

Bureaucratic activism and radical school change in Tamil Nadu, India

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Abstract In 2007, Activity Based Learning (ABL), a child-centered, activity-based method of pedagogical practice, transformed classrooms in all of the over 37,000 primary-level government schools in Tamil Nadu, India. The large scale, rapid pace, and radical nature of educational change sets the ABL initiative apart from most school reform efforts. Interested in understanding how this movement achieved such success, we conducted oral history and ethnographic interviews, as well as an extensive review of reform documentation, to develop a historical case study of the ABL initiative. In this article, we present one of the findings of this study, arguing that the pursuit of ABL in Tamil Nadu was characterized by varied types of bureaucratic activism. State-level administrators, whom we consider bureaucratic activists, engaged strategies for change that combined both movement-building tactics and the conventional tools of administrative power. These reformers became pedagogical experts, expended considerable time and effort promoting the method, and engaged in a participatory, grassroots approach to pursuing the ABL reform within the state education sector. The egalitarian spirit with which ABL was promoted appeared to contribute to a moral authority and good will that generated support even when administrators used traditional tools of bureaucratic power, including top-down mandates, to institutionalize the reform. Ultimately, we argue, in their bureaucratic activism to change the government schools these administrators contributed to visible shifts in the nature of bureaucratic practice itself.

Keywords Activity Based Learning · Bureaucratic activism · India · School reform movements · Tamil Nadu

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

– *State Officer in the Education Sector*

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

– *State Officer in the Education Sector*

Our blood is ABL blood.

– *Activity Based Learning State Coordinator*

These statements from three key reformers reveal the movement-like nature of their efforts to reform government schools in the South Indian state of Tamil Nadu. The focus of their efforts was Activity Based Learning (ABL), a state-sponsored educational reform that has been called revolutionary. An initiative of Tamil Nadu’s ‘Education for All’ office, *Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan* (SSA), ABL has transformed classrooms such that they bear no resemblance to the government school classrooms of only a few years ago. ABL is an approach to pedagogy in the early elementary grades that replaces teacher- and textbook-centered instruction with students’ independent pursuit of active, child-friendly learning activities. Although it is this radical change in classroom practice that has earned the ABL initiative the ‘revolutionary’ label, equally stunning for those of us who study educational change is how rapidly this reform has been scaled up throughout the state. Piloted in Tamil Nadu’s capital city of Chennai (formerly Madras) in 2003, ABL has since been implemented in all 37,000 of Tamil Nadu’s government schools, most of which serve children from high-poverty communities. The ABL reform is thought by some to be among the most rapid transformations of schooling at this scale in world history (“Sibal to visit...,” 2010). Yet, the increasing attention ABL has garnered from inside and outside India appears to have resulted not from the speed of school change but from the unlikely nature of the new educational practice.

Scholars of educational change have noted that radical transformations of classroom practice are rare because reformers fail to recognize that change is complex, non-linear, and reliant on meanings made in cultural context (Fullan 1982, 2005; Sarason 1971, 1993). Reform in India has been particularly vulnerable to these limitations because, historically, the state has relied on a tightly-controlled ‘top-down’ model of policy implementation (Dyer 1999) and has been burdened with excessive bureaucratic red tape (Gupta 2006). For the most part, these limitations have been exploded in the ABL case.

In this article, based on our research documenting the history of the ABL movement, we explore how such dramatic educational change was achieved in Tamil Nadu. We argue that multiple kinds of bureaucratic activism characterized

the pursuit of the ABL initiative, including those that were more conventional and those that resembled social movement activism. We found that bureaucrat-activists engaged strategies for change that combined both movement-building tactics and the conventional tools of administrative power. Interestingly, although conventional tools of administrative power were used, strategic work to generate support for ABL reflected the movement's particular social and educational ideals. For example, reformers pursued an egalitarian and participatory approach to engaging those in Tamil Nadu's education system (including school teachers) in rethinking and reforming government school education. This approach was characterized by an expressed trust for and responsiveness to teachers. In this way and others, the reformers' work at changing the government school classroom also ultimately transformed the nature of Tamil Nadu's education bureaucracy itself. In what follows, we develop these arguments with findings from our research into the history of this movement. First, however, we provide an overview of ABL and its history in Tamil Nadu and a description of our study.

Activity Based Learning in Tamil Nadu

The ABL pedagogical method is considered an active, child-centered pedagogical approach, the design of which has been informed by several Indian and Western educational philosophies that loosely share a constructivist orientation. In ABL, students are conceptualized and treated as autonomous, active, and engaged learners, and classroom practices are oriented toward their independent pursuit of learning activities. The social relations and interactions within the classroom reflect this, with teachers no longer at the front of the class lecturing but instead on mats on the floor working with individuals and small groups of children. In multi-age classrooms, these children move around the classroom freely, gather learning materials independently, and work on activities either alone, in groups, or with the teacher. One of the first things a visitor is likely to notice upon entering an ABL classroom is that the children are working with large, colorful cards that direct their learning activity. The carefully-designed learning activities described in the cards are referenced on a learning 'ladder' that children consult to guide their activity. A chalkboard at the child's level extends around the perimeter of the ABL classroom, providing each child with a work space of his or her own. Teachers are viewed as facilitators, promoting and assessing each child's learning at his or her current step in the learning ladder. Textbooks no longer have a prominent place in the classroom but are instead viewed as resources. To supplement the ABL materials, the state has developed colorful readers, authored and illustrated by teachers, that are designed to be enriching, attractive, and engaging to children.

