A multilingual approach to promote children’s well-rounded development in ethnic minority areas in western China: practices from Ministry of Education and UNICEF China’s joint SEL project

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Language is a key to ethnic minority children’s development in China. Ethnic minority children tend to not perform as well as their non-ethnic minority peers due to the language of education. Mother tongue-based multilingual education (MTB-MLE) has been proved effective in addressing the issue of providing an equal opportunity for every child to develop. However, the question of how to better bridge from the MTB-MLE system to the standard national education system to enable ethnic minority children to reach their full potential alongside their peers needs more exploration. This presentation showcases Ministry of Education China and UNICEF China’s joint Social and Emotional Learning (SEL) project, a multilingual approach to promote children’s well-rounded development in ethnic minority areas in western China, which begins to address the issue.

The project aims to create a safe, happy, inclusive, and participatory environment for children and support them to establish positive self-awareness, develop communication skills, face challenges, and solve problems. It was piloted in five western counties including three located in areas with predominantly ethnic minorities (Yunnan and Guangxi provinces and the Xinjiang Autonomous Region).

Through training to improve the principal leadership in SEL and promote SEL teaching and learning in pilot schools, the school climate has become more inclusive and participatory, which encourages ethnic minority children to engage and develop themselves. SEL teaching strategies include circle time, buddy schemes, dramas, group work, and art activities. These encourage ethnic minority children to express themselves and communicate with others in a multilingual way – not limited to languages only – which in turn significantly improves their engagement in learning and therefore improves their performance and helps them gradually adapt to the standard national education system.