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## Contextual Factors Impacting School and Pastoralist Family Communication in Rural Mongolia: A Partial Ecological Model

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### Abstract

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### Keywords

pastoralist children, school-family communication, ecological systems theory, government policy, teacher education, interpretative phenomenological analysis

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# Contextual Factors Impacting School and Pastoralist Family Communication in Rural Mongolia: A Partial Ecological Model

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## Introduction

Mongolian full-time pastoralists or herders, who made up 19.1% of the total households, herded 67 million livestock head in 2020 (NSOM, 2020). Mongolian pastoralists or herders live remote areas and carry out seasonal movements to feed their livestock herds on good grazing pastures and to fatten them up to increase their chance to survive the long and cold winters (Lkhagvadorj et al., 2013).

Mongolian pastoralism and education policy were closely interconnected before the 1990s (Stolpe, 2016) and the government invested heavily in rural infrastructure by building boarding schools for pastoralists' children (Ahearn, 2018). Today, however, there is a lack of "government spending to maintain the physical infrastructure and staff in rural dormitories" (Ahearn, 2018, p. 4). Today herder families find themselves struggling to send their children to formal education.

Mongolia adopted a new education system in the 2008-2009 school year which lowered the school entry age to six. Due to the declining infrastructure of school dormitories and the younger children's school admission, some pastoralist parents now seek different living arrangements for their children to send them to schools in settled areas far from their camps. Three major living arrangements for the herder children during the school year have been documented as follows: (1) staying in boarding school dormitories, (2) staying with relatives, and (3) staying with mothers in split households (Ahearn, 2018; Ahearn & Bumochir, 2016; Sukhbaatar & Tarkó, 2022).

The challenges of school attendance faced by pastoralist families seem to be associated with lower academic performance of these children. According to a World Bank report (2018), first- and second graders from herder families performed significantly poorer at early grade Mongolian language reading and numeracy assessments than non-herder family children.

Over the past 40 years parental involvement has emerged as one important element of effective education (Hornby & Lafaele, 2011). Thus, “parent engagement is increasingly becoming an area of intense focus for politicians, public policymakers, schools/school leaders, teachers, higher education providers/pre-service teachers worldwide” (Guo & Wu, 2018, p. 10). The current trends in the education policies of Mongolia require increasing cooperation of school, family, and community to foster future citizens. Teachers are expected to plan activities for promoting every child’s success together with the pupil and his/her parents, and then provide parents with regular reports of progress and assessments of their pupils’ learning and mastery of grade-level standards (MES, 2014). However, communicating and partnering with herder families is a big challenge for schools and teachers since these children and families are often separated during the school year and herder parents must work remotely, often far from the school.

Given the importance of school-family communication that has been recognized in the literature, factors preventing good communication between teachers and parents, including family circumstances and parents’ work situation, have been studied (Hornby & Lafaele, 2011; Ozmen et al., 2016). In addition to factors related to teachers and parents that impact school-family communication, several studies have identified other external factors (Farrell & Collier, 2010; Pang, 2011; Sukhbaatar & Tarkó, 2018). These studies used Bronfenbrenner’s (1977) ecological systems theory to gain greater insight into contextual factors impacting school-family communication and cooperation. Adapting the Pang and Bronfenbrenner models, Sukhbaatar and Tarkó (2018) proposed a conceptual framework of ecological contexts of school and pastoralist family communication in Mongolia. The relevance of this framework is enhanced by noting that Gisewhite and her colleagues (2019) proposed a human ecological model for teacher education specifically for effective communication with parents. The current work builds on the Sukhbaatar and Tarkó model (2018) and the aim of this paper is to develop a partial ecological model of contextual factors, located at the exosystem and the macrosystem levels, impacting rural school and pastoralist family communication.

## **Theoretical Framework**

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. The microsystem refers to an immediate setting that contains the child, such as home and school. The mesosystem encompasses interactions between home and school. The exosystem and the macrosystem involve major institutions of society and societal systems that affect the child’s development.

Recently, home-school cooperation and communication studies (Farrell & Collier, 2010; Pang, 2011) have applied the theory to explore interactions between home and school at the mesosystem level while recognizing these interactions are affected by larger social contexts at the exosystem and the macrosystem levels. For instance, Pang (2011) adapted the ecological systems theory and developed an analytical framework for contextual factors related to home-school cooperation in his Hong Kong study.

