

Mongolian Pastoralist Parents' Experiences in Managing Their Primary School Children's Living Arrangements

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Sending children, especially six-year-old ones, to school put pressure on pastoralist or herder households to balance their livestock herding needs and their children's schooling needs at the same time. Due to remote campsites located in isolated rural areas far from any schools, pastoralists need to arrange a place for their children to stay during the school year. In this interpretive phenomenological study, we explored pastoralist parents' experiences in managing different living arrangements for their primary school children during the school year. We conducted semi-structured interviews with five pastoralist parents from a remote county (an administrative division under a province) in Mongolia. Living arrangement options included staying in a boarding school dormitory, staying at a relative's place, and staying with mothers in split households. The pastoralist parents' own school experiences, the presence of first-grade school children, boarding school conditions, and family resources were found to be important factors for deciding the best living arrangement. We recommend that the government agencies should work on improving conditions of school dormitories and on providing better educational opportunities for pastoralists and their children.

Keywords: pastoralist parents, six-year-old learners, boarding school dormitories, interpretive phenomenological analysis

Introduction

Mongolia adopted a 12-year education system extending the previous 11-year system and lowering the school admission age from seven to six in the 2008-2009 school year. In relation to the new education system of the 12 years of schooling, there were debates about placing six-year-old children from herder families in school dormitories. Later, the President passed a decree in 2014 requiring schools to provide a pleasant learning and living environment for six-year-olds. In the decree, it was stated that local governments, based on their resources, should provide specialized teachers who are able to support the six-year-olds' learning, development, and emotional needs, and to partner closely with the children's parents and caregivers (Sanjaabadam, 2014). Young herder children, who live in school dormitories far from their parents, thus may adjust to a new place more easily where the specialized teachers are close to them and take care of them. However, these teachers are generally not available because of a lack of economic resources in rural communities (Sanjaabadam, 2014).

Mongolian “herders value education and actively enroll their children in formal schools” (Ahearn & Bumochir, 2016, p. 91), and formal education has long been popular among Mongolian herders (Stolpe, 2016). Homes located in remote areas, severe weather conditions, and poor infrastructure require children from herder families to settle near schools for the duration of the school year. Meeting the requirement for sending children to school has become an even bigger problem for pastoralist families due to the lowered school entry age and a lack of the “government support to maintain the physical infrastructure and staff in rural dormitories” (Ahearn, 2018, p. 4). Poor conditions in boarding school dormitories mean that pastoralist households need to take care of their six-year-old children’s living arrangements in order to send them to schools in settled areas far from their camps. Ahearn and Bumochir (2016) argue that Mongolia’s current school system posed challenges to nomadic herders’ livelihoods and that, as a result, this system needs to be examined.

The present study aims to extend these earlier studies by exploring experiences of pastoralist families regarding the different living arrangements they used when they sent their children to school. The findings of this study may help minimize livelihood and education related challenges faced by pastoralists by providing research-based evidence for educators and policy makers to better understand the effects of important education policies and pastoralists’ responses to them. Parents should be one important group of stakeholders who should be research participants in educational studies and whose voices should be considered when it is time to design educational policies. Especially, those families who are poor, marginalized or indigenous bear the consequences of governmental policies around the world. Mongolian herder families could be one of these groups who suffer the most under the educational policies in terms of sending their younger children to school.

Literature Review

In a country with a population of 3.4 million, 26.7% of the total households, including 20.5% of full-time pastoralist households, managed 67.3 million head of livestock in 2021 (National Statistical Office of Mongolia [NSOM], 2022). Pastoralist families carry out seasonal movements to feed their livestock herds on good grazing pastures and to fatten them up to increase their chance to survive the long and cold winters (Lkhagvadorj et al., 2013).

Mongolian Pastoralists and Educational Policies

The Mongolian education system has been widely acknowledged for providing universal education access to pastoralists until 1990 when the transition to a market economy began. The decrease in public education expenditure due to the dramatic drop in funding from the Soviet Union (Weidman & Yoder, 2010), and the privatization of livestock (Stolpe, 2016) had a big societal impact such as an increased rate of school dropouts.

