

Zero Barrier Multilingual Education in Yunnan, China
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This paper outlines a pilot program among the Bai and Dai peoples in Yunnan in Southwestern China. The official language of instruction in China is Mandarin Chinese. The standardized textbooks reflect an urban environment, and they contain themes of no relevance to minority children living in rural areas. Minority children speak different languages at home, but primary school textbooks assume proficiency in Chinese, so children do not know enough Chinese to deal with their books in the first grade. Due to a time-on-task approach to teaching and learning Chinese, children spend their time catching up on Chinese, for which they must learn over 2,000 characters in order to become proficient, but miss actual concepts in math and other subjects that are being taught. Over seven years in Bai minority areas in Yunnan, for example, scores in Chinese are consistently higher than those in Math.

Zero Barrier Multilingual Education aims to teach mother tongue first to ethnic minorities. The approach applies modern teaching techniques to improve learning outcomes. A two-year program on mother tongue-based education was piloted in Bai and Dai villages, which began with 100% mother tongue in the first year, with oral Chinese as a subject in the second year. Among the Bai people, some challenges came in the linguistically diverse school, where only 60% were Bai speakers and 40% were Yi and Lisu (other minorities), but the curriculum was designed with Bai as the mother tongue. Further, project teachers from the village were not qualified teachers and were trained and paid by the program. Among the Dai, the teachers are now fully trained and the program is close to the point of sustainability though there is still a lack of personnel. In the area of literacy, there is some confusion due to the old Dai script, which is still taught to boys who study at the temple with monks, and the new Dai script.

Overall, in both Bai and Dai areas, Math and Chinese scores have shown improvement, though when students exit the program, there is often a transitional delay and the national curriculum is culturally relevant. There is the added stigma that prevents girls from pursuing studies past primary school.

From 2011, however, the Dai project will be run by the local education authority and the Bai project will see the inclusion of an additional school. Expanding this model to other minorities is delayed, however, by the fact that many don't have orthographies. Further, the political situation is different for minorities in other areas such as the Uighurs and the Tibetans. In Tibet, there is a dual monolingual system and students have to choose one type of school. When they get to university, however, they realize that the prestigious Chinese language universities in Beijing are inaccessible to them.