

## **Zero Barrier Multilingual Education in Yunnan Province, China.**

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When Chinese is the only language of education, the Chinese education system seems foreign to ethnic minority communities in Yunnan. Enrolment from these communities is high in the early primary grades, but students who do not learn Chinese well drop out after primary or middle school. Compulsory education in China lasts nine years, but many ethnic minorities cannot take advantage of their learning opportunities.

In the 2000s, SIL International, East Asia Group (EAG) launched two model centres of multilingual education (MLE) in Yunnan to develop the “Zero Barrier MLE” programme with the goal of improving long-term educational achievement of two ethnic minorities: the Bai and Dai. This programme serves as a model for other ethnolinguistic communities. At the model centres, students study for two years in a mother-tongue (L1) pre-school before transitioning to Chinese language (L2) instruction in Grade One. The project’s curriculum continues with L1 classes while it leverages local culture before introducing the L2 and more foreign concepts.

The first year of pre-school uses the learners’ first language. Students must be fluent in L1 literacy before starting L2 learning. The second year of pre-school continues L1 instruction for most classes. However, oral Chinese is learned as a second language using Total Physical Response (TPR) methods. In Grade One, students begin Chinese language reading and character writing, whilst still continuing to study the L1 as a subject. The project provides textbooks and graded teachers’ manuals with regularly scheduled teacher training. Although in the early stages of development, the model centres have demonstrated success with the Zero Barrier MLE approach.