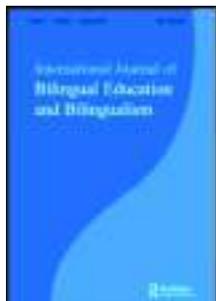


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### A bilingual education professional development project for primary Tibetan teachers in China: the experience and lessons learned

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## **A bilingual education professional development project for primary Tibetan teachers in China: the experience and lessons learned**

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This paper examines bilingual education policies and practices in China and the interconnection and influences of the west in the new developments in bilingual education in this country. It focuses on bilingual education in Tibetan areas considering the sociopolitical context, the Tibetan tradition, and the current developments and new knowledge in the area of bilingual education. It discusses the challenges and limitations that Tibetan teachers and students face today as well as their strengths and aspirations for an improved bilingual education system through which teachers can teach better, students can learn faster, achieve higher, and consequently communities can prosper. It presents the experience and lessons learned from the Gannan Tibetan Bilingual Education Project in Gansu Province, a bilingual teacher training project for Tibetan primary teachers, supported by the UK Department for International Development in China in collaboration with the Gansu Provincial Department of Education. This experience can provide insight and useful information for educators, policy-makers, and governments in the design and implementation of similar bilingual teacher professional development projects in countries where minority and indigenous people live.

**Keywords:** bilingual education; ethnic minorities; indigenous languages; minority education; mother tongue education; cultural identity

### **Introduction**

The World Leaders' Declaration in the Dakar World Education Forum (April 26–28, 2000) that 'the heart of EFA [Education for All] lies at the country level' and that 'no country seriously committed to Education for All will be thwarted in its achievement of universal primary school completion by 2015 due to lack of resources' marked a new era in the way we approach development in education (FTI 2009; The Dakar Framework for Action 2000).

This approach represents a new paradigm shift in international education development. It moves the focus from the past trend to simply assist poor nations to today's practice of empowering poor nations to assist themselves. It has many positive implications for developing and transforming nations' education systems because it supports sustainable capacity building and empowerment at the country level.

The Tibetan bilingual teacher training project presented in this paper was designed by following the new trends in international aid. It took place in China

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between 2006 and 2010 in Gannan Tibetan Autonomous Prefecture (GTAP), Gansu Province. It was supported by the United Kingdom Department for International Development in China (UK DfID/China) as a component of the Support to Universal Basic Education Project (SUBEP) in cooperation with the Gansu Provincial Department of Education. SUBEP was funded to expand to 31 additional counties the key lessons and activities of the Gansu Basic Education Project (GBEP) which was initiated in 1999 aiming to support the efforts for achieving Universal Basic Education (UBE) in Gansu province. The GBEP has been highly successful. It helped increase school access for minority and poor children; raise student enrollment in some areas for more than 12%; and improve the quality and relevance of education for minority children and communities (GBEP 2009).

This paper describes the Tibetan bilingual primary teacher training project and presents the lessons learned. It aims to provide insight and helpful suggestions for other similar bilingual education projects not only in China and other Tibetan areas but also in other countries where similar tasks are undertaken for the improvement of the quality of education of indigenous and minority children.

### **Background**

As the year 2015 is approaching and there are still millions of children out of school in the world, it is critical to accelerate and strengthen our efforts toward the elimination of gender and marginalized populations' disparities in education in order to achieve UBE for all boys and girls. It is essential, however, to ensure that children do not only complete school but they also actually learn.

In developing countries the challenges faced by school-aged children are many and have a significant negative impact on their learning. Some of these challenges are: malnutrition, poverty, lack of literacy practices at home, undiagnosed learning disabilities, and untreated health problems including HIV/AIDS, gender biases, minority status and language of instruction, lack of classroom resources, poor school conditions, and lack of trained and effective teachers.

Teacher quality and language of instruction are the most important two factors in improving student learning when it comes to minority children's education. Indigenous and minority children and especially minority girls consist some of the most vulnerable student populations. In many developing countries, these children may not have access to education at all or they may receive poor quality education, often in a language other than their mother tongue. Subsequently, the risk for school failure and drop out is high (Klaus et al. 2006).

Quality bilingual education for indigenous and marginalized children has been receiving more and more attention recently all over the world because it has proven to increase student enrollment, improve student learning outcomes in the second language and in the content areas, and in the long run to overall decrease the costs of education (Patrinos and Velez 2009). Teacher professional development in indigenous areas must focus not just on core knowledge and effective bilingual education practices but also on empowering minority teachers to improve their instruction in culturally and linguistically appropriate ways tailored to their students' own unique needs.

### **Sociopolitical context and minority education in China**

Out of the 56 ethnic groups living in China, 55 are ethnic minorities. These minorities account over 100 million and occupy vast areas in more than 60% of China's whole territory but mainly reside in provinces and five autonomous regions in the west and southeast China. They speak over 80 different languages of which about 40 are written. The majority ethnic group, the Han-Chinese, speak Mandarin and account to about one billion (Xing and Yanheng 2001).

The Tibetan language is spoken by approximately six million people in about five provinces in the northwest and southwest of the country and in particular, the Tibetan Autonomous Region (TAR), and the provinces of Gansu, Sichuan, Yunnan, and Qinghai. The main Tibetan oral dialects are: *Lhasa* which is spoken in central Tibetan areas and the TAR, *Khams*, and *Amdo*. The dialects of Lhasa and Khams are tonal while Amdo is not. There is only one type of written Tibetan, the *classical Tibetan* and it is used by all Tibetan language groups: Lhasa, Khams, and Amdo.

