

A Qualitative Study of Mongolian Herder Parents' Involvement in and Choice of Living Arrangements for Ensuring the School Readiness of Their Young Children

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Abstract

Original Research Article

For herder families residing in remote areas of Mongolia, enrolling their children in school presents significant social and financial challenges. Consequently, many children from these families do not participate in preschool education, placing them at risk of being inadequately prepared for formal schooling. According to the National Statistical Office of Mongolia (2020), approximately 14% of children aged 2 to 5 do not receive preschool education, with over 9% of these being children from herder households.

This study employed a qualitative research design to explore herder parents' involvement in their children's early education and the living arrangements made to support school readiness. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews incorporating open-ended questions, supplemented by information on participants' socioeconomic status and field notes from observations. The study sample consisted of 36 herder families, selected through purposive and criterion sampling based on two key criteria: (a) the family must be engaged in full-time herding, and (b) the family must have a five-year-old child expected to begin formal schooling in the upcoming academic year.

Children in the study were drawn from three educational categories: (a) those enrolled in formal kindergarten programs, (b) those attending alternative preschool services, and (c) those with no access to any form of preschool education. Following transcription and translation into English, data were analyzed through a multi-step process, including data organization, preliminary reading, thematic coding guided by the theoretical framework, theme identification, data representation, and interpretative analysis.

The findings revealed that herder parents expressed a strong desire for their children to access better educational opportunities and not follow in their footsteps as herders. Despite this aspiration, they did not perceive childrearing itself as a burden. Parents' decisions regarding preschool options were influenced by several factors, including the physical environment, the psychological disposition of the primary caregiver, and established daily routines.

Keywords: Herder Parents' Choice, Living Arrangements, School Readiness, Young Children.

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INTRODUCTION

Mongolia has one of the lowest population densities in the world, with only one person per 1.5 square kilometers (Stolpe, 2016). This sparse distribution presents significant challenges for delivering educational services across the country (Krätli, 2001; Ministry of Education, Culture, Science and Sport, 2012).

According to the National Statistical Office of Mongolia (2018), 19% of Mongolian households are classified as full-time herders (*malchin*), meaning that they rely entirely on traditional livestock herding for their

livelihood. While the country encompasses a range of ecological zones—including taiga forests, the Gobi Desert, and expansive steppe regions—herding is viable throughout most of the countryside. Water availability is critical for pastoral livelihoods, which requires seasonal mobility to access suitable pastures. Consequently, herders routinely relocate depending on seasonal conditions, with the exception of those in Ulaanbaatar, the capital city. In recent years, Mongolia's expanding mining sector has increasingly competed with herder communities for access to water and pastureland (Semetsky, 2008), contributing to a growing number of herders abandoning



their traditional way of life and migrating to urban centers. Due to their geographic isolation and nomadic lifestyle, herder populations are educationally marginalized—particularly in relation to preschool education (Ahearn & Bumochir, 2016). As a result, herder parents often assume the primary responsibility for preparing their children for school, despite having limited access to knowledge, training, or resources (Ministry of Education, Culture, and Science, 2012). This is particularly concerning given research on school readiness that demonstrates a strong correlation between parental education and children's academic achievement (Shagdarsuren, Batkhuyag, & Khurelkhuu, 2015).

The Ministry of Education has conducted national studies assessing school readiness through three dimensions: (a) children's readiness, (b) schools' readiness, and (c) families' readiness (Ministry of Education, Culture and Science, 2011). Findings consistently show that herder families are among the most vulnerable due to insufficient information and limited knowledge about how to support children's early development (Mongolian Ministry of Education, Culture and Science, 2011). In addition to national efforts, several international organizations have also contributed research on early education in Mongolia (World Bank, 2015; Jeong et al., 2021). However, there remains a lack of in-depth research specifically addressing the school readiness of herder children and the kinds of support their families are able—or unable—to provide. Thus, the present study was undertaken to better understand the unique challenges Mongolia faces in ensuring that children from herder families are adequately prepared to enter school and benefit fully from formal education. To contextualize these challenges, it is helpful to review Mongolia's historical and educational background.

