



A Qualitative Study of Preschool Education Policy Implementation for Herder Population in Mongolia

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Abstract. The herder culture covers the majority part of the country's population, but herder children cannot receive appropriate education services as children of the mainstream families in urban areas do. The current education system has created some challenges for herder children to access formal education at preschool, primary, secondary and higher education levels in Mongolia. We gathered the interview data mainly from *taviul* pre-school children and their parents, along with interviews of kindergarten teachers, kindergarten directors and an official of the Mongolia Ministry of Education. The purpose of our study is to investigate the current preschool education policy for the herder community in Mongolia along with its implementation and suggest our recommendations for further improvement based on the research outcome. Our results showed the strengths and weaknesses of the implementation of the preschool education for herder community in Mongolian rural areas.

Keywords: preschool education alternative programs · family · culture · teacher

1 Introduction

Managing preschool programs for children of rural herders is a real challenge in Mongolia. Recent data show that the majority part of herder children have not been enrolled in preschool education programs. This phenomenon forces parents to move to urban areas, e.g. centres of villages (or soum) and provinces to provide preschool education for their children [5, 10]. There are several options for herders to enroll their children in primary school: (a) sending young children (starting at the age of six) to stay in a school dormitory in a soum; (b) moving the whole family to a soum with their livestock near the town so that children can go to school; (c) one of the parents stays with a child/children, and the other one stays with the livestock; (d) letting the child stay with relatives in a soum; or (e) postponing school enrollment until their children are 7 or 8 years old. A World Bank research report [16] suggested the need for further research using qualitative inquiry methodology to gain better understanding of the herder community situation regarding preschool education in the remote countryside. Similarly, Bum-Ochir and Ahearn [1]

mentioned that further research is needed to understand the value the herders place on education. The purpose of this study is to investigate the implementation of current preschool education policy for the herder population.

In Mongolia, the knowledge in the early childhood education system commonly relies on quantitative studies, where data collection, analysis, and conclusions do not follow science based research standards and processes. Previous studies [4, 13, 15] and reports [10, 16] found that the education of the herder community has been a continuing issue of concern in this sparsely populated country. Thus, their conclusions include recommendations for further studies into the conditions of herder population education system as a core value in the social and cultural aspects of a herder livelihood.

2 Methodology

A qualitative case study approach was selected for this study due to the in-depth investigative focus on the experience of children in the herding context in Mongolia [8].

Preschool education which includes kindergarten is the early childhood education in the Mongolian context. Kindergarten is the main institution that provides preschool education throughout the country. To assess the policy implementation in the local (*soums*) area, interviews with six parents of herder children, four local kindergarten teachers and two kindergarten directors, and one government official were recorded while observations were conducted in the herder community and the local kindergarten environment of the selected province of Mongolia. We had an audio recorder next to the participant to ensure the accuracy of the data collection during the interview processes. Particular attention was put on the specific and individual sociocultural lenses that serve to construct meaning with the participants. Therefore, researcher reflexivity was vital during the interview process to fit the needs of each participant [2, 3, 6, 7]. The names of the participants of the study were changed for security purposes.

3 Results

Each of the 18 soums in the Gobi-Altai province, where the study took place, had a kindergarten. Unfortunately, only 9 of these soums have alternative programs for preschool children, i.e., preschool education alternative programs are only organized in rural areas where there is the highest number of children of preschool age. Two soums were selected by their geographical location.

Further, we briefly review the current status of the alternative programs in the two soums included in this study based on available documents and interviews.

Soum A, with a population of 4,236 people, consists of five baghs (smallest local administration unit). An alternative program teacher works at the kindergarten of Soum A and serves around 20 to 30 out-of-school children per month to provide preschool education. She utilizes her private vehicle for the visits and she does not receive a transportation allowance from the local kindergarten, only a limited gas reimbursement, which is not enough to cover the visits of all children. There is only one mobile ger kindergarten program, so the soum kindergarten chooses the bagh with the highest

number of out-of-school children to hold the program every summer. This decision means that the other four baghs are not able to have ger kindergarten programs at all.

Soum A's kindergarten director speaks about this situation:

... The bagh directors request that we organize ger kindergarten at their bagh. However, we have only one ger. So, we choose a bagh where there are many out-of-school children. Last year we chose the fourth bagh, which is on the south of the Gobi Desert. This area has the lowest population density, and we used to choose another bagh. The local herders were very thankful, and, to celebrate, they organized a mini Naadam at the end of the three weeks of the ger kindergarten program. According to the Naadam tradition, they organized the three manly games (horse race, archery, and wrestling) among the bagh herder families and made a khorkhog (meat dish prepared in its skin or a rumen sac into which red hot stones are put in order to cook the meat)...