According to the Constitution of the People's Republic of China, 'all minorities have the freedom to develop their minority languages.' Chinese education policy supports minority and bilingual education and at the national level there is the belief that it has a positive impact on student outcomes (Prof. J. Qumu, 2006, personal communication).

However, although minority education is supported by the national government, it is not clear to what extent there is knowledge and awareness about bilingual educational theory, research, and instructional practices. Bilingual education is merely viewed as learning in two languages or using the native language as the medium of instruction (at least for part of the school day) but in terms of instructional practices and methodologies and of delivery and implementation of successful bilingual programs, there is not a clear understanding of 'how to' or of 'what works and what doesn't.'

In China, minority education is managed at various administrative levels: the national, the provincial, the regional or prefecture, and the municipal or county level. Each province has the autonomy to decide about its bilingual education program. Minority education has been receiving the attention and support of the national government but because China focuses on examination outcomes, local governments prefer to choose Mandarin as the medium of instruction in schools having the belief that students will improve on their examination scores. In reality though, minority students experience difficulties to study in Mandarin because it is a language they do not speak and understand well.

In China's poor provinces, girls, minority, indigenous, and children with special education needs have low basic education completion rates. Gansu, one of the poorest provinces in the northwest of China, in 2004 had an average completion rate for nine years of basic education which was only about 46.95%, while the average national for China was about 63.8% (SUPEB 2005). Poverty, distance to school, lack of resources, lack of qualified teachers and poor instructional quality, language of instruction, and hard living conditions in minority areas are factors which have been limiting Gansu's indigenous children from access to and success in education.

Students who graduate from bilingual schools can enter the university. However, because at the university level the sciences and medical disciplines are offered mainly in Mandarin, minority students who graduate from indigenous language speaking

schools have limited higher education choices and often choose to study in minority colleges and universities (Qumu 2006).

In minority areas, there are three different types of teacher training institutions:

- the Normal School (equivalent to high school), which is the teacher preparatory program for primary school teachers;
- the Normal College (three years undergraduate education) for Junior High School teachers; and
- the Normal University (four years undergraduate education) for Senior High School teachers.

Minority education in China is mainly organized into three streams: *Bilingual*, *Boarding*, and *Multiple Education* and it is summarized in Table 1 (Qumu 2006; Xing and Yanheng 2001).

### **Tibetan bilingual education**

During the cultural revolution and for a period of about 20 years (1958–1977), the Tibetan language – like many other minority languages in China – was not permitted to be used as the medium of instruction in the schools and even in some cases to be spoken in public. As a result, in several Tibetan areas of China today, the Tibetan language is not spoken and the levels of illiteracy among Tibetan people are high. Young people often view their mother tongue as inferior and see Mandarin as their only passport to educational and financial success. However, negative attitudes toward their mother tongue have a negative impact on Tibetan children's socio-emotional development and on the development of their cultural identity and self-esteem and eventually a negative impact on their educational and professional development later on in their life (Prof. H. Sangji, 2007, personal communication).

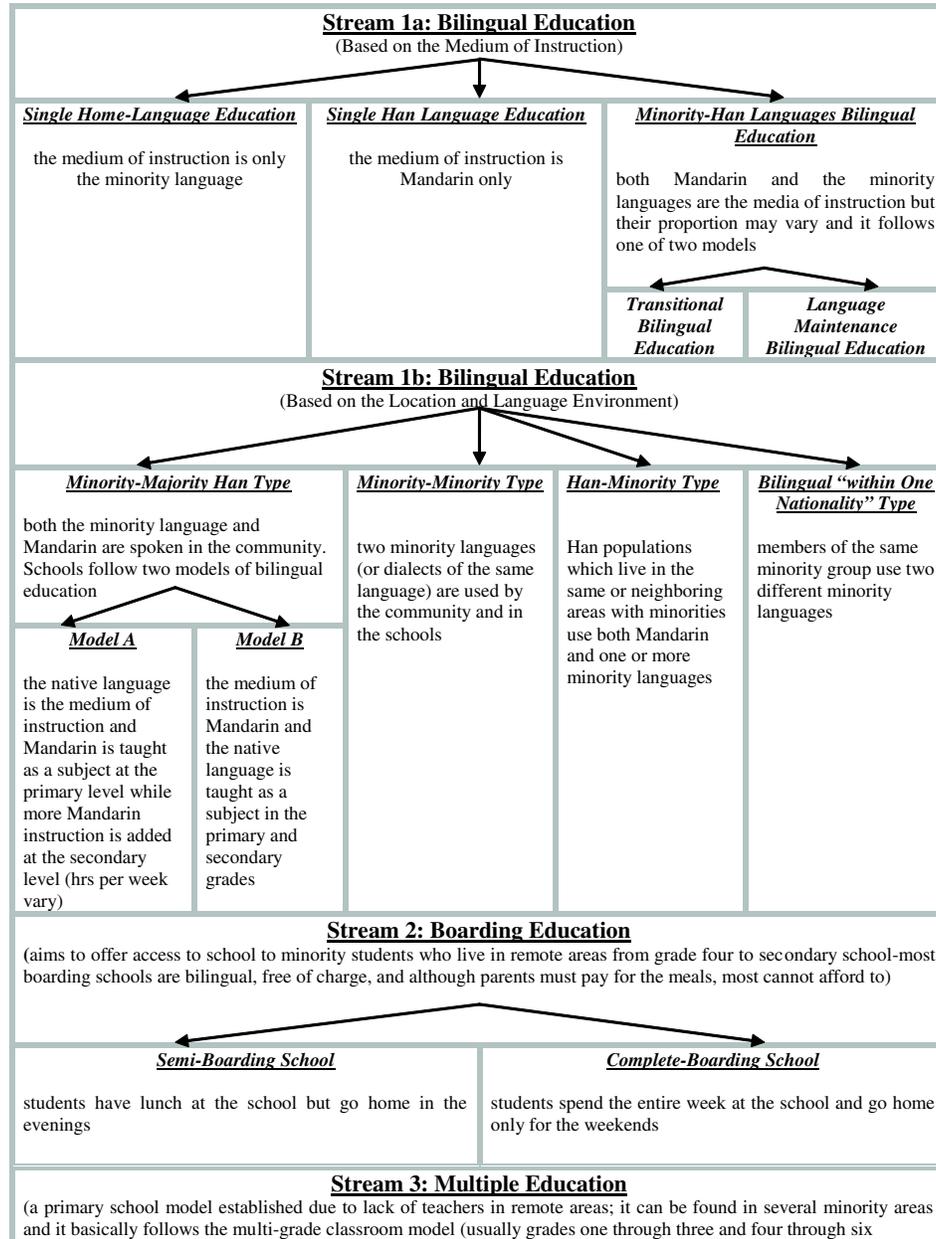
Tibetan communities experience high poverty levels and very hard living conditions. People work in the fields with very limited means lacking even outdated technology, face very cold weather conditions without the means to keep houses and schools warm, have poor school and home sanitation facilities, and lack of water purification systems in schools. Unemployment levels among young people are very high and educational and financial growth remain unfulfilled dreams for many Tibetans (Prof. H. Sangji, 2007, personal communication).

