



CONTEXTS OF SCHOOL AND HERDER FAMILY COMMUNICATION IN MONGOLIA: A CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

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Many nations around the world are engaged in pastoralism, including cattle herding among Maasai and Fulani groups in West and East African grasslands; desert camel herder groups in Arabia, North Africa, and South and Central Asia; goat and sheep herders in the Middle East; horse nomad Kazakhs in the Central Asian steppe; yak herder Tibetans in the Himalayas; and reindeer pastoralist Tungus and Chukchi groups in Northern Siberia and the Arctic Circle (Fratkin & Meir, 2005). Mongolia is one of these geographical locations in Central Asia, which is extensively engaged in mobile pastoralism or nomadic herding. Mongolia's case could be special in at least two respects: Mongolian herders herd five types (horses, cattle, sheep, goats, and Bactrian camels) of mixed livestock, and they own the largest number of livestock head in the world. In fact, "Hardly any state is so heavily associated with nomadism as Mongolia" (Stolpe, 2016, p. 20).

When talking about herders, there are some common issues, such as marginalization, sedentarization and boarding schools, discussed over time. "Pastoralists today are facing tremendous pressures on their former way of life" (Fratkin & Meir, 2005, p. 5). States take little care and attention of pastoralists who, as a result, find themselves marginalized. While the pastoralists in Gujarat, India face difficulties of shrinking pastures, the pastoralists in Africa, Asia, and the Middle East are viewed as lawless, and hard to administer, tax, and control (Fratkin & Meir, 2005). On the other hand, it is also argued that access to formal education has required nomadic families to sedentarize (Dyer, 2010), and boarding schools have introduced sedentary lifestyle to nomadic children (Dyer, 2001). A study in a Tundra school in Yamal (Laptander, 2013) discussing one of the negative aspects of boarding schools stated that nomadic Nenet children were away from home at boarding schools for nine months.

Mongolia's case is exceptional in respect of schooling for herders (Stolpe, 2016). According to Finke, 2004 (as cited in Stolpe, 2016, p. 22),

„Pastoralism did not experience any economic, political or ideological marginalization in Mongolia because its importance in economic respects and its being a fundamental feature of traditional Mongolian culture was generally acknowledged.”

Moreover, herder children actively attend schools as Mongolian herder parents value education (Ahearn & Bumochir, 2016). School year schedule allows herder children to stay at home in remote areas during quarter breaks for a week to three weeks, and the summer holiday lasts for three months. This helps avoid sedentary lifestyle, de-skilling and cultural alienation (Stolpe, 2016). Herder children have traditionally been valuable assistants in animal husbandry, especially during the breeding season. The spring break is longer and coordinated with this peak-period (Stolpe, 2016). Boarding schools are flexible enough to cater for the needs of herders. For instance, schools tolerate herder students' late arrivals at the beginning of new quarters (Stolpe, 2016) and earlier holiday leave at the end of quarters due to heavy snowfall and overloaded herder parents. Although Mongolia is „an exceptional case” (Stolpe, 2016, p. 19), there are some recent challenges faced by herders in terms of access to education in general and school communication with herder parents in particular to be discussed in the rest of this paper.

Mongolia has witnessed considerable changes in social institutions starting with the 1990's post-Soviet market economy reforms. These political and economic changes over the last 25 years have adversely affected herder families. Access to education for herder children has created additional difficulties for herders resulting in split households, fewer family members to help with herding, and financial challenges related to educating their children (Ahearn & Bumochir, 2016; Steiner-Khamsi & Gerelmaa, 2008; Stolpe, 2016). For teachers, this new situation has resulted in requiring more practical skills to reach out to these herders.

The ability to cooperate with parents is one important competency that teachers are required to have (Bruine, Willemsse, D'Haem, Grisword, Vloeberhgs, & van Eynde, 2014). This requirement is also included in the Primary and Secondary Education Law of Mongolia stating that it is teachers' responsibility to cooperate with parents and caretakers in order to identify and develop each child's talents and interests as well as to protect the child's rights and provide parents with child-related advice (Mongolian State Parliament, 2002, Article 22.1.6).