One of the tragic consequences of educational policy was the decrease in the ratio of students who stayed in boarding school dormitories, which dropped from 14.5% in 1990 to 4.1% in 1996 (Stolpe, 2016). For a time, starting in 1996, pastoralist households needed to provide schools around 70 kilograms of meat per child in order to place them in school dormitories (Steiner-Khamsi & Stolpe, 2006). Stolpe (2016) describes this practice:

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. (p. 25)

Because many low-income families could not afford this requirement, they kept their children at home until 2000 (Steiner-Khamsi & Stolpe, 2006) when, finally, these fees were canceled by a new government decree in 2000 (Stolpe, 2016).

Recent studies (Stolpe, 2016; Sukhbaatar, 2018b; Sukhbaatar & Tarkó, 2022a, 2022b) have documented higher illiteracy rates now among herder parents. During the socialist period, herders looked after herds owned by the state collectives. However, with the end of the socialist system, state husbandry collective farms collapsed in the 1990s and the entire livestock herds were privatized by 1992. Herder families got their own herds from the collapsed collectives, and they needed more people to help with their herds. So, they removed their children, especially boys, from schools because boys were greatly needed to cope with the workload of mixed livestock (horses, cattle, sheep, goats, and Bactrian camels; Stolpe, 2016). In the 1992-1993 school year, over 30,000 students dropped out of school. This peak national dropout rate accounted for nearly 9% of the total number of students nationwide. More than 70% of these dropouts were boys (Batchuluun & Khulan, 2006). However, later many of these dropouts were brought back to school under large-scale alternate education programs. They were offered classes on Saturdays and during school vacations (Steiner-Khamsi & Stople, 2006). Even today, there are equivalency programs for primary and lower secondary education being offered. In the 2022-2023 school year, 4,981 students attended these programs, and 4,133 of them attended rural schools. Among them were 2008 students aged above 19 (Ministry of Education and Science [MES], 2022).

Post-Soviet education reforms started under the adoption of official documents such as the Education Law of Mongolia and the Mongolia Education and Human Resource Master Plan (Weidman & Yoder, 2010). The Master Plan, developed in 1994, identified some areas for immediate action, including enhancing basic and general education. A 2002 amendment to the Education Law started a change in the structure of general education schools, and this change, began in the 2005-2006 school year, extended the previous 10-year system to an 11-year system. Three years later Mongolia adopted the current 12-year system with children starting school at the age of six.

Living Arrangements of Pastoralists' Children

Literature documents that there are three major living arrangements for schoolchildren from herder families in Mongolia during the school year: (1) staying in a boarding school dormitory, (2) staying at a relative's place, and (3) staying with mothers in school locations leaving fathers behind in pasture locations (called "split households"; Ahearn & Bumochir, 2016; Sukhbaatar & Tarkó, 2022a, 2022b).

School Dormitories

Mongolian boarding school dormitories serve students from the 1st to 12th grades free of charge. There were 859 public and private schools in Mongolia in the 2022-2023 school year, and among them, 532 boarding school dormitories accommodated 35,077 students (MES, 2022). Most of the herder children were placed in the boarding school dormitories, and 76.6% of all students staying in dormitories were from herder families (MES, 2022). Even though school dormitories accommodate most of the herders' children and contribute greatly to the better educational access for herder families, dormitory conditions are still inadequate. The statistics show that 55 out of 532 boarding school dormitories did not meet required living condition standards (MES, 2022).

Providing boarding schools for Indigenous, rural, remote, Aboriginal, pastoralist, or low-socioeconomic status students is an important means of access to education in different

geographical locations of the world. For instance, “[i]n the Australian context, attending boarding school is a way to overcome educational barriers associated with distance” (Martin et al., 2014, p. 1039) for Indigenous students. In Yamal in the Russian Federation, Indigenous reindeer pastoralists’ children enter boarding schools as there are no alternatives for them (Liarskaya, 2013).

The interconnection of the pastoralist lifestyle and policy to provide educational access to pastoralists, which was successfully managed during socialism, now has been challenged by the education policies that are dominantly formulated by donor agencies (Stolpe, 2016), who offer financial assistance, such as Save the Children, World Vision and others. During the socialist period, educational policy was closely coordinated with the requirements of nomadic livestock herding (Steiner-Khamsi & Stolpe, 2006). The state-financed boarding schools for all levels of education was the most important priority. Moreover, “[t]he relatively late age of school enrollment (eight years) was not only a concession to the difficulty of providing room and board, but it was also a concession to the harsh climate” (Steiner-Khamsi & Stolpe, 2006, p. 45).