Until 1990, Mongolia was a socialist country operating under a centrally planned economic system for nearly 70 years. During this period, all livestock was state-owned, and herders were employed by collectives (*negdel*), receiving fixed salaries (Goldstein & Beall, 1994). Educational access for herder populations during socialism was considered exemplary (Steiner-Khamsi & Stolpe, 2005), with effective implementation embedded within the collectivist infrastructure. Krätli (2000) identified four core features that contributed to near-universal enrollment of herder children: (a) a strong societal respect for herders and a cultural continuum between rural and urban life; (b) a robust legal framework that enforced educational participation; (c) provision of free education; and (d) integration of herder education into broader pastoral development policies.

Following the collapse of socialism in 1990, Mongolia underwent rapid decentralization and privatization, including of livestock. Herders became independent, managing their own animals without state support, and relying on unpredictable income rather than a guaranteed salary. In pursuit of financial survival, many herder families kept their children at home to assist with herding rather than sending them to school. Over time, witnessing the negative consequences of educational exclusion—including unemployment and poverty—many families began migrating to urban areas to provide better educational opportunities for their children.

Urban migration has surged in recent years. In 2017 alone, 31,000 people moved to urban centers, with 31.2% of families citing access to education as their primary motivation. Yet even in urban areas, these families often encounter barriers such as lack of space in public kindergartens, unemployment, and inadequate housing. As noted by Steiner-Khamsi and Stolpe (2005), the herder population has become a "transfer victim"—a casualty of political and social neglect in the post-socialist democratic era.

During the early years of Mongolia's transition (1990–1995), preschool enrollment declined significantly—from 25.5% to 18%. However, by 2005, it had rebounded to 59.9% (Ministry of Education, Culture, Science and Sports, 2012), and by 2018 had reached 79.9% (National Statistical Office of Mongolia, 2018). Several factors contributed to this increase: (a) the adoption of a new Preschool Education Law in 2008; (b) the expansion of alternative programs specifically designed to include children in remote areas—such as mobile *ger* kindergartens, visiting teachers, and shifting group services (Ministry of Education, Culture, Science and Sports, 2012); (c) government-funded meal provision for enrolled children; and (d) the proliferation of private kindergartens (World Bank, 2016). Nonetheless, while access has improved, the quality of alternative early childhood education programs—especially those targeting herder children—remains inadequate (World Bank, 2016). This study aimed to qualitatively examine the involvement of Mongolian herder parents in supporting their children's school readiness, and to explore the living arrangements families adopt to facilitate this process. The research was guided by the following two questions: (1) How are Mongolian herder parents involved in preparing their young children for school? (2) What living arrangements do herder families adopt to ensure their children are ready for formal education?

Theoretical Framework

The concept of the *developmental niche*, introduced by Super and Harkness (2002), offers a multidisciplinary framework for understanding human development by integrating perspectives from psychology, anthropology, and related fields (Harkness, Super, Mavridis, Barry, & Zeitlin, 2013). In psychology, human development is primarily understood in terms of the sequential growth of individuals and the stages at which specific abilities emerge. In contrast, anthropology approaches development as a culturally embedded process shaped by prevailing patterns of behavior and thought (Super & Harkness, 1986). The developmental niche, therefore, bridges these disciplinary perspectives by conceptualizing human development as an interaction between individual growth and the surrounding environmental and cultural context.

As a theoretical framework, the developmental niche serves to integrate concepts and empirical findings from various disciplines concerned with child development within specific cultural settings (Super & Harkness, 2002). It aims to synthesize anthropological and psychological theories into a cohesive model comprising three interrelated subsystems: (a) the *physical and social*

settings of daily life—referring to the environments, social networks, and activities in which children engage (Super & Harkness, 2009); (b) *customs and practices of child care*—which encompass culturally normative caregiving behaviors and routines; and (c) *parental ethnotheories*—caregivers’ culturally informed beliefs and expectations about child development and parenting (Harkness et al., 2009). Together, these subsystems shape the developmental experiences of children and reflect the culturally constructed nature of early childhood.

METHODOLOGY

A qualitative research design was employed in this study to address the two central research questions. Creswell (2013) defines qualitative research as an approach to exploring and understanding social or human

problems through data collected in natural settings, with sensitivity to participants and their contexts. This methodology involves capturing participants lived experiences, offering rich, descriptive interpretations of complex issues, and often highlighting the need for change (Denzin & Lincoln, 2011; Merriam & Tisdell, 2015).

