

Across China: Transforming kindergartens in rural China ^[1]

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EXCERPTS

Play time for 24 preschoolers in Yelang Village Kindergarten is different than most. Unlike traditional teachers who tend to dominate the class, Liu Fen gives more freedom to her students by letting them do what they want, observing and recording their behaviors rather than telling them to calm down.

The 28-year-old is the only teacher of Yelang Village Kindergarten in the city of Tongren, southwest China's Guizhou Province.

Born in a remote village in Guizhou, Liu didn't go to kindergarten when she was a child. "There was no kindergarten in my village. The nearest primary school required a two-hour hike through the mountains. For fun, we played hide-and-seek and made figurines out of mud," she recalled.

Becoming a qualified kindergarten teacher was once her biggest challenge. In 2016, however, China's Ministry of Education and UNICEF launched a five-year project to improve the quality of rural preschool education in the land-locked Guizhou.

The project aims to benefit nearly 10,000 preschoolers across 100 rural kindergartens in Guiyang, Zunyi and Tongren, as well as Qiandongnan Miao-Dong Autonomous Prefecture.

Chen Xuefeng, child development and education specialist with UNICEF, said that under the project, early childhood education experts regularly offer on-site training and support to rural teachers.

In addition, educational resource centers have been set up in Tongren, enabling village kindergartens to share books and teaching materials. For example, Gaolouping central kindergarten has built a resource center to share educational resources including 4,000-plus books and other teaching materials with four nearby village kindergartens. Teachers also organize monthly teaching and research activities.

Yelang Village Kindergarten opened in 2014, and is among 25 pilot kindergartens in Tongren. Under the guidance of experts, the school has created a children-friendly environment.

The kindergarten set up corners for different purposes including reading, playing with blocks, and art, displayed the students' artworks on the walls, made a "wall" out of discarded tires for students to climb, and made toys out of locally grown bamboo.

Along with the unique kindergarten environment, the teacher has also abandoned the old ways of teaching.

Liu learned how important early childhood education is in child development, and how her work is "not all about teaching knowledge, but about fostering children's interests and contributing to their all-around development and well-being."

"I tell stories compiled by experts of the ministry and UNICEF to improve children's linguistic skills, mathematical and social competence, and help older kids prepare for primary school," Liu said. Previously, children sat in orderly rows and listened to her reading textbooks.

The class is no longer dominated solely by the teacher. Most of the time, kids are free to choose a corner and learn by themselves. "I only get involved when they are in danger or want me to play with them," she said.

In 2013, Tongren launched a village kindergarten program. Instead of building new kindergartens, many unused primary and middle school classrooms and villagers' affairs committee offices were renovated to suit the children's needs.

By the end of 2017, there were more than 1,600 village kindergartens in Tongren -- seven of the ten districts and counties under its jurisdiction have been designated as poverty-stricken areas.

Before the Yelang Village Kindergarten was set up, there was only one kindergarten in Gaolouping Township.

Nearby villagers had to ride motorbikes to take their kids to the crowded central kindergarten or spend up to 200 yuan (about 31 U.S. dollars) a month for a chartered shuttle bus. If a child's parents left to go work in a bigger city, they often just stayed at home with their grandparents.

"The village-level kindergartens have provided education to around 50,000 kids in rural areas of Tongren," said Zhang Chunhua, director of the Tongren's preschool education office.

Statistics showed that more than 87 percent of children aged between three and six in rural areas of Tongren attend kindergartens now. In 2013, that figure was only 45 percent.

"The quality of education is not only decided by facilities but also by teachers," said Zhang. "The UNICEF project has helped us improve the quality of early education in rural areas as a whole through professional teacher training."

These educational changes are reflected in the children's performance.

Zhou Yucheng, a four-year-old student in Yelang Village Kindergarten, has been living with her grandmother Liu Taoxiu. Zhou's parent left to work in factories in Wenzhou, a booming city in east China's Zhejiang Province, soon after he was born.

"My grandson changed a lot after he began kindergarten," said Liu. "He rarely greeted visitors before, but now he is more outgoing and polite."

Liu Fen attends teaching and research activities at the Gaolouping resource center two days a month, discussing teacher-student interaction and child development issues discovered in previous months and preparing activities for the next month.

In addition to on-site support and guidance, Liu's job is also guided by experts through phone calls or social networking apps.

Despite the fact that Liu only earns around 2,000 yuan a month and returns home once a week due to the distance, she still enjoys her job as a village kindergarten teacher.

"I like kids and continuously strive to offer rural children similar or even better education than their urban counterparts," said Liu.

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