

DAVID HORSBURGH'S NEEL BAGH VS ACTIVITY BASED LEARNING IN CHENNAI CORPORATION SCHOOLS - A STUDY

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Activity Based Learning (ABL) method has its roots in David Horsburgh's Neel Bagh. Influenced by the writings of Bertrand Russell, R. F. Dearden, A. S. Neill, Tagore, and Gandhi, and inspired by Jiddu Krishnamurthy's philosophy, David Horsburgh, an Englishman, started the Neel Bagh school in a remote village in Bangalore in 1972. He wanted every student to be successful. He created a learning space where an individual's freedom and autonomy were valued, radicalising the school education system in India.

"Joyful Learning" experiment started in Tamilnadu in the mid-90s. M. P. Vijay Kumar, Commissioner of the Chennai Corporation, introduced Activity Based Learning (ABL) in Chennai Corporation Schools in 2003. Nearly 37,000 schools in Tamilnadu use this method today. Though it is considered to be a successful method by many, its influence on the development of English language skills, Mathematical skills, and advanced reading and writing skills in Tamil is under question.

Many teachers who practise ABL method in corporation schools do not realise the significance of the method. They are dissatisfied with the ABL method as they believe that the activities have diminished the learning potential of the students. (Learning potential, according to them, is the students' memorising skills.)

They do not understand that the students are 'learning' through the activities. They argue that the students 'simply do activities' without learning anything productively. They complain that ABL method has handicapped the students by making them playful and lazy. They opine that the students get no practice for writing paragraphs and essays in ABL method, and this will seriously affect their board exam marks, impairing their career forever.

This paper will study the origin and development of ABL Method and bring out the reasons for its ineffectiveness or teacher-dissatisfaction by comparing it with the teaching methods and learning outcomes of David Horsburgh's Neel Bagh school.

“All of us cannot be David Horsburgh, but we can each be our own Davids and battle against the Goliaths of the system to ensure a better learning world for our children.”

- (Mahapatra, 2004)

Introduction:

Activity Based Learning (ABL) was introduced in 13 Chennai Corporation schools in 2003. It is supported by the UNICEF and has been adopted in 270 primary schools in the district. Initially 10 schools in every rural block implemented this method (Anandalakshmy, 12). Recently 37,000 schools across the state of Tamilnadu use this method at elementary level.

Activity Based Learning (ABL) method used in corporation schools is considered to be a successful method. Thangavelu (2006) remarks that ABL method has ‘transformed the way thousands of children are taught every day’. Corporation school Headmistress Ms. Parameshwari has said, “Earlier, we used to pass every student even if they did not know how to read or write. In ABL, every child who passes the first and second standard will definitely know how to read and write. It’s a great achievement.” (*unicef.in*)

On the contrary, Prabha Hariharan (2011) who has studied the effectiveness of ABL method at elementary school level for the National Child Rights Research Fellowship has found that the corporation school students’ basic reading skills and speaking skills in Tamil have been developed satisfactorily, but advanced reading and writing skills have not. There is no significant effect of ABL method on English language skills (75). English and Mathematics are found to be the most underachieving subjects. Prema, Subbiah, Ramnath, & Subramanian (2009) also remark that ABL materials do not contain enough lessons on advanced Mathematics.

According to the researcher V. Vinu (2016), students in private and corporation schools lack phonemic awareness at Grade 1 level. She has conducted field research in North Chennai and made the following observations: 45% of Grade 1 students in 4 private and 4 corporation schools are unable to identify English alphabet. 30% of them are unable to read simple words. 59% of them are unable to identify pictures.

In the selected 4 corporation schools, classrooms were not overcrowded. One of the teachers had remarked that it was difficult to get more students in corporation schools as most parents wanted to put their children in private schools (196). Though the class strength was less, the teachers complained that they were unable to focus on the slow learners.

