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ARTICLE



## Teachers' experiences in communicating with pastoralist parents in rural Mongolia: implications for teacher education and school policy

Batdulam Sukhbaatar <sup>a,b</sup> and Klára Tarkó <sup>c</sup>

<sup>a</sup>School of Education, University of Szeged, Szeged, Hungary; <sup>b</sup>Research and Foreign Relations Unit, Dornod University, Dornod, Mongolia; <sup>c</sup>Institute of Applied Health Sciences and Health Promotion, Juhász Gyula Faculty of Education, University of Szeged, Szeged, Hungary

### ABSTRACT

One important group of people living a special lifestyle in Mongolia is mobile pastoralists. Requirements from the government of Mongolia push pastoralist parents to send their children to schools in settled areas far from their camps. This interpretative phenomenological study explored primary school classroom teachers' experiences in communicating with pastoralist parents during the school year. In-depth interviews were conducted involving six classroom teachers from a rural primary school in eastern Mongolia. We applied Bronfenbrenner's ecological model to organise our findings in our interpretative phenomenological analysis. The findings indicated that classroom teachers had difficulties in communicating with pastoralist parents. The school and teachers heavily relied on a very few traditional forms of communication which was not appropriate given the pastoralist parents' unique situation. This suggested the need for preparing pre-service teachers better for partnering with pastoralist families and their extended family members, and the need for further professional development on this topic for both teachers and school leaders. Our findings were also related to some contextual factors impacting teacher communication with pastoralist parents besides teacher education. This study highlighted the implications for teacher education and school policy. Potential directions for future research were recommended.

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### KEYWORDS

Pastoralist children; teacher-parent communication; caregiver; teacher education; ecological model

## Introduction

Parental involvement in children's learning has emerged as one important element of effective education over the last 40 years (Hornby & Lafaele, 2011). Research shows that parental involvement is beneficial not only to children, but also to parents and teachers (Hornby & Lafaele, 2011). Thus, politicians, policymakers, schools, and teacher educators worldwide have paid increasing attention to parental involvement (Guo & Wu, 2018).

Recent Mongolian education policy documents emphasise the importance of parental involvement and school-family communication in teaching and learning (Sukhbaatar, 2018a). Mongolia adopted a new core curriculum for primary education in the

2014–2015 school year. In accordance with this core curriculum adoption, the Minister of Education and Science stated that one of the responsibilities of a teacher is to plan activities together with parents for promoting each student's success (Ministry of Education and Science, 2014). Moreover, teachers are required to involve parents, local people, and local organisations in promoting students' learning and in establishing effective communication with each of these groups.

One important group in Mongolia is mobile pastoralists or herders who live in remote areas and herd their livestock in open pastures. (Here in this paper, the terms of "pastoralist" and "herder" will be used interchangeably.) As one pre-service teacher reported in Sukhbaatar's (2018a) study, communicating with pastoralist parents, especially with those living far away from their school children, would be a big problem for her once she starts teaching. The present study aims to extend this earlier study by exploring the communication experiences of classroom teachers with pastoralist parents at the primary school level in rural Mongolia.

## Literature review

### *Mongolian pastoralists*

Before the political and economic changes in 1990, pastoralists were state employees of collectives. With the end of the Soviet Union, the husbandry collectives collapsed and livestock herds were privatised. As of 2017, Mongolia's full-time pastoralist households accounted for 19.2% of total households of the country. They herded over 66 million head of livestock along with 6.7% of part-time pastoralist households (National Statistical Office of Mongolia [NSOM], 2018). Livestock husbandry contributed to 10.6% of the country's GDP in 2017 and made up 30% of the labour force (NSOM, 2018).

Before the 1990s, pastoralism and education policy were closely interconnected (Stolpe, 2016) and the government invested heavily in rural infrastructure that built schools with boarding facilities for the schooling of pastoralists' children (Ahearn, 2018). During this time children entered school at the age of eight. Children's schooling has put more pressure now on pastoralist families due to lowering school entry age to six and a lack of "government spending to maintain the physical infrastructure and staff in rural dormitories" (Ahearn, 2018, p. 4). Starting in the 2008–2009 school year, changes in the structure of Mongolia's education system required six-year-old children to start school. At this young age, pastoralist parents must carefully consider their child's living arrangement based on their family resources and the school's dormitory conditions. Three major living arrangements adopted by these parents have been documented as follows: a) staying in boarding school dormitories, b) staying with extended family members or relatives, and c) staying with mothers in split households (Ahearn, 2018; Ahearn & Bumochir, 2016).

