking training seriously is unjustified; when the teachers find the training useful, they do attend, irrespective of personal inconvenience. Another important lesson I learnt was that we should not depend on the Government system and Government machinery alone for solutions. There are many NGOs who, out of their field experience, might have answers. Therefore we must look outside as well and if we find anything suitable, not hesitate to adopt it. If our intention is to make children learn, why not try something that has been tried and proved successful elsewhere? I was able to use these lessons later when we designed teacher training and revamped the classroom processes in Chennai Corporation and in the SSA.

Invariably, the training was held in a school located within the Block. In the first half day, there would be a group discussion on why children did not learn in the present system. This was to sensitize the teachers to the real problem – methodology. This was followed by three half-days on each subject, Tamil, Math and Science. In the training session, every trainee was asked to participate and practise every activity. It was a delightful sight. One had to see it, to believe it. There was so much of activity, fun, songs, and movement. Every participant

seemed to enjoy the freedom from constraints and routines. There was no barrier of age or hierarchy. They had never sung together or played with their peers in a career of twenty or thirty years. When they got an opportunity, they enjoyed the activities thoroughly as could be seen in their body language.

I decided that If the classroom is to be child-centred and activity-based, the training methods must reflect it. Unless the training is joyful, providing the learners the scope to learn with enjoyment, they cannot become teachers who provide such opportunities to the children. In the training, there was focus both on methodology and content. There was no point in making teachers sit in rows and columns and lecture them for the whole day, on the joy of learning, and activity- based learning. Unless the training session gave them an opportunity to experience freedom and liveliness, there would be no difference in their classrooms at a future date. This participation in the teacher training in Vellore came in useful for me later on in the SSA.

This was in direct contrast with some of the training organized by the Education Department. In my anxiety to find an alternative methodology to the conventional one, I had started attending every training programme for teachers, held in the district. I never missed even a single opportunity. I used to spend at least a couple of hours in each session. Invariably the training was entirely lecture-based and there was very little interaction or participation. They were mere rituals. It used to be a big surprise for the officials, trainers and teachers, to see the Collector of their district sitting in their training classroom and observing the process. Unmindful of the embarrassment, I pursued my exploration relentlessly, to understand what was going on in the name of training. I had an intuitive feeling that if children do not learn, there is something basically wrong in our teacher preparation. This led me to conclude that Teacher Training, as an instrument of teacher preparation, needed to be modified.

Wonderful Montessori Mathematic Kit – why not in Government schools?

As a result I was constantly on the look out for a good teacher training programme. This search for locating a good teacher-training module, I landed in one of the training sessions handled by Mrs. Uma

Shankar in her teacher training institute at Centre for Montessori training. I was then Joint Secretary, Education in the Secretariat at Chennai. When I learnt more about the Montessori mathematics kit, I recognised its potential. I wondered whether we could make these materials available to all schools and with proper training to teachers. I was convinced that this would revolutionize mathematics teaching in our schools and was determined to ensure the supply of at least one kit to every one of the 38000 primary schools. Since that day in 1997, I have continued my efforts to make the dream a reality.

Why can't children learn in schools?

The capacity of the child to learn is natural and universal. Children start learning to speak their mother tongue between the ages of one to two. By the time they reach 4 or 5, they speak the mother tongue fluently. Children also learn many other things, like operating a mobile phone, a TV remote, or singing cinema songs and dances, without any formal instruction. When the child learns so many things outside the classroom, why should he refuse to learn what we teach in school? Does it not mean that we do not know how to teach them? Is there something wrong in the class room process, which is a barrier to learning? What is that factor that hinders children's learning in school? I went through the basic books in educational psychology. The theory is very clear. It says children have inherent potential to learn and they learn by doing, experiencing and reflecting. They learn by doing something actively, not by listening alone. If somebody wants to learn swimming she has to swim and if somebody wants to learn singing, she has to sing. Just by listening to lectures of how to swim or how to sing, or even by observing somebody swimming or singing, we cannot expect children to learn. "What the child himself does, not what the teacher does for him develops and educates him."

Shared values - a critical managerial intervention

At the end of the teacher training organized by us, as Collector, I met all the participants regularly and interacted with them on the training they had received, its usefulness, the process, its applicability in regular class rooms and so on. The need for a change was the central point of discussion. Most of them were convinced that a change was imperative, but its viability in the classroom, there was not much optimism. Our experience also showed us that the enthusiasm of the teachers we saw immediately after training, slowly faded away, as they went back to their normal routines. Another lesson I learnt then was that just training

teachers was not sufficient, however good it was. Monitoring is an important aspect for successful implementation of any programme. One tangible impact was that most of the teachers started going to school with some chart or map paper to use. There was a change in their mind set and some of them started to practise what they had just learnt. They had acquired some knowledge and practice of a specific number of suitable activities, which if performed serially, would impart the prescribed skills to children. Some of the teachers interspersed these activities with the lecture method, others tried it exclusively. It was left to the individual initiative of teachers to practice whatever was feasible and appropriate. Since these activities were not put into a structure, either with the text book or combined with any other class room process, the scope for the practice in full was never fully explored. Further, the Asst. Educational officers were not involved and therefore, the teachers feared his criticism and were reluctant to try something which was not familiar to their superior officers. As a result the training did not have any direct impact in the classroom. The only gain was that the teachers realized that the methods they had been using were not the most appropriate.

Dr Rao and Rama - Spectacular and Splendid Contribution

Another landmark development during my tenure in Vellore as District Collector was my acquaintance with the Rishi Valley's Satellite Schools, especially with Dr Padmanabha Rao and Mrs Rama Rao . It was Dr P. Rao and Mrs Rama Rao who were the pioneers in developing a sequential set of cards based on the curriculum (called the ladder system) in primary education. We borrowed extensively from these materials when we later developed and implemented the ABL (Activity-based Learning) in the Chennai Municipal Corporation. When we first interacted with the Raos between 1993 and 1996, we were very impressed with the "Metric Mela" (carnival for introducing numbers and number concepts to the community). At that time, we were not aware of their methods in the classroom. We used their metric mela model to bring the community to the school and showcase the talents of the school going children to the parents. The community

seemed convinced that schooling was both useful and enjoyable. Incidentally around that time, we became familiar with the ladder system followed in the satellite schools of Rishi Valley. We began nurturing the idea that given an opportunity, we would use the Rishi Valley model with suitable modifications, for our regular schools.