The condition today is significantly different: Boarding schools are faced with limited budgets, resulting in poor physical condition and insufficient professional staff; the earlier age of school enrollment (six years) results in challenges to herder family structures, finances, work patterns, well-being of herders, and well-being of their livestock herd; and poor infrastructure including transportation and telecommunication facilities hampers pupil progress and school communication with herder families (Ahearn & Bumochir, 2016; Stolpe, 2016; Sukhbaatar & Tarkó, 2022a, 2022b). Researchers (Steiner-Khamsi & Stolpe, 2004) noted that public education in Mongolia was relatively expensive due to Mongolia’s harsh weather conditions and dispersed population. They found that more than 20% of the education budget was spent for heating and electricity, and this resulted in very few financial resources for maintaining or rehabilitating school buildings.

The poor condition of school dormitories has been a significant barrier discouraging young learners to attend formal education when they reach the school admission age. In the 2016–2017 school year, 1,335 children did not attend school at the age of six, and they accounted for 2.2% of the total six-year-olds who entered school (Ministry of Education, Culture, Science and Sport [MECSS], 2016). The Ministry collected data of these 1,335 children from all 21 provinces in Mongolia and investigated the reasons for non-attendance (MECSS, 2016). One of the reasons was related to the living arrangements of 64 children who were reported to not be able to stay with relatives near a school and could not stay in the school dormitory because of its poor condition.

Relative’s Place

Sending their children to stay with extended family members or relatives who are close to school is another common way of providing living arrangements for herder children (Ahearn & Bumochir, 2016; Steiner-Khamsi & Stolpe, 2006; Sukhbaatar & Tarkó, 2022a). Extended family members (usually grandparents, aunts and uncles) take care of the children during school quarters. This way of living arrangement allows herder parents to stay in their remote campsites and herd livestock herds by themselves.

Split Household

The new requirement to send six-year-olds to school has made a bigger impact on the herders’ labor pool and family finances, especially when the household chooses to have some family members settle near the school with their younger children. Such herder families usually

occupy an additional or second home as personal property or use a relative's property in county centers so the mothers can stay in these places with their children (Ahearn & Bumochir, 2016) in split households. This way, herder fathers herd their livestock herds alone in their campsites, risking their own well-being and the well-being of their livestock (Ahearn & Bumochir, 2016; Stolpe, 2016) as mothers take care of their schoolchildren near the school. It was found in a study (Ahearn & Bumochir, 2016) that, in one administrative subunit in a county, nearly 50-60% of herder households split during a school year.

Due to poor conditions and a lack of human resources in boarding school dormitories, herder families often decide on different living arrangements for their school children (Ahearn & Bumochir, 2016). A natural question then is how do herder parents manage living arrangements of their primary school children during the school year? Despite some historical and policy research on schooling of Mongolian pastoralists (Steiner-Khamsi & Stople, 2006; Stolpe, 2016) and ethnographic research on Mongolian mobile pastoralists and their children's access to education (Ahearn & Bumochir, 2016), a lack of empirical research exists to understand pastoralist parents' experiences in sending their children to school and in managing their living arrangements.

This study is a part of a doctoral work which aimed to explore the contexts of communication between rural schools and herder families within the primary school level in Mongolia, based on Bronfenbrenner's ecological model. According to Bronfenbrenner (1977), human development occurs within multiple environmental systems, namely, the microsystem, the mesosystem, the exosystem, and the macrosystem. Recently, researchers (Farrell & Collier, 2010; Pang, 2011) applied the ecological model in their school-family communication and cooperation studies as a theoretical framework. The doctoral work consists of three sub-studies which explored the microsystem where relationships between schools and herder families exist; the mesosystem where herder family and school communication is experienced (Sukhbaatar & Tarkó, 2022b); and contextual factors at the exosystem and the macrosystem levels impacting communication between rural schools and herder families (Sukhbaatar & Tarkó, 2022a). The current study is related to the first sub-study which explored relations between schools and herder families at the microsystem level of the ecological model in relation to herder parents' experiences in managing their children's living arrangements during the school year. While the first and the second author co-authored some studies on communication between rural schools and pastoralist families, and contextual factors impacting this communication in Mongolia (Sukhbaatar & Tarkó, 2022a, 2022b), the third author co-authored a study on history and reforms of teacher education in Mongolia with the first author (Sukhbaatar & Sukhbaatar, 2019). The current study is based on prior experience in previous studies of the authors.