### *School-family communication*

One important responsibility of teachers is to provide all families with proper information about the child and school and communicate this information using the most appropriate method considering each parent's situation (Symeou, Roussounidou, & Michaelides, 2012). Researchers describe various forms of communication including one-way

communication and two-way communication (Graham-Clay, 2005); written or oral communication (Symeou et al., 2012) among teachers and families using letters, report cards, notices of special events, communication books, telephone calls, teacher home visits (Pushor, 2018; Stetson, Stetson, Sinclair, & Nix, 2012); one-to-one basis communication (Symeou et al., 2012); and parent-teacher conferences or meetings (Gastaldi, Longobardi, Quaglia, & Settanni, 2015). Recent studies in Asia and elsewhere note that advancements in technology enhance the frequency and forms of parent-teacher communication. Examples include daily communication using the Internet, Wi-fi, smart phone, and WeChat, a mobile app (Guo, Wu, & Liu, 2018; Willis & Exley, 2018).

The international literature indicates that communication with and parental involvement of families living in remote areas has been challenging. Parental involvement in children's education among Australian Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families is barely visible in boarding schools (Benveniste, Guenther, Dawson, & Rainbird, 2014). A study (Cao, 2016) conducted in boarding schools in a Chinese county, where Tibetan inhabitants who live as nomads and some who live a semi farming-semi nomadic lifestyle, noted that often less than half of the parents would visit the school on the parental visiting days due to preclusive long distances and travel expenses.

Studies on parental involvement in Mongolia identified collective parent-teacher meetings as a major form of communication (Sukhbaatar, 2014, 2018a, 2018b). Herder parents, however, would not attend these meetings due to their remote location. Herder parents usually visit schools only once a quarter to pick up their children for quarter breaks or to take their children back to school after breaks (Sukhbaatar, 2018a). Other forms of communication such as phone calls, however, may not be practical with herder parents since pastoralists make seasonal migrations and stay in remote areas where there is limited cell phone reception (Ahearn, 2018).

### *School-family communication in teacher education*

In order to achieve good parental involvement, schools and families should work together and practice two-way communication "having the child as the common object of interest" (Gastaldi et al., 2015, p. 100). It is, therefore, the school's responsibility to establish stronger connections with families and develop a partnership with them (Symeou et al., 2012).

Unfortunately, it is common that teachers, especially new teachers, do not know the importance of promoting parental involvement and its relationship with the child's academic and behavioural achievement, because they missed how to communicate effectively with parents in their teacher education (Stetson et al., 2012). A series of studies conducted in Mongolia (Sukhbaatar, 2014, 2018a) revealed that the coverage of parental involvement was a missing part in teacher education programmes.

Sukhbaatar's (2014, 2018a) studies on parental involvement preparation at one of the pre-service institutions in Mongolia revealed that there was no particular course addressing parental involvement in the pre-service teacher education; however, there were some class sessions covering the topic in courses on pedagogy, psychology of child development, special needs education, and introduction to teaching. The participating prospective teachers reported that they learned more about working with parents from their supervising in-service classroom teachers, and parental involvement activities they

conducted themselves during their student teaching practice (Sukhbaatar, 2014, 2018a). During their student teaching practice, the prospective teachers were required to conduct at least one parental involvement activity following the practice guidelines (Sukhbaatar, 2018a). As one preservice teacher reported, the guidelines did not provide any instructions on what or how parental involvement activities should be conducted. It was found that the parental involvement activities they conducted varied considerably in terms of quality as most of them faced a big challenge with low rates of parental participation. Moreover, it seemed that the supervising teachers and the schools had dissimilar experiences of working with parents. For instance, most of the pre-service teachers reported that they observed their supervising teachers conducting collective parent-teacher meetings as the primary parental involvement activity and they learned from their supervisors how to conduct these meetings. However, a couple of pre-service teachers reported that their supervising teachers did not conduct any parent-teacher meeting during their eight-week student teaching practice (Sukhbaatar, 2018a).

Similarly, studies conducted around the world (Farrell & Collier, 2010; Hornby & Lafaele, 2011; Saltmarsh, Barr, & Chapman, 2015; Stetson et al., 2012; Symeou et al., 2012) have argued that teacher education programmes pay little attention to equip the prospective teachers with competencies to work and communicate with parents. Teacher education seems to be one formidable barrier to school-family communication and “[i]n particular, the lack of preparation of pre-service teachers [in this area] has been highlighted as being problematic” (Willemse, Thompson, Vanderlinde, & Mutton, 2018, p. 252).