As Joint/Additional Secretary in School Education Department 1996-2001

Is the job of the Joint Secretary in Education a file- pushing job?

During 1996 May I completed my three-year tenure in the district and was due for a transfer. After having developed so much passion for Elementary Education, I wanted a placement in the Education Department in the Secretariat. No field or Director's posting was available in the Education Department for All India Services officers. Normally a posting in Secretariat itself is considered inferior, for the reason that it is stationary, and one would not be able to contribute anything new. The popular impression is that nothing very important happens in the Secretariat, as the files move from one office to another. In fact one of my senior colleagues advised me, as soon as I joined the Joint Secretary's post, that if I wished to be successful, I must simply push the file upwards if it comes from below and send it downwards if it comes from above! Any attempt to make a noting, seek a clarification or differ from the office note will only invite problems. He explained that with this philosophy, he had been successful for more than a decade and had one of the best rankings for officers.

My tenure as a Joint Secretary was eventful and interesting. With knowledge of field realities, I kept on reminding the Secretary and the Minister that all was not well in the field. The type of routine expenditure review, I felt, was not enough. At that time, a quality intervention programme in select districts (DPEP) for Elementary Education was under implementation. The project Director for DPEP and Director of Elementary Education were exposed to the Joy of Learning model. DPEP absorbed it immediately and even though the Elementary Education Director showed some initial reluctance, he went ahead with training all the

120000 teachers in the State, when he saw it in operation. As mentioned earlier, the method was not without its deficiencies. But with all its limitations, it was included in the training of all the teachers in the State.

I kept on presenting my views in every meeting with the Secretary and the Minister. They started seeing some meaning in what I said. The pertinent question I used to ask in every budget meeting, “Does the system deliver the best value for money? What indicators do we have for measuring the learning outcomes of children, against which we must judge the value of our investment?”

Teacher preparation is the issue

I felt that changing classroom process in regular schools was not enough, but a lasting solution would be found, if the teacher training emphasized the core concept of the child-centric process. There was a wide gap between theory and practice. Therefore a separate cadre for the Teacher Education Directorate was formed and new staff members were recruited. Once we had an exclusive directorate and staff for the department, the issue of building capacity was considered. All along, the staff from the School Education Directorate were posted as Lecturers of DIET (District Institute of Education, Research and Training). Invariably, the practice until then was to post to the Teacher Education Directorate, teachers who were not wanted in schools or teachers who wanted this specific posting because of choice of station. A long pending issue of forming a separate Directorate had been resolved. I approached the National Institute of Educational Planning and the NCERT for some guidance on the knowledge and skills required for a teacher trainer. These enquiries did not meet with any success. Whenever I came upon any teacher training programme, I would attend a session, with an open mind to find anything suitable to train the newly recruited staff for the directorate. Fortunately the then Secretary to Government in School Education Department, Mr Gowri Shankar and the then Minister for Education, Hon’ble Anbazhagan had tremendous faith in me and gave me complete freedom to explore and pilot- test a model if I could locate one. During the course of this enquiry, Mrs Amukta Mahapatra suggested a model for training, which was found

suitable. It was tried in the Directorate. All the new lecturers were trained in a cascade mode.

Teacher training curriculum revision: imminent need

The Teacher Training Curriculum (TTC) was crying for revision. It had been last revised around 1970. The TTC, which was two and a half decades old, remained completely untouched by any change in the developments in fields like child psychology and methods of teaching, I got the orders of Secretary and Minister for revision of TTC and it was revised incorporating some of the latest developments.

Only teachers should write text books

My tenure as Joint Secretary was unique in the respect that it gave me the opportunity to usher in some major reforms. Text Book revision was a landmark achievement. Earlier the text books for the Primary classes were monotonous, uninteresting and unattractive. When I examined the process followed earlier, Textbook writing committees and review committees were formed, preferably each led by a Joint Director or Director of the Education department. They would select teachers of their choice as members who would be drafting and reviewing the texts. There was bias in selecting writers and the quality of books left a lot to be desired. The first thing I did was to convince the government to issue orders banning the practice of departmental officers heading academic committees. We insisted that only practising teachers should undertake such assignments. Mrs Elke Crause introduced Mr Subir Shukla, a senior consultant of EDCIL, Government of India to us He explained the process of writing textbooks, which was very appealing. I discussed the matter with the Secretary who readily agreed to the proposal. Within a day or two, orders were issued. Such was the rapport I had with Mr Gowri Shankar, Secretary School Education, one of the finest and most outstanding officers I have ever come across. Whenever we discussed an issue and agreed on it, the Government order would be issued within a day. This was because we did not expect any formal proposal or recommendation from the Head of Department (Director). Normally for issue of any government order, the

Secretariat would have to invite proposals from the Head of the department, a process which used to take time. In all these cases, the ideas were ours and therefore we never depended on anybody for decisions or issue of orders. My experience as collector and the exposure to the working of education department helped me substantially in deciding issues at the Secretariat.

The process suggested by Subir Shukla was based on a few assumptions, the most important of which was that text book writing is a skill to be acquired consciously. Any teacher cannot write text books, as was done previously. All these predicaments arose from the perception prevailing in Government, that position and authority automatically empower the person with skills. In this case, Subir suggested that we should select 500 teachers by interview and a written test, and train them for at least six months in writing textbooks. Only those, who had the aptitude, should be involved in writing textbooks. The results were extraordinary. The books published for primary sections around 1997-99 were completely different from the previous ones, with many illustrations and activities built into the text. They stood out in quality and in technical specifications. The popular perception among my colleagues that secretariat postings are dull and unproductive seemed to be completely mistaken, as far as I was concerned. Some of the most important initiatives were taken during my tenure in the Secretariat.

TANSI develops expertise in manufacturing Montessori Mathematics Kit

Another development was my resolution to find ways and means to provide Montessori Math Kit to all schools. I felt that if we resort to the procurement of these materials by following the process of calling for tenders, we may not be able to ensure quality. Further, the process itself was cumbersome. Instead, if we trained the carpenters of a Government Company (TANSI), it would be much easier to manufacture the kits and buy them directly, without going through the process of tender. This happened some time in 1998-99. TANSI has a very good carpentry unit, with an excellent team of carpenters. These carpenters were trained intensively in making these materials. A rigorous quality control mechanism was put in place. After repeated trials, TANSI came out with a model

which cost Rs 7000, for one set of math material, for which a private company used to charge nearly Rs. 100,000. Simultaneously, carpenters from an NGO in Chennai, called Bala Mandir, were also trained to make the same materials.