Methods

The present study employed an interpretive phenomenological approach to explore experiences of herder parents regarding the different living arrangements they used when they sent their children to primary school. In interpretive phenomenology, the research question asks for participants' experiences, of "being in" the environment, and the meaning of the phenomenon (Reiners, 2012, p. 2).

Research Site

Before we conducted the study in a remote county in an eastern Mongolian province in February in 2018, the research design was formally reviewed and approved by the Institutional Review Board of the Doctoral School of Education, University of Szeged. The research site consisted of six primary classes from 1st to 5th grades with 162 students in the county primary

school in the 2017-2018 academic year. The minimum number of students in a class was 19, and the maximum was 38. Altogether 78 students out of 162 were from herder families. There were 25 students placed in the school dormitory, and four of them were six-year-olds. Another 32 of the herder students lived in split households with their mothers, and 21 herder students stayed with relatives or extended family members.

Participants

We used criterion sampling, “in which participants meet predefined criteria” (Moser & Korstjens, 2018, p. 11). Our main criterion was herder parents’ experiences in managing different living arrangements for their primary school children. We looked for herder parents varying in characteristics and in their individual experiences (Moser & Korstjens, 2018), such as educational level, number of children, home location, and income sources. We requested five classroom teachers of 1st to 5th grades to suggest herder parents from each of their classes to help us select potential candidates. Interpretive phenomenological studies rely on a small sample to enable deeper understanding of the phenomenon being studied (Clarke, 2009; Pietkiewicz & Smith, 2014). On this basis, we recruited five participants for this study, one from each class.

The five parents (four female and one male) were from different backgrounds in terms of education, size of herds, and living arrangements for their children (Table 1).

Table 1
Participants’ demographic information

No.	Gender	Age	Education level	Spouse’s education level	No of livestock head	Income source	Home location distance	No of moves a year	No of school children	Children’s living arrangement
Parent 1	F	37	Quit 1st grade	Vocational school	Hired as a full-time herder	Wage & GFSP	70 km	NA	2 (1st & 3rd grades)	School dormitory
Parent 2	F	32	Quit 1st grade	Quit 4th grade	Hired as a part-time herder	Wage & GFSP	County center	NA	3 (1st, 3rd, & 7th grades)	Home & center
Parent 3	F	35	Primary school	Lower secondary school	300	Livestock herds	20-57 km	4	3 (2nd, 3rd, & 7th grades)	-Split household -Relative’s home
Parent 4	F	34	Lower secondary school	Lower secondary school	1000	Livestock herds	60-100 km	4	1 (5th grade)	-Relative’s home -Split household
Parent 5	M	55	Lower secondary school	Upper secondary school	Hired as a full-time herder	Wage & GFSP	12-40 km	3	2 (1st & 4th grades)	School dormitory

Among the participants, two were illiterate and had left school when they were in their first grade. Three parents were hired as herders and did not own any herds themselves. These families were poor and vulnerable, and they enrolled in the government food stamp program (GFSP). In this program, the families are supported with the consumption of basic food items

on a monthly basis. One family owned around 300 head of livestock, and the other one owned 1,000. One family resided in the county center, and the husband was hired as a herder and herded horses in 13 km away from the center. The other families resided in remote areas in 20-100 km away, and they moved their camps three to four times a year. The pastoralist parents had chosen the school dormitory, a relative's place, and split household for their school children's living arrangement. While two parents experienced both split households and relative's homes, the other two decided school dormitory for their children during the data collection. The remaining one reported that she looked after her three children by herself at home in the county center, while the husband herded daily for someone.

Instrument

We developed the interview protocol for pastoralist parents (Table 2) adapting from the Farrell and Collier study (2010). Because the current study aimed to explore herder parents' experiences in managing their primary school children's living arrangements during the school year, we carefully adapted the interview protocol for the purpose of the study. The original protocol was used to explore teachers' perceptions of military family-school communication in elementary schools where parents are frequently away from home serving.