Communicating and working with indigenous and cultural minority families should be an important part of teacher education. Benveniste et al. (2014) noted that studies suggested many teachers in Australia felt they wanted improvement in both initial teacher education and continuing professional development programmes in order to equip them for working with Aboriginal families. A recent study (Saltmarsh et al., 2015), involving Australian initial teacher education programmes from 15 universities, revealed that the formal inclusion of parent engagement was found across a number of subjects, however, overlaps and discontinuities of this topic could not ensure the prospective teachers were well prepared for their work with families after graduation. It is worth noting that school-family relationships were addressed in Indigenous education and pre-service teachers were taught the history, cultural values, traditions of Indigenous people, the impacts of government policies and practices, and the family and community contexts of Indigenous students (Saltmarsh et al., 2015). In Mongolia, Sukhbaatar (2018a) found that pre-service teachers felt that working with herder parents would be very challenging and concluded teacher education should consider herder families as an important group to cover in pre-service education.

### *Ecological model*

In this research, Bronfenbrenner’s ecological systems theory (1977) was selected as a relevant theory that underpins “the knowledge base of the phenomenon to be investigated” (Adom, Hussein, & Agyem, 2018, p. 438). Bronfenbrenner. (1977) developed an ecological systems theory that consisted of multiple environmental systems, explicitly the microsystem, the mesosystem, the exosystem, and the macrosystem, to provide context for human development. Simply stated, the microsystem refers to relations between the

child and the environment, such as home and school. The next level of mesosystem encompasses interactions among microsystems, such as how home and school interact. The exosystem and the macrosystem include major institutions of society and the societal systems that affect, but do not directly involve, the child.

The theory has been applied in home-school cooperation and communication studies beyond its original application in child development processes and settings. Relatively recent examples of researchers examining home-school cooperation or school-family communication as a mesosystem include Farrell and Collier (2010), Gisewhite, Jeanfreau, and Holden (2019), Pang (2011), and Sukhbaatar and Tarkó (2018). Most of these researchers discussed various contextual factors at the microsystem, exosystem, and macrosystem levels impacting school-family communication and cooperation at the mesosystem level. Further, Gisewhite et al (2019) believed that “[t]he mesosystem is particularly important to a child and is a major factor in the value of educating pre-service teachers to learn how to communicate effectively with parents” (p. 10).

## Methodology

This study explored how classroom teachers or participants with lived experience interpreted their experiences of “being in” communication with pastoralist parents (Reiners, 2012, p. 2). This study thus employed interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA) in order to achieve the research goal given that “IPA is a suitable approach when one is trying to find out how individuals are perceiving the particular situations they are facing, how they are making sense of their personal and social world” (Smith & Osborn, 2008, p. 55). In other words, IPA aims to understand people’s lived experiences and the meanings they attach to their experiences (Clarke, 2010).

The findings of this study included both the participants’ account of their experiences in their own words and our interpretative comments (Pietkiewicz & Smith, 2014). Reflexivity is an important part of IPA. In IPA studies, “the researcher uses empathy or relevant prior experience as an aid to data analysis and/or interpretation of meanings” (Sloan & Bowe, 2014, p. 12). This study builds on our reflections based on our prior experience in previous studies on the contexts of school and herder family communication (Sukhbaatar & Tarkó, 2018), on pre-service teachers’ views on working with diverse families (Sukhbaatar, 2018a), on institutional and social factors contributing to a lack of parental involvement (Sukhbaatar, 2018b), and on pre-service teachers’ preparation for parental involvement (Sukhbaatar, 2014).

The research was approved by the Institutional Review Board of the Doctoral School of Education, University of Szeged. The consent forms were signed by all the participants and the interviews were recorded with the permission of the participants.

## Participants

A remote county school in an eastern Mongolian province was chosen for the study where almost half of the students (45%) the school served were from pastoralist households. This study conducted six semi-structured interviews with six primary education teachers. All of the teachers had students from herder families in their classes and the herder students used the three main options of living arrangements described previously (see Table 1).