The prototype for ABL was developed by an NGO called RIVER, which is located in the Rishi Valley of neighboring state, Andhra Pradesh. Rural school teachers working with RIVER, along with their leaders, developed and promoted their pedagogical method to bring engaging and high-quality education to low-resourced rural schools in India. Although the educators themselves developed the method, they were influenced in direct and indirect ways by educational theorists including Montessori and Indian philosopher, J. Krishnamurti, as well as by

precursor initiatives in Rishi Valley. The campus that houses RIVER is also home to an elite boarding school based on the educational philosophy of J. Krishnamurti. Rishi Valley itself is known throughout India as a site of innovation in schooling.

Once Tamil Nadu's capital city of Chennai decided to adopt the ABL prototype, much time and energy was devoted to adapting the pedagogical approach to the curriculum, language, and priorities of Tamil Nadu government schools. As we discuss elsewhere (Niesz and Krishnamurthy forthcoming), the Tamil Nadu educators and administrators involved in the ABL movement had many additional influences that informed their precursor work to reform government schooling and, ultimately, their adaptation of the RIVER prototypes. Among these were literacy and science popular education movements in Tamil Nadu and progressive education networks influenced by Montessori, Krishnamurti, and others. What came to be known as ABL was ultimately the product of many influences, many educators, and decades of work in South India.

After ABL was piloted in Chennai, it was scaled up throughout the state as an initiative of Tamil Nadu's SSA, a federally-funded, state-administered organization to promote the Universalization of Elementary Education. As a 'project,' SSA is not a permanent feature of the state's administrative landscape but a multi-decade program to work first toward universal school access and then toward issues of school quality. Having achieved school enrollment targets relatively early, the SSA's goals in Tamil Nadu turned toward improving the quality of government school education. ABL was developed as the key initiative to do so.

It is too early to tell whether ABL has substantively improved the quality of government school education, but initial signs are promising. Although assessments of learning have been controversial and somewhat mixed, Tamil Nadu has seen enhanced school attendance, achievement test scores, gender parity, caste parity, and matriculation rates since the implementation of ABL (Akila 2011; SchoolScape 2009). This noted, it is important to emphasize that our research was not oriented to evaluating ABL as a method of instruction or as a program of school improvement. Instead, our intent was to document the cultural history of ABL as a movement for educational reform.

The study

Our use of the term "movement" is deliberate and reflects our conceptual framework. Social practice theories, which focus on how practice, cultural forms, identities, and ultimately new 'worlds' are produced in situated activity (Holland et al. 1998; Holland and Lave 2001), inform how we conceptualize educational change. In particular, our conceptualization of the ABL reform as a *movement* builds on recent applications of practice theory to studies of social movements (Allen et al. 2007; Holland 2003; Holland et al. 2008), as well as classic applications of practice theory to understanding the historical development of identities and new cultural worlds (Holland et al. 1998; Holland and Lave 2001; Lave and Wenger 1991). This literature suggests that successful movements, beyond gaining legitimacy for their ideas (Williams 2002), must also provide spaces for collective,

situated activity in which new practice, identities, and frames of reference are produced (see Holland et al. 1998; Lave and Wenger 1991; Niesz 2010). In other words, movements work through networks and communities of practice (Allen et al. 2007; Diani and McAdam, 2003; Niesz 2008). We thus sought to trace how ABL discourses traveled through space and time and gained legitimacy and proponents among diverse stakeholders. We also conceptualize movements as situated in broader historical, cultural, and institutional contexts that have the potential to ‘push back’ and powerfully influence the cultural production of change (Niesz 2008). Therefore, we sought to understand the structures and cultures that both supported and constrained reform, and explore how ABL capacity, knowledge, practice, and identities were produced in these contexts.

In order to pursue these goals, we developed a case study of ABL’s history in Tamil Nadu through in-depth interviews, oral histories, and artifacts of the reform. To generate descriptions of key events in ABL’s history and accounts of individual and collective experiences within the movement, our team of one American researcher (Niesz) and two Indian researchers (Krishnamurthy and Vaishali Mahalingam) met with over 45 individuals in a variety of positions and roles in Tamil Nadu and Andhra Pradesh in the spring and summer of 2010. Informed by oral history and ethnographic approaches, together the three of us conducted in-depth interviews with key players in the ABL movement, including administrators and other leaders in SSA and the Department of School Education, educationists who served as their consultants, and teachers and teacher support personnel. We also interviewed individuals who were outside the formal administrative and school education sectors, including university professors, an NGO leader, volunteer teachers outside of the government school system, and an education journalist. When lengthy, in-depth interviews with teachers were impossible (as when we visited teachers in their schools during the school day), we conducted focus group discussions or brief interviews with them. Interviews were conducted in either English or Tamil, at the preference of the interviewee, as Krishnamurthy and Mahalingam are multilingual and fluent in both languages. Ultimately, approximately half of the interviews were conducted in English and half were conducted in Tamil. These were all transcribed, and Tamil-language transcripts were translated into English. To supplement these interview accounts, we collected dozens of artifacts related to the reform movement, including official documents, internal documents, classroom materials, media coverage of ABL, and so forth. We also visited and observed in several classrooms across a range of communities to better understand the nature of classroom practices under ABL. Our analytic work has focused on developing both a chronological history of ABL and understandings of how the movement was experienced in social context. Although our larger project focuses on multiple actors across a range of roles throughout the history of ABL, this article focuses almost exclusively on Chennai-based key reformers—state-level administrators¹ and ABL state coordinators—and their allies to examine how they