Table 2
Interview protocol

Main questions	Probing questions
What is your experience of sending your 6-year-old child/ren to school?	What happened then? Could you give me an example?
What is your experience in managing your 6-year-old child/ren's living arrangement during the school year?	What experiences, if any, do you have related to the different living arrangements for your child/children during the school years? Do your children have different living arrangements during their school years?
What is your experience in managing your older children's living arrangements during the school year?	Why?
How do you make sense of your experiences in managing your child/children's living arrangements?	Please explain why/how...?

Procedure

Phenomenologists believe that interactions between researchers and participants create knowledge and help researchers understand the phenomenon being studied (Reiners, 2012). In this regard, researchers often utilize semi-structured interviews for their interpretive phenomenological studies because this format gives researchers enough space and flexibility for original and unexpected issues to arise. This way, researchers can explore the phenomenon being studied in more detail with further questions (Clarke, 2009; Pietkiewicz & Smith, 2014).

The lead author conducted the interviews. She provided each participant with an informed consent before interviews and they signed the agreement indicating that they decided to participate in the study. To the two illiterate parents the first author read the informed consent in Mongolian and they signed the agreement. They learned to write their names. With the permission of the participants, the lead author audio-recorded interviews, and they lasted for

25 to 45 minutes. After interviews, we gave all participants some cash and basic food items for their involvement.

In the present study, we did not conduct follow-up interviews for clarifications. In order to establish the credibility of the qualitative work, the researchers employed peer debriefing while member checking was not appropriate because two of the participants were illiterate.

Data Analysis

The lead author conducted interpretive phenomenological analysis (IPA) following a three-step-guideline methodology (Pietkiewicz & Smith, 2014): (1) multiple readings and making notes, (2) transforming notes into emergent themes, and (3) seeking relationships and clustering themes. The lead author conducted the initial IPA using the Mongolian transcriptions done by the third author.

First, the lead author made notes of reflections about interview experience and thoughts focusing on content and context after listening to the audio recording and reading the transcript a number of times. She made notes in English. Next, she formulated concise phrases to transform the English notes into emergent themes. Lastly, she assessed relationships between themes and clustered similar themes together. After the initial analysis, the third author reviewed the findings, and they agreed upon five themes and 11 subthemes which supported the phenomenon being studied.

This study employed peer debriefing for establishing validity (Creswell & Miller, 2000). When a study applies peer debriefing to establish validity a reviewer reviews the research process, and provides feedback to researchers (Creswell & Miller, 2000). One peer reviewer, familiar with education in Mongolia, conducted the peer debriefing reviews along with the second author. With the feedback provided by the reviewers, the researchers further analyzed all findings in terms of analytical reduction of the data, and some subthemes were dropped. Moreover, the remaining themes and subthemes were more concisely labeled. The final list comprised of four themes and eight subthemes (Table 3).

Table 3

Initial and finalized findings

Initial findings	Finalized findings after peer debriefing
Theme 1. School for younger children a. The 6-year-olds are quite young b. New beginning for the child	Theme 1. Starting school a. Dealing with a six-year-old b. Assuring a good start
Theme 2. Education-minded herder parents a. More educated children b. Parents' schooling experiences	Theme 2. Education-minded herder parents a. Better educated children b. Parents' school experiences
Theme 3. Shared experiences a. Satisfaction with school b. Dissatisfaction with school	Theme 3. Shared experiences a. Positive reports about the dormitory b. Negative experiences and observations
Theme 4. Family relationships a. Sibling relationships b. Extended family support c. Child involvement in decision making	Theme 4. Family resources a. Financial resources b. Social resources

Theme 5. Resources

- a. Financial resources
 - b. Social networks
-

Findings

In the current study, we explored how herder parents interpreted their experiences in dealing with living arrangements for their children during the school year. During the analysis we developed four themes and each theme was divided into two subthemes. The four themes were: (1) children starting school, (2) education-minded herder parents, (3) shared experiences, and (4) family resources.

Starting School

It seemed parents seriously considered their children's age and age-related experiences. They thought starting a new life journey is very important for their six-year-olds.