However, many teacher education programs do not prepare teachers and school administrators properly for school-family partnerships (Sewell, 2012; Sutterby, Rubin, & Abrego, 2007; Sukhbaatar, 2014, 2018a, 2018b). Moreover, there are other external issues or contextual factors, such as social, political, historical, institutional, and policy contexts, that hinder schools and teachers from maintaining good communication and cooperation with families (Farrell & Collier, 2010; Hornby & Lafaele, 2011; Pang, 2011; Sukhbaatar, 2014, 2018b).

Bronfenbrenner (1977) has developed an ecological systems theory that consists of multiple environmental systems, such as the microsystem, the mesosystem, the exosystem and the macrosystem, that provide context for human development. The theory is among the most widely used theoretical frameworks for studying human development in an ecological context (Neal & Neal, 2013). According to this ecological systems theory, human development occurs between a growing human organism and the changing immediate environments, and the developmental process is affected by these immediate settings and larger social contexts as well (Bronfenbrenner, 1977). The four systems are described as follows:

- 1) the *microsystem* is the complex of relations between the child and the environment in an immediate setting containing that child, such as *home and school*;
- 2) the *mesosystem* comprises of the interrelations among major settings containing the child at a particular point in his or her life. In other words, the mesosystem encompasses interactions among *microsystems (home and school)*;
- 3) the *exosystem* is an extension of the mesosystem including major institutions of society that affect, but do not directly involve, the child, like *parental workplace, the neighborhood, mass media, and local and national agencies of government*; and
- 4) the *macrosystem* is the overarching institutional patterns which include the *economic, social, educational, legal, and political systems*, of which micro-, meso-, and exo-systems are the concrete manifestations.

The ecological systems theory was originally developed to study the processes and settings of human development. There are relatively few researchers examining home-school cooperation or school-family communication at the system level by applying the ecological systems theory (Farrell & Collier, 2010; Pang, 2011).

Farrell and Collier (2010) conducted a qualitative study on school personnel's perceptions of family-school communication at elementary schools serving a US military population, and found a number of ecological factors influencing family-school communication at the macrosystem level, namely military policy, national or state mandates, deployment, and reunification. Another study on home-school cooperation (Pang, 2011) adapted the ecological systems theory as the analytical framework, and examined various contextual factors in the microsystem, exosystem and macrosystem reviewing both empirical and theoretical studies on home-school cooperation conducted in Hong Kong.

The application of the ecological systems theory can help researchers systematically examine the conditions of home-school cooperation. This approach helps to organize the contextual factors of home-school cooperation and clarify the interactions between the home and the school (Pang, 2011). This study aims at examining the contextual factors located at different levels of Bronfenbrenner's (1977) ecological systems theory which influence school and herder family communication at the primary school level in Mongolia.

Proposed ecological contexts for school and herder family communication in Mongolia

The ecological contexts of school and herder family communication in Mongolia within four layers of the microsystem, mesosystem, exosystem, and macrosystem are proposed by analyzing data from academic journal papers, technical reports, book chapters and statistics of various government agencies (see Figure 1). The purpose of introducing this

adaption of the Pang (2011) and Bronfenbrenner (1977) models is to create a context to organize the corresponding literature on the primary research purpose of this study.

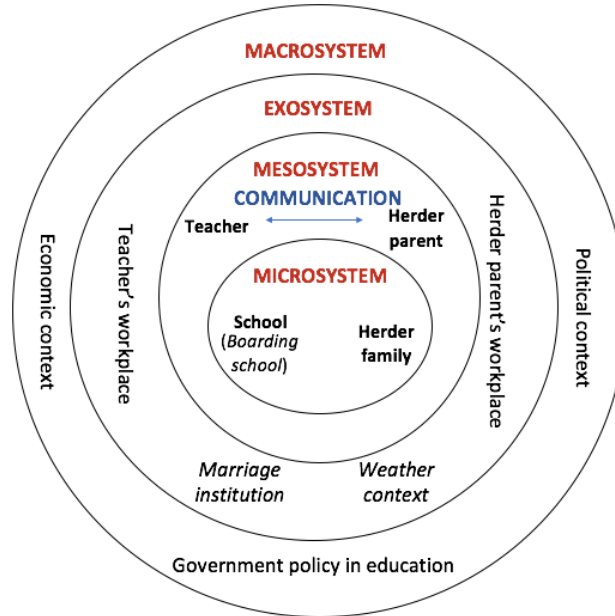


Figure 1.

