UNICEF-China
November 2012

Case Study on Narrowing the Gaps for Equity

China
Improving Basic Education for Ethnic Minority Children in China
Country Name

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ABSTRACT

In alignment with Millennium Development (MDG) Goal 2 (universal primary school education), the Government of China adopted a national policy calling for all school-aged children to have access to and complete nine years of basic education. Although China has met MDG2, and its educational progress on a national scale is astounding, counties with the highest populations of ethnic minorities continue to struggle to meet this national policy goal. Attendance and completion rates for ethnic minority children remain low, and the quality of basic education provided to minority children raises concerns. Ethnic minority children in China’s rural and remote areas are not participating equitably in China’s educational advances.

UNICEF-China, in collaboration with government partners and UNESCO, worked in three Western provinces with high concentrations of ethnic minorities to close this gap. The intervention helped ethnic minority children access quality basic education, and supported their increased attendance and completion rates, by providing bilingual learning and teaching materials; by building the capacities of teachers and school administrators; and by fostering child-friendly, gender-sensitive and culturally-appropriate educational environments.

BACKGROUND

China is a multi-ethnic country. The largest ethnic group, the Mandarin Chinese-speaking Han, constitutes about 90 per cent of the population. Fifty-five other groups comprise the balance. These ethnic minorities, including Tibetans, Hui, Jingpo, Dai, Achang, Lisu and Da’ang, may not speak Mandarin Chinese at home. China’s ethnic minorities reside predominantly in rural, remote and Western provinces, where socio-economic development trails the national average. Incomes and standards of living are accordingly lower.

These ethnic minority populations likewise suffer disparities in education. Even within disadvantaged areas, ethnic minority children tend to fall in the lowest quartiles in terms of access to education and educational achievement. Many reasons account for this inequity: the basic education curriculum uses Mandarin Chinese as a language medium; the curriculum is often disconnected from local circumstances and of seeming little relevance; the teaching method is often rote learning; the quantity of ethnic minority teachers and school administrators is inadequate; and capacity for delivering bilingual education is low. As a result, ethnic minority children lack motivation to attend and complete school.

China’s national policy that all school-aged children have access to and complete nine years of basic education is difficult to achieve in these circumstances. Likewise, achievement of MDG2 with equity will not occur without interventions.

To respond to this situation, UNICEF-China worked with UNESCO and China’s Ministry of Education (MoE) to develop models for providing quality basic education to ethnic minority children. A component of this intervention was a three-year pilot project in Tibet, Qinghai and Yunnan provinces that focused on (a) building teaching and school management capacities through training of ethnic minority teachers and principals; and (b) introducing child-friendly, gender-sensitive and culturally-appropriate educational materials, including adapting the curriculum to local circumstances, producing bilingual teaching and learning materials, and providing quality sports equipment and user-friendly library kits. This intervention also included introduction of international best practices in bilingual teaching, and opportunities for international knowledge sharing.
STRATEGY & IMPLEMENTATION

Programme objective. UNICEF-China and its partners intervened to support equitable access to quality basic education for ethnic minority children.

Equity focus. On an aggregated national scale, China’s education-related achievements, in furtherance of its national policy and MDG2, are impressive, but ethnic minority children simply are not benefitting commensurately from China’s educational progress. This intervention supported universal primary school education in China that is substantively universal, in that it (a) ensures equitable access to quality, child-friendly, gender-sensitive, culturally-appropriate education for all children, and (b) helps stem the low rates of ethnic minority student attendance and primary school completion.

Advocacy. Broad advocacy campaigns at the national level, and with provincial and county education bureaus, supported policy development to improve access to quality basic education for ethnic minority children. Specific recommendations included revising policy relating to national and local teacher training, integrating the needs of ethnic minority children into the national curriculum, and developing policies to promote school management plans. Guidelines and best-practice models for child-friendly, gender-sensitive, culturally-appropriate, bilingual education that enable widespread replication also informed policy advocacy.

Capacity building. Building teacher and school administrator capacity was a substantial component of the intervention. Training topics included: establishing child-friendly schools; gender-sensitive and culturally-appropriate teaching practices; school planning and management; and bilingual education, including the development of bilingual teaching and learning materials. National education experts observed classroom teaching in ethnic minority schools and offered suggestions to support teacher improvement. UNICEF-China helped organize opportunities for international knowledge sharing and the introduction of international best practices for promoting and implementing bilingual education.