**Table 1.** Participants' demographic information.

No.	Age	Gender	Teacher education institution graduated from	Teaching years	Grade level taught	Number of students in class	Number of herder students	Per-centage of herder students	Herder students' living arrangement		
									School dormitory	Split household	Relative's place
Teacher 1	49	F	Capital	30	1st	24	12	50%	3	2	7
Teacher 2	43	F	Local	24	5th	28	15	54%	11	1	3
Teacher 3	25	F	Capital	1	3rd	30	14	47%	5	3	6
Teacher 4	29	F	Local	5	1st	23	18	78%	3	13	2
Teacher 5	41	F	Local	4	4th	38	15	39%	1	11	3
Teacher 6	31	F	Local	1	2nd	19	4	21%	2	2	-

The interview guide was adapted from the previous work by Farrell and Collier (2010) which explored teacher educators' perceptions of school-family communication at elementary schools serving a US military population.

### *Data analysis*

A three-step-guideline methodology (Pietkiewicz & Smith, 2014) was employed for the IPA including: 1) multiple reading and making notes; 2) transforming notes into emergent themes; and 3) seeking relationships and clustering themes. In addition, Bronfenbrenner's (1977) ecological system helped us identify themes in our IPA analysis. We applied the conceptual framework by Sukhbaatar and Tarkó (2018), which was adapted from the Pang (2011) and Bronfenbrenner (1977) models, to organise our findings. Moreover, using the ecological system we discovered factors impacting teachers' communicating experiences with herder parents building on a key strength of IPA, which is "its recognition that contextual factors influence how meaning is constructed by an individual" (Clarke, 2009, p. 39).

### *Findings*

Three themes emerged from the data analysis: 1) the experience of teachers communicating with pastoralist parents; 2) the challenges teachers face in communicating with pastoralist parents; and 3) the experience of teachers' pre-service teacher education. The resulting themes facilitated a deeper understanding of teachers' cumulative experiences in communicating with pastoralist parents at the mesosystem level along with impacting factors located at different levels of the ecological model.

#### *Theme 1: The experience of teachers communicating with pastoralist parents*

At the mesosystem level, two sub-themes in teachers' experiences in communicating with pastoralist parents were found. They were communication goals and forms. A number of these communication goals and forms were identified as being important for initiating communication between teachers and herder parents along with the frequency of these communications.

#### *Goals*

Teachers' goals focused on informing parents about children's learning, needs, and problems; informing parents of collective parent-teacher meeting announcements; and asking parents to facilitate students' learning at home. The most common goal was to inform parents about children's difficulties and needs:

Last time it was an urgent call to a herder parent of a child who lived in the school dormitory. I called the parent to inform them that the child did not have warm boots and coats when it was getting colder. The parent said that they [she and her husband] were not able to come to school soon because they were hired to herd someone's livestock. (Teacher 1)

The teacher recounted she resolved the issue by inviting other parents to donate some warm clothes to the child.



Teachers were more likely to make calls to the parents only when there was something urgent to communicate and such efforts were not frequent as one teacher said:

I rarely call herder parents. I call them when there is something urgent. For instance, I ask them to come to parent-teacher meetings and inform them about children's grades for a quarter. (Teacher 4)

Herder parents, however, were reported to initiate calls to the teachers more often than the teachers initiating calls to the parents. The parents especially called teachers more frequently when their children were in the first and second grades. Herder parents' goals for communication were more likely to focus on asking teachers for a child's leave of absence from school for a couple of days before a quarter break starts or just to inform teachers the child would come to school two or three days late when a new quarter starts. Some teachers (Teachers 1 and 3) reported that such absences were due to parents being worried about their child being homesick and also due to a lack of transportation between the school and their chosen remote herding area.

### Forms

The participants indicated that the forms of communication between teachers and herder parents included phone calls, collective parent-teacher meetings, and informal face-to-face meetings. Letters and home visits were reported as being less common. Classroom teachers tended to prefer in-person meetings to phone calls, even though this is difficult for herder parents, as one teacher articulated:

Face-to-face meeting is preferable. I cannot talk about all the issues on the phone. When I talk to them on phone, I ask them to come to school and meet me. (Teacher 5)

A teacher (Teacher 6), who also preferred in-person meetings with herder parents, admitted that some parents were unable to visit the school when there was a heavy snowfall and she had a herder student in her class whose family was settled more than 200 kilometres away in their winter camp.