The conceptual framework: Ecological contexts of school and herder family communication [Adapted from Pang's (2011) contextual factors and home-school cooperation model]

The microsystem

The microsystem refers to the home and the school. In Figure 1, the microsystem of the school includes boarding schools. Likewise, the herder family microsystem includes the cultural characteristics of nomadic herding in Mongolia.

The school system

Mongolia is a lower middle income country with relatively high levels of education and human development indicators. It is above the average in this respect compared to other countries in the Central Asian region. Basic education is free and the government provides subsidized boarding schools for children from herder families (Groppo & Kraehnert, 2016) as boarding school dormitories have been the best practice for schooling

of herders (Ahearn & Bumochir, 2016). Boarding schools make a valuable contribution toward encouraging herder families to send their children to school in the nation. In the 2016-2017 school year, Mongolia had 778 public and private primary and secondary schools and of those 513 boarding school dormitories accommodated 34,598 students (Ministry of Education, Culture, Science and Sport [MECSS], 2017). Most of the children from herder families were provided with dormitories during the school year. Statistics show that 72,4% of all students staying in boarding school dormitories nationwide were from herder families (MECSS, 2017).

Mongolian boarding schools welcome students from the 1st to the 12th grades free of charge. The new education system, adopted in the school year of 2008-2009, has resulted in sending six-year-olds, or 1st graders, usually from herder families, to live in boarding school dormitories.

Even though boarding schools significantly contribute to expanding free access to education for the rural family, the system of boarding schools has always been very expensive. Steiner-Khamsi and Stolpe (2006) have reported that a significant sum of government spending has been allocated to the education sector due largely to subsidizing boarding schools and paying for a long period of heating from October to May. Steiner-Khamsi and Gerelmaa (2008) have discussed the children of herder families staying in boarding school dormitories as one of the groups that are underserved in the Mongolian education sector. They have found that after the end of the first school year a sizeable number of herder families take their children out of school for the following reasons: poor performance of the child, bullying by other students, unhealthy dormitories and the emotional distress caused by homesickness for the child. Others have argued that food subsidies for the dormitories should be reduced, and parents should cover part of the food costs (Zayadelger, 2011).

Efforts to secure funds to rehabilitate boarding schools in rural areas have not always been successful. According to the 2017 statistics of MECSS, 99 boarding school dormitories out of a nationwide total of 513 do not meet the required standards of living conditions.

The herder family

Livestock herding has been a very important sector of Mongolia, the least densely populated country in the world, because it plays an important role in the economy, politics, national prosperity and traditional culture of the nation. Historically, most Mongolians were herders whose livelihood was heavily dependent on their livestock herds (Sukhbaatar, 2018a). However, this way of living has changed and currently, only 32% of Mongolians live in rural areas. Herder households comprise of more than 25% of the total population, which is about three million, but only 19% of them are full-time herder households. These herders have managed to herd almost 56 million head of livestock in 2015 (National Statistical Office of Mongolia [NSOM], 2016).

During the socialist period, the livestock production system was managed by government collectives which employed herders to herd a particular number of state livestock. These government-employed herders kept collectivized herds for a monthly

salary and had to fulfill a planned production target for livestock products (Lkhagvadorj, Hauck, Dulamsuren, & Tsogtbaatar, 2013). The collectives started their operation in 1928 but the program was not complete until 1959. The system collapsed in the 1990s, and the entire herder livestock was privatized. Recent statistics show that a full-time herder household owns an average of 323 head of livestock (NSOM, 2016). In the nomadic culture, herder families often move around for better pastures, and a recent study has found that most herders move their herds 2 to 25 times per year (Groppo & Kraehnert, 2016).

Lkhagvadorj et al. (2013) have reported that the livelihoods of herder households heavily rely on the income derived from livestock products. The monthly income of a herder household consists of two parts: monetary and non-monetary income. Some 67% of the income is monetary mainly coming from livestock herds as well as government grants, pensions, and salaries, while 33% is non-monetary income resulting from the household's own consumption of their livestock products. The biggest percentage (37%) out of the 67% of the monetary income derives from cash from sale of livestock products.