Unlike Soum A, soum B consists of three *baghs* and has a kindergarten with no alternative program teacher for the population of 2,785. Therefore, the out-of-school children in the rural areas do not have a mobile teacher. The kindergarten administration here also chooses one of the baghs every summer for a ger kindergarten program. The Zavkhan River runs through the soum, and the third bagh is located on the other side of the river. The river is wide and does not have a bridge connecting the two sides. Therefore, there are many out-of-school children in the third bagh, so every year they organize an alternative program there since the two other baghs' herder families do not have natural obstacles to access the kindergarten at the center of the soum. However, there is neither a mobile teacher nor a mobile ger kindergarten for out-of-school children in the rural areas.

3.1 Preference of Herder Parents for Full-Time Kindergarten Due to Dissatisfaction with the Alternative Program

Child 1's family herds over 520 heads of livestock. Although they had an opportunity to participate in the alternative program that is designed for the herder community, Child 1's parents prefer the kindergarten in the center of the soum for the following reasons:

... The formal preschool program is much better than the alternative preschool programs. In the kindergarten, children acquire a lot of information, learn how to communicate, and develop academic skills. The alternative programs only last for a short period of time, and sometimes they are not organized due to lack of finance and teachers... —Child 1's grandmother

Soum A's kindergarten teacher agreed, admitting that the alternative program needs to be improved:

... We only have alternative programs at the preschool level; for the other levels, children have to live in urban areas to get an education. It is an advantage having these alternative programs, but the programs need to be improved...

Although herders do not want to be separated from their children, they understand their children need to be prepared for school and future life. They fear that their children will be left out of society or be discriminated against if they do not send them to school.

3.2 Herder Families' Ways to the Access to Preschool Education

There are several ways that herders manage to send their children to kindergarten in the soum: (a) the family splits into two parts; (b) they hire a herder to take care of their livestock in the countryside; or (c) they let their children stay with a host family as *taviul*.

When parents are separated, one of them can take care of their children and help them attend the school in the *soum* (this is often the choice when families have several children of school age) and another takes care of the livestock in the countryside (it is usually the fathers who stay alone in countryside during the winter, from September to May). Child 1's father referred to this as a "period of sadness." Not only do the fathers feel lonely during this time, other family members miss the fathers, too. When husbands and wives live separately for long periods of time, it can cause further problems. During long winters, husbands feel lonely and easily become exhausted working alone.

... Parents choose to be separated for a long time if they don not have reliable relatives in the soum center or do not have any relatives or friends at all at the soum center. Parents live separately because one of them needs to take care of the children so they can attend school in the soum, and the other takes care of animals in the countryside. This is especially the case for families that have two or more children that need to go to school in the soum. But there is a danger that such an arrangement leads to a divorce after a certain period of time... —Child 2's grandfather

Soum A's kindergarten director elaborated:

... Because few people live in the soum, we know each other very well. Last year one of our kindergarten students' parents divorced after living separately. While the mother looked after their children in the soum, the children could go to kindergarten and primary school and the father herded their livestock in the countryside. They lived like that in fall, winter, and spring during the academic year and only united in the summer. The father worked hard without proper food and eventually became desperate. The parents became alienated and ended up divorcing...

Another option involves parents leaving their herd with relatives or friends in the countryside while the whole family moves to the soum. If they do not have any relatives or friends who can help out, some families hire someone who is experienced and reliable, but it is not easy to find such people. Yet, another way of handling the issue for herder parents is to keep their children with them out of school or quit herding and move to the center of the soum to send their children to kindergarten in order to avoid separation from their children at young age.

During the interviews, parents noted that the age for entrance to preschool and primary school is too early for children to live away from their parents. The expected

age for starting preschool is 2 years old, and at age 6 children are expected to start primary school.

... Although I know we cannot change the system by telling this, I would like to suggest changing the school entrance age. I think it should be age 8, not 6, because it directly lowers the kindergarten age. When I was young, it was fine to have 10 years of formal schooling. The current 12 years are too long for the children who are from the herder community... —Child 2's mother

Five of the participating children started attending kindergarten at age 5 because their parents did not want to be separated from them at such a young age. The children will be enrolled into a primary school next year.

4 Discussions and Recommendations on Current Government Preschool Policy for Herder Families

Based on the findings of the current study, the following themes emerged for discussion and recommendation: organization of preschool education alternative programs, inclusion of herder population in the mainstream society, and practices for adjustment into kindergarten.