Teachers sometimes failed in their attempts to communicate with herder parents due to poor mobile signals in remote areas. A teacher (Teacher 3) reported that once she sent a letter to a herder family in an isolated rural area because she could not connect with phone calls. In her letter, she asked the parents to encourage the student to take school seriously. She asked a driver driving there to pass the letter to the herder parents. Letters, however, sometimes may not be successful. Most of the teachers (Teachers 1, 3, 4, 5 and 6) mentioned that there were a couple of children in their classes whose parents were illiterate and one teacher (Teacher 4) said it would be better to talk to them individually because those parents were shy in group settings.

The findings suggest that some factors related to herder parents and families, such as home location distance and illiteracy, at the microsystem level impact the communication goals and forms between school and family. Further, factors at the exosystem, namely heavy snowfall and poor mobile signal in remote areas, also impact communicating experiences of teachers with herder families at the mesosystem level.

## *Theme 2: The challenges teachers face in communicating with pastoralist parents*

Requesting pastoralist parents to be present at collective parent-teacher meetings and using these meetings to communicate with children's caregivers seemed to be a major obstacle for teachers. The challenges teachers faced were divided into two sub-themes: collective parent-teacher meetings and caregivers.

### *Collective parent-teacher meetings*

Most of the teachers interviewed seemed to believe collective parent-teacher meetings could help them bring the parents to school. However, interviews revealed that herder parents were usually unable to attend collective parent-teacher meetings due to factors present at the exosystem level such as long distances, poor infrastructure, and heavy snow-fall. Teachers, however, seemed to rely heavily on this traditional way of communication. To encourage attendance at parent-teacher meetings, a teacher drew up her own strategy:

I conduct parent-teacher meetings once a quarter. I plan carefully and inform parents 14 days or a month ahead about the meeting and ask every parent to show up even they are in remote areas. (Teacher 2)

The teachers reported that at parent-teacher meetings they usually informed parents about students' learning progress, students' grades for quarters, homework guidelines, results of contests and competitions organised in the class and school, and students' performance of homework completion for quarter breaks. A teacher stated the following, which suggests she understood she would have lower parental attendance if she conducted these meetings more often:

Conducting parent-teacher meeting once a month is fine for me. If I conduct more meetings they will get fed up with meetings. (Teacher 5)

At the exosystem level, most of the teachers (Teachers 2, 3, 4 and 5) complained they were overloaded with paperwork such as planning extracurricular activities and writing reports on class activities; writing reports on two projects implemented by the Ministry including photos of activities students had done every quarter; and filling in unexpected surveys from the Ministry besides designing their thematic and lesson plans. Being overloaded with paperwork a teacher may find parent-teacher meetings as the easiest form of communication:

I do not have enough time to meet with herder parents one by one individually. For this reason, I organise collective parent-teacher meetings. (Teacher 5)

Another teacher said paperwork diverted her attention away from teaching and other important tasks. She added:

We always need to provide papers as evidence of what we have carried out. (Teacher 2)

### *Caregivers*

A teacher (Teacher 4) who handled the first grade seemed to feel satisfied with parental involvement. According to the teacher, in her class 13 herder students lived in split households, while three students lived in the school dormitory and two others lived in their relatives' homes. When herder families split their households, mothers stayed with school children while fathers stayed in remote areas herding alone. However, when

herder families could not split their households and herder children lived with relatives, sometimes there were miscommunications and misunderstandings that occurred between herder parents and teachers when they communicated through relatives:

A child, who lived with his aunt, was behind the rest of the class in dictation. I called the herder mother and she came. I showed the mother the child's dictation notebook with lots of mistakes. The mother said she did not know the child was performing poorly. After this meeting, the mother stayed with the child in the county center for a while and the child improved. Before the mother left, she rearranged her child's living arrangement and now the child lives with his grandparents. (Teacher 5)

Some of the teachers (Teacher 2, 3 and 5) tended to avoid partnering with relatives; they preferred communicating with herder parents rather than caregivers saying:

I am not sure whether relatives pass on [to herder parents] what was communicated between us. (Teacher 3)

Besides the relatives, there is a dormitory teacher who takes care of the herder children living in the school dormitory. In the school, only one teacher worked with 40 students, who resided in the dormitory, facilitating their homework. The classroom teachers expected this dormitory teacher to communicate with herder parents on their behalf. A teacher who had two herder students living in the dormitory reported:

I do not contact the two pastoralist families whose children are staying in the dormitory. I only communicate with the dormitory teacher. (Teacher 6)

A teacher stated the dormitory teacher should always attend parent-teacher meetings saying:

In fact, classroom teachers and the dormitory teacher should frequently communicate, otherwise students do not do homework. (Teacher 3)

A teacher, who had 11 herder students staying in the school dormitory out of 15 herder children in her class, said:

I always ask herder parents to place their children in the dormitory. Relatives are not good caregivers. I communicate with the dormitory teacher about my 11 students. (Teacher 2)

This teacher, however, explained:

The dormitory teacher cannot always represent all 11 children's parents, so I ask herder parents to come to parent-teacher meetings once a quarter. (Teacher 2)

The findings show that factors at the exosystem level, such as family resources for parents and paperwork for teachers, impact teacher communication with herder parents. On the one hand, social resources through marriage often allowed herders to receive support from extended family members or relatives but these arrangements sometimes presented challenges to teachers. On the other hand, deciding to split households helped teachers to regularly communicate with herder mothers, but at the expense of reducing their family's herding capacity.

### *Theme 3: The experience of teachers' pre-service teacher education*

Participants emphasised the importance of teacher-parent communication in teacher education and in school policy. The analysis indicated two sub-themes: the needs of teachers and the importance given to communication within the school.

#### *The needs of teachers*

The teachers were found to have dissimilar experiences in, and strategies for, communicating with parents. Most of the teachers experienced difficulties in communicating with pastoralist parents and the caregivers of their children, especially when expecting high attendance at parent-teacher meetings. Two teachers (Teachers 3 and 5) used the “schoolbag” strategy (Sukhbaatar, 2018a, p. 305) where they asked their students to leave their schoolbags in the classroom after classes. They believed parents or caregivers would come to the parent-teacher meetings in order to pick up the schoolbags as one said:

If I do not ask my students to leave their schoolbags, parents or caregivers would not show up. ... sometimes there are two or three schoolbags left after the meeting. (Teacher 5)

What makes this finding significant is that none of the participants learned how to communicate with herder parents in their initial teacher education programmes. A teacher who graduated from a teacher education institution in the capital and who was in her first year of teaching said:

It would be helpful if the teacher education offered this topic. We may teach anywhere, not only in urban areas. (Teacher 3)

All of the participating teachers reported that they wanted to learn more about the topic:

I want to learn about how to work with herder parents, such as how to communicate with herder parents, how to involve them in school and classroom activities, and how to increase their involvement in their children's learning. (Teacher 4)

#### *The importance given to the communication within the school*

The interviews uncovered that the school site for this research had no particular policy or strategy to encourage the classroom teachers to work with herder parents:

Herder parents are not emphasised, but we generally talk about parental involvement concerning all parents. But there is a need to emphasise herder parents. (Teacher 4)

A teacher wanted the school to organise some activities particularly for herder parents saying:

I suppose the school could organise herder parent-teacher meetings once a year or once a quarter. (Teacher 1)

As one teacher explained, the school could allocate a budget for visiting herders' campsites as they did it once before:

We visited herders' campsites in spring 2004. Teachers gave a concert and also gave a presentation about teaching and learning. The aim for the visit was to raise donations for

celebrating the 80<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the school. We received generous donations from herder parents. Since then we [the school] have not visited herders' campsites. (Teacher 1)

This teacher proposed an idea of cooperating with the community saying:

There are four administrative subunits (*baghs*) in our county. It is possible that when the county organises *bagh* meetings they can ask us to join them and the school and the county administration can arrange our visits and we can visit herder parents. (Teacher 1)

These findings suggest that a lack of policies at the macrosystem level has left a gap in teacher education programmes to meet the national policy goals of school-family cooperation. Parental involvement and communicating with parents from diverse family patterns were found to be topics missing in the teacher education programme (Sukhbaatar, 2018a). Moreover, it was found no specific legislation on partnering with herder families specifically was available to guide rural schools serving this unique population.