Sukhbaatar and Tarkó (2018) proposed a conceptual framework of contexts for school and herder family communication in Mongolia by adapting Pang’s model. They analyzed data from academic journal papers, technical reports, book chapters and statistics of various government agencies in order to propose the framework. In their proposed model, the

microsystem referred to rural boarding school and herder family, which is the immediate environment of the herder children. They proposed communication between teachers and herder parents as the mesosystem. Further, seven contextual factors impacting parental communication were identified at the exosystem and the macrosystem levels. The four factors at the exosystem level were teachers's workplace, herder parent's workplace, marriage institution, and weather context. At the macrosystem level three factors, namely government policy in education, economic context, and political context, were identified.

### **Mongolian Pastoralists**

Mongolian pastoralists have been extensively engaged in nomadic pastoralism for centuries; they have continuously been herding five types of mixed livestock: horses, cattle, sheep, goats, and Bactrian camels. Indeed, "[h]ardly any state is so heavily associated with nomadism as Mongolia" (Stolpe, 2016, p. 20).

Livestock herding provides a big part of the economy, and it is a well-regarded part of the nation's traditional culture. In the nomadic herder culture, families have to move their camps and herds several times a year in order to find good pasture to feed their livestock. However, herder children cannot attend school in these remote campsites, so herders need to arrange a place for their children to stay during the school year by using the following three options of living arrangements.

First, some herder families send their children to school dormitories in boarding schools. Mongolia was able to provide a well-functioning boarding school system before the 1990s. However, after the collapse of the socialist system, rural development was neglected due to economic changes, which has resulted in inadequate infrastructure and a lack of healthy and well-maintained schools and dormitories (Steiner-Khamsi & Gerelmaa, 2008). Steiner-Khamsi and Stolpe (2006) argued that families who lacked financial and social resources tended to place their children in school dormitories.

Second, some herder families send their children to stay with extended family members or relatives who live close to a school. In the Mongolian culture it is common for extended family members to let herder children stay with them and to take care of the children during the school year. These extended family members are usually grandparents, or aunts and uncles. Extended family members, however, are not always good caregivers. A previous study noted that relatives had a lower level of parental involvement and children living with relatives usually did not do homework (Sukhbaatar, 2018a).

Third, some herder families acquire an additional or second home as personal property or use a relative's property in county centers so the mothers can stay close to school with their children (Ahearn & Bumochir, 2016). This results in household splitting, where households split residences between pasture locations and school locations during the school years. The consequence is that women and children move to county or provincial centers for school and men are left alone in distant winter camps with a reduced labor force, which risk their own well-being and the well-being of their livestock (Ahearn & Bumochir, 2016; Steiner-Khamsi & Gerelmaa, 2008; Stolpe, 2016).

Access to education for herder children has created additional difficulties for herders seeking different living arrangements. This results in fewer family members to help with herding, in financial challenges related to educating their children, and in poorer parental involvement in their children's learning.

The current study is a part of a doctoral project which explored contexts of school and pastoralist family communication in rural Mongolia and developed an ecological model covering all four nested levels. This paper, however, explores contextual factors, at the exosystem and macrosystem levels, impacting rural school and pastoralist family

communication. We focus only on the two upper levels in this report as there is sufficient research on school-family communication at the mesosystem level. Moreover, we attempt to uncover and discuss how contextual factors at these upper levels of the ecological model interact and influence rural school and herder family dynamics. Our intention of conducting this study, therefore, is to extend and empirically validate the contextual factors impacting school and pastoralist family communication in the proposed conceptual framework by Sukhbaatar and Tarkó (2018).

As the first author has been conducting a series of studies on parental involvement and teacher education in Mongolia, the current study is an extension of her previous works. The second author, however, is a co-author of some of her studies (Sukhbaatar & Tarkó, 2018, 2022).