It is heartening that what was a dream in 1997, has become a reality now. We have one set of math material in every Government Elementary school (30000). The combination was excellent: SSA funding for procuring learning materials and TANSI for manufacturing and supplying materials. It ensured availability of these materials in all the schools. With the training of teachers to handle math material and this kit being built into the ladder as a compulsory activity, most of the children could learn mathematics with the help of these materials. Shri Vibhu Nayar IAS., who was Additional Secretary in the School Education department, played a major role in training TANSI carpenters. Elke Crause continued to play a critical role in giving technical inputs. Finding an alternative methodology had always been in my mind and DPEP provided the opportunity for making materials. Availing of this facility, we started developing activity cards based on the Rishi Valley model, but we could not complete the job. The half-finished materials were left in the DPEP Office.

These were some of the developments that took place between 1996 and 2001, a period during which the ABL was gradually evolving.

My long-standing association with the education department was one of my greatest strengths. Since 1993, I had been fully involved in the questions of education. Whether I served in the Education department or not, I continued to search for new ideas and keep track of the recent developments. I never hesitated to offer my views on the activities of the department. When I joined the Secretariat as Joint Secretary, the Directors of the various directorates never anticipated that I would ask them so many inconvenient questions. During review meetings, I used to ask them about the poor learning outcomes of students and what they were planning to do about it. Is it not their duty to ensure that school children learn? What is the root cause for the low level performance? I would also point out that if 50% of the children do not learn it is a waste of 50% of our

resources. Who is to be held responsible for this? I used to record these questions in the minutes and in the letters which the Secretary would send to them.

Only some of the higher level officers were unhappy with my persistence on these questions; most of the others saw meaning in the issues raised and realized the need to find an answer. It appeared that they had started thinking. I used to keep my office door open, indicating my willingness to receive anyone who wished to meet me. It sent very strong signals and generated a lot of good will. Concerning the staff of the Department, I did my best to have their grievances redressed. When necessary, I would take up their case directly to the Secretary or the Minister. All these moves generated a lot of good will for me, which was very helpful in later years. In this period, I had an opportunity to get to know every officer in the department.

As Commissioner of Chennai Corporation: 2003-06

I continued in the department in the Secretariat as Additional Secretary, till June 2001. Between June 2001 and June 2003, I was in two other departments. It was in May 2003, that I got an opportunity, which provided the space for my implementing the plans. I became Commissioner of Chennai, Municipal Corporation with a clear mandate from the then Chief Minister, Selvi J Jayalaltha to set the house in order. In the briefing before I joined, she said categorically that she knew me well and had chosen me to set things right in the CMC. The AIADMK came to power in May 2001. Between May 2001 and May 2003, eight Commissioners had come and gone. I was the ninth officer to take over. Thereafter, I continued as Commissioner for three years under the AIADMK Government and six more months under the new DMK Government. This turned out to be the second longest tenure for any serving Commissioner in three hundred and fifty years of the history of the CMC. The officers, staff and the Councilors were aware that I was chosen by Chief Minister herself. It made my job easier in toning up the administration and improving service delivery. While I

made improvements in sensitive areas like solid waste management, and improving infrastructure like roads and parks, many other issues like containing stray dogs and stray cattle also received my close attention. There were also substantial improvements in Public Health, Sanitation and Maternal and Child health areas. The Commissioner's seat was considered politically, a hot seat. When one enforces discipline, one tends to incur the displeasure of some of those affected. This is inevitable in public service. You cannot be good to everybody, especially when you handle a large volume of public funds and contracts. Some affected individuals will be unhappy. I was aware of this reality.

Realizing our dream

As soon as I took over as Commissioner, the first thing I did was to rush to the erstwhile office of the DPEP and get hold of the half-finished learning cards that had been dumped in a corner of one of the rooms. I brought them to the Corporation office. There were 264 primary and middle schools in the Corporation, under the direct control of the Commissioner. I quietly re-grouped my old team of teachers, namely, Shanmugam, Pitchia, Ratnavelu and Malathy in the Corporation and told them that within six months time I wanted the adapted Rishi Valley methods in a few model schools in Chennai.

The team swung into action. About 100 teachers from Tamil Nadu went to the Rishi Valley Satellite School Training centre and took an extensive course. These teachers returned to Chennai, charged up with the possibilities of bringing change to the school system. They worked after school hours for more than six months and prepared the materials. I would visit them regularly when they were working late in the evening and I supported and encouraged their work. This additional assignment carried no remuneration. What motivated them to work much beyond their school timing for so many days was never made explicit, but it was apparent that the teachers were committed. Thirteen schools were selected for pilot testing the material. Initially, the material was developed for Standards I and II. They were photocopied and the suggestions made in the field trials were incorporated, before the materials were printed. It turned out to be a

tremendous success in terms of student learning outcomes and their confidence levels.

Once we saw the results, there was no going back. For more than a decade, it had been a dream. We focused on these 13 schools and they became the best schools in the Chennai Corporation. Simultaneously we commissioned the same team to prepare materials for classes III and IV. These thirteen schools became models for the rest of the schools in Chennai Corporation. There was never any pressure on any school to adopt the method. We brought teachers from the other schools and allowed them to observe the classes and interact with the teachers and students. The team of visiting teachers spent a day or two in the model schools. Once they were convinced and opted to adopt the new methodology. The Corporation provided the technical support and the required resources. The spread of the new methodology was amazingly fast. The ABL system had many in-built advantages, and could impress even a casual observer. In this case, everybody knew that the Commissioner was closely monitoring the progress. In Government service, hierarchy matters most. Whatever the Commissioner or the Director wants will happen and the staff will generally obey orders, even if it does not make sense to them. Government officers have been conditioned to obey. In this case it was a blessing that Commissioner was reviewing and monitoring the schools. Therefore the scheme got extended in a short time. While the improvement in performance of Chennai Corporation was palpable in all the other fields like Health, handling of floods, infrastructure like roads and parks, I had decided to keep a low profile about the introduction ABL in schools.