Data were collected from two *soums* (towns) in a province selected for its above-average herder population and its geographic remoteness—factors that made it a representative setting for the study. The data collection methods included: (a) semi-structured interviews with open-ended questions conducted with participating parents; (b) collection of socioeconomic background information; and (c) researcher field notes from direct observations.

Table 1: Sample Size by Category of Young Children

Town (soum)	Children who attend kindergartens	Children who attend alternative programs	Children who have no access to preschool education	Total
Soum (town) A	male 3, female 3	male 3, female 3	male 3, female 3	18 (male 9, female 9)
Soum (town) B	male 3, female 3	male 3, female 3	male 3, female 3	18 (male 9, female 9)
Total	12 (male 6, female 6)	12 (male 6, female 6)	12 (male 6, female 6)	36 (male 18, female 18)

A total of 36 herder families participated in the study. A criterion-based purposive sampling strategy was employed, guided by two selection criteria: (a) the family was engaged in full-time herding, and (b) the family had a five-year-old child expected to begin formal schooling in the upcoming academic year. The children involved in the study fell into one of three categories: (a) children enrolled in formal kindergarten programs; (b) children attending alternative early education services; and (c) children with no access to preschool education.

Following transcription and translation into English, the data were analyzed through a multi-step process based on the analytical procedures outlined by Creswell and Poth (2017). These steps included: organizing and preparing the data, reading through all materials to gain a general sense of the information, conducting analysis informed by the study’s theoretical framework, identifying emergent themes, presenting the findings within the context of the research questions, and interpreting the broader implications of the data.

Ethical considerations were strictly followed throughout the research process. Participants were informed of the purpose of the study and were assured that their participation was entirely voluntary. Informed consent was obtained, and the confidentiality and anonymity of all participants were guaranteed (Goodwin & Goodwin, 1996).

RESULTS

All of the participating households have sheep and goats as small livestock (*bog mal*); the average number is 100 sheep and 200 goats per household. One fifth of the

participants have horses, cattle, and camels as big livestock (*bod mal*). Herder households directly use all livestock products, such as meat and dairy for food and dried dung for fire. Therefore, it is not easy to calculate their income as cash. In addition, they sell the livestock hides, cashmere, meat, wool, dairy, and so on. Electricity is only available at town centers. Most households have solar panels for daily use of electricity, television sets, and mobile phones. Most herders use motorcycles as a means of daily transportation. Some families move by camels.

Herder families make decisions on movement based on the weather and pasture conditions. If a place is convenient for their livestock, they stay longer but if a place does not have enough grass and water they move to areas with better pasture. When grass is insufficient, families may move up to 10 times a year.

To investigate the involvement of herder families in their young children’s school readiness based on the developmental niche, three components of the theory were selected as the main focus: the physical and social settings of daily life, the customs and practices of care, and parental ethnotheories – the psychology of the caretakers (Super & Harkness, 1986).

Due to the challenges of herding their livestock in the remote countryside vs. participating actively in the education system, herder parents must decide if they will continue to live with their children in the countryside where there is limited access to a preschool education or split the family in varied ways to allow their children to attend school. Options include the following:

- a) The child stays with relatives as a *taviul* child in the



village center. (b) One of the parents, usually the mother, moves to the village center and stays with the child while the father remains in the countryside to look after their livestock. Or (c) the family hires a

herder to take care of the livestock, and the whole family stays together in the village center for the sake of their child's education.

Table 2: Comparison of Herder Children's Preschool Access Categories for School Readiness

	Children who attend kindergarten	Children who attend alternative programs	Children who have no access to preschool education
Physical and social settings of child	The children have to stay with a relative or the family has to split into two: One part stays in the town center and the other remains in the countryside to herd the livestock.	Children enrol in alternative programs that take place for a short time each year, which means that the services are not constant or lasting for very long. The teaching quality and facilities are not adequate.	Children from families with few members are unable to participate in the other two categories because their parents are busy herding livestock and live very remotely. Children are involved in herding with family members.
Customs of childcare and education	Children have a specific schedule at the formal preschool program; at home they spend time freely.	Parents help their children to learn numeracy and letters, but not always. The children receive assignments from the visiting teacher. There is no specific schedule at home; children assist their parents. Daily activities are similar to those of children who have no access.	There is no specific daily schedule. The children are involved in herding by assisting their parents. The children are busy with play and housework.
Psychology of caretakers	Parents are not satisfied with the alternative programs offered to the herder population. They prefer formal service. Parents rely on formal preschool service for school readiness.	Parents are not satisfied with the alternative programs, but they don't have the choice of sending their children to the formal program if the family only has few members.	Parents say they will let their children go to the public preschool program soon and the kindergarten located in the town center.