¹ We use “administrators” and “officers” interchangeably in this article. We also use “reformers” and “bureaucratic activists” interchangeably in this article to refer to both the administrators promoting ABL and their support personnel, including, primarily, ABL state coordinators.

engaged in the quest for fundamental school change through both movement-like and more conventional bureaucratic activism.

A brief history of the ABL movement

Elsewhere we describe how the ABL movement was pursued by a network of actors from diverse circles of educational activity who joined Mr. S.R. Raman,² an Indian Administrative Service (IAS) Officer, to develop and promote alternative pedagogical practices in Tamil Nadu's government schools (Niesz and Krishnamurthy forthcoming). There we discuss how activists from literacy and science popular education movements and progressive educators from NGOs and elite schools were invited into precursor educational initiatives by Raman when he served as Collector of Vellore, an administrative district in Tamil Nadu. The initial network that developed from work on these educational projects in the early 1990s continued to grow over time, forming an extensive network in support of ABL by the early 2000s. By this time, Raman, the leader of the ABL movement, had been transferred to serve as Commissioner of Chennai. Here he was able to initiate the development and piloting of ABL in the capital city's government schools. Next, according to one interview, he requested a directorship at SSA even though the government wanted to place him in a more prestigious post. An administrative officer we interviewed told us that the Chief Minister asked Raman, "Why you are asking [for the] director post? I'll give the Secretary post for you, but you are asking [for a] small *chotta* post.' But he says, 'I want to become a director to implement my project.'" The Chief Minister relented and placed Raman in the directorship. He was now poised to take ABL to scale across the state.

The knowledges, educational ideals, pedagogical practices, and activist orientations of the voluntary popular education movements and progressive education circles were extremely influential in the ABL network that they spawned. Spanning the state and civil society and generating educational knowledge outside of state-sanctioned organizations, this movement network reflected counterhegemonic understandings of learning, the child, and the role of the state in providing high quality schooling. Specifically, members of this network viewed children as highly capable learners who are always learning. They understood learning as facilitated through participatory engagement in activity. They viewed the state as accountable to the quality schooling of children in high-poverty, low-caste communities. Reflected in these views was thus a sharp critique of the practices and failures of conventional government schooling (see Niesz and Krishnamurthy forthcoming).

We have argued that the success of the ABL movement resulted from the networking of insider and outsider (relative to the state) movement participants and their generation of a 'figured world' (Holland et al. 1998) of alternative education knowledge (Niesz and Krishnamurthy forthcoming). However, despite appropriating and generating knowledge *outside* of the state's formal channels, the network ultimately had to work *through* the state to radically transform the practices and

² All proper names are pseudonyms.

social relations in tens of thousands of classrooms. As we describe below, movement-building continued in the state education sector such that administrators and, ultimately, many teachers and other educators were convinced of the promise of ABL. We argue that the movement not only gained adherents for ABL but also appeared to change the nature of bureaucratic work in SSA. This was achieved through particular approaches to bureaucratic activism that not only made use of the traditional tools of bureaucratic power but also, importantly, reflected the ideals of the ABL movement network.

Bureaucratic activism

‘Bureaucratic activism’ has been empirically and theoretically explored in several social science disciplines but not to a great extent in educational research. The construct has been conceptualized in myriad ways capturing differing levels of analysis, including the politicization of formerly politically-neutral bureaucracies of recently-independent states in the postcolonial period (Simmonds 1985); the functioning of specific “administrative agencies as change agents in the policy process” (Lambright and O’Gorman 1992, p. 176); the work of groups of federal bureaucrats aiming to build an informed and democratically-active citizenry (Zwarich 2009); and individual “mavericks within the state bureaucracies organizing the grassroots” outside of the system (Morone et al. 2001, p. 133). Zwarich uses the term to capture “the contradictory nature of an enterprise that actively and optimistically sought (and sometimes secured) social change from within the confines of the status quo” (p. 26). Indeed, many analysts of bureaucratic activism highlight the apparent contradiction of the construct, referring to the taken-for-granted assumption that “polity members and social movement activists are distinct entities” (Santoro and McGuire 1997, p. 503). The concept of bureaucratic activism challenges this assumption, focusing on insiders working on outsider causes (Santoro and McGuire 1997). Santoro and McGuire highlight scholarship on the women’s movement, noting that it has recognized the key role of bureaucratic activism to greater extent than other areas of social movement scholarship (see, e.g., Banaszak 2005). They lament that “unfortunately, social movement theory has yet to conceptualize actors who are located within political institutions but who pursue outsider goals” (p. 503). This is indeed what we found in Tamil Nadu’s education sector.