I was fully clued in to the inner workings of a Government department. I knew that when people feel uneasy with any new rule or procedure, they would look for vulnerable points to attack. I felt that if it was known that I was taking special interest in this scheme, ABL could become their target. Quite consciously, I kept the ABL profile low. Similarly, since the political climate was very sensitive at that time, even though the scheme had the approval of the then CM, the matter was kept confidential. But the schools switched over fast. We had simultaneously

developed resource persons who kept going round and provided on-site support to the schools. Every Saturday, I would meet these resource persons. My meeting them regularly and appreciating their work had a tremendous effect. They were doubly motivated and went ahead with vigour.

Soon we developed material for the III and IV standards as well and introduced them in all the 264 schools. An amount of Rs 50 lakhs was allotted from the Corporation funds for printing and laminating the cards. UNICEF came forward to supplement the financial costs of printing the cards. Ms Aruna Rathnam of the UNICEF has been a constant supporter of the reform process, and a source of strength to us. Her technical input was also very valuable. The cards were subsequently printed and distributed. In another situation, getting Rs 50 lakhs would have been impossible. But in the Chennai Corporation, with my being at the helm of affairs, it was easy. Subsequently, this amount was reimbursed by the SSA.

There were many advantages I enjoyed because of my tenure as Commissioner in the Chennai Corporation. Firstly, the schools were under my direct control and I did not have to wait for any one's permission to pilot test ABL in schools. In fact, officers and teachers were only too willing to oblige and make it a success. Secondly, funding was not a constraint at all. As I was a trained Cost Accountant, I was familiar with the financial procedure and I knew how to mobilize resources. The standard objections by accountants and finance officers did not hold me back.

The work culture of the Corporation was worthy of emulation. Their dedication and commitment levels are far better than many others. With only minimal support and recognition from me, they managed to transform the schools within one year. My being at the top of the hierarchy helped of course.

Quality Primary Education was no one's agenda.

There were constant questions on how this was possible in Corporation schools. The public and the press came to know about Corporation schools becoming a model, only two years later, when the SSA started bringing teachers from districts to visit the Corporation schools. The answer was very simple. Providing quality primary education was not on anyone's agenda. All the publicity in the press about poor quality of education was merely lip service. If someone at any level had perceived it as a problem, some solution would have certainly emerged. Nobody in authority took any interest in knowing what was happening inside the four walls of a class room. When more than 50% children did not acquire basic skills in Language and Mathematics, as assessed and widely published by NCERT, it did not bother anyone. When adverse reports were published in the news papers, it would be a topic of discussion for one day. The very next day it would be forgotten. Therefore, when a sea change was introduced in the classroom, it did not attract any one's attention for a time.

Do we need to give a special name to the scheme?

Resource persons were keen to give a special, attractive name to the scheme. They mentioned this to me more than once. But I was very clear that the scheme should not have any name other than Activity Based Learning, which is what the scheme is. A special name would give a separate identity to the scheme which I did not wish. Once it has a name and an identity there will be a tendency to identify the scheme with a particular individual or agency. For this reason, we avoided giving a special name to the scheme.

Somewhere during second half of 2005 I had an opportunity to attend the Executive Committee meeting of the SSA in Chennai. The Committee had been convinced about the need for a change in classroom procedures and decided to try out ABL in 10 schools in every block. Consequently 10 schools in each block were selected, teachers trained and the materials printed and distributed.

I had completed three and half years in the Chennai Corporation by September 2006. The post of State Project Director for the SSA was vacant at that time. In the previous year I had been pleading with the Chief Secretary for some placement in the School Education department. When the post of State Project Director fell vacant, I made a request to the Government to post me as State Project Director of SSA..

Director Vs Secretary to Government

I was fully aware that the post of Head of Department (Director, State Project Director) even though subordinate to that of Secretary to Government, would be more in my line, than the post of Secretary. The main responsibility of the Director (SPD) is to monitor and ensure the implementation of the schemes for education. Even though the Secretary's post is higher and the Director has to obey his orders, I chose to become State Project Director, SSA and kept on pushing this request to the Chief Secretary and to some senior Ministers.

Breaking News

I was in Coimbatore in my brother's house and about to catch a train in the evening, when Mr Loganathan, a dependable personal assistant in the Chennai Corporation, rang me up to inform me that he had received a cover from the Public Special Department Secretariat. On my instruction, he opened the envelope and broke the news that I had been posted as State Project Director SSA. Within a week I joined the SSA.

As Project Director SSA

I know the problem, I know the solution and I have the power

Mrs Amuktha Mahapatra, who did a mid-term evaluation of ABL while I was in Chennai Corporation has quoted me in response to her query about the need for intervention, as saying "I know the problem, I know the solution and I have the power to implement it as well". I do not distinctly recall saying that. But this phrase sums up what I had in my mind as my job in SSA.

Yes. I had decided that we must change. There was no second opinion. I was not handicapped now and I did not need not to depend on others for sanctions. My writ would run. There were 37,486 schools, 55 lakh children, and 1,20,000 teachers. I was in full charge of SSA. SSA had all the components that are necessary for intervention. We needed to print cards for ABL and SSA had the money for printing the materials. We needed to train teachers for the ABL. SSA had a substantial allotment for teacher training. We needed to have some improvements in the classroom like low level blackboards, racks to keep the trays, trays to keep the cards etc. SSA had provided for an annual allocation for each school and a specific amount for maintenance which, taken together, was more than adequate for making these improvements.

Measured Steps and Dormant Model Schools

Even though I was desperate to get things going, I did not hasten the course of action. I requested the officers and staff in Headquarters to spend some time in ABL schools of Chennai Corporation and asked them if all the schools in the State could look like this. On my request, even finance and accounts officers visited the schools. In this way, everybody in the State started sharing my vision on the need for change. In the meantime, I went round the State, visited the so-called model schools in the blocks set up during the second half of 2005. These schools in the districts seemed to have remained dormant. They had the materials and infrastructural facilities of ABL. But, any knowledge about how to use them was missing. When the teachers were asked if they could give up the conventional methods, their response was lukewarm; they were not convinced about ABL. In late 2005 and early 2006, when the SSA wanted to create model schools, they just printed the materials and gave minimal training to the teachers, which proved to be inadequate. There was no follow up and no monitoring. The teachers did not seem convinced about accepting the changed system.