In 2 corporation schools, the teachers were very responsible. They displayed pictures and charts and used ‘oral drill method’ for language learning. They were supposed to use Activity Based Learning (ABL) method, but they used ‘oral method’. They said that enough ‘activity cards’ were not available in the school. (197) The teachers complained that it was difficult for them to teach both English and Tamil medium students who were mixed together due to space constraint.

Most of the teachers were not happy with the ABL method. They remarked that the method was quite inconvenient as bright students finished fast and disturbed the slow learners, and it was difficult to maintain learning ladders and student records. As they did not understand 'individual learner difference', they encouraged bright students but humiliated slow learners. They were completely unaware of 'language learning disabilities' in their students. (197)

Other 2 corporation schools had insincere teachers. The researcher found the students running around and playing as there were no teachers in the classroom. The students spoke well in Tamil, but found it difficult to speak in English. Most of the students found it difficult to read and write both in English and Tamil. Many students scored less marks in English and Tamil tests. It was difficult to find whether it was because of students' learning disability or teachers' insincerity. (197)

As the teachers do not know how to use computers and Internet, they do not show interest in using multimedia teaching materials in the classroom. They say that they don't have time to explore new teaching materials as they are over-burdened with clerical work. They say that many children come from broken homes and their parents are uneducated. They blame the slow learners for poor attendance and less motivation.

Some teachers give 'oral drills' saying that the students learn better by 'repeating what they say' rather than 'doing the activities' on the cards. In some schools, students waste more time in searching for the 'activity cards'. As the teachers don't train them to maintain their cards properly, they pick cards randomly and work on them casually.

'Move from one card to another' means the student has learnt something new. But the teachers do not reinforce understanding or critical thinking. No systematic reinforcement from the teachers makes the learning process 'mechanical' rather than critical or creative.

From the field studies and direct observations, it is quite clear that most teachers do not realise the significance and potential of the ABL method. This paper will study the origin and development of ABL Method and bring out the reasons for its ineffectiveness or teacher-dissatisfaction by comparing it with the teaching methods and learning outcomes of David Horsburgh's Neel Bagh school.

Origin and Development of ABL Method:

David Horsburgh, an Englishman, worked as a technician with the Royal Air Force (RAF) in India during World War II in 1943 and stayed at Chittagong (which is now in Bangladesh). After his service with the RAF, he went back to England to obtain a B.A. Honors in Sanskrit and Pali from the School of Oriental and African Studies (SOAS). (Tiwari, 6)

David returned to India in 1950 and served as Professor of English in Mysore. He left the university as he was supporting the students who protested against the authorities (Mahapatra, 2004). In 1954, he joined Rishi Valley, a residential school in Andhra Pradesh, managed by F. G. Pierce. He met a team of visionary teachers in Rishi Valley. Jiddu Krishnamurti, the philosopher, used to have intellectual discussions with the teachers.

When he was asked to leave Rishi Valley in 1959, he was taken on by the British Council to train teachers and write textbooks for schools in Madras (Nicholas, n.d). He initiated the M.E.L.T (Madras English Language Teaching) program and involved himself with the Bangalore Little Theatre company.

In 1972, he set up Neel Bagh School in a small village near Srinivasapur, about 30 kilometers from Madanapalle and 120 kilometers from Bangalore. Later on, Neel Bagh Trust had three schools under its umbrella - Neel Bagh, Vikasana (near Bangalore), and Sumavanam (near Madanapalle) (Nicholas, n.d).

The idea of ‘personal freedom of children’ was advocated by A. S Neill who started the Summerhill School in England. He wanted to create ‘minds that would question and destroy and rebuild’. Neill was a prominent voice talking about progressive education in those days. (Tiwari, 7) David was influenced by the writings of A. S. Neill, Bertrand Russell, R. F. Dearden, Tagore, Gandhi, and J. Krishnamurthy.

In an interview to Rosalind Wilson in 1983, David had stated that his idea was to have a school where everybody was successful (9). He tried to get rid of gender stereotypes and create a learning space where an individual’s freedom and autonomy were valued.