## Discussion

Unlike school-family communication in contexts of Australian Aboriginal families and Tibetan nomadic families, this study was situated within the broader communicating challenges of teachers who communicated with not only nomadic herder parents, but also with their extended family members, boarding school dormitory staff, and herder mothers living in split households depending on different living arrangement types used by herder children during the school year. The unique lifestyle of Mongolian pastoralists presented challenges for teachers trying to communicate with them. The findings suggested that sometimes it was helpful for teachers to regularly communicate with herder mothers when the families split their households. Herder mothers living in split households had all the same capabilities to communicate with teachers as non-herder families. Teachers, however, faced challenges in partnering with relatives and the dormitory teacher when some herder households were not able to split families during the school year resulting in their children living with relatives or staying in the dormitory. Sometimes communicating with relatives led to miscommunication and misunderstanding with pastoralist parents. Attempting to avoid further miscommunication and misunderstanding, teachers seemed to prefer pastoralist parents attending collective parent-teacher meetings or communicating with them in-person. Intersecting factors of school and family play a role in determining how herder parents communicate with teachers and how teachers communicate with herder parents in this school context (Saltmarsh & McPherson, 2019). On the one hand, herder family's financial and social resources are impacted when herder mothers stay with schoolchildren in split households in their second home. This improves the teachers' capabilities for regular communication with herder mothers while reducing the families' resources. On the other hand, when families cannot split their households, teachers' lack of teacher training affects their capability to deal with relatives or the dormitory teacher when it is time for school-family communication.

A key finding of this study was that herder parents mainly communicated with teachers in order to ask for a child's leave of absence from classes. This finding is similar to Cao's

(2016) finding that in general, Tibetan parents rarely asked about their children's learning and living in boarding schools. The relation between school and Tibetan families was passive and parents were given no opportunity to take part in school teaching. Cao (2016) noted that Tibetan adolescents in boarding schools suffered from alienation and one of the reasons was little or no relations between families and schools. Cao (2016) stated later that alienation had a dramatic impact on negative behaviour of students which could lead to not paying attention to lessons and to temporarily dropping out of school. Extending this discussion further, studies could explore impacts of poor school-family communication on herder children's learning in Mongolia.

Consistent with the literature, the topic of parental involvement, including working with diverse families and teacher-parent communication, appeared to be a missing part in Mongolian teacher education programmes. Without better guidance, teachers tended to use only a few traditional forms of communication such as collective parent-teacher meetings. It could be concluded that the school and the teachers were not using the most appropriate method of communication considering the pastoralist parents' special situation (Symeou et al., 2012). The participants expressed the need for learning more about partnering with pastoralist parents as an important component of teacher preparation and continuing professional development.

Government policies in education at the macrosystem level seem to be a formidable factor that negatively impact teachers and schools as they try to establish and maintain good communication with herder families. Moreover, it was found there were other factors that impact good school and herder family communication at different levels of the ecological model. The findings of this study suggest that heavy snowfall, poor mobile signals, increased paperwork for teachers, and pastoralist family factors all contribute to preventing good teacher and pastoralist parent communication. Further studies should systematically explore these contextual factors impacting teacher communication with pastoralist parents at the exosystem and macrosystem levels in order to mediate school and herder family communication and to develop strategies for improved parental involvement with this unique group. The ecological systems theory reminds us that education for children involves complex contextual factors, not only home and school factors (Pang, 2011).

Gisewhite et al. (2019) proposed that a human ecological model for teacher education for effective communication with parents "has the potential to encourage healthy and advantageous exchanges of information between teachers and parents to promote educational success for each student" (p. 15). Their call for ecologically-based teacher-parent communication skills training in pre-service teacher education programmes (Gisewhite et al., 2019) aligns with our argument on school-family communication at the mesosystem level presented in the current research. A major recommendation, therefore, should be developing a detailed ecologically-based model for teacher training for effective communication with parents and caregivers.

## Conclusion and implication of findings

The findings of the current study have implications for teacher education, school, and policymakers. First, teachers were found to have dissimilar practices and skills to contact and communicate with herder parents, caretakers or relatives, and the dormitory teacher

at the mesosystem level. Teachers thus developed their own strategies to deal with the challenges faced when communicating with them. Some of the strategies tended to be unsuccessful, for instance the schoolbag strategy. This finding supports those of a previous study (Farrell & Collier, 2010) that concluded elementary educators “lacked formal preparation for family-school communication and constructed their skills based on experience” (p. 4). Initial teacher education can equip teachers with more meaningful communication strategies. It is important to teach pre-service teachers about the special lifestyle of herders, the family and community contexts of herder students, and the impacts of educational policies on herder families and students. This can be a big help to prepare prospective teachers for meaningful partnerships with herder families (Saltmarsh et al., 2015), especially if factors at the microsystem, exosystem, and macrosystem levels are identified and their impacts are explained. Such teacher education could equip prospective teachers with various effective communication strategies related to the unique conditions of pastoralist families. Partnering effectively with extended family members and dormitory teachers should be an important component of this teacher education. These novice teachers can be change agents who may be able to change the school’s and teachers’ long traditions of ineffective communication (Sukhbaatar, 2018a). Moreover, ongoing professional development could equip teachers and school leaders with strategies for healthy school-family communication. With school leaders better prepared for working with pastoralist families, the school could emphasise school and pastoralist family communication by recognising them as an important group living a special lifestyle.