As usual in any Government scheme, the executive committee had followed the instructions literally. So on paper, the model schools were created and those in power were happy with completion report sent by field officers. Many things in

Government are rituals like this. Senior officers especially Directors/Commissioners, who are responsible for implementing various schemes, are unaware and often indifferent, to the objectives of the scheme. In these so-called model schools, there was no semblance of ABL activity. All the materials were found to be dumped in a corner. This is how so many good decisions remain only on paper in government files. The focus is only on exchange of papers. Most of the data collected are meant to be left in the files handled by Junior Assistants.

From my angle, it was a great start as all the requisite materials were available in the model schools. With a little push, these schools could become real models in every block. Having a few model schools in each of the 400 Blocks was no mean achievement. This would have taken at least six months, if I had started afresh. Now I had a head start of six months.

When I went round the districts, I would go round to the schools with the education officers during the day. In the evening, I would assemble all the officers at the block level in a convenient place, to hold discussions.

Breaking hierarchy

When we went round seeing the schools I broke the conventional established procedure. Normally when senior officers go out to the field for inspection, lunch is arranged in the Travelers' bungalows. Even field tours are planned in such a way that they reach a place where they have this facility for lunch. I made it a point to avoid such pre-arranged lunches. We would keep going round seeing the schools. In any hotel en route that was available, we would have lunch together. I always shunned any special treatment to me. We used to hire one or two cars, and all of us used to travel together. This may appear a small step but it sent strong signals. People became aware of my style and accepted what I said. My instructions were very clear; I said that all the expenses should be booked in the management account. What used to happen earlier was that one of the junior officers would be asked to bear the expenses. These small gestures sent signals to the staff that I meant business. All that I wanted was performance.

I stated clearly, to all the staff and officers at every meeting, that in Government service nobody is personally obliged to anybody. All of us draw our salary from the contingent fund of the state. Nobody is paid by anybody personally and therefore the loyalty of all of us should be to Government. This can be shown only by implementing government schemes in the true spirit and efficiently. I have seen officers who treat their peons as their personal servants. All of us are paid by the same government, for specific duties assigned. After office hours we do not have any relationship. Treating somebody like their personal servant is simply not acceptable. Some of these views, and my actions in keeping with these principles, brought about a lot of changes in the organization. Every officer began to feel empowered and started taking initiative and showing some originality. ((My administration was transparent and democratic)). I was always available to everybody. I never asked anyone why they were bringing their problems to me. On the contrary, I impressed on them that they could always come to me with any problem and it was my duty to solve it. I had made my telephone (mobile) number available to nearly 7000 employees of my organization and 200,000 teachers. They could talk to me whenever they wanted. When I received their calls, I attended to their problems immediately. I conveyed my sense of trust and said I would overlook any inadvertent omission on their part. I would be happy only if they did their best.

The change in the culture of our unit was palpable. Almost everyone came up, fearlessly, with some suggestion for improvement. Every officer and teacher seemed fully convinced about the merits of ABL. In addition, they enjoyed the freedom to speak to me directly and this enhanced their confidence.

About 4000 Block Resource Teacher educators were meant to supervise schools. About 2000 BRTes had been made to work in the schools, even though they were recruited for SSA and were drawing salaries from SSA. They were to report at the Block Resource Centres only on Saturdays. I brought all of them to the SSA and then posted them to various blocks. Adding nearly one half of the strength of BRTes was a big boost to the morale. This issue had been pending for a very long

time. Since I took action immediately, the officers and staff started believing in my ability to get things done.

There were 120 forms the BRTes had to fill in every month to send to the HQ. During my field visit, they complained about this monotonous and unproductive work. The Chennai district, which had led the ABL movement and pilot-tested ABL successfully, became a model for the whole country, but had been adjudged as being low on performance. The formats and the data failed to capture the real progress. The district rankings were based on the information sent by the BRTes. I noticed that most of the required information was repetitive and redundant and did not serve any purpose other than giving ranks to the districts. These formats were revised and reduced to 21 reports (seven monthly, seven quarterly and seven half- yearly). This substantially reduced their unrewarding work load.

Training of Block Resource Teachers – shared vision

As soon as this 2000 BRTes joined the existing force, it was felt that we needed to train them on the ABL as they had not been exposed to ABL methodology. Residential training for three days was organized for all of them. Training was given for school observation. Resource persons were mostly practising teachers. At the end of the training, I made it a point to meet them in batches of 100 and address them. I listened to their grievances and redressed them on the spot, where possible. In respect of others, action was taken soon after. Some of the reforms were a) reducing the data collection work load, b) allowing BRTes to go to the schools directly from their homes instead of coming to the BRCs first and c) signing the attendance in the school instead of at the BRC. This type of informal interaction was very helpful in motivating the staff and in articulating the vision. It became a shared effort for every member of the organization.

I spoke to them of the golden opportunity we had to get children of the poor into mainstream education. With ABL in hand, we felt that we could transform the educational experience in the primary schools. The BRTes were young and energetic graduates and post graduates, freshly recruited through a competitive

examination. They were a strong team, I felt, who with proper direction, would be capable of creating history. That is precisely what they have done.

The Three Stalwarts

We wanted to go to scale with ABL and see it function throughout the State by June 2007. We were already in November 2006. An exceptional role was played by the Joint Directors, Dr.Elangovan, Dr.Kannappan and Mrs Latha. Dr Elangovan had a natural talent for organizing, coordinating, and liaison work and excellence in public relations. His thinking and conceptual skills are also extraordinary. He stayed in the head-quarters and looked after the office. Dr. Kannappan is exceptional in logistics, planning, building a team and in motivating colleagues. For at least four days in a week, Dr. Kannappan and I would be in the field, going around from school to training centre, interacting with the field staff. In the evenings we would review and plan the next steps with Dr.Elangovan. Mrs Latha devoted herself to pedagogy. She spent most of her time on preparation of materials for Classes I to IV and the training of teachers and resource persons. All the three officers handled their part of the project with exemplary competence.

They were also thorough and resourceful in financial management and knew which head of accounts to tap for specific items. It seemed as if the directorate was virtually run by them. Once they were familiar with my style of functioning, all the three officers gave their total involvement to the organization. Each of them enjoyed complete autonomy. They knew that I would stand by them in all their actions as I had faith in their capability. I used to feel confident that with the assistance of these three joint directors, I could change the world! They never hesitated to express their views, even dissent. It was a quality, rare among Government officers. In retrospect, I know it was their total involvement in ABL, which enabled its take-off.