Dealing with a Six-year-old

Parent 4 noted that the requirement to send their six-year-olds to school was not easy because the child was quite young. She reported the following:

My child found it hard to study. After school he came home and did homework in the afternoon. But while he was doing homework he fell asleep. I let him sleep. He woke up in the evening at 5 or 6 pm and restarted doing homework. I needed to be very patient in order to make him complete assignments. Sometimes I let him watch TV for a while and then asked him to complete homework assignments. Or sometimes I needed to inform the teacher that he fell asleep and could not complete homework.

This mother added that she stayed with her child during the school year when the child started school at six, leaving behind her husband in the countryside.

Parent 3 who chose split households in her child's first year also considered her child's safety saying,

Coming from the countryside and adjusting to a new place is not easy for my six-year-old who had not gone to preschool and had not visited places in the county center before. Every time I had to follow my child because there are cars and dogs in the streets.

Assuring a Good Start

Parent 3 who chose a split household for the school year when her child started school at age six felt, however, that it was better for her to stay together with the child in the first year and said:

I stayed with my child, so I could work with her more closely and efficiently and she could learn better. If she learned better from the beginning, she would struggle less in subsequent school years in upper grades when I leave her to stay in the dormitory or at a relative's place.

Education-Minded Herder Parents

Herder parents valued education, and they wished their children to be more educated than they were. Herder parents understood from their past school experiences that education is very important.

Better Educated Children

Those parents who quit school at early ages and could not complete their studies showed a strong desire to support their children so they would receive a good education. These parents preferred living with their children during the school year. Parent 2 said the following:

Because I couldn't go to school I am always willing to send my children to school. So, my family moved to the county center from the countryside. Our oldest child did not go to school. My husband really tries hard to keep three children going to school thinking that no school for me and him, and our oldest child is enough.

She also added she preferred living in the countryside herding. However, the family moved to the county center because of their children's schooling. These parents seemed to prioritize their children's schooling over other considerations such as better living condition in the countryside.

Parents' School Experience

The parents who quit their school in their early primary school years were more likely to consider their children's schooling and living arrangements carefully because of their past experiences.

Parent 3, who stayed with her children when the youngest one was in the first grade, said:

I care deeply about my children's education because I was not able to continue my own studies after primary school.

Thinking back about her schooling experience seemed to be a very sore subject for her. When she was asked about her drop-out experience, tears welled up in her eyes and her voice was lowered, and she said:

I have six siblings and they also quit school in their 2nd and 3rd grades. Our living condition was poor and we had a small number of livestock. So, I quit school... Now my husband and I really try hard and split the household last year. We have [purchased] a second home in the county center.

Parent 1 quit school with many others during the 1990s when the collective farms collapsed, and livestock herds were privatized. She quit school in her first grade and remained illiterate. It was challenging for her to help the children with homework. She decided to place her children in the school dormitory because the dormitory teacher helps younger children with their homework:

I quit school in 1990 ... I think. During this time, many children quit school in order to help their families with herding. ... Because my education is very poor I cannot help my children with homework. But the dormitory teacher works very well with children in there. So, I have them stay in the dormitory.

Since none of the parents who participated in this study finished higher education, these herder parents, in addition, wished for their children to continue their studies and go to universities. Parent 4, who finished lower secondary school, said she was sure she would send her child to a university.

Shared Experiences

Parents learned about the school and dormitory from their neighbors and their children. They shared both positive and negative experiences about the school and dormitory.

Positive Reports About the Dormitory

Parent 5 said he learned about the dormitory usually from their neighbors and their children:

I learned from my children that food is good enough in the dormitory. It is good that they [janitors] wash the primary school children's clothes. And also, the dormitory teacher helps children complete their homework.

Parent 3, a mother of three, with the youngest child in the 2nd grade, who was thinking of putting her children in the school dormitory next school year, had the satisfaction of seeing the dormitory as a better living arrangement compared to split households and relative's places. She had already experienced both split households and relative's places, and now was thinking the following:

My neighbors had their children staying in the dormitory and they had never said about the dormitory was doing badly. I believe the dormitory is a good place. My three children can stay there since other children are doing so.

Negative Experiences and Observations

Parents, who decided not to place their children in the dormitory, seemed to have feelings of dissatisfaction with the school. Their feeling of dissatisfaction could be related either to their own experiences with school or to what they had learned from others about the school.