Question hour was organised in Neel Bagh where students would gather and raise questions randomly. The purpose of this session was to discuss the real-life observations made by the children. There was no pre-determined agenda, and the social control was vested with the students themselves. Activities were designed in such a way that the students explored and enabled themselves to look for answers than merely relying on the teacher (10). This ensured learner autonomy and life-long learning.

Neel Bagh School was greatly inspired by Jiddu Krishnamurthy’s philosophy. Krishnamurthy advocated healthy relationships. In Neel Bagh, greater emphasis was laid on the teacher-student relationship, which was based on unconditional love. Competition and reward were regarded as negative traits that prevented children from co-operation and team work. Activities that made students compete with each other were avoided at Neel Bagh. (Tiwari, 10)

In 1975, David gave newspaper advertisement stating “teacher, but not trained”. The teacher trainees of Neel Bagh underwent formative training, shaping their understanding of education and getting inspired for effective teaching in the future. Neel Bagh was also a teacher training institution which housed a school where the teacher trainees could learn by practice. The teachers were made to ‘observe’ more than ‘being trained’ in a method or technique. (11)

To help children learn by doing, the teachers themselves were given hands-on assignments in developing language teaching materials, pottery, wood working, etc. They were encouraged to go back to their communities or regions start a school based on high ideals. Some of the popular trainee teachers from Neel Bagh were Faith and John Singh from Jaipur, Malathi of *Vikasana*, Amukta Mahapatra, an independent consultant in Chennai, Rohit Dhankar of Jaipur, Usha and Narasimhan of *Sumavanam*, and Indrani who worked in Madanapalle. (Anandalakshmy, 4)

After David Horsburgh’s death in 1984, Rishi Valley (Krishnamurthy Foundation) acquired Neel Bagh. Anil Bordia, Secretary in the HRD Ministry at Delhi, sanctioned a project linking Neel Bagh, Sumavanam (a school run by Usha and Narasimhan), and Rishi Valley. However, without David’s high ideals, true passion, hard work, Neel Bagh could not be sustained (4).

Though Neel Bagh school was closed, David’s ideas and methods were adopted and enhanced by many educationalists. Radhika Herzberger, Director of the RVS, discussed folk culture with Rajeev Sethi and set up the Rural Education centre. Usha and Narasimhan supported

in developing Telugu and Science curricula. Alok Mathur and Padmapriya Shirali, teachers of Rishi Valley, contributed significantly to content creation. (4)

Padmanabha Rao and his wife Rama Rao loved folk theatre and poetry in Telugu. They had discussions with intellectuals like Arvind Gupta (renowned designer of toys), P.K. Srinivasan (a committed Mathematician), and mime and puppetry experts from Andhra, Karnataka, and West Bengal. Ganguli's *Theatre of the Oppressed* helped in building a rapport with the local people. (5)

Padmanabha Rao and Rama Rao introduced the concept of 'learning ladder'. It is rule-governed but very flexible. It makes the students less teacher-dependent. It helps them learn at their own pace. It also serves as a monitoring tool for the school administrators. Personal hygiene, clean surroundings, environmental protection, etc. were also included in the school syllabus (5). All these things happened following the footsteps of David Horsburgh.

In 1994, IAS Officer M. P. Vijaya Kumar, in collaboration with Supriya Sahu and Muruganandam, started special schools for the children who were freed from bonded labour at Vellore in Tamilnadu (5). They introduced children-friendly 'joyful' learning methods to attract the students. Parents, students, and teachers of Panchayat schools that followed traditional teaching methods also became interested in joyful learning.

Initially, 60 Head Masters were given special training. Later on, 7000 teachers were trained on the new methodology. A teachers' guide called *Karpathu Karkandey* was published. With the support of UNICEF, *Katralil Inimai*, a compendium of songs, stories and games, was published. (5)

To explore innovative teaching methods and materials, teachers of BRCs and DIETs visited *Ekalavya* in Madhya Pradesh and Siddharth Village in Orissa. 30 teachers attended a three months training programme in Rishi Valley Rural Education Centre. The experienced teachers were sent to different districts in Tamilnadu to train the other teachers (6).