After 1977, the Tibetan language was reinstated in schools and today, most Tibetan educational systems in many Tibetan areas, follow Model A bilingual education where Tibetan is used as the medium of instruction and Mandarin is taught as a subject at the primary and secondary levels (*zang wei zhu*). Fewer schools follow Model B bilingual education where the medium of instruction is Mandarin and Tibetan is taught as a subject (*han wei zhu*) (Lamtso 2005, unpublished essay).

Tibetan schools have limited educational and financial resources, limited numbers of highly qualified teachers, and the student–teacher ratio is about 1:70. The majority of the Tibetan students who graduate from high school score low in the university entrance examinations both in Mandarin and in the content areas and, therefore, their chances to enter higher education are limited.

To assist toward the improvement of the education of Tibetan children, the *Association on Tibetan Language* developed textbooks for all levels of education (primary, secondary, and tertiary). The textbooks are disseminated to the provinces

Table 1. Minority Education in China (Xing and Yanheng 2001; Qumu 2006).



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of Gansu, Yunnan, Sichuan, Qinghai, and TAR in areas where Tibetan populations live and are written in classical Tibetan. To ensure alignment with the national curriculum, all teaching materials have been directly translated from Mandarin to Tibetan with few modifications to include local history and geography. As a result, students have difficulty in studying and comprehending the content presented in the textbooks which are written in classical Tibetan, a form of language that they do not

speak in their communities and often the content in the textbooks has very little to do if anything with the Tibetan tradition, natural environment, and culture.

### **The bilingual education project in Gannan Tibetan Autonomous Prefecture**

Gannan Tibetan Autonomous Prefecture includes seven counties: Lin Tan, Zhuo Ni, Lu Qu, Zhou Qu, Die Bu, Ma Qu, and Xia He and one city: He Zuo. In GTAP, most schools use both bilingual education models (A and B), that is to say 'One School-Two Models.' In Model A (zang wei zhu), Tibetan is the medium of instruction and Mandarin is taught as a subject and in Model B (han wei zhu) Mandarin is the medium of instruction and Tibetan is taught as a subject. When both approaches are offered in the same school, usually, children have the option to choose the language approach they wish to follow. There are four types of schools: primary (grades 1–6), junior high (grades 7–9), middle (junior high and senior high/grades 7–12), and nine-year compulsory school (primary and junior high/grades 1–9).

In GTAP, due to limited numbers of qualified bilingual (Mandarin/Tibetan) teachers, instructional materials, and resources and because of the utilization of outdated teaching methods Tibetan students face serious academic difficulties and are at high risk for school failure and drop out. Furthermore, the students who graduate from high school have limited higher education and career development choices because the minority colleges and universities in China do not offer degrees in a great variety of disciplines.

Aiming to support and improve the education of Tibetan students in GTAP, and along the same line with previous efforts in other parts of Gansu Province, the UK DfID/China undertook the task to develop the Gannan Tibetan Bilingual Education Project in collaboration with the Gansu Provincial Department of Education. The project began in August 2006. The main goals of the project were: (1) the development of bilingual education teacher training materials for teaching language arts and mathematics and (2) the training of the Tibetan teachers in GTAP on sound modern bilingual teaching principles and methodologies following the participatory approach.

The author of this paper was invited by UK DfID/China to serve as the international consultant of the project. Her role was to design and implement the bilingual professional development program from its start to the completion of the pilot teacher training. To this date, the development of the bilingual education training materials has been completed and the majority of the Tibetan teachers in GTAP have been trained.

### **Theoretical framework**

The theoretical framework on which the Tibetan bilingual education teacher training project was based on draws its principles from the concept of community-based education (Villani and Douglas 2000), from the cognitive theory of culture (Bruner 1996; Shore 1998), and from the communities of practice approach (Wenger 1998a).