PROGRESS & RESULTS

Improved service access. UNICEF-China and its partners helped improve equitable access to quality basic education for ethnic minority children by supporting the establishment of child-friendly, gender-sensitive, culturally-appropriate learning environments in pilot schools. The intervention in pilot schools included: adapting curricula and textbooks to the local context; capacity building for teachers, including training resource teachers to provide ongoing support to classroom teachers; commissioning and distributing bilingual story books to support bilingual education; providing library kits to improve children’s reading skills; and supplying sports equipment, including manuals on physical education, to contribute to students’ physical development. These components helped make primary school relevant to the lives of ethnic minority children, and facilitated their increased engagement with and interest in completing primary school.

Improved data collection and utilization. The Government of China does not yet collect education data disaggregated by ethnicity and sex at the national and local levels. Doing so would improve the quality of education data, and would support evidence-based policy development to address inequities. UNICEF-China and its partners collected data from the pilot schools to assess the impact of the intervention on ethnic minority students’ access to, completion of, and attitudes about primary school education.

Greater demand and participation. The input of ethnic minority children was central to the development of culturally-appropriate teaching materials and guidelines. Children’s involvement ensured the relevancy of the materials, by incorporating the children’s unique cultural and linguistic contexts. Participation in the process also enhanced the children’s capabilities and sense of engagement.

The development process also involved teachers, and thereby heightened their interest in the teaching tools developed through the process, and in exploring the use of information and communications technologies (ICT) for education. Soliciting teacher input fostered a positive perception of the child-friendly educational environment, as well as a sense of ownership as a stakeholder in the culturally-appropriate approach to primary school education.
Increased capacity and sustainability. The intervention trained thousands of teachers, including resource teachers who promote ongoing capacity building opportunities for classroom teachers in ethnic minority schools. Participating teachers reported significant shifts in their perspectives, including: increased recognition of their roles in helping ethnic minority children adapt to the school environment; acknowledgement that promoting and retaining the cultural heritage of ethnic minority children is part of the educational process; increased understanding of their responsibilities in fostering the healthy development of ethnic minority children; and the importance of respecting the rights of ethnic minority children.

Schools in the pilot project also drafted and implemented child-friendly school development plans. The plans integrated the use of locally-developed and culturally-appropriate teaching materials, including monitoring and evaluation of their use. The school development plans also helped improve management of schools with ethnic minority student bodies.

CHALLENGES

Three primary challenge arose in the course of the intervention. First, participating ethnic minority communities were located in remote and truly hard-to-reach areas. The geographical challenges created difficulties for exchanging experiences and promoting project successes. UNICEF-China and its partners addressed this issue through capacity building to facilitate distance learning and networking using information and communications technologies (ICT).

Second, the national and local educational policy frameworks do not adequately reflect the needs of ethnic minority children, nor do policy makers currently demonstrate sufficient understanding of how important improved policies are to better educational outcomes for ethnic minority children. UNICEF-China and its partners designed and engaged in advocacy campaigns to raise awareness about these issues.

Third, implementation of China’s educational programming is decentralized, and local governments – especially in remote, rural areas in Western provinces – often lack the funding necessary to provide quality education to ethnic minority children. This issue remains a concern.

LESSONS LEARNED

Three important lessons learned emerged from the intervention. First, classroom teachers in ethnic minority schools tend to lack training and qualifications relative to their peers. In the course of the intervention, teachers in pilot schools improved their understandings of child-friendly and culturally-appropriate education, and built their capacities for bilingual teaching; but the underlying training gap still leaves these teachers at a disadvantage relative to their peers. Sustainability of the gains made through this intervention depends on ongoing capacity building.

Second, the effectiveness and sustainability of the resource teachers who support ongoing capacity building for classroom teachers in schools with ethnic minority student bodies will depend on continued monitoring and technical support.

Third, the remoteness of the pilot sites suggests a larger role for distance support, learning, networking and capacity building. Supporting development of the infrastructure to enable a well-functioning and expanded ICT component of the intervention is an important consideration in replicating the model developed in this pilot project.

NEXT STEPS

UNICEF-China has helped prepare guidelines and best practices models that facilitate expansion and replication of the piloted intervention. Over the relatively short three years of the pilot project, UNICEF-China and its partners did not have opportunities to address emerging issues or the entire scope of the problem presented. During replication and expansion, implementers should focus their efforts in two ways. First, sustained capacity building of teachers and administrators is necessary to create child-friendly, gender-sensitive and culturally-appropriate learning environments that motivate ethnic minority children to attend and complete school. Second, expanding the development and distribution of bilingual and culturally-appropriate teaching and learning materials is integral to the sustained success of this model.
RELATED LINKS*

[Refer to internet-based resources that provide additional information relevant to the initiative’s history, development or outcomes.]

*All titles are hyperlinked to their respective web-based files.


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Acknowledgements: This case study is a collaborative effort among the UNICEF China Country Office, the Internal Communications Section (Division of Communication) and the Programme Division.

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