Our own conceptualization of bureaucratic activism reflects that of Santoro and McGuire (1997) to an extent. They write, “We view institutional activists as social movement participants who occupy formal statuses within the government and who pursue movement goals through conventional bureaucratic channels” (p. 504). But unlike Santoro and McGuire, who provide statistical analyses of the impact of would-be institutional activists, we are more interested in exploring the nature of bureaucratic activism in practice and how institutional activists grow their movement networks within an administrative system—sometimes transforming that very system, as in the case of the ABL movement. It is to this exploration that we now turn.

Changing roles and changing practice: Pedagogical specialization in the bureaucracy

Gupta (2006) notes that “In the mid-nineteenth century, the colonial administrators implemented a new bureaucratic format for the educational system in India. The new system would be governed by a bureaucracy tightly controlling all aspects of schooling” (p. 46). The bureaucratic system of which Gupta writes has continued to dominate government schooling into the twenty-first century. Given our research team’s understandings of Indian bureaucracies, we expected to hear technocratic explanations of the achievements of the administration when we first met with officers to talk about the ABL initiative. To our surprise, what we often heard instead was substantive discussions of educational theory; these discussions were not for our benefit, as they seemed to run through day to day activities in the SSA administration building. High-level administrators in diverse roles in the education system shared thoughtful pedagogical conversation with us and, we could see, with each other. Dewey, Thorndike, and even Socrates were mentioned in our interviews with administrative officers. One officer noted to us that the conventional education “system is wrong, not for the individual’s fault. So the system has to change. So how can it be improved? This kind of discussion is everywhere and anywhere.” Throughout our interviews, we heard enthusiasm for the pedagogical substance of the reform and commitment to the principles of ABL. We also noted that administrators themselves were engaged in active work on the development of new ABL learning materials. These observations were early clues that SSA was no typical bureaucratic organization. What we heard and observed on our regular visits to the SSA building suggested a transformation of the nature of bureaucratic work itself.

One aspect of this change was the shifting roles of administrators, from bureaucrats to pedagogues. Even early in his career as an IAS officer, long before serving in any formal roles in the education system, Raman, the leader of the ABL movement, expressed interest in improving schooling. This interest led him to develop expertise in educational theory. “I went through the books on child psychology. Books on all teacher training, on the principles of teaching, theories of teaching and learning, the philosophies of education.” Given his elite status in the administrative service, this commitment to understanding education in order to improve schooling for children in poverty impressed many of his colleagues. In our meeting with state coordinators, one who had worked with Raman since the early days in Vellore noted,

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

Colleagues noted that even when Raman was not in administrative positions related to education he remained interested in and connected to the cause of education for underserved communities. Another coordinator, Mr. Ramesh, explained.

- Ramesh: When I was in [another organization], Sir [Raman] would discuss education with me. He would take me home for discussions. This was in the 1980s. In the '80s he was the Personal Assistant to the Chief Minister... He always had his focus and thoughts on education. That something needs to be done, that spark was always there within him. [In] '83–84, he would take us home and discuss about what can be done for the children of the poor... He would ask us, "What can be done? What methodologies can be followed?" Like that he used to talk with us. That we need to do something good for these children.
- Meenakashi: Even though he was in the top position there, his mind was always on the primary school children.
- Ramesh: His full concentration was on education. He was interested in what we were doing. What were the projects we were doing? What was being done in curriculum development? What good things are happening in curriculum? These thoughts were always there within him. (*Translated from Tamil*)

Raman's study of educational theory and his commitment to changing government schooling were frequently related with considerable interest when we interviewed administrators and teachers.

These interests and commitments extended far beyond Raman, however, and could be seen throughout SSA. Administrators we met in SSA were highly engaged in pedagogical discussions and activities, including the development of new ABL learning materials. Shared views on teaching and learning appeared to regularly orient work and conversation in the SSA building. In response to a question about why this was, one administrator said, "Raman is a role model for us. He is an IAS officer. Why was he very interested in education?" Raman had been retired for a couple of years at the time of our research, and while he remained an occasional consultant, he was no longer living in Chennai and participating in the work of ABL on a regular basis. Yet, he still served as an inspiration for those who were. More important, however, was that the ethos of the movement Raman had led appeared to endure without him. We heard frequent indications that key members of the ABL movement network, even those in the highest positions in bureaucratic institutions, shared not only understandings of learning theories but also particular commitments to actively applying these theories to educational planning. Although these officers were not members of the original movement network involved in precursor initiatives, their views on teaching and learning suggested that collective orientations had grown into the state's administration sector.