## Methods

The current study aimed at exploring the communicating experiences of primary education teachers and pastoralist parents in order to empirically validate a proposed model of key contextual factors impacting school and pastoralist family communication in rural Mongolia. Therefore, a phenomenological approach was applied as phenomenology is the study of experience (Henriksson & Friesen, 2012). There are two main phenomenological approaches: a) descriptive, and b) interpretative. In descriptive phenomenology, a research question asks for participants' descriptions of their experiences of what they know as persons (Reiners, 2012). In interpretative phenomenology, however, the focus is to study "the concept of being in the world rather than knowing the world" (Reiners, 2012, p. 1).

Because this study aimed at exploring how herder parents and teachers interpreted their experiences of "being in" the condition requiring them to communicate with each other, the interpretative phenomenological approach (IPA) seemed to fit best with the purpose of the study. This study thus employed IPA in order to achieve the research goals as "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). The primary goal of an IPA study is to explore how participants make sense of their experiences related to the phenomena being studied (Pietkiewicz & Smith, 2014; Smith & Osborn, 2008).

In order to explore contextual factors impacting communication between school and pastoralist family an IPA was employed since "one of the strengths of IPA is its recognition that contextual factors influence how meaning is constructed by an individual" (Clarke, 2009, p. 39). The individual's point of view of his or her lived experience is therefore embedded within a sociocultural context and it cannot be separated from his or her environment (Clarke, 2009). The IPA approach combined with the ecological model worked well to uncover contextual factors related to school and herder family communication efforts.

## Research Site

Classroom teachers and pastoralist parents, from two different rural schools in remote eastern Mongolian counties, participated the study. The two counties served large numbers of herder children and they are located at distances of 150 and 195 kilometers from the capital of an eastern province, respectively. The province is 650 kilometers away from the capital city Ulaanbaatar. The province was chosen for the study as the first author had conducted her series of studies on parental involvement and teacher education based on a teacher training institution located in the province.

## ***Participants***

In order to understand a phenomenon of communication between school and pastoralist family, it is necessary to interpret key stakeholders' point of the view of the phenomenon (Englander, 2012). Thus, primary education teachers and pastoralist parents were invited to semi-structured interviews.

IPA studies use purposive sampling, which is as homogenous as possible, for "whom the research question will be significant" (Smith & Osborn, 2008, p. 56). This study recruited a total of 10 teachers and 10 pastoralist parents; five from each school. This allowed to better explore contextual factors impacting communication between classroom teachers and pastoralist parents at two different locations in order to examine similarities and differences between two remote schools. We attempted to recruit participants from more diverse backgrounds. The participants were recruited based on purposive sampling and with the help of school education managers and the participating classroom teachers.

### ***Teachers***

All of the teachers were female and had 12-24 herder pupils in their classes, except for one who had only seven herder pupils. While eight of the teachers graduated from a local Higher Education Institution [HEI], the other two had graduated from a HEI in the capital. The participants' teaching experiences ranged from one to 30 years. The teacher who had only one year of teaching experience, however, had experience in communicating with herder parents for three quarters of the school year.

### ***Pastoralist parents***

Most of the herder parents had two or three schoolchildren. Three parents had only one schoolchild. Regarding their educational background, two parents quit school when they were in their first grade and they were illiterate. One parent finished primary school and the rest finished secondary or vocational schools. These families generally resided in remote areas, 10-100 kilometers away. However, one family moved to the county center and they had three children in school. The husband herded someone else's horses 13 kilometers away from the center. Every day he went to the countryside to herd allowing his wife to take care of their children at home near the school. The other families moved their camps three to ten times a year.

Three families were hired as herders and did not own any herds themselves. These families were poor and vulnerable, and they enrolled in the Government Food Stamp Program [GFSP]. In this program, the families are supported with the provision of basic food items on a monthly basis. There was one family who had their own 100 head of livestock, but also looked after someone else's herds at the same time. These four families were paid 200,000-300,000 tugrik (US\$83-US\$124) monthly. The rest of the families owned 230-1000 head of livestock. Except for the one family who moved to the county center, the living arrangement of schoolchildren chosen by these pastoralist parents included the school dormitories, relative's places, and split households.

### ***Research instrument***

The interview protocols for teachers and herder parents were adapted from the previous work by Farrell and Collier (2010) for the purpose of the study. The original protocol was used to explore teacher