As soon as I took over as State Project Director , I brought back Shanmugam, Pitchia, Malathy and Rathnavel as State Coordinators. SSA had the provision for them to function as Consultants with full authority. The entire Directorate knew

that they were chosen by me and it gave them authority. Shanmugam and Pitchia toured every nook and corner of the State, tirelessly, and monitored the implementation of the scheme. Malathy confined her monitoring to Chennai and looked after visitors from other States. When needed, she visited other States along with the team of resource persons and provided valuable support.

Steadfast support by UNICEF

I wish to record my appreciation to UNICEF and Aruna Rathnam in particular, for the steadfast support to the change process. We received support for printing the ABL cards, in addition to advocacy.

SSA, a well structured and efficient organisation

SSA was an organization with an excellent structure and flexibility to produce the best results. Since it was a project, there was considerable financial autonomy. There were officers with all the facilities at State, District and Block levels. Well laid out procedure manuals and guidelines were already in place. Funds were handled through bank transactions, without going through the treasury. A well-structured hierarchy was in place at the district and block level. In position was a two-way communication satellite facility, connecting all the 400 block head quarters with head office. All the districts and blocks were well connected with email facility. Any message could reach every member of the organization within one day. Most of the staff members in the project were also familiar with computers.

In Governmental hierarchy, the chief executive's word prevails. There is generally no dissent. I believed that, as Director, I could get things done easily, an assumption that proved right in this case.

Scaling up

We planned to first make the model schools in the Blocks effective and simultaneously prepare for scaling up the model in the entire State of Tamil Nadu, by June 2007.

The knowledge, experience and the ingenuity of the all the three Joint Directors combined into a real force. They assessed how much money remained unspent in the system and under which head of account. We needed money for printing cards, providing infrastructure like Low-level black boards, trays, shelves etc. We noticed that the money in the budget of 2006-07 was available even in December 2006, to implement ABL in all the 37486 schools. All that was needed was the interpretation of the existing guidelines. This was something I could manage. With my long experience in the Government and my knowledge of finance and accounting procedures, I was able to give the necessary interpretation for them to use the budgeted funds.

In this context, a flashback to a couple of experiences in my career would be instructive. To be effective in Government, knowledge of the subject one is handling and the intention to do the job well good are both necessary. I realized my weakness in the knowledge area when I was Deputy General Manager in State Industries Promotion Corporation of Tamil Nadu (SIPCOT) during 1986-87. As Deputy General Manager, I was in charge of personnel and had to negotiate with the Trade Union on the eve of Diwali on their demand for a 20% Bonus. The Finance Manager's brief to me was that we need to pay only the minimum bonus of 8.33%, as the company was incurring loss. During negotiation the trade union leaders held that the company incurred loss because of the change in our accounting procedure from Mercantile system to Cash system. They argued that the workers should not be penalised for this change. I did not know anything about mercantile system or Cash system. I felt that I cut a sorry figure in not knowing how to handle the crisis. But the lesson I learnt was that there is no shortcut. One just has to learn.

I was aware of a similar deficiency while working in SIPCOT, a financial company giving long term loans to Industries. Serving in a Government Company in senior position without knowledge of basic accounting procedures and without being aware of Balance Sheets and how to read them, I found myself dejected and ineffective. I used to depend on the finance person's advice for every decision

and in the process somebody else always decided for me. I realized that I would be serving Government for another twenty years and that I must get a thorough knowledge in all aspects of financial management. I scouted around for a good academic course which would give me in-depth knowledge in Finance and accounts. I found and pursued a course in Cost Accountancy for two and a half years and acquired the degree. It is one of the finest courses I have come across, with a rigorous syllabus and a good mechanism for evaluation. This course is suitable for anyone who wants to pursue the course while in service. Normally, the Financial Adviser in any organization occupies the prime place because he decides financial allocations and gives interpretations and clarifications in the case of ambiguity. Besides, he also controls audit. In my case, the mere information that I had qualified in cost accountancy was enough to settle matters. No objection was ever raised to my interpretations! A typical example was the way we found money for the exposure visit of nearly 40,000 teachers from all the Blocks to Chennai.

Exposure visit of 40 000 teachers

We felt that we needed to make the “model schools” in the block, real models so that replication in the block would be easier in June 2007. One strategy which we found very effective in Chennai Corporation when we extended ABL to all schools, was the training of teachers in model schools with 80 % practical, as hands on experience and 20 % theory. We never taught theory alone in our teacher training programmes. The theory component was restricted to about 20% of the time. Teachers had an opportunity to see the performance of children themselves, besides interacting with fellow teachers and getting their doubts clarified on operational issues. This type of peer interaction substantially helped in convincing the teachers about the applicability of the scheme in their own school settings.

Therefore we wanted to adopt the same strategy for setting up model schools in the block. We needed to bring about 40000 teachers from nearly four hundred blocks to Chennai as we had ABL schools only in Chennai at that time. We did not have adequate funds for exposure visits, but money was available under the head

of Research, Evaluation and Monitoring. We wanted to make use of REM amount for the exposure visit. We designed a research project to assess the efficacy of the exposure visit as training methodology, compared to the usual training without classroom observation. Tools were developed and 40000 teachers were brought to Chennai in batches from the districts over a period of three months. They would spend one full day in the ABL schools. (Their written feedback was obtained to pursue the research purpose). In the evenings, we would meet in batches and the focus of discussion was the performance of children in the schools they visited. Almost every teacher went back thoroughly motivated and with resolution to implement the ABL and change her school. These visits did wonders. Within three months, we were able to make 4 to 5 schools in every block into model schools. I have never encountered dearth of resources as a problem; one needs only to know how to interpret the rules. As is apparent, the system offers enough flexibility.

When we went round model schools in the district, we noticed that many teachers were struggling to practice what they had learnt in the training. Even though they had seen model classes, they had problems in practice. They needed more support in the classroom to put ABL in place. The resource teachers were all in Chennai. I assembled all the Chennai teachers (about 500) and asked them to volunteer to go to the districts and stay there for a day or two, to help their fellow teachers to administer ABL. Nearly 300 teachers volunteered. They spanned out to various blocks and spent one or two days in the rural schools and gave on-site support to the teachers. Even though we provided for their accommodation, many of the visiting lady teachers stayed in the homes of the other lady teachers. I heard that they exchanged telephone numbers and even after two or three years, they maintain contact, to share their ideas and experiences.