Physical and Social Settings

In terms of the physical and social setting, the study showed that all participants lived in *gers* (Mongolian traditional accommodation) in remote areas, with distances varying up to more than 100 kilometers from the town center. Everywhere the family moves, they easily build their *gers*; even if they move to the village center, they move their *gers* with them. A *ger* is one-room type of house or tent that functions as kitchen, bedroom, study room, dining room, playroom, washroom, and so on. Family members eat and sleep together. Many herders' children have never experienced entering an apartment in an urban area (personal communication with local kindergarten teacher). Every family member has a certain space in the *ger* and plays a particular role in helping with housework tasks and herding livestock, depending on the season. Children are involved in cleaning and cooking indoors and assist their parents in many ways outdoors as well.

Herder children do not have strict schedules with timelines and specific activities. The following is based on

observations taken place during the spring season of the general routines of herder children who do not attend a formal preschool program but stay with their family in the countryside.

In the morning after breakfast, children help separate young livestock from parent livestock after the young animals are fed by the mother animals. This takes about one to two hours. Children are usually responsible for the newborn and young livestock, whom they herd near home separately from their parents' animals. While they watch the young livestock, the children play with siblings, friends, or the young animals. By early afternoon, children have lunch at home and then herd the young livestock back to camp. After that, around 5:00 PM the parent animals come back to camp. Before dinner, the children again help separate young livestock from their parent animals after the young animals have been fed by the mother animals. The children are as busy as their parents.

"For housework, my child has so many things to do. She brings in firewood and dried dung, washes dishes and looks after young calves."
(Parent_24)

Herder children play with different toys such as cars, dolls, Barbies, and chess, as well as natural toys of stone and ankle bone (*shagai*). The children usually play with their siblings (younger or older brothers and sisters), with grandmother, with father, and with friends and neighboring children.

Customs and Practices of Care

Herder parents prefer formal preschool education programs at the town center because the alternative preschool program for herder families only take place for three to six weeks during the summertime. Herder parents have to choose whether they will live together with their children in remote areas with only a summer preschool program or let their children attend a formal kindergarten in a town center and then stay during the week with relatives who live in the town center and then go home to the countryside on weekends. Relatives may be close relatives such as grandparents, uncles, or aunts. If the herder family does not have relatives in the village center, the child may stay with another family, under an arrangement called *taviul*, which means the child's parents provide all the expenses for staying in the family.

"My child comes and stays in a countryside home during the weekend and help us on herding young animals because it is springtime, the peak time of the year, animals are now giving birth we have a lot work to do." (Parent_31)

"My son stays with us during the weekend. Every Monday morning my husband drops them to their kindergarten, and they stay with my older sister's family at the village center from Monday to Friday. My husband brings our son back every Friday." (Parent_14)

"Because I don't have a big family and many relatives, my son stays in my friend's father's home in the village center. I prepare their winter food."¹ (Parent_23)

Another option is for the herder husband and wife to live separately to let their child attend a formal preschool program. That is, one of them takes care of the child in the village center while the other takes care of the animals in the countryside. This is especially the case if the families don't have reliable relatives in the village center or don't have any relatives or friends at the village center at all, or if they have two or more kindergarten or school-aged children. Living separately like this is a tough decision to make and sometimes leads to divorce.

"We have two homes. My husband stays in the countryside to look after our animals alone and I take care of my two children at the village center. My son attends local kindergarten and my daughter attend 3rd grade at primary school at the village center. Sometimes it is tough living separately." (Parent_13)

An additional option involves the whole family moving to

the village center while leaving the livestock with relatives or friends in the countryside. If they don't have any relatives or friends, some herders hire someone who is experienced and reliable for herding animals, but it is not easy to find such people.

"I hired a herder for my horses to look after, but the herder lost my 32 horses. I searched for my horses for two months and later I found that my hired herder was the one who stole them. After all, I couldn't do anything to take back my horses because he already sold them to meat merchant." (Parent_6)

Parental Ethnotheories

While herder parents are busy herding livestock in the countryside, they are also concerned about their children's education. They believe that academic skills are essential for becoming ready for school. Therefore, they encourage their children learning the basics of numeracy and writing.