Based on the fresh ideas, innovative methods, and creative teaching materials, ABL method was designed and introduced in the Chennai Corporation schools in 2003. It was when M. P. Vijay Kumar became the Commissioner of the Chennai Corporation. ABL method is supported by the UNICEF, and nearly 37,000 schools in Tamilnadu use this method today.

Neel Bagh Vs ABL Method - Similarities:

David Horsburg's mission was to give the 'best' education to the poor children, which was reserved only to the rich in India (Tiwari, 8). Chennai Corporation Schools also aim to provide education to the underprivileged people.

At Neel Bagh, the students were not grouped into grades or classes. Instead, they were organised around vertical age groups (8). This was to allow the students learn at their own pace. Learning was driven by activities like singing, wood work, pottery, dance, theatre, etc.

The children worked on the materials on cards, systematically planned and pedagogically designed with sketches, drawings, and an occasional touch of humour. Fresh materials on cards would be added frequently. Neel Bagh had a magnificent library that was accessible to teachers and students. (Anandalakshmy, 3)

Children were trained to sing melodiously. Every morning, the first period would be 'music' for them. David had talent in theatre, acting, direction, and production. Students enacted

scenes from Shakespeare or *Panchatantra*, first in the school and then in Bangalore before David's thespian friends. (4)

In the ABL classroom, students of grades 1-3 sit together. The syllabus is divided into smaller units. The students are given attractively designed 'study cards' or 'activity cards' for English, Tamil, Maths, Science, and Social Science. These cards are called Self-Learning Materials (SLM).

Every student has to complete his/her 'study cards' to reach a 'milestone'. Only after finishing all the 'milestones', he/she can take up an 'exam card'. He/she can mark own attendance and choose the preferred 'study card' for the day (Thangavelu, 2006).

The curriculum contains learning components to create awareness about health, hygiene, environment, etc. Innovative methods like songs, rhymes, and Bommalattam (puppet show) are used in the ABL classroom. (*unicef.in*)

Neel Bagh Vs ABL Method - Differences:

David Horsburgh's Neel Bagh	ABL Method in Corporation Schools
Neel Bagh was located in a remote village in Bangalore, teaching only rural students.	ABL method is used both in Chennai Corporation schools and rural schools in Tamilnadu.
Neel Bagh had only 27 students on roll. (Tiwari, 9)	ABL method is used in 37,000 schools in Tamilnadu. Number of students on roll would be in lakhs.
Training in pottery, woodwork, dance, theatre, etc. was given to the students.	No vocational training is provided in ABL method.
Only interested teachers were trained in the method of teaching.	All the government school teachers are compelled to use this method.
All the teachers in Neel Bagh understood the significance of David's teaching methods and materials. They had high ideals and passion for teaching kids.	Most of the teachers don't realise the significance of ABL method. They don't have the passion and patience for teaching kids.
Teachers were 'not trained' but 'inspired' by great educationalists.	The teachers are given formal training by educationalists. Most teachers complain that the trainers speak theoretically and don't understand the practical difficulties faced by the teachers.
Teachers don't have clerical work.	Teachers have to do more clerical work, getting no time for exploring new teaching materials.