Community-based education considers not only the cognitive capacities of individuals, the methods of instruction, and the core academic subjects of the curriculum but goes further emphasizing the social and emotional aspects of learning. It supports the development of interpersonal relationships and of intrapersonal reflection and awareness in people's own social and cultural realities.

It cultivates the ability of the learners to understand issues and concerns and to solve problems in their community while developing a sense of self and of a community in which its members work collaboratively toward common goals. 'Community-based education fosters interdependence and leads toward educational and community practices that have the potential to impact people on a global scale' (Villani and Douglas 2000, 121–122).

The cognitive theory of culture is based on the 'central thesis ... that culture shapes [the] mind [and] it provides us with the toolkit by which we construct not only our worlds but our very conceptions of selves and our powers ... [that] learning, remembering, talking, [and] imagining ... are made possible by participating in a culture ... [and that] education does not only occur in classrooms, but around the family dinner table ... [and in the community] ... ' (Bruner 1996, x–xi). Because of humans' 'premature' birth, the development of the brain is completed outside the womb and within a specific ecological and cultural environment. Therefore, not only nature but also nurture, ecology, and culture shape the way humans perceive and make sense of the world around them (Shore 1998).

Communities of practice are groups of people who share a concern, a set of common problems, or the same passion about a topic, and who deepen their knowledge and expertise in this area by interacting on an ongoing basis (Wenger, McDermott, and Snyder 2002, 4).

Communities of practice are rooted in human history as 'our first knowledge-based social structures' and can be found in every area of human activity (Wenger, McDermott, and Snyder 2002, 5). They have short-term value in improving organizational outcomes and experience of work and long-term value in developing organizational capabilities and in fostering professional development.

Although communities of practice are formed for different reasons and in a variety of aspects of human life, they all share three fundamental structural characteristics: (1) a *domain* of knowledge which affirms its purpose and creates common ground and a sense of common identity; (2) a *community* of people who care about this domain which fosters interactions and relationships based on mutual respect and trust while it creates the social context for learning; and (3) a shared *practice* which is the specific knowledge that the community develops, shares, and maintains in order to be effective in the domain of knowledge (Wenger, McDermott, and Snyder 2002, 27–28).

Communities of practice are flexible and evolving. They differ from a business or a functional unit, a team, and a network in the sense that: they define themselves in the process of doing; are kept together by the common interests and learning of their members; and they are created for a specific purpose and not just for networking (Wenger 1998b).

Communities of practice evolve in five stages: (1) *Potential*: people face similar situations without the benefit of a shared practice, find each other and discover commonalities. (2) *Coalescing*: members come together and recognize their potential, explore connectedness, define joint enterprise, and negotiate community. (3) *Active*: members engage in developing a practice and in joint activities, create artifacts, adapt to changing circumstances, renew interest, commitment, and relationships. (4) *Dispersed*: members no longer engage very intensely but the community is still active as a force and center of knowledge, stay in touch, communicate, hold reunions, and call each other for advice. (5) *Memorable*: the community is no longer central,

but people still remember it as a significant part of their identities, tell stories, preserve artifacts, and collect memorabilia (Wenger 1998b).

### **Stages of project development**

#### ***Potential: defining the common goal and creating the core community of practice***

In the beginning of the project, our first priority was to establish the core of our community of practice, the bilingual education team (BET) which would first receive the bilingual education training, would be responsible for the authoring of the training materials and for conducting the bilingual teacher pilot training and the training of additional trainers.

With the assistance of the Beijing DfID Education Office and of the Chinese Provincial Department of Education in Gansu as well as of the Gannan prefecture education authorities we organized an initial small BET of about 10 members comprised by professors, researchers, Tibetan scholars, education administrators, and translators. We organized meetings and discussions in Lanzhou, the capital city of Gansu, to explore commonalities, ideas and experiences regarding Tibetan education in GTAP. We all agreed on the common goal: to develop bilingual education teacher training materials for language arts and mathematics for Tibetan teachers and consequently to help improve the teaching and learning quality and outcomes in GTAP. We also made an initial plan of action and organized our first field visit in GTAP with the objective to conduct a needs assessment and include more community members in our activities.

#### ***Coalescing: coming together, recognizing our potential, and negotiating our community***

Our small BET visited several primary and secondary schools and education administration offices in GTAP and specifically in HeZuo City and Xiahe and LuQu counties.

In GTAP, we conducted classroom observations and met with school administrators, teachers, and students and also conducted interviews to assess the current instructional methodology and learning conditions in the schools. We assessed the needs, strengths, and weaknesses of the education system in the prefecture. We organized focus groups with about 40 teachers and school administrators to discuss their needs and aspirations and assess their knowledge on bilingual education principles and practices. Our main goal was to establish a baseline understanding of the foundation on which we had to build our bilingual education training activities and recruit more members to our BET.

At the end of our field experience in GTAP, we recruited 15 more teachers of language arts and mathematics and school administrators as additional members to the BET to participate in the bilingual education training and subsequently, in the authoring of the training materials and the delivery of the teacher training. Later, the BET was divided into two working groups one for language arts and one for mathematics.

Our findings from our first visit in GTAP and our baseline evaluation revealed a great need for teacher training on quality and culturally appropriate bilingual education and modern instructional methodologies, computers and other technologies in the schools, books and other instructional materials. It also revealed the

great desire of teachers, students, and administrators for the improvement of their educational system and the teaching and learning conditions. Our findings showed that most teachers did not have a clear understanding of what bilingual education is and had difficulty in defining it; they were unaware of the methods, principles, and practices of bilingual education.