"I bought him a letters notebook for practicing writing letters, again and again, that will support his writing skills." (Parent_5)

"I always encourage my daughter to draw pictures and practice writing letters." (Parent_10)

Most herder parents do not want their children to be herders like them; instead, they want their children to get a higher education to have a specific profession.

"In the future, I wish my child would be a citizen in the city. My son told me that he would be a policeman in the future." (Parent_7)

"My child can have any profession in the future; however, the only thing that I am concerned about is the need to have higher education." (Parent_9)

While interviewing a mother, the researcher asked her son about his future plans. The boy answered that he wanted to be a herder in the future, which made his mother unhappy to hear, prompting her to exclaim, *"Oh no!"* (Parent_4)

CONCLUSION

Most herders are not critical of their living conditions; yet, many of them do not want their children to be herders like themselves. Rather, they prefer their children to become well educated and work in the cities. Education is highly esteemed, because the herders see the herder way of life as hard and risky due to environmental and climate uncertainty, even though they themselves enjoy living in their native region. Therefore, most herder families are very concerned about promoting their children's education.

Parents' involvement in ensuring their children are ready for school is hampered by their workload as full-time herders and lack of knowledge and skill for supporting

¹ "Providing winter food" means herder parents provide the host family with their annual supply of meat.

their child's learning and development. Without support from society, herder parents take care of their children and herd their livestock at the same time in rural Mongolia. According to their responses to this study, parents do not feel confident about teaching academic skills although they value academic skills such as basic numbers and letters. Parents are confident, however, about teaching living and herding skills and encourage their children to be involved in different housework considered basic living skills. Thus, children are involved in many different tasks according to their age and gender.

The findings showed that participating parents' ethnotheories were built on a social-economic viewpoint that devalues herders' livelihood culture resulting in limited education for their children in the countryside as a result of an education system that does not take the needs of the herder population sufficiently into account. Faced with the dilemma between participating fully in the education system and their life as herders in rural areas of Mongolia, parents have a great desire to secure a better education for their children.

Parents choose one of the following arrangements with regard to their children's early childhood education based on their living conditions:

1. Living with their children in the countryside even though there is limited access to preschool education and the setting is isolated far from the village center and province; herder children spend most of their time assisting their parents with herding livestock and playing in nature when they have time.
2. Splitting the family in different ways for the purpose of securing a better education for their child:
 - a. Herder families arrange for their children to stay with relatives as a *taviul* child in the village center.
 - b. One of the parents, usually the mother, stays with the child or children at the village center while the father looks after the livestock in the countryside.
 - c. The family asks relatives or friends to look after their livestock in the countryside or hire a herder to take care of their livestock and then stay together in the village center for their child's education.

Herder parents make decisions and arrange living environments based on what is available for them as they manage household splits, labor shortage, and financial difficulties. This study highlights the deep tension herder families in rural Mongolia face between preserving their way of life and pursuing educational opportunities for their young children. While most herder parents highly value education and hope for a different, often urban-based future for their children, they remain rooted in a lifestyle that is physically demanding, geographically isolated, and often unsupported by formal educational systems. Based on these findings, several key recommendations emerge.

Parental involvement is essential for children's early learning, yet herder parents often feel ill-equipped to support their children's academic development due to their

own limited schooling and demanding work schedules. Therefore, it is vital to offer training and support tailored to herders, including culturally relevant parenting resources and community-based workshops that build confidence in supporting children's early literacy, numeracy, and social skills.

The role of teachers is also central to improving rural preschool education. It is crucial to invest in teacher training that includes an understanding of nomadic life and culturally sustaining pedagogy. Recruiting teachers from rural areas and supporting them through ongoing professional development can strengthen the connection between educators and herder communities.

At the policy level, greater inclusion of herder voices in education planning is needed. National and local policies must recognize the specific needs of nomadic and semi-nomadic populations and commit to bridging the rural-urban divide in educational opportunity. Participatory planning processes that engage herder parents, local leaders, and educators can ensure that policy responses are grounded in lived experience.

Finally, further research is needed to understand the long-term outcomes of different early childhood living and education arrangements—such as the experiences of *taviul* children or children who remain in the countryside without preschool access. These insights can guide the development of more inclusive and equitable early childhood education strategies that respect families' choices while expanding opportunities for all children, regardless of geography.

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