Motivation of Supervisory staff- a critical managerial intervention

During our field visits, we made it a point to meet all the supervisory staff (AEEO, DEEO) and sensitize them on the need for a change in the educational system. I would highlight the fact that in the past, schools were run, teachers taught in the school regularly, with an absenteeism of not more than 5 to 6 %, but the learning outcomes were most discouraging. In 2006, the Director of Elementary Education and SSA conducted an achievement study for 5th Standard students. It was found that nearly 65% children could not perform basic operation in Mathematics and about 35% children could not read or write fluently. The break- up for every block was available with us. The data clearly revealed that all was not well in our schools. It was known that children have inherent potential to learn and if they do not learn inside the classroom, it only means that the classroom is not conducive for the children to learn. By active discussion in an open forum, the case was made for a complete change in the teaching methodology. The ABL offered the best choice in the present circumstances. These discussions in every district brought about a change in the mindset of most of them. I did not fix the blame on any one person. I always concluded that no single individual was responsible, but the system was inadequate. System change was not possible without direction and support from the top, which is what was happening with the introduction of ABL. These interactions proved very helpful.

Political will crucial for success

Political will is a critical input in spearheading system change. Tamil Nadu was very fortunate to have Thiru Thangam Thennarasu as Minister for School Education. He visited two of the Chennai Corporation Schools and immediately gave his approval. What was striking was the swiftness of his decision and his continued support.

Matching administrative will

We also invited the Secretary, School Education to visit a few schools and he readily agreed that the ABL could result in the transformation of primary schools .

This kind of informal approval, political and administrative, boosted our morale and reinforced our determination to take it to its logical end -- to all the State and State- aided schools in the State.

The two critical factors for bringing a paradigm shift in pedagogy – political will and administrative will—were mutually strengthening. The stage was set for the implementation of ABL and ALM.

Approval of MHRD

Another landmark was the meeting for the approval of the Work Plan Budget for 2007-08 in the Ministry of Human Resources Development. We projected ABL as a major quality intervention in the coming year. Ms Brinda Swarup JS GOI, who had seen the ABL schools in Chennai, supported the proposal and the Ministry gave its approval for extending the scheme to the entire State.

The stage was set to scale up the ABL with the support of the State Government and the MHRD. April and May of 2007 were used to provide infrastructure to all schools in the state and arrangements were made to print ABL cards. There were nearly 4000 cards of different sizes. Tenders were floated for printing and distribution. Technical advice was obtained from the Text Book Corporation. SSA had never handled such high value contract. My experience in Chennai Corporation and my knowledge in cost accountancy were helpful in my organizing and deciding on issues. Three persons played a crucial role in finalizing the tenders in record time: they were Financial Adviser Thiru Anbarasu, Consultant Thiru Thulasiraman and Superintendent Venkataraman. Within three months, the printing was done and the materials started arriving in the schools. The logistics of assessing the requirement and planning for distribution was taken care of by Sundararaman. It was almost like magic! The material had started arriving in June 2007 and by July of the same year, the training was almost complete. The training of teachers was conducted in the model schools at the block level. The earlier strategy of training, combined with school observation was adopted. In cases where it was not possible, there would certainly be a demonstration class in the

training centre or a school visit followed by classroom observation. Since we had model schools at each block, the teachers could observe what was taught in the training session. This was an important aspect of training. They saw the students engaged with the materials and were convinced that they could adopt this new system in their schools.

Funding only from SSA

The entire expenditure for implementing ABL and ALM was sourced through project funding under SSA. We did not ask for funds outside SSA at all. The SSA scheme had been under implementation from 2002 onwards and every year the project had been receiving funds regularly.

Four crucial months

Scaling up had to happen at this time. A big function was arranged to launch ABL in the State. I think that was the first time any Government celebrated the launching of a new pedagogy in the school system. Such public functions add value to the scheme and in this case it sent strong signals to all teachers and their representatives that it was a government scheme.

All 37486 schools with 120000 teachers and 5 million children would have to implement the innovative ABL. Teachers had been trained, the material distributed, supervisors sensitised, and the monitoring system in place, with clearly observable process indicators. We were fully conscious of the gigantic task before us. It called for extensive touring. We needed to visit every district and most of the blocks and see as many schools as possible

We had a plan to interact with the teachers, find out if they had difficulties in the field and swiftly come up with an answer. With such a major change being contemplated, there was no room for any complacency. I was sure that face to face contact with the field officers would help to tackle most of the problems.

During the months of June, July, August and September, if somebody had taken a look at my diary, they would find that for almost 90% of the time, I was touring

the districts. Excepting Mondays, Kannappan the JD and I were in the field going from place to place and from school to school, ascertaining the situation on the ground. If we came across any issue, we would discuss the matter over the phone with the State level coordinators and come up with a solution the next day. All our offices were connected by email and we could reach entire state -- all the 400 blocks, in two hours. All our decisions were taken after discussion and deliberation. At the end of each day's visit we had a meeting of all officers in the district to discuss what we had observed and what else was needed. We never criticized any one. A pep talk pointing out their potential and giving a few hints on how to be more effective would meet with success. It seemed that the entire district team was motivated and enthusiastic.

There were many issues that required an immediate decision for smooth implementation. This was the first time we kept mixing the age groups, even if mono-grade was possible. Some of the parents of the older children objected to their children sitting with the younger ones. The teachers who were already convinced about the new methodology persuaded the parents to bide their time. After two months, they were able to demonstrate the improved learning outcomes of their children. They had learnt this strategy from the Chennai Corporation teachers. Once parents found that their children performed better, academically, they started supporting the scheme whole heartedly. It was a fact that if ABL was fully implemented for one month, we could be assured of results. The practice of children sitting in groups was something new to the community. Combining classes was also a big challenge. Initially we asked the teachers to combine all the four grades together. But in most cases, the teachers resisted. Even in some of the best ABL schools, teachers preferred to keep classes 1 and 2 together and classes 3 and 4 together. We know that it would be better to keep children from classes 1 to 4 together. We announced that the schools had the freedom to choose the combination. However, combining 1 and 2 is a must and the rest was left to the discretion of the schools. We were flexible on minor issues. Our main objective was that the schools should switch over to ABL and enable children's active learning. In certain minor issues, some compromise was

necessary. This flexibility in approach convinced the teachers that their views were also considered important. This, in turn, produced excellent results in securing their cooperation.