4.1 Organization of the Preschool Education Alternative Programs

Alternative programs are implemented by local kindergartens that choose the type of alternative programs based on the soum's out-of-school child population. The two most common choices are the mobile ger kindergarten and the mobile teacher. Each soum has one ger that is supposed to be used for the mobile ger kindergarten. Given this one-ger capacity, the soum kindergarten chooses one of the baghs where there are the largest number of out-of-school children. Then, other baghs' out-of-school children remain without any educational services - neither full-time kindergarten nor alternative programs. The mobile teacher visits the remaining out-of-school children in the soum in half of the selected province (9/18 soums). The other nine soums do not have a mobile teacher. Each local kindergarten reports about their alternative programs to the soum director and the province education and culture center. However, it should be noted that their reports are different depending on the soum's out-of-school child population.

There could be two main strategies to improve implementation of the alternative programs: an equitable budget and constant feedback from herder parents. First, the budget for kindergartens throughout the nation is clearly stated in government regulations, with the alternative programs receiving much lower amount of financing. According to the national child protection law, every Mongolian child has the same rights regardless of their family background. Thus, it is recommended that children should receive the same preschool education service funding to positively impact to the quality of alternative programs.

Currently, alternative programs are not evaluated by any professional organization, and only one report is submitted by the local kindergarten as an introduction to its

operation. The second recommendation for the improvement of the quality of alternative programs, therefore, is to conduct ongoing monitoring and evaluation in order to listen to the voices of herder community members and to improve the services.

4.2 Inclusion of the Herder Population

The study revealed that some parents had previous negative experiences and their children were not accepted by the primary school because they were out-of-school. The Preschool Education Law 14.2.2 states, “Before starting primary education, every child must have preschool education” [11]. It can be inferred that lawmakers do not consider the life style of herders and how herder parents are able to obey this requirement; instead, the main target of the legislation is on the mainstream population in the city. The case studies in this research showed that herder parents are organizing everything by themselves to let their children attend kindergarten, without any collaboration or support from public organizations. That is, parents are finding the host families by themselves and, providing their winter food, they only desire to support their children to receive a proper education. For single parents, the situation is even more challenging as they are unable to visit their children in the soum because they have to herd the livestock in rural areas.

During the period of socialism in Mongolia, most of the educated people in the country had a herder background and valued the traditional pastoral way of life in the country. There was a sense of equal treatment of urban and rural children and herder education was part of the national development policies [4], which resulted in a high literacy rate throughout the population.

Since Mongolia was democratized 30 years ago, the herder population has been left behind in the development of educational services. The country has lost the sense of the importance of treating urban and rural children equally and combining herder education with broader development policies for pastoralists.

To decrease this gap, we need to admit how alienated we have become from each other and then revisit and learn our original culture and tradition. We need to pay attention to educating the youngest generation with Mongolian traditions and culture not only to regain mutual respect and understanding but also to renew consideration and inclusion of every Mongolian citizen in national development policies. This action will encourage a more supportive learning environments for herders’ children and connect the quality of herder children’s education with the broader development of national policies.

4.3 Practices for Adjustment to Kindergarten

For children who come from herder communities, the study revealed that the main adjustment difficulties are daytime napping, food, as well as communication with the teachers and with other children. Public kindergartens in Mongolia have been continuing traditions from the socialist period in terms of the daily routine, such as napping and food schedules.

... A few children stay awake during the nap time. One of them is Child 3. She never sleeps but stays awake and is silent while she is in bed... —Soum A kindergarten teacher.

Children from herder families eat meat and dairy as their daily food. They usually do not eat vegetables and fruits because they are not readily available in the countryside. Child 4's mother notes on behalf of her son:

... My son does not like eating kindergarten food. he said to me that his teacher always demands them to finish eating the food that he dislikes such as cabbages and carrots.

Besides napping and food, the study found the greatest adjustment challenge for taviu children is communication with the teacher and their peers.

... When I try to talk with the children, they do not respond, and some of them communicate with me through another child. I think, the reason is they are not adjusted to the social environment, and it is hard for them because they are used to communicate only with their family members. But the children who are from urban and suburban areas tend to have good communication skills... —Soum A teacher

Additionally, the fieldwork revealed no initiation by teachers or parents with the host family to ask them to support their children in adapting to the kindergarten environment. Likewise, no meetings were organized between teachers and parents by the directors or teachers.

One of the participating children in the study, Luvsan, could not adjust to kindergarten when he was 4 years old and ended up quitting. He returned to the kindergarten after a year as his family did not have any other options. Eventually, Luvsan's case is a success story, in that he eventually came back to the kindergarten and was able to adjust to the kindergarten environment. His sleeping routine, eating, and social behaviors were different from the kindergarten's plan and schedule, but he eventually adjusted. However, he needed support and special attention from the teacher. Currently, there is an independent chapter content about practices of helping children to adjust to kindergarten developed for pre- and in-service teacher training. In addition, no previous research has examined this practice, particularly for the children from herder community.

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