Schooling of herders' children has resulted in changes to the family structure. The majority of children from herder families stay in boarding school dormitories. However, there are other living arrangements used by herder families, such as splitting the household during the school year so the mother stays with the younger children in the county centers, or children stay with relatives and friends of the family. When the household is split, men are often left alone in distant camps with a smaller labor force (Ahearn & Bumochir, 2016; Steiner-Khamsi & Gerelmaa, 2008; Stolpe, 2016). In one administrative subunit, nearly 50-60% of herder households split during the school year (Ahearn & Bumochir, 2016).

The literature contains some controversies related to the schooling of children from herder households. While some research results show that schooling prevents children from learning the skills necessary for pastoralist livelihoods (Ahearn & Bumochir, 2016), other researchers (Lkhagvadorj et al., 2013) note that all the herder parents taking part in their study would wish their children not to live as pastoralists like them.

The mesosystem

The mesosystem refers to interactions between microsystems, such as communication between teachers and herder parents. This section discusses goals and forms of communication between the school and the family in general.

Teacher-parent communication and student learning

Parental involvement in children's schooling is an area that has been insufficiently studied in Mongolia. Sosorbaram (2010) discussed the importance of evaluating children's non-cognitive skills by involving parents. Sukhbaatar (2018b, 2014) has found out some institutional and social factors contributing to the lack of training preservice teachers how to involve parents at one of the three national teacher training institutions of Mongolia.

The importance of school-family communication has been recognized in the literature over the years (Epstein, 2010; Farrell & Collier, 2010; Ozmen, Akuzum, Zincirli, & Selcuk, 2016; Pang, 2011; Ratcliff & Hunt, 2009; Sukhbaatar, 2014, 2018a, 2018b). Efficient communication is necessary and

„Especially communication between teachers and parents regarding students’ performance in the class bears vital importance in better understanding students’ problems, increasing parents’ support in education, performing effective counselling and guidance, and ultimately increasing students’ motivation and success” (Ozmen et al., 2016, p. 28).

Epstein (2010) identified six types of home, school and community involvement. They are: (1) parenting, (2) communicating, (3) volunteering, (4) learning at home, (5) decision-making, and (6) collaborating with the community. Recent studies conducted in Mongolia (Sukhbaatar, 2018b; Sukhbaatar, 2014) have identified three parental involvement dimensions: (1) home-based, (2) school-based and the dimension of (3) parental resourcing. The study has indicated that home-school communication forms the basis of the three parental involvement dimensions, and this communication appear to be vital to foster parental involvement. When parents and teachers communicate, understand each other, recognize each other’s expectations for the child, and work together in order to pursue goals for the child, the child’s learning outcomes are improved. Research shows successful schools play the primary role in initiating communication and partnership with families (Farrell & Collier, 2010). However, there are challenges in communicating when both parents and teachers are too busy to have a discussion about students and their learning (Pang, 2011).

Teachers have a main duty in fostering and developing every child’s talents and interests (Ministry of Education & Science [MES], 2012). Teachers are expected to carefully examine problems they face during their teaching in order to develop the talents and interests of each child. Teachers also play a vital role in promoting the development of every child (MES, 2012).

There are a number of activities aimed at parental involvement practiced at schools in Mongolia that facilitate teacher and parent communication. A survey (Sosorbaram, 2010) inviting more than 500 teachers and school managers from rural and urban areas in Mongolia has indicated that current practices include: (a) parents attending regular meetings, (b) parents watching classes, (c) parents helping decorate classrooms, (d) parents attending pedagogical workshops, (e) parents receiving regular reports on their children’s performance, (f) parents competing in sports competitions or quiz contests with their children, and (g) parents attending graduation day. If parents miss these activities, the channel of communication usually shifts to telephone conversations between parents and teachers (Sukhbaatar, 2014, 2018b). In fact, herder parents rarely show up to these activities. However, Mongolian schools welcome herder parents anytime they happen to visit, and they usually visit schools to pick up their children when quarter breaks start.

Goals and forms of communication

Parents and teachers have common goals of increasing children's academic achievement and development. Parents' goals are more likely to be focused on improving their children's performance and learning more about school life. Teachers' goals for parental involvement focus on involving parents in homework, providing a nurturing environment, raising money, and having parents attend school events and parent-teacher meetings (Hornby & Lafaele, 2011). The goals of communication for teachers also include discussing children's progress and difficulties, learning from parents how children are coping with school, discovering how parents can help their children at home and learning about any potential conflicts with parents (Hornby & Lafaele, 2011).