One more important component of both initial teacher education and ongoing professional development could be research skills development. For instance, if teachers always struggle with lower attendance at collective parent-teacher meetings they should study the problem by conducting action research to solve the problem. The local teacher education institution where most of the participating teachers graduated from could play an important role to provide researchers who can work with teachers in this kind of research. A good example is a study by Pushor (2018) on participatory action research initiated by a local university researcher conducted in the field of parent engagement in Canada. Pushor (2018) and her team have conducted their action research based on a local school where one third of the student population were Indigenous. They had different collaborators join the research project including decision-makers, families of different representatives, the school principal and teachers, and members of the parent community. Their research project covered different activities such as community forums, parent surveys, community canvassing, teacher education courses, and strategic planning bringing together parents and school staff. As a result of the participatory action research, there have been some changes such as many more teachers conducting home visits, parental mentors working with teachers in classrooms, and a language programme for parents (Pushor, 2018).

In addition, the participating teachers in the present study seemed to have different attitudes towards and experiences in communicating with herder parents as the school had no particular policy or encouragement for engaging herder parents. In this regard, the school can benefit from schoolwide policies. One of the important strategies for schools to improve school and herder family communication could be “more consultative practices to elicit parent preferences regarding home-school communication” (Saltmarsh

& McPherson, 2019, p. 8). Schools can send out a questionnaire to herder families, using the available ways to reach the families such as their relatives or when they visit school to take their children home for quarter breaks, asking what forms of communication would best fit them and how often they would like this sort of communication (Saltmarsh & McPherson, 2019). Parents and teachers need to be able to negotiate with each other on the best ways to communicate effectively. Schoolwide policies, in order to improve communication with pastoralist families, should become successful if the planning process is based on a needs analysis and if a shared vision is established (Pushor, 2018).

The current study suggested that collective parent-teacher meetings would not be an appropriate form of communication with herder parents considering their special lifestyle and personal factors such as illiteracy and shyness. These meetings could be replaced with one-to-one communication. For instance, teachers in the Greek-Cypriot educational system are required to assign one weekly period for the 10- or 15-minutes conferences or briefings with each parent or caregiver to provide them with not only information about their children's academic progress, behaviour and school activities, but more importantly, to discuss with parents how families can cooperate with the school (Symeou et al., 2012). Ideally such meetings can let pastoralist parents come and meet teachers based on a flexible schedule and encourage two-way communication. This can also lead to more open and meaningful communication. Moreover, planned visits from parents to school (Benveniste et al., 2014) could be an effective strategy to foster bidirectional relationships of school with indigenous families living in remote areas. The international literature also suggests the school should allocate time and space for conducting regular home visits in remote communities (Benveniste et al., 2014). Schools could allocate a budget for home visits or could cooperate with the local administration and community to facilitate such visits. Such efforts to visit rural herders could be combined with activities of working around the literacy issue since illiteracy among herder parents was reported to restrict some forms of communication.

Finally, policymakers should make sure of a smooth implementation of recent education policies by including these requirements in teacher education courses. There should be common requirements for including courses on parental involvement, working with diverse families, and communicating with parents in teacher education programmes (Hornby & Lafaele, 2011). Parental involvement and communication should not be restricted to individual teacher competencies, but should be an essential component of the school organisation and development (Willemse et al., 2018).

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## Ethics statement

The research was approved by the Institutional Review Board of the Doctoral School of Education, University of Szeged. The consent forms were signed by all the participants and the interviews were recorded with the permission of the participants.



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## Notes on contributor

*Dr. Sukhbaatar* earned her PhD from University of Szeged and is a lecturer at Dornod University. She conducts research on parental involvement and teacher education.

*Dr. Tarkó* is a college professor and a head of the Institute of Applied Health Sciences and Health Promotion, Juhász Gyula Faculty of Education, University of Szeged. Her research focuses on minority studies and lifestyle.

## ORCID

Batdulam Sukhbaatar  <http://orcid.org/0000-0003-0207-3601>

Klára Tarkó  <http://orcid.org/0000-0002-0812-6631>

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