Importantly, administrators' work with teachers and other stakeholders reflected their beliefs about learning. It was stressed to us repeatedly that the team never lectured nor began with theory when initially introducing ABL to teachers, support personnel, parents, and others. As Raman told us, "We never spoke theory. Not that we never spoke theory at all. We spoke theory after showing the working models. After having seen [ABL in practice], then we explain to them the logical philosophy." This approach was strategic on one hand, underpinned by the

knowledge that seeing ABL in practice was undeniably persuasive. On the other hand, however, the reform team's approach to change reflected their theories of learning. This was captured nicely when one top-ranking officer described with a smile the Socratic way in which they facilitated discussions with teachers after classroom observations:

Myself and Mr. Raman, we met [with teachers] in the evenings, 4:30 to 5:30 like that. We give the one-hour talk, just like Socrates, and motivate the teachers. That gives a lot of impact. Each and every teacher has [left] assured in the evening.

This administrator suggested that teachers left these meetings having all of their questions answered. We also learned that this approach was taken with everyone in the system, not just teachers. Raman explained the process for communities and parents: "We brought the community into the classroom. We brought the parents into the classroom. Asked them, 'you see for yourself after 3 months of trial.' The parents were taken into the classroom [to] see how children learn. That convinced them." As the team worked to persuade stakeholders across multiple roles, all introductions to ABL avoided didacticism.

In summary, our observations of discussions about learning and of active work to apply these ideas to changing schooling suggest a shift in the nature of bureaucratic practice. One telling story we heard was of a group of education professors who visited Tamil Nadu at the bequest of Raman. This high-cost conference turned out to be disappointing for the ABL team. With laughter, one interviewee shared the ironic story that the professors "spoke about constructivism for two and half hours non-stop" (*Translated from Tamil*). In contrast, another reformer, now the chief officer of a state education office, explained to us that lecturing is not only prohibited in teacher education but also shunned in all aspects of their work in the organization.

As we discuss later in the article, the reformers' particular orientation toward learning transformed their work with teachers and other stakeholders. Here we wish to emphasize the changing roles of bureaucrats, who effectively became pedagogical specialists. This appears to be quite a break with tradition. What we saw in the SSA building in 2010 were movement meanings and practices pervading the work of the bureaucracy.

Struggle, effort, and commitment in building the ABL movement within the state sector

"We struggled a lot, like a big movement." This statement was shared by an administrative officer who had worked closely with Raman and others to prepare the ground for the scaling of ABL across the state. Indeed, 'struggle' was a word we heard frequently in conversations with administrators about their experiences with the ABL initiative. Their descriptions of the enormous amounts of time and effort expended to engage others in considering ABL did not present a picture of bureaucratic business-as-usual. Mr. Subramaniam, whose statement (about forgetting his family during the early years of ABL promotion) introduces this article,

went on to explain the years spent in strategic thinking about generating support for ABL.

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

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

Several reformers told of their tireless efforts “convincing” people of the value of adopting ABL through a particularly time-consuming process. This process entailed organizing visits to ABL model classrooms, engaging in long discussions about what was observed during the classroom visits, and responding to teachers’ and other stakeholders’ questions and concerns. Although Raman and his team certainly used the tools of bureaucratic power accorded them, as we discuss below, their primary mode of bureaucratic activism resembled social movement activism: They persuaded those at the grassroots to rethink primary schooling through inviting them to observe the practices of the ABL classroom—and sometimes participate in them. This combination of strategy, effort, and grassroots participation is apparent in the following description of early reform work by one of the ABL state coordinators.

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

In addition to struggling to promote ABL in the early days, the team has continued to expend enormous amounts of time and energy since the success of their efforts to scale ABL across the state. As we saw on our frequent visits to the SSA building, ABL materials were constantly being revised, improved, and supplemented. Feedback from teachers and many others contributed to the early revisions of activity cards and learning ladders (adding spaces for teacher-developed lessons and whole class activities, for example). Early feedback also contributed to a rethinking of the multi-age setting (such that larger schools moved from classrooms with children from grades 1–4 to those with grades 1–2 separate from those with 3–4). During the spring and summer of 2010, the kinks of the pedagogical approach had been worked out for the most part after 3 years of consistent effort. At this time, attention had turned to revising ABL materials to reflect a new national curriculum.

In addition, much effort was going into developing attractive, teacher-authored (and art-teacher illustrated) children's books. A high-level officer explained,

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

We saw many of these books in the classrooms we visited.

The officer who explained the supplementary reader project to us was fairly new to the ABL initiative; he had not been a part of the initial ABL team. Coming into SSA post-scaling, he noted with interest how the energy around this movement was not waning:

After three, four years, there seems to be a continued energy. One of the reasons must be that there are a lot of new activities coming in... Usually after a few years it dies down. The energy, enthusiasm goes. This is something that has been alive for quite a few years.

We were struck by the same thing on our visits to the SSA building, a building brimming with energy and activity. We frequently walked into meetings where new plans for ABL were being developed or discussed. Even though ABL was being practiced in every school in the state, the work was not ending.