There are different forms of communication between teachers and parents. Graham-Clay (2005) defines two categories of interaction between teachers and families: one-way communication and two-way communication. One-way communication occurs when teachers inform parents about school or classroom events; communicate student progress using letters; send home classroom or school newspapers, report cards, communication books; or create school Web sites. Two-way communication involves interactive conversations between teachers and parents. These conversations mainly mean telephone calls, home visits and parent-teacher conferences.

The most common form of communication between teachers and parents in Mongolia has been parent-teacher meetings (Sosorbaram, 2010; Sukhbaatar, 2014, 2018a, 2018b). However, these meetings tend to be one-way communications where all parents sit together quietly and the teacher is in front of the parents providing information about the school and the class, and sometimes about the problems of some particular students (Sukhbaatar, 2014, 2018a, 2018b).

Contextual factors in the exosystem

In this study, four contextual factors are proposed at the exosystem level that appear to influence school and herder family communication in Mongolia. These factors include teachers' workplace, herder parents' workplace, the marriage institution and the weather context.

Teachers' workplace

Results show that teachers in primary education complain about their workload more frequently than teachers at other levels. Studies by Sukhbaatar (2018b, 2014) have noted that the heavy workloads of teachers contribute to a lack of parental involvement. Primary education teachers perceive themselves as overloaded with more additional tasks than teachers at other levels. These tasks include more regular checks of student papers, more time to prepare teaching and learning materials, the Olympiad coaching of a whole class, after class work with slower learners and so on (Sukhbaatar, 2014, 2018b). Teachers in

Mongolian schools have also been found to convey a feeling of professional tragedy regarding their low payment (Steiner-Khamsi & Stolpe, 2006).

There is also a gender issue; the majority of the teaching staff at all levels of the education system are women. According to the 2017 statistics, 81.3% of all teaching staff of primary and secondary schools nationwide are female (MECSS, 2017). Approximately 94% of the teaching staff in primary schools are female who have little time for extra training because they carry double work burdens as being mothers themselves (Asian Development Bank [ADB], 2005). Balancing the double work burdens of a teaching career and family duties seems to be challenging for these female teachers. The double work burdens may restrict their time and efforts to facilitate effective communication with parents and meaningful parental involvement (Sukhbaatar, 2014, 2018b).

Pang (2011) points out that one factor in the ecological system of education reforms introduced by governments that prevents teachers from investing in family communication is the need to complete a significantly increased paperwork. These education reforms in Hong Kong have posed serious challenges to teachers since research shows that paperwork has increased significantly in order to meet various administrative requirements and this can detract from home-school cooperation (Pang, 2011).

Herder parents' workplace

The collectivization of livestock under Communism let each herder family herd one kind of livestock species, and the livestock herds were kept on a common pasture. Wells, daily collection of milk, transport of livestock for sale, hay for winters as well as seasonal movement of herder families and livestock were centrally planned and supported by the collectives (Lkhagvadorj et al., 2013). However, after the collapse of the communist system in 1990 the centrally planned economy was transformed into a market economy with the privatized livestock for herder families. Now herder families have to plan and carry out all of the activities on their own. A wealthier family may manage herds of over 2000 mixed livestock, while another family only has a herd of 208 mixed livestock, which is close to the minimum number to sustain their household (Ahearn & Bumochir, 2016).

Even though compulsory education is provided free of charge along with dormitories and meals, parents need to pay fees for school uniforms, learning materials, and extra classes. Moreover, transportation to school is often expensive for herder households residing in remote areas (Groppo & Kraehnert, 2016).

One historic example of an extra expense that herder households needed to meet in order to send their children to boarding schools during the harsh times at the beginning of the market economy reforms was a so-called "meat requirement" policy. Between 1996-2000, a herder family had to pay 70 kilograms of meat per child in a school year to send their child to school. The fairness of this requirement, however, was eventually challenged:

„Through this requirement, mobile pastoralists became the only social group in Mongolia to pay for access to primary and secondary education, a payment that contravened article 16 of the 1992 Constitution, which declares the right to basic education free of charge” (Stolpe, 2016, p. 25).

When low-income families could not afford this meat requirement, many children were kept home (Steiner-Khamsi & Stolpe, 2006). The policy was abolished in 2000 in order to prevent the serious consequences of an increasing number of dropouts.