For example, Parent 2 went to literacy and life skills training some years ago at the school, but she quit the training and remained illiterate. She felt embarrassed about going to the same school as her children and other children in her community since the county center was small. She added,

I heard from others that parents of children staying in the dormitory came to visit them rarely and children were usually left behind. Herder parents might be extremely busy herding.

Parent 4 said that she did not know or even hadn't heard about the dormitory. She, of course, used other living arrangement. Parent 4 whose child stayed with the grandmother expressed that she did not know what the dormitory was like and she was not interested in placing her child in there. This mother, without enough positive information about the school dormitory concluded, "The school dormitory is not like a home."

Family Resources

Family resources refer to the herder family's financial resources and social resources or networks.

Financial Resources

Three out of the five participants in this study reported that their families were enrolled in the GFSP, which meant these families were poor and vulnerable. It was found that sending two to three children to school was economically challenging for them. Parent 5, who decided on the dormitory for their children, said,

The school dormitory is free of charge. Once I asked the dormitory teacher if there was something necessary for my children that I should provide. But she said there was no need.

Moreover, Parent 1, whose family was enrolled in the GFSP, said,

My 3rd grade son rides race horses. During his summer vacation, we sent him to someone's home to ride race horses. My son came back home in August and the horse owner gave us some money. We bought school materials and uniforms for our two children and left them in school dormitory free of charge.

In Mongolia, there are national and local festivals which include horse racing as a main part. These festivals are usually held in summer, but some are held in spring and autumn. Children, mainly boys, aged seven and above often ride race horses.

Social Resources

As an alternative to the dormitory, parents usually had their children stay with their relatives, usually grandparents and aunts of children. Parent 4 felt satisfied with her child's caregiver, and this did not allow her to think of other types of living arrangements:

Because my child stays with his grandmother, I have no plans to put him in the school dormitory.

The transcripts show that herder parents and extended family members mutually support each other. Parent 4, whose child stayed with the grandmother, admitted the following: "When our child stays with his grandmother, we contribute to the household food."

However, there was Parent 1 whose family was enrolled in the GFSP who thought relatives could not take good care of her children. She chose the school dormitory in order to prevent any misunderstanding with them, saying:

The school dormitory is better than relatives because my boys may make them upset. Nowadays children are behaving differently and my relatives may not manage them. But the dormitory keeps good control over children.

Discussion

The Mongolian herder parents' interpretations of their experiences of managing their children's living arrangements during the school year were found to yield four main themes. The four themes were related to (1) pastoralist parents' own school experiences, (2) the presence of first-grade school children, (3) boarding school conditions, and (4) family resources. The participating parents chose different living arrangements for their school children including using the school dormitory, staying at a relative's place, and splitting households. However, this study found that herder children had different living arrangements in different school years. For instance, especially, when a child started school at age six, mothers more often moved to the county center and stayed with the child for a year. Herder mothers were more likely to leave the child in the school dormitory or at a relative's place after the child finished the first grade. A similar observation was made in a previous study (Sukhbaatar, 2018a), finding that preservice teachers reported parental involvement among herder parents was better when children were in the first grade because often mothers moved to the county or provincial centers and stayed with their children.

A school for pastoralists typically requires changes to patterns of work, mobility, and the situated learning on which their nomadic livelihoods depend (Dyer, 2016). Splitting households, is one major phenomenon related to schooling among the Mongolian pastoralists. More and more herder families split their households when they send their six-year-olds to school in settled areas (Ahearn & Bumochir, 2016). Splitting households has been reported to not only make men in remote pastures face labor shortages but was also an emotionally negative experience with the wife staying with her children, always worrying about her husband and herds in remote areas, especially when the weather was bad (Ahearn & Bumochir, 2016). However, the strategies of split households and staying with relatives seem to be more likely to put pressure on herder parents in terms of finance due to purchasing a second home or to contributing to the relative's household expenses. Cao (2016) discussed in his study that parental mobility influences the traditional family structure and increases divorce rate. The participants of this study, however, did not report any family divorce cases due to households splitting. But, one herder participant mentioned that they jokingly said they got "divorced" when they split their households for school years.