There were many issues brought to our notice during our field visit. One issue was whether teachers need to write notes of lesson for the ABL classes. Our consultants felt that it was better to see the achievement chart, instead of the notes of lesson. After discussion, we realized that all these years, writing notes of lesson had not produced any results; it was just a ritual. We decided to do away with notes of lesson. Instead, the supervisor was asked to look into the children's achievement charts. These field visits and touring helped us substantially to have a complete grip over the ground realities. The state coordinators, Shanmugam and Pitchia also toured extensively, meeting teachers at block level to ensure the implementation of the scheme. Everyday, they would bring any hitch that needed attention to our notice. All these issues got solved then and there and the solutions communicated to the blocks the very next day. In two days, it used to reach all 37486 schools.

Teachers associations

There was some resistance from the Teachers associations after five or six months. At that time, all the office bearers were invited for a discussion and the need for change was explained at length. Some agreed with our views and some disagreed. There were other considerations for them to resist the new scheme, than ABL per se. But at no point in time, was it a serious enough issue for them to oppose. Later, some associations which had chosen to resist, felt isolated. Even their own members did not support them. Besides, they were all aware that the Scheme had the complete backing of most teachers and the Government of Tamil Nadu. Government had issued an order for the implementation of ABL and ALM. Our main purpose of celebrating the launch of ABL by the Hon'ble Minister for Local Administration (now Deputy CM) was to inform all the stakeholders that the Government was serious about the scheme. The purpose, I think, has been achieved.

intelligence of every child. As a result, a number of other States started considering the introduction of ABL. Many chose to visit the State to see the ABL schools. We had a continuous stream of visitors.

Things worked like a well-oiled machine, with each person responsible to take care of a specific aspect, working tirelessly with one single objective: that all children should get a good education.

Having been successful in introducing ABL in all 37486 state- run and aided schools, I was desperate to develop a methodology for the upper primary classes. The logic was very simple. We needed to engage children in the classroom. If the teacher kept talking and demanding silence of the students, children can at best, learn passively. As we all know from experience, very little learning would take place. In primary classes, we were able to replace the text book with cards. We could also do away with common terminal exams, because the government had been following a “no detention” policy. In upper primary sections, we needed to keep the text book intact and to prepare children for exams. Therefore, we were on the search for some good methodology, which would be completely child centric and at the same time, provide space and time for the child to engage in reading, comprehending, and consolidating. In every academic forum I raised these questions, but there were no answers, until I came in contact with the outreach team of ‘The School’. Mrs Sumitra Gautama and Mrs Padmavathy offered to share the new methodology called Active Learning Methodology (ALM). We were happy to find a suitable method and requested them to train 60 BRTes during the first fortnight of May 2008. We were elated with the pedagogy and without further loss of time, in three months after pilot testing in 120 schools, the scheme was extended to all the middle schools, middle sections of high and higher secondary schools in Tamil Nadu. We followed the same strategy for scaling up the ALM as we had done for the ABL. It was Hon’ble Minister who saw a model school in Pudukkotai district and gave approval, in principle. This was followed by the Secretary’s clearance. Armed with these approvals we jumped into action. Before we scaled up, Mrs Lata JD, ably assisted by Sivagamasundari

and her team of BRTES, worked untiringly for days together and brought out source books, which served as teachers' guides. In this process we had opportunity to interact with Shri Gauama, Mrs Sumitra, Mrs Suchitra, Dr Ramkumar, Mrs Padmavathy and other faculty members of 'The School'. We were impressed with their commitment and integrity and could not stop saying what fine human beings they were. None of them ever accepted any money from us even for transport expenses. Such principled behaviour was unequalled in our experience. Their contribution for improving the quality of education is immense - they have done yeoman service for the State. I really have no words to express my gratitude to them.

ALM has received an amazingly positive response from the students. During the initial period of its implementation, we went round and ensured that the system was in place.

I retired from Government service on 31st July, 2008 with peace of mind. Both ABL and ALM were different methodologies of teaching and use different approaches. They are certainly better than the methods we had been following earlier. We don't claim that they are perfect. As the teachers start to internalize the innovations, other new ideas will emerge. We expect to keep improving the process by receiving feedback constantly from teachers and experts. Everything is still evolving

I was extremely fortunate to have such a good team both in the Chennai Corporation and the SSA. They have made my tenure most enjoyable and pleasant. These two organizations have not functioned like traditional bureaucracies. They have become vibrant, democratic, lively and energetic institutions. It was a great opportunity for me, one which very few civil servants would get.

Lessons learnt.

- We have demonstrated that Government systems can also be transformed to ensure quality.

- Government Departments need not be tied up in bureaucratic procedures. They can become even more efficient than private institutions.
- Government officials are often condemned for lack of initiative and imagination. However, it is lack of direction that is a barrier.
- For bringing about attitudinal change, no separate training (as being attempted in the Corporate sector) is necessary. If the individual is equipped with professional skills and clarity on the objectives of his job, his attitude automatically changes.
- There is no dearth of funds in the Government. It is only lack of involvement, ideas and commitment that hinders development.
- In Government service, non- performance or lack of realization of the objectives are not seen as problems to be addressed. It makes one wonder why they are paid. A Government officer, in the normal course, thinks that his job involves going to the office, attending to files, seeing visitors, conducting or attending meetings and so on. In all these tasks he should adhere to procedure. If procedure is not available, then go by precedence. The absence of clarity on the roles and responsibilities is the order of the day. If properly oriented nurtured and supported by a strong leadership, the same group of people become a team and produce good results.
- For the problems perceived, solutions may be available outside the department or outside the system. An open mind to look for a solution will ultimately be successful in locating one. Given the will and determination, success is certain.
- The failure of many schemes is attributed to the lack of political will. Political will is not automatic. Someone has to work for it. If the political leadership can see the advantages and are convinced, they will not hesitate to support a new scheme.

- Showing working models and then working towards their replication is a good strategy. With a concrete model to observe and emulate, all the teachers could go forward. Seeing is believing!

The story goes on. In a recent evaluation (under publication) of the ABL in Tamil Nadu 99.6% of the children interviewed said that they like coming to school. This tribute in their collective voice is the best place to close this essay.