Responsiveness to teachers

Although there were many aspects of reformers' extensive efforts to promote ABL, most often mentioned were those related to the team's responsiveness to teachers and others in the educational system. When ABL was first piloted and again after ABL was implemented state-wide, teachers' problems with and criticisms of the program were elicited in multiple forums. After every teacher training session and at every school observation, feedback and concerns were collected from teachers. These were regularly addressed through problem-solving and, as noted above, substantial revisions of ABL materials. Importantly, it was not lower-level staff who were sent to work with teachers; it was Raman and his team who traveled around the state to listen to teachers' difficulties and critiques.

Several key players in the reform movement described this work:

We visited nearly all the districts from Chennai to Kanyakumari at least one time or two times, and we met the people directly in the school, not in any meeting ground. [We asked,] "What are the difficulties you have faced when implementing the ABL process?" Then we have kindly noted down everything from the teachers. Whatever the teachers tell us. Then we come back to the headquarters and we sat with the state resource person. "These are the difficulties as raised by the teachers, and what are our solutions?" Then the interaction is continuous. Then we got the solutions from the state resource meeting and this solution has to be immediately sent to teachers through

circular and email within a flash of time.... We continuously meet the teachers. And we continuously meet the district officials. (A high-level officer)

Every evening we all meet together with the participants. And then the SPD [State Project Director, Raman] will ask them what they observed there. “What about your feeling? What do you want? Something more?” So once we return, that is not the end. So we want everybody’s suggestion, and we will make it. We will modify and every year we are doing that work. So that he asked everyone: “What is your suggestion? What’s your idea? What’s your opinion?” So, like that every day. We will discuss with the other district resources who are coming here. After that, everybody has got a mind of doing this. (An ABL state coordinator)

An officer from a different department in the education system described three-hour long meetings with teachers, non-teaching school employees (teacher educators, teacher support personnel, etc.), and administrative officers, noting,

We ask all the teachers to speak, whatever they want to say... Then teachers, they came out with new, nice ideas. Then they spelt this, spelt out whatever the difficulties they were facing. Then, all issues were taken care of.

Another SSA employee who was sitting in on a group interview expressed admiration, even astonishment, for the extent to which the state coordinators responded to schools and teachers.

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

At this point, one of the coordinators in the group interview added,

Usually what happens is, we say child-centered and leave the teacher out. But in this the teacher also seems to be supported. The teacher is also centered in this approach. Both are kept in the center. One is not left out. (*Translated from Tamil*)

We want to emphasize again that top-ranking SSA officers participated in this process. Raman himself attended most of the meetings in the years of piloting and scaling. It goes without saying that such close work with school teachers is not business-as-usual for IAS officers. Yet it was a key form a bureaucratic activism in promoting ABL. One story that several teachers shared with us was how Raman provided his mobile phone number to all of the teachers he met. He invited them to call him if they encountered any problems with ABL. One enthusiastic teacher we met told us that she called him more than once. Raman’s team provided their phone numbers as well, as he explained.

We have given our telephone numbers to all 200,000 teachers. We told them, “this is my telephone number, you call me anytime, whatever problem you

have.” In fact... when they went back and started practicing, they encountered a lot of problems. But we are there to support. A team was sent from here. Whenever we received a call, immediately we will attend.

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

Egalitarianism and teachers’ participation in reform activity

We have never said you do this. We have never told anybody that you will have to change, you will have to do this. We just developed thirteen schools. Even [in] those thirteen schools, they are all volunteers. We told them, “We have a proposal to innovate, try something new. Who are all willing?” (Raman)

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

Raman noted, in his statement above, that initially participating teachers were volunteers. He continued by highlighting the centrality of this initial cadre of teachers in the early spread of ABL in Chennai.

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

allowed them to interact, showed them. “If you are convinced go back and practice, we will support you.” And we meant [it] by saying that we support you.

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

In our conversation with the four ABL state coordinators, Ramesh explained that this participation contributed to teachers’ confidence, both in the method and in the administrative support.

[Raman] organized a meeting every Saturday. It would happen in different schools each time. He would get all the teachers together and discuss the problems they faced. He would come around 10:30 and be there till 2:30. We will discuss all the problems faced during that week. Like that it continued for around 11 weeks. From 2003 September, it continued for 11 weeks. After these 11 weeks, these teachers became excellent, like gems. They were confident and said they would show that it is possible to do this method.... When they raised their problems we accepted it. We just listened to their problems without telling them how to solve. That itself was liked by the teachers. When he (Raman) listened to their problems, confidence grew in them that he was for them.... Initially, the teachers who earlier said they could not do this, after 11 weeks all of them said they could implement this method.
(Translated from Tamil)

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

Central to this inclusionary, participatory, and responsive approach to teachers during the ABL initiative appeared to be a deep respect and trust for teachers. This was the case even though the specific ways in which reformers generated understanding, acceptance, and ownership of ABL among teachers (and,

importantly, positively influenced their unions) were often referred to as strategic. Although strategic thinking about how to persuade teachers was central to the bureaucratic activism of the reformers, their egalitarianism went beyond strategy and appeared to be an underlying principle of the ABL movement. In addition to the references to teachers as “excellent” and as “gems,” the top-ranking SSA officer at the time of our research referred to teachers as “experts.” We found this striking because Indian teachers, like teachers in the U.S. and elsewhere, often bear the brunt of blame for the failures of government schooling. This was not the case in the ABL movement. “We never, never blamed anybody,” Raman said. “We told them that we trust you. We trust teachers. If teachers have not been able to produce results, if they have been failing earlier, that was not [their] problem. That was a system problem.” This respect and trust for teachers appeared to run deep and be heart-felt.

