

# The ABL of getting it right

P Selvaraghavan, a Class VII student in a Chennai Corporation school, is busy writing an essay on the Relevance of Republic Day. He walks over to his English teacher and asks her the spelling of magnificent. His teacher makes a few corrections in the paper and tells him to go ahead and finish the exercise.

If it weren't for training under the activity-based learning (ABL) methodology, these children would not be able to write a 200-word essay, nor have the courage to walk up and ask the spelling of a word they find difficult, says the teacher. Across Tamil Nadu, the new method has brought back the joy of learning by helping students move away from the practice of studying by rote and learn by doing.

When introduced in 2003 under the Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan (SSA), many inside the system saw ABL as a cosmetic change that would soon fade out. Eight years later, most admit that it has triggered a silent revolution in the state school education system and is here to stay.

Former SSA special project director M P Vijayakumar spearheaded its implementation in state schools. Initially, there was resistance from teachers, who found it difficult to make the transition from the old lecture method to a system that would involve multigrade classrooms with students from different age groups, do away with exams and leave children free to reach academic milestones on their own. Be it their mother tongue, or how to operate new technology or a cinema song, children are constantly learning outside the classroom. If they fail to learn at the same pace in a classroom then we have to admit that there is something wrong with the system. As managers of the system it is our duty to provide an alternative, says Vijayakumar.

The effort is finally showing results. The Aser report by NGO Pratham says that Tamil Nadu is the only state in the country to show improvement in both reading and arithmetic levels. In Tamil Nadu the improvement in reading may be an outcome of an overall change in pedagogy that allows children to learn at their own pace rather than being encouraged to achieve reading skills as a priority, it says.

A visiting team from the World Bank and European Commission found the model working well two years ago. Economist Deepa Shankar, a team member, said ABL ensures that 95% children in the classroom are engaged. Also, it converts the problem of large or multigrade classrooms with few teachers into a solution, as the method incorporates peer learning.

N Manimegalai, headmistress of Rani Meiyammai Primary School in Gandhinagar, Adyar, who has been teaching for 36 years says that earlier classes used to be exam-oriented and the goal of teachers was to complete portions. There was no time to see if children understood what was being taught. In a class of 45, if 20 to 25 children understood the concept we moved on to the next lesson. Those 25 children would be confident about finishing class. But, after adopting ABL all our 700 students are confident of reaching milestones in their own time (TOI 22-1-12).