The marriage institution

According to the 2011 statistics (NSOM, 2011a), there were 713,780 households in Mongolia. More than two-thirds of these households, that is, 67%, were registered in urban or semi-urban areas, while the remaining 33% lived in rural areas. Among the total number of households, there were four primary types: nuclear families, extended families, blended families and solitary adults. Nuclear and extended families make up 87% of the total: nuclear families take up 62% and extended families 25%.

In the Asian culture, it is normal for parents to receive support from their extended family network (Nguon, 2012; Steiner-Khamsi & Stolpe, 2006). It is also common in Mongolia that relatives help herder parents with the schooling of their children (Sukhbaatar, 2014, 2018a, 2018b). For instance, while the herder parents live in the countryside, children often live with their grandparents or relatives in the county center where schools are located. This is one of the three major ways of arranging schooling for children of herder families.

Moreover, the significant changes over the past few decades in family structures, and the political, economic and historical contexts challenge mothers' involvement in education: now mothers face balancing issues of working with schools while having increased workload and participating in the labor market along with effects of marital status (Hornby & Lafaele, 2011). An increase in female-headed households has become an issue in Mongolia. In 2011, 21.5% of households were headed by females nationwide (NSOM, 2011b), and these households were found to be vulnerable. Such women were shown to have more household tasks (ADB, 2005) which limited their time spent on their own children's learning and development (Sukhbaatar, 2014, 2018b).

By sending six-year-olds to school, the new education system has further contributed to the changing workload of herder families while also having an effect on their financial conditions. It is especially visible in the changes of the household organization: some members of the family settle near the school with the younger children. This results in "household splitting": households split residences between pasture locations and school locations during school years. The unintended consequences are that women and children move to centers where the schools are located and men are left alone with a shortage of labor, which risks their own well-being as well as the well-being of the family's livestock (Ahearn & Bumochir, 2016).

The weather context

Mongolia has a severe continental climate with four seasons which affects herds, herder families, the economy and rural schools. In December, 2009 and January, 2010, extreme weather conditions occurred: the temperature dropped below -40 °C, which was

the coldest since 1945. By January in 2010, 90% of the region was covered with snow and large numbers of herd animals died (Groppo & Kraehnert, 2016).

Extreme weather conditions are one of the greatest threats that Mongolian herders face. These conditions are called *dzud*, and they cause high mortality of livestock due to cold temperatures with excessive snowfall that restricts grazing. *Dzuds* can also be caused by insufficient rainfall during summer that limits grass growth (Groppo & Kraehnert, 2016). Groppo and Kraehnert (2016) studied the impacts of extreme weather conditions on education in Mongolia using household panel data along with livestock census data and climate data. In their study, the researchers studied severe winter conditions that occurred between 1999 and 2002, and 2009 and 2010, which resulted in the death of 11.2 million and 10.3 million livestock, respectively. These events threatened not only the livelihood of the herder population, but also the education of their children.

According to Groppo and Kraehnert (2016), *dzuds* impact education through a variety of channels. First, livestock mortality reduces the household income, which limits the household budget available for education. Secondly, extreme winters result in school closures for significant amounts of time in provincial areas due to the breakage of school heating systems. Furthermore, household income difficulties may contribute to the psychological distress of children, which can further affect their learning. Lastly, loss of horses in *dzuds* contributes to transportation limitations meaning that children from remote areas cannot reach schools.

Herder families who lose their herds in *dzuds* usually migrate to urban areas seeking employment. However, this mass migration from the rural areas has had serious consequences: it has resulted in an increase in the already overcrowded classes in urban areas. This mass migration along with a shortage of school buildings in cities has resulted three shifts of classes, which means three different class groups share one classroom: the first group uses the classroom in the morning, the other one uses it in the afternoon, and the last one uses it in the evening. It is one of the biggest problems faced in the education sector in recent years.

In the macrosystem realm, three contextual factors are identified in this study that appear to influence school and herder family communication in Mongolia. These include government policies concerning education, economic contexts, and political contexts.

Government policy in education

Education has been considered to be a leading sector in Mongolia for years. The State Education Policy for 2014-2024 (Ministry of Education, Culture and Science [MECS], 2015), passed by the Parliament in 2015, states that education is a key factor in ensuring the quality of every single citizen's life, while also ensuring the social, economic, scientific and technological development of the nation.