Relatives were an important group of people who were involved in living arrangements for herder children. These relatives acted in place of parents when the herder children lived with them during the school year. It was found that herder parents were likely to contribute to the relative's household to some extent. Moreover, findings of the study suggested that relatives or extended family members were not always the preferable living arrangement option for some herder families.

Herder parents seemed to feel more comfortable when two or more children of a family stayed together in the dormitory. In this study's school dormitory, there were four six-year-old children staying with their siblings who were attending 3rd, 4th, and 6th grades. The dormitory attempts to provide a family-oriented atmosphere (Steiner-Khamsi & Stolpe, 2006) for herder children by allowing them to stay in the same room if siblings are the same gender.

Currently more resource-poor and financially vulnerable families tend to accept the current dormitory conditions while other groups of herders seek other living arrangements for their children and even at the risk of their livelihoods. This finding is in line with a previous study (Steiner-Khamsi & Stolpe, 2006). Improving the living conditions and utilities in school

dormitories is under debate among researchers and educators. They argue that some shares of food cost could be covered by parents in order to reduce subsidies for food and increase subsidies for better living conditions (Zayadelger, 2011).

Living and learning conditions for herder children in school dormitories are not ideal but they can be improved by providing better utilities, providing more quality education, and creating more home-oriented atmosphere. This way school dormitories can serve more herder families and help reduce challenges (e.g., splitting households, financial burdens, etc.) posed to herders. Policy makers should decide on policies addressing provision of well-functioning school dormitories, that meet required living condition standards, and provide specialized and assistant teachers for younger children.

Despite the questionable physical condition of boarding schools, there are some features that should make staying at school dormitory appealing for herder pupils. English and Guerin (2017) conducted a contextual analysis of four living arrangements of indigenous pupils from remote Aboriginal communities in urban schools in Australia. The researchers presented several interconnected features of boarding schools comparing with three other boarding options: hostels, family group homes, and residential colleges. The Aboriginal boarding schools had the following positive features: (a) they provided specialized programs for assisting pupils to cope with living at the residence, including transition programs and extended family visits, (b) they established social relationships with pupils, staff, family, and community members thereby lowering levels of loneliness, isolation, and homesickness, (c) they provided a safe, secure, supportive, and culturally relevant environment in order to facilitate bi-cultural awareness with curricular and co-curricular activities, (d) they helped maintain cultural identity by encouraging family and community involvement such as family members undertaking roles on the governing council or as temporary house parents, (e) they employed specialized staff to support the cultural identity of indigenous pupils including activities such as enabling staff to visit indigenous communities to help them deeply understand their Aboriginal pupils and their background, (f) they utilized modern technology such as teleconferences, emails, and digital photos to connect pupils and families to reduce the isolation felt by indigenous pupils, and (g) they ensured low staff-pupil ratios and the presence of long serving quality staff who fostered friendly relationships with indigenous pupils while including culturally appropriate rules and boundaries.

One important finding in this study was the case of the race horse rider child who stayed away from his herder parents and lived with a race horse owner during the summer holiday. For racing horses, the child got paid and supported him and his younger brother with learning materials when his parents did not have enough resources to buy school supplies for their children. This issue is related to a wide-ranging debate concerning childcare, child rights, and child labor. Further studies should be conducted on this issue since a full treatment of this topic is beyond the scope of the current study area. By inviting different stakeholders to participate, future in-depth studies can be undertaken to investigate whether herder children staying with race horse owners during the school year is an additional type of arrangement.

The low sample size was a limitation of the present study. This provides some possible directions for future research studies. The sample of different stakeholders including extended family members and dormitory staff could help inform issues related to herder children's emotional issues, and educational achievement, along with school dormitory conditions. Further in-depth studies may explore the actual experiences of children in boarding schools by inviting those children and collecting sound data from them. These potential research directions can encourage educational researchers to reach out to people in remote areas and explore their problems in real life contexts. Moreover, bigger and more diversifying sample size would allow the generalizability of the findings in other settings.

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Article Citation

Sukhbaatar, B., Tarkó, K., & Sukhbaatar, B. (2024). Mongolian pastoralist parents' experiences in managing their primary school children's living arrangements. *The Qualitative Report*, 29(5), 1399-1415. <https://doi.org/10.46743/2160-3715/2024.7068>