Many of the teachers in GTAP had limited educational background. Most of the teachers in these schools clearly followed a teacher centered approach in instructing primary and secondary children. The classes were very large with over 70 students in some cases and there were no teaching assistants.

The teachers' lesson plans did not reflect modern pedagogy and teaching practices and there was no attention given to multiple intelligences and individual learning styles. Their instructional style did not reflect Tibetan traditional pedagogy either as the Tibetan scholars of our BET observed. The teachers' approach was rather behavioristic and teacher-centered. For their instruction, the teachers relied solely on the book to deliver their lesson and their main instructional strategies were rote memorization, and repetition in unison. The students were very well behaved and respectful to the teachers and to classroom visitors. They sat quietly at their desks and spent almost the entire classroom time copying from the board and taking notes from the teacher's lectures. They had very few opportunities to ask questions and interact in the classroom. Some students would be asked to come to the board and solve a problem or answer a question but there was no peer interaction or any other type of facilitative discussion in the classroom. The teacher would often pause for a second to ask the question to the class: 'Do you understand?' and the students will all reply in unison: 'Yes, we do!'

Some teachers had heard before of the 'participatory approach to teaching' and had attempted to group their students in cooperative groups of six or eight. However, the teachers were not clear about the principles of the participatory approach and did not have any knowledge on cooperative learning structures. As a result (and with the exception of one class in which the teacher had received prior formal training on the participatory approach), the students sat together in groups but they did not collaborate; they just listened to the teacher's lecture.

The students' textbooks were merely translated from Mandarin to classical Tibetan without significant cultural and linguistic modifications to reflect the local dialect, which is Amdo, and had very few illustrations. Many of the examples and stories in the textbooks were culturally and contextually unfamiliar to the students.

In most classes, the furniture was arranged in ways that did not allow any student movement. Classrooms were cluttered with old and unutilized pieces of furniture such as bookcases, stacked desks, and other items. It was very difficult for students to move around in the classroom which made it even more challenging for the teacher to group them in collaborative groups. It was clear that the teachers had not received any training on building classroom environments conducive to teaching and learning through exploration, hands-on activities, and student active participation. There were not any computers or other types of technology and the only teaching tools appeared to be the blackboard, chalk, the textbooks, pencils, and student notebooks.

Many of the classrooms were not heated properly and teachers and students had to wear their coats during the lesson. The sanitation and living conditions in the schools and dormitories were very challenging. There were not adequate heating units to keep warm during the long winter months. In some cases no more than two adults looked after over 350 children. To maintain the dormitories and the facilities,

the students themselves had to do the majority of the chores such as cleaning, washing, and scrubbing. The food was not enough or nutritious as their main meal usually consisted of a piece of bread and some potato and rice soup cooked in plain water.

One of the most astonishing things, however, that our team discovered was that despite the odds and the noticeably hard learning and living conditions in the schools and dormitories, teachers, students, and administrators were happy, energetic, and very dedicated to teaching and learning. Despite their extremely low salaries, teachers appeared unbelievably devoted to their students and duty. They were very enthusiastic, eager to improve their educational practices, and to learn new ways of teaching.

The Tibetan teachers and students' positive attitude toward education and improvement and their hard work and dedication was perhaps the most significant of our findings. It did not only give us a great example of the power of the human spirit and perseverance but it also served as the main foundation on which we built our project. It served as the bonding element for our community of practice and as the driving force for overcoming the significant challenges which were awaiting us ahead and for the successful implementation of our project. In summary, our field visit and baseline assessment revealed the following needs and strengths (Table 2).

***Active: the training of the BET on bilingual education principles and practices and on Tibetan teaching methodologies***

After conducting the needs assessment, our second priority was to train the BET on sound bilingual teaching methodologies and practices grounded in theory and research while incorporating traditional Tibetan teaching approaches and methods. When the training was completed, members of the team conducted a field visit at bilingual schools in DongXiang County in Linxia Prefecture in Gansu Province and

Table 2. Needs and Strengths of Tibetan Educational System in GTAP.

Needs	Strengths
A clear understanding of the meaning and scope of bilingual education	The positive attitude of teachers and administrators about improving Tibetan bilingual education
An organized support system for bilingual schools with trained administrators, inspectors, researchers, and teachers and of criteria for bilingual teaching evaluation	Teachers' strong desire to receive training and participate in the development of bilingual curricula and educational materials
Appropriate and effective curricula and textbooks, of trained bilingual teachers, and of lesson plans, curriculum guides, and teacher resource materials	Teachers' commitment to the education of Tibetan children and to the education profession in general
The development of subject matter terminology in the Tibetan language especially in mathematics and the sciences and of reliable dictionaries and other resources	Support for bilingual education by the educational leaders and administrators
Organization of classroom environment and community and parent involvement	Students' great respect for their teachers, for the teaching and learning process, and their desire to learn

a field visit in Vietnam. There, the team members observed bilingual classrooms, met with education officials, administrators, and students and collected first-hand information about bilingual education practices in the areas where minorities reside.

The team received training four times within a year period for about 10 full work-days at a time. The training was organized in a workshop format. The author presented bilingual education theory and research, bilingual education models, principles, and instructional practices including cooperative learning, cognitive, metacognitive, and socioaffective strategies. The Tibetan scholars of our team presented Tibetan traditional teaching methods and practices. During the training, the participants had the opportunity to ask questions, engage in discussions, and practice the applicability of the new methods in collaborative teams.