Teachers were clearly instructed to teach how to read and write, how to learn (by enquiry and by finding answers to own questions), and how to think critically and creatively (Tiwari, 10).	Teachers do not undergo formal training to teach reading and writing for young children. They are not trained to systematically support students' questioning attitude, self-enquiry, critical thinking, and creativity.
Teachers understood 'learner difference' and helped each student do his/her best.	ABL teachers do not understand 'learner difference'. Many of them appreciate bright students and humiliate slow learners. (Vinu, 197)
Teacher-student relationship was (said to be) healthy.	ABL teachers train the bright students to present before the government Inspection Committee and make the slow learners run errands inside the school campus. (Hariharan, 38)
Children of uneducated parents were educated enthusiastically at Neel Bagh.	Teachers point out broken homes and uneducated parents as reasons for poor student performance.
Teachers allowed the students to learn at their own pace as there were no authorities to question them.	Authorities would question, so the teachers make the students finish the cards using indirect means. [They themselves write the answers or make the bright students finish the cards for the slow learners.]
No other syllabus has to be completed by the teacher.	Some teachers complain that the students have to complete the ABL activity cards and learn the lessons in Samacheer syllabus. This puts double stress on the teachers.
The students' learning outcomes would be basic literacy and vocational training.	ABL method is expected to train the students in language skills, fine-motor skills, memorising skills, and test-taking skills.
Students are not compelled to write board exams. They can choose any profession based on their skills training.	All the students are compelled to write board exams, which test their memorising skills and not their critical thinking, creativity, or problem solving skills.
There was no proper mechanism to evaluate the final outcome of the teaching methods or materials in Neel Bagh. Only the teachers and trainee-teachers give positive feedback about David's innovative techniques.	There are various mechanisms to evaluate the effectiveness and learning outcomes of the ABL method. Qualitative and Quantitative Action Research is necessary to rectify the follies at every level to make ABL method a success in corporation schools.

Recommendations:

Neel Bagh had only 27 students on roll (Tiwari, 9). On the contrary, ABL method is used in 37,000 schools in Tamilnadu, and number of students on roll would be in lakhs. The government has to put sincere efforts to enhance the ABL method to avoid developing a ‘generation of learners’ who do not learn at all.

Hands-on training should be given to the teachers to make them understand the potential of ABL method. Training sessions on ‘how to develop LSRW skills through ABL method’ should be organised as most teachers are incapable of relating ‘activities’ with ‘LSRW skills’.

Clerical work for the teachers has to be reduced. They should be allowed to explore new teaching methods and techniques. They should be encouraged to do ‘action research’ in their own classrooms. The research findings should be utilised to enhance the ABL methods and materials.

Advanced cognitive skills require retention of information obtained through basic cognitive skills (Garner, 1987). Students’ memory is not very good as they learn only by doing the activities (Prema et al, 2009). ABL activity cards should be designed in such a way that students’ cognitive skills and constructivist ideas develop along with ‘memory retention’.

The government has set low level of expectations from the students. “Even at such low level of expectations, the results are so abysmal. It alludes to the fact that ‘low expectations’ at all levels beget ‘low quality’ at all levels.” (Hariharan, 9) Students have to be trained both in basic and advanced skills-training. Students with high IQ and high motivation should be given opportunity to experience ‘advanced teaching and learning’ at all levels.

According to Anandalakshmy (2007), students get the opportunity to recall learnt material at each stage, and evaluation has become part of the process in ABL method. (7) She remarks that in the conventional school system, so many children drop out of school because they fail in year-end examinations. The asura called “Annual Exam” has been vanquished in ABL method (8). This seems to be an interesting phenomenon, but its wash-back effect is disheartening.

Most teachers complain that the corporation school students do ‘only activities’ at elementary level, and it is very difficult to develop ‘learning habit’ in them at the middle or high school level. ‘Evaluation as a process’ and ‘evaluation as a product’ are two extremes. In ABL method, evaluation is ‘a part of the learning process’. In 10th and 12th board exams, evaluation is the ‘ultimate product’ which is going to determine the fate of the students. ABL researchers have to keep the students’ board exams in mind and design the ‘activity cards’.

Conclusion:

ABL method which is being used in 37,000 schools in Tamilnadu has its roots in the monumental Neel Bagh school of David Horsburgh. According to Tiwari (2014), “Neel Bagh was a social process of innovation in primary education. The school doesn’t exist anymore, yet the approach to education that it developed has taken various forms and made way into the current discourse and practice of education.” (2)

If all of us - researchers, government policy-makers, stake-holders, administrators, teachers, parents, and students - realise the significance of ABL method and strive hard to make it effectual and productive, David Horsburgh’s dream of giving the BEST education to the poor

and any educationalist's dream of giving the BEST education to the learning community will definitely come true.

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