Teachers even shared in the attention and accolades ABL generated; this made a strong impression on one teacher we met. Ms. Kalyani was one of the teachers who developed the original ABL materials for Chennai’s pilots. She explained that high-ranking officials from the government lauded the work of the teachers like herself.

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

Later in our interview with Kalyani, she remarked on how these kinds of accolades were unusual for teachers.

When we went initially, teachers like us knew only about our immediate surroundings and context. We remained within that only. When we were sent from here, we thought, “What are we going to write? Would it be useful?” In that attitude without too much interest we started working on this. What Mr. Raman did was to bring all the important people from the Secretary onwards, Minister and all of them. When we got an opportunity to meet all these people, we ourselves got the feeling of responsibility that we should do this properly according to a proper method. When we observed that all these people are looking at this and when we knew that this is going to spread all over Tamil Nadu, an interest automatically got created within us.... When [we met] these important people, a lot of IAS, that was a good experience for us. All of them now know Kalyani. In Tamil Nadu, a lot of IAS officers know Kalyani... So that makes me happy, no? Having been born in a small village and come here. So because of that we became like volunteers [laughter]. (*Translated from Tamil*)

As Kalyani suggests, their acknowledged centrality in the reform efforts contributed to the movement ethos among teachers during the pilot stages. On one hand, the attention conveyed the importance of the work they were doing. On the other, that teachers were involved alongside the bureaucratic activists who were promoting ABL suggested a grassroots orientation to the reform movement. Teachers saw that

they were key participants in government school change, that they were respected by administrative reformers, and that they were getting credit for the work.

School teachers were thus elevated in status through participating in reform activity (and receiving the associated credit and accolades) alongside administrative officers, suggesting major breaks to traditional hierarchical relations in the practice of the education system. Likewise, reform leaders in the administration subverted traditional hierarchies by working alongside teachers in roles that were quite unusual for elite administrators. According to Subramaniam, “When we meet the teacher, we fall down to the teacher’s level, not the director or joint-director level. So we are just like one of the teachers.” Just as the oft-repeated story of Raman sharing his mobile phone number was symbolic of the broader shift in the role of an elite officer, so was Raman’s constant presence at teacher trainings. Referring to some of the precursor work in the 1990s, one of the state coordinators explained,

The special thing about this is in whichever training Raman was involved in—for example in Vellore, if we had given training to 7000 people, he saw every one of them. If he came in the afternoon, if the others picked up plates to eat lunch, he would also go and pick up a plate. If all of them sat on the floor, he would also sit on the floor. In 1996, parliamentary elections happened. He was the returning officer, even on that he did not concentrate. He was more focused on schools and training. He would talk to us, talk to the teachers. If he visited a school he would spend one or two hours with the children. (*Translated from Tamil*)

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

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

Use of the conventional tools of bureaucratic power

Thus far we have focused on how administrators’ bureaucratic activism, characterized by their commitments, ideals, principles, and extensive efforts at the grassroots level of the education system, generated a movement ethos around the work of education reform. However, although the team subverted the expectations

of bureaucratic hierarchies in many regards, they still used the conventional tools of bureaucratic power at their disposal. Raman and his team used the power of their positions, including working for top-down mandates, to institutionalize ABL. Their strategic use of this power was another form of bureaucratic activism.

The up-scaling faced early resistance from teacher unions and from parents. Resistance was overcome at least partly through using the tools of administrative power, as Raman explained.

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

One way in which Raman and his team used the power of the government hierarchy was in lobbying government officials to support ABL, as one administrator described:

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

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

In discussions with us, several leaders noted that teachers could not be compelled to practice ABL without political backing for the initiative. The government order (G.O.) mandating the use of ABL methods and materials in all primary-level government schools was particularly important to the ABL movement's success. "Otherwise [teachers] will simply refuse," we were told by one administrator. "Because then, followed by the G.O. only, we could get grants on various accounts, like [for] developing low-level blackboards." Although the ABL movement had generated support from many teachers involved with early stages of the initiative, up-scaling required the participation of approximately 150,000 teachers and their unions. A top-down approach was viewed as necessary to complement reformers' more egalitarian forms of bureaucratic activism.

Not only did taking ABL to scale become a top-down mandate, it also required approximately 37,000 schools adopt ABL at once. The administration faced criticism for the rapid pace of scaling up. We talked with several outsiders to the system who wondered why it all had to happen so quickly. What we learned, however, was that the rapid state-wide implementation was strategic. Raman viewed

the timing as important due to the unpredictable nature of bureaucratic life spans. He knew that he might have a short window of time to reform the schools. He and his team planned to address the problems that resulted from the rapid scale-up once ABL was firmly institutionalized in all of the state's primary-level classrooms.