The BET members discussed and reflected on the bilingual teaching methods and the traditional Tibetan methods. Through this exploration of ideas, the members of the team discovered that although the two approaches appear different and come from different parts of the world, they do share common values and underlying philosophies such as experiential learning, participatory learning, and instructional methods to address the needs of diverse learners.

The Tibetan teaching methods which were presented were: Nian tsu, Maar tsu, Cher tsu, Sie tsu, Long, Tsu, and Mengh (Prof. H. Sangji, 2007, personal communication). In particular:

- (1) Nian tsu (teaching based on knowledge) is an instructional method where the teacher uses mainly behavioral techniques such as repetition, rote memorization, and using rhythm and reciting to learn facts. The goal of this approach could be placed at the first and second level of Bloom's taxonomy (knowledge and comprehension);
- (2) Maar tsu (teaching based on practical experience) is an instructional method which could be placed at the third level of Bloom's taxonomy (application). It is a constructivist approach to learning through which the teacher uses hands-on activities and scaffolding to teach step-by-step and ways that the new knowledge can be applied in practice;
- (3) Cher tsu (teaching diverse learners) is an approach that is very similar to diversification of instruction and also to teaching groups of students by ability (ability grouping). The teacher pays particular attention to individual student learning needs and levels of performance. The teacher teaches by student level including giving more and higher level work to the advance students. In addition, the teacher uses various techniques to help students who struggle including encouragement and motivation techniques so that they do not feel frustrated or overwhelmed during learning;
- (4) Sie tsu (lecturing and direct instruction) is the same method we use in the west when the teacher gives a lecture or provides direct instruction by examples or demonstration;
- (5) Long (teaching based on traditional knowledge passed from generation to generation) is a teaching method that follows a developmental approach according to the age and development level of the students. The curriculum is designed in a spiral manner in which the same subject is taught and revisited at different grade levels but with increasing depth and complexity. For example, Tibetan grammar is taught starting early primary school and

continuing through middle and high school. However, the teaching methods and content are adjusted to the age and grade level of students;

- (6) Tsu (teaching using various teaching styles) is a method where the teacher incorporates auditory, visual, kinaesthetic, and tactile learning to reach all students and according to the subject of instruction; and
- (7) Mengh (developing special skills and expertise) is a teaching approach which focuses on teaching learning strategies and processes. The students develop the skills to learn the various subjects and the ability for critical thinking and for transferring skills and competencies from one subject to another and to real life application.

When the presentation and discussion of the bilingual education and Tibetan education methods were completed the members of BET were astonished by discovering the many similarities between the two approaches. They also realized how rich their teaching traditions are and that many of these methods are not known to many Tibetan teachers of our generation. The BET team developed sample lesson plans which reflected the Tibetan culture aligned with the Chinese national curriculum and followed current research-based bilingual teaching practices while combined traditional Tibetan teaching methods.

For example, one lesson plan in language arts was about the Tibetan story of Tenba Namzie, a story about four animals which symbolizes harmony and collaboration in the community. The lesson included cooperative learning, visual, auditory, tactile, and kinaesthetic activities, graphic organizers and anticipatory guides. Another example of a lesson plan in mathematics focused on teaching young children how to utilize ‘the one hundred numbers’ chart’ to recognize numbers and count. In this lesson, the teacher would divide the children into eight groups as many as the Tibetan symbols for happiness. The teacher would introduce a group game and a Tibetan song incorporating visual, auditory, tactile, and kinesthetic activities, teacher-made worksheets and graphic organizers. In Table 3, there is a summary of the BET’s training topics.

***Active: developing a practice and authoring the teacher training materials***

When the training was completed, the BET which was divided into two working groups one for language arts and one for mathematics began the development of the teacher training modules for the primary grades. In addition to the bilingual education training they had received, the BET took into consideration the Tibetan traditional teaching methods, the data collected from the needs assessment study in GTAP, the lessons learned from the field experiences in bilingual schools in DongXiang and Vietnam, the national and provincial curriculum standards for Tibetan and Mandarin language arts and mathematics, the national and provincial bilingual policy guidelines, and the existing textbooks and teaching materials in GTAP.

The authoring of the training modules lasted for about six months. The teams developed 16 modules for language arts and 16 for mathematics. All modules were written in Tibetan. The training modules were based on current bilingual instructional approaches and student-centered methodologies and incorporated traditional Tibetan pedagogy (see Table 4). All modules used Tibetan cultural

Table 3. Training topics of the BET.

Bilingual education approaches	Tibetan education approaches
Theories of first and second language acquisition and bilingual research findings	<i>Nian tsu</i> (teaching based on knowledge)
Models of second language teaching (transitional, early- and late- exit, dual language instruction, full and partial immersion)	<i>Maar tsu</i> (teaching based on practical experience)
Country examples of bilingual education policies and practices and benefits and challenges of bilingual education	<i>Cher tsu</i> (teaching diverse learners)
Conducting a ‘Needs Assessment’ to determine the learning needs of bilingual students and plan instruction in ways to meet these needs focusing on three instructional areas: (a) Language Functions, (b) Content Area Knowledge, and (c) Learning Strategies (Cognitive, Metacognitive, and Socioaffective) based on the CALLA model	<i>Sie tsu</i> (lecturing and direct instruction)
Cooperative learning, reciprocal teaching, the Writer’s Workshop, the writing process, the use of graphic organizers and anticipatory guides	<i>Long</i> (teaching based on traditional knowledge passed from generation to generation)
Developing assessments, rubrics and evaluation tools based on Bloom’s Taxonomy, diverse learning styles and multiple intelligences	<i>Tsu</i> (using various teaching styles)
Modifying and adapting instructional materials and textbooks to meet the students’ diverse needs including the needs of bilingual students with disabilities	<i>Mengh</i> (developing special skills and expertise)
Organizing physical classroom environments, collaborating with parents, teachers, and other school professionals, and team building	

examples and content while focusing on the learning standards of the national and provincial curriculum for the primary grades.