The Mongolian government has emphasized the significance of parental involvement in fostering future citizens. Parental involvement is to be promoted in order for parents to contribute to the improvement of their child's learning. Policies require teachers to plan activities for promoting each child's success together with the student and the parents, and then provide parents with regular reports of progress and results of their children's learning

and mastery of grade-level standards (MES, 2014). To sum up, the current education policy trends of Mongolia require a close cooperation between school, family and community to foster future citizens.

However, there is no specific legislation on parental involvement, and this leads to voluntary participation and uneven practice by schools. Moreover, government level decisions do not cover the issue of parental involvement in teacher training programs. In other words, there is no common requirement to include courses on working with families in teacher training programs (Hornby & Lafaele, 2011).

Studies (Sukhbaatar, 2014, 2018a, 2018b), carried out in one of the primary education preservice institutions of Mongolia, have revealed that there are no courses particularly dealing with parental involvement in teacher training. The studies have determined that preservice teachers consider the student teaching practice the most helpful training experience for learning about parental involvement, and especially about how to conduct parent-teacher meetings as seen from their supervising classroom teachers'. However, parental involvement practices and skills vary enormously among those supervising classroom teachers.

Economic contexts

Livestock husbandry has always been an important part of the economy and the workforce in Mongolia. Today, herding accounts for 18-23% of Mongolia's GDP (Ahearn & Bum-Ochir, 2016; Stolpe, 2016). Moreover, it engages 34-38% of the country's labor force (Stolpe, 2016).

Recent developments in the mining sector has an impact on nomadic herding. Since mining exports now account for more than half of the GDP, mining has transformed the nation's traditional dependence on husbandry and agriculture. This has serious consequences for pastures and the environment (Central Intelligence Agency [CIA], 2016). Since mining cannot ensure a long-term sustainable development for a nation, education has been a priority for government planners. However, the GDP share going to education was only 4,7% in 2012 (NSOM, 2013).

Overwork and underpayment of teachers seem to devalue the teaching profession. Secondary school teachers nationwide have been striking for a salary increase several times since 1990 (Sukhbaatar, 2014, 2018b). Low teacher salaries probably contribute to an overall decline in teachers' social status in Mongolia. According to Fisher (2009), teachers are often not perceived as professionals by parents and are seen to be motivated only by long school vacations.

Political contexts

Wales, Magee and Nicolai (2016) conclude that education systems can be understood better when they are researched in light of their political context, rather than in isolation from it. Understanding political structures that underlie education systems has been shown to be important, because politics affects government investments in education,

government responsibility for education as well as the development and implementation of policies.

Political involvement in education is therefore one of the key factors to be considered when taking the ecological systems view of education. Researchers (Begz, 2015; Steiner-Khamsi & Stople, 2006; Weidman & Yoder, 2010) have pointed out that education is a highly politicized issue in Mongolia and the education reform process reflects the political situation of the country. After each parliamentary election, the winning party has the power to establish government cabinets and new administrative officials are appointed regardless of their experience and specialization (Begz, 2015). This tends to prevent smooth continuity of the policies and reforms adopted by the previous cabinet.

The government as well as donor agencies have played a significant role in the educational progress of Mongolia. After the collapse of the Soviet Union, Mongolia distanced itself from Russia and instead started to seek for donor support for educational reforms from the West (Weidman & Yoder, 2010). The education sector was decentralized and many external parties or donor agencies became involved in educational reforms such as the Mongolian Foundation for Open Society, the World Bank, ADB, and the Japanese International Cooperation Agency. However, this wholesale adoption from multiple sources has had serious consequences: foreign educational concepts have been imported without proper or complete adaption without regard to the Mongolian national identity or the Mongolian culture.

Since the importance of education is stressed by the Mongolian electorate, political incentives exist to improve access to education. The emphasis has been put on supporting rural access and highly visible school rehabilitation. However, Mongolia does not seem to have improved in learning outcomes alongside this expansion of educational access and assets. A lack of national consensus on educational outcomes results in short-term policy-making, which undermines the effectiveness of education. Even so, external financial assistance may facilitate educational progress regardless of the nature of the political system (Wales et al., 2016).