Raman was also strategic in finding ways to keep the members of the school change network that had been built over time since the Vellore years in key positions either in the state or as consultants. Some colleagues from Vellore, for example, served in SSA as ABL state coordinators. They were involved with teacher education and support, as well as program revisions. Those who had always been outside the state administration, such as educators at some of the elite, progressive schools, served as consultants. Such consulting took the forms of participating in teacher education, working on curriculum revision, meeting for problem-solving, conducting research, and so forth. Over time, some key members of the reform team within SSA moved into other organizations in the state's education system. One former SSA officer was in the director of the state's teacher education organization when we met him. "Since I got [this institution], I could convince a big wing," he told us. Earlier, Raman had noted how important it was that this member of the initial team was now in charge of teacher education for the state. Keeping members of the network in influential positions was part of the strategy for sustaining ABL.

Always intertwined with the more movement-like approaches to bureaucratic activism discussed earlier, the strategic use of the conventional tools of bureaucratic power for movement aims was an important aspect of the success of the ABL initiative. To put it simply, top-down and grassroots approaches to institutionalizing ABL were engaged simultaneously. Reformers' bureaucratic activism included the issuing of government orders at the same time that it promoted a shared vision for education through participatory, inclusionary, and egalitarian practices.

Discussion and conclusions

Tamil Nadu's success in transforming its government school classrooms can be attributed to multiple factors. We must acknowledge the serendipity of the historical currents that bolstered the ABL movement. As we discuss elsewhere, Tamil Nadu's particular history with political, educational, and social movements provided a context in which the bureaucratic activism we discuss here could be successful (Niesz and Krishnamurthy forthcoming). Yet, the large-scale educational change seems to have been contingent on bureaucratic activism informed by the figured world of the ABL movement.

The reformers' approach to bureaucratic activism had multiple dimensions, including, as we have discussed, becoming pedagogical experts and keeping children's learning at the center of their work; expending enormous amounts of time and effort to first promote and then improve ABL; partnering with teachers and others at the grassroots in the piloting stages; being responsive to teachers' difficulties and concerns throughout the reform period and beyond; and so forth. All of these activities appeared to be infused with an egalitarianism that subverted

expectations associated with bureaucratic hierarchies. The administrators' commitment and struggle, as well as the visibility of the underlying principles that informed the commitment and struggle, made the administrative activity appear more movement-like than bureaucratic. This movement-like approach, characterized by bureaucratic activists 'walking the walk' in promoting ABL, appeared to build considerable good will. As such, the administrative power that was used to institutionalize ABL was legitimated by the moral authority of the movement aims and principles, as well as by how reformers enacted their ideals through egalitarian practices at the grassroots.

We see the contribution of the ABL story to the field of educational change as two-fold. First, we would emphasize the importance of how, when the ABL movement moved into the state sector, bureaucratic activism remained guided by what appeared to be the deeply-held principles of the movement. Reformers' participatory approach to generating understanding and commitment at the grassroots through particular educational strategies reflected the movement's theories of learning and their social commitments to an egalitarian and democratic practice. These commitments had been nurtured in precursor movements in the areas of popular education, progressive schooling, the education of former child laborers, the universalization of formal education, and so on (see Niesz and Krishnamurthy forthcoming). These were spaces of earlier activism for many members of the ABL movement network. When the ABL movement gained a foothold in the state's education sector, these activist sensibilities and commitments moved into the state's bureaucratic apparatus. Knowledges generated outside the state system transformed the knowledges within the state. Because of the power of movement leader Raman's position and the strength and support of his team, their novel approach to creating change and doing the business of the bureaucracy could be established and sustained. The structural and cultural changes wrought by ABL movement have persisted beyond Raman's retirement—both in the government schools and in the SSA.

It is the recognition of the substantive change to bureaucratic practice that we would highlight as a second major contribution of the ABL story. The bureaucratic activism we have described not only established large-scale, radical change in the state's government school classrooms but also transformed the SSA. The way that reformers became pedagogical experts, partnered with school teachers, promoted learning while avoiding didacticism, expended time and effort beyond the conventional work day, and subverted the hierarchies in place in the system became 'business-as-usual' in a government institution.

Given these attributes we must acknowledge that the ABL case is unusual. We do not, however, think that it is an isolated one. The bureaucratic activists promoting ABL can be conceptualized as simultaneously state actors and social movement actors. We believe that we would find their counterparts in education systems throughout the world. Although India is known for its unique set of partnerships between the state and civil society (see Pai 2005), social movements engage educators at all levels of state systems across the world. The English-language educational change literature, however, has yet to explore bureaucratic activism (at least under that label). Social scientists in other fields have argued that it behooves

us to contest the false dichotomy that has been established between social movements and state institutions (see Banaszak 2005; Lambright and O’Gorman 1992; Morone et al. 2001; Santoro and McGuire 1997). As Banaszak (2005) notes, the state is sometimes an ally to social movements. Paying attention to bureaucratic activism and its role in creating substantive change in schools and in centers of educational policy will open new avenues to inquiry, which, in turn, will generate better understandings of educational change and its relationships to social movements.

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