***Active: conducting the pilot primary teacher training***

The pilot primary teacher training took place in Lanzhou city, capital of Gansu Province in May 2008 and lasted for eight days. Sixty teachers (30 language arts and 30 mathematics primary teachers) from GTAP were invited of whom 51 (25 females 26 males) were able to attend. The participants had an initial meeting with the provincial education officials and the BET members for welcome and orientation and then they were divided into two different groups (teachers of mathematics and of language arts).

The pilot training for mathematics and language arts was conducted simultaneously in two different conference rooms. The presentation of the modules followed a demonstration approach and the medium of instruction was the Tibetan language. An interpreter for Mandarin and English was available during the duration of the training. The training method followed the participatory approach and facilitative learning to allow opportunities for collaborative work in small groups, and included visual, auditory, kinesthetic, tactile, and whole group hands-on activities. At the end

Table 4. Pilot training schedule.

Day (Date)	Day 1	Day 2	Day 3	Day 4	Day 5	Day 6	Day 7	Day 8	Day 9
9:00–10:15	Preparation	Module #1	Module #3	Module #5	Module #7	Module #9	Module #11	Module #13	Module #15
10:15–10:30	Break	Break	Break	Break	Break	Break	Break	Break	Break
10:30–12:00	Practice	Practice	Practice	Practice	Practice	Practice	Practice	Practice	Practice
12:00–2:30	Lunch	Lunch	Lunch	Lunch	Lunch				
Meeting									
Reflection	Lunch	Lunch	Lunch	Lunch					
2:30–3:45	Module #2	Module #4	Module #6	Module #8	Module #10	Module #12	Module #14	Module #16	
3:45–4:00	Break	Break	Break	Break	Break	Break	Break	Break	Break
4:00–5:30	Welcome/Orientation	Practice	Practice	Practice	Practice	Practice	Practice	Practice	Practice
5:45	Dinner	Dinner	Dinner	Dinner	Dinner	Dinner	Dinner	Dinner	Closing/Celebration

of each training session, participants were given 15 minutes to reflect on the training session in the journals they kept. The reflection journal entries were used as one of the evaluation tools for the training.

Each training day was divided into two sessions (morning and afternoon). Each session had two components: the 'introduction' of the new module and the 'practice.' During the *introduction* of the training the participants received instruction on bilingual teaching methodologies and practices. During the *practice*, the participants were grouped into cooperative teams and developed lessons and instructional materials based on the new information they had learned with the support of the trainers. Then, the small groups presented their work to the whole group receiving feedback, comments, and recommendations.

At the mid-point (fourth day) of the pilot training the BET, the trainees, the trainers, and the provincial education officials met. The purpose of this meeting was to reflect and provide feedback on the pilot training to that point and evaluate its effectiveness and impact. The participants shared their reflections from their journals and gave recommendations for the second part of pilot training. They were also given the opportunity to express areas of need to be covered and ask questions for clarification.

During and at the end of the pilot training two types of evaluation forms were completed: one by the trainers evaluating participant engagement in each individual training module and one by the trainees evaluating the overall quality and effectiveness of each one of the training modules.

Based on the data collected from the evaluations, the pilot training was overall very successful and exceeded our expectations in terms of quality, relevance to the Tibetan primary education, effectiveness, and participant engagement. One main concern which was expressed by many participants was whether they would have the ability to replicate what they had learned in their overcrowded classrooms with limited resources and without coaching support. Below, some of the participants' comments which capture the general reaction to the pilot training are provided:

- 'Thank you for this opportunity to come to this training. We have been teaching for many years but all we have known is the teacher-centered approach. We have been using just one piece of chalk, one textbook, and one blackboard. Now, by attending this training I understand that there are many ways to teach and that we can develop many different activities to help children learn faster and effectively. I think the new methods are really good and children can get a lot of benefits from them.'
- 'I like this training and I understand we can teach children in many different ways, not only just with lecture. My concern is whether this new method is really practical and applicable in our classrooms. In GTAP schools, we have many students in one classroom sometimes 50–70 students.'
- 'Students will get benefit from these new methods. My concern is if all these new strategies and techniques can be applied by us in our schools without any additional resources and support. How can we go back and apply what we learned without having a trainer on site to coach us?'
- 'In our classrooms, the textbooks we use are just translated from Chinese and most of the times are of poor quality. We need to select some good quality Tibetan supplemental materials and use them as resources for our teaching.'

- ‘The trainers used a lot of materials in the pilot training. It would be helpful to also show us how to make this kind of materials for our classrooms.’
- ‘I am looking forward to the finalization and development of the bilingual teacher training materials. I really like this training and find it very useful but I don’t think it will be enough. We need more training and on-going professional development in order to improve our teaching skills and our students’ learning.’
- ‘In order to apply the new methods we must first improve the conditions in the schools. We need supplementary materials, and training support. The new teaching methods are very good because they combine the traditional Tibetan methods with new ideas and research-based instructional practices. However, this combination of the traditional and the new must be further explored and expanded.’
- ‘Some of us have attended some teacher training before but never this kind of training especially prepared for Tibetan teachers. Most of the training we have had so far it was in lecture format and only in Mandarin. We very much appreciate this opportunity and have learned a lot from it.’