Methodology of a further empirical study

The proposed conceptual framework for contexts of school and herder family communication in Mongolia, adapted from Bronfenbrenner's (1977) and Pang's (2011) models and using secondary sources of data, will be empirically validated in the future study. The future study will apply a phenomenological approach to explore the communicating experiences of schools and herder families along with facilitating and hindering factors affecting the current state of the communication between teachers and herders. More importantly, the contextual factors located at the exosystem and the macrosystem will be explored. Semi-structured interviews, questionnaire surveys, and document analyses will be utilized to collect qualitative data for this phenomenological study.

Research site

Dornod province has been chosen to conduct this study as an extension of the previous studies including preservice training on parental involvement (Sukhbaatar, 2014, 2018b) and preservice teachers' views on working with diverse families (Sukhbaatar, 2018a). These studies suggested further in-depth investigations into the communication between herder families and school personnel, and discussed some institutional and social factors contributing to a lack of parental involvement in primary schools. The research will be conducted in one of the two boarding schools in Choibalsan, the capital of Dornod province, and two other boarding schools in two counties which serve more herder children. Out of the 21 provinces of Mongolia, Dornod is the most eastern one. It is 650 kilometers away from the capital, Ulaanbaatar. The two counties with the two boarding schools taking part in the study are located at distances of 150 and 195 kilometers from Choibalsan respectively.

Participants

In this study around 50 participants; boarding school training managers, classroom teachers, boarding school dormitory teachers and workers, herder parents, relatives of herder families, and herder students; will be invited to participate in key informant interviews. Approximately 150 classroom teachers who serve herder families from 22 schools in Dornod will be invited to fill in the questionnaire surveys.

Conclusion

The study examined the contextual factors influencing school and herder family communication in Mongolian primary schools at the system level. This is perhaps the first attempt to examine ecological factors affecting school and herder family communication in the Mongolian context since there is a lack of studies on parental involvement in general. The current study helps to better understand communication between the school and herder families and, ultimately, to improve educational outcomes for herder children.

Children's access to education poses challenges to herders' livelihoods, herder children's development as well as to schools and classroom teachers. Mongolia's current school system was thoroughly examined in order to gain insight into the educational inclusion of herders' children and the well-being of herders (Ahearn & Bumochir, 2016). In this respect, the current study may help to inform other researchers and education policy makers.

The contextual factors were explored at exosystem and macrosystem levels. The weather context was included in the exosystem because herding is heavily dependent on weather conditions, and the weather context seems to impact education in many different ways, including family-school communication. Extreme winters and *dzuds* may prevent parent-teacher communication in several ways. For example, teachers become overloaded

with more tasks. At the same time, heavy snowfalls during *dzuds* can possibly restrict access to communication channels due to signal failure of local lines and limited transportation.

On the macrosystem level, government policy on education and the political context were found to be of critical importance. Further empirical study is to be conducted to explore the facilitating and hindering factors at exosystem and macrosystem levels, and how they impact on the current state of school and herder family communication by using the phenomenological approach.

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Batdulam Sukhbaatar and Klára Tarkó

ABSTRACT

CONTEXTS OF SCHOOL AND HERDER FAMILY COMMUNICATION IN MONGOLIA: A CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

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Communicating and cooperating with nomadic herder families is a major challenge for schools and teachers since these children are separated from their families during the school year. A natural question then is how do teachers provide herder parents with regular reports on their children's performance? Findings from recent studies (Farrell & Collier, 2010; Pang, 2011; Sukhbaatar, 2014) suggest a need for an ongoing and deeper examination of family-school communication involving a broader inclusion of various constituents and contextual factors at the systemic level. This paper examines the contextual factors that influence communication between schools and nomadic herder families in Mongolia through an analysis of data from journal articles, technical reports, book chapters, and official statistics from government agencies. A conceptual framework is proposed using Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory (1977) and adapting Pang's (2011) contextual factors and home-school cooperation to locate the influencing contextual factors at different levels of the ecological systems. The proposed conceptual framework consists of four levels: the microsystem, mesosystem, exosystem, and macrosystem. Unlike other research which has used Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory to examine home-school cooperation and communication, this study adds the weather context as an important factor in the exosystem to understand communication between schools and herder families in Mongolia. The weather context is important because nomadic herding is heavily dependent on weather conditions, and it seems to impact education in many different ways, including school-family communication. A methodology for a further empirical study is discussed in great detail.

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