***Active: disseminating the bilingual education training in GTAP***

Following the pilot training, the bilingual primary teacher training modules were edited and revised for the last time taking into consideration the information and feedback received from the pilot. The modules were published in the form of teacher training handbooks and the dissemination of the training in GTAP schools began in the end of 2008. Several of the teachers who had participated in the pilot training became trainers. Since then, the number of teachers who can train others on bilingual teaching methods has been multiplying. The training takes place when children are out of school, during the school vacation days and holidays and therefore, the Tibetan bilingual education community of practice is still in its active phase. Data collected by the Provincial Department of Education reveals that the number of Tibetan teachers increased significantly from about 500 in 2006 to more than 885 in 2009. By 2009 more than 87% of the Tibetan teachers had been trained and were able to apply the new teaching methods and 78% of the classrooms showed active student participation and engagement in the learning process. In addition, the Tibetan bilingual teacher training materials have been used as reference work for other provincial bilingual programs.

**Conclusion**

Bilingual education efforts are developing in many indigenous and minority areas in the world. Governments, donors, international development organizations, NGOs, and advocacy groups are supporting bilingual education projects as the only promising way to secure access to and success in education for minority and disadvantaged boys and girls in developing countries.

No effort to develop and sustain bilingual programs in indigenous areas regardless its size goes in vain. A lot is learned not only from the results but mainly from the process. Improving our approaches and procedures in developing strong

bilingual programs will bring us in a more favorable position in enjoying better student learning outcomes.

However, no new bilingual teaching methodology can be effective and applicable in another geopolitical and cultural context unless it ‘marries’ with the traditions of the native population. No new knowledge can be embraced unless the knowledge of the native culture is equally valued, respected, and capitalized upon. For that reason, theoretical approaches such as community-based education, cognitive theory of culture, and communities of practice can provide good theoretical frameworks for bilingual education teacher training programs in indigenous and minority areas.

Our community of practice for example was formed based on the domain of knowledge of improving Tibetan bilingual education which served as our common ground and gave our community a sense of identity and purpose. Our community was developed by a group of people who cared deeply about improving Tibetan bilingual education; people who respected and trusted each other and who all worked together to create a positive social context for learning. Our community of practice developed specific knowledge on Tibetan bilingual education incorporating research-based bilingual education methodology and traditional Tibetan methods, and then it shared and maintained this knowledge in order to effectively disseminate it to the greater Tibetan community.

Essential elements of our community of practice were our flexibility and adaptability in welcoming new members and new ideas and also our openness and willingness to grow, reflect, and evolve based on the lessons we learned from each other, our common practice, and from the continuously evolving needs of our project. We followed democratic procedures in everything we did and all decisions we made valuing equally every member’s opinion.

Finally, in terms of our roles within our community of practice it was very interesting to experience a harmonious flow among our members’ commitment at various levels; in assuming responsibility, leadership, and accountability for task completion and quality. For example, initially, as members of the community we would assume our roles and responsibilities based on our expertise and by volunteering to complete various tasks. However, these roles and responsibilities would shift and change depending on the needs and stage of the project. For example, at one point in the process a community member may have assumed the leader’s role in completing a certain task while at another point, the same member would be the learner and the apprentice for learning a new teaching methodology or a new way of developing lesson plans.

From the Tibetan bilingual project in GTAP one of the most significant lessons learned is the importance of the minority culture and its human capital in the success of the project. As much knowledge and best practices the research-based bilingual teaching methods can offer to indigenous educational systems, indigenous traditional teaching approaches can also offer to the global education community, especially rich ones such as the Tibetan culture and educational tradition.

Another important lesson learned from our project is the positive impact the training had on the Tibetan teachers. Becoming active members in a community of practice, they were empowered through the activities of the project and were encouraged to assume leadership roles in the process. The ones who became trainers and conducted the pilot training did a remarkable job that every western bilingual education trainer would have every reason to admire and a lot to learn from.

The empowerment of the members of the BET was also evident in the end of the pilot training. In the beginning of the project, the members of the BET had expressed in their journals that they did not feel confident about being able to learn and understand the new bilingual methods, write the training materials, and deliver the training. At the end of the pilot training, however, they expressed high levels of confidence as teacher curriculum developers and teacher trainers. They felt most proud and satisfied for being able to incorporate current bilingual teaching approaches, the Tibetan traditional methods, and the content areas in such an artful way while delivering dynamic lesson demonstrations.

Especially notable was the empowerment of the women trainers. Although in the beginning of the project the women members of the BET would take the 'back seats' (literally the back seats) when we held our meetings and discussions, later in the process their self-efficacy, confidence, and creativity were impressively increased. During the pilot training, the women had become the leaders and the motivators; they were the recruiters who recruited new trainers for the dissemination of the project.

What is finally important to note in efforts such the Tibetan bilingual project in Gannan is the necessity for follow up professional development activities with responsibility and ethos keeping always in mind as ultimate goal the benefit of the minority and indigenous children. Unfortunately, often times, wonderful efforts begin and put the seeds for improvement, empowerment, and innovation for the education of disadvantaged children but they are not supported for a sufficient length of time to bring about significant positive change. As a result, they slowly fade overtime as other political and financial priorities emerge at the government and/or school administrative levels. The heartfelt wish of this author is that the effort to improve bilingual education for Tibetan teachers and students will continue and will bring fruitful results for the Tibetan communities in GTAP and in other areas of China where Tibetans and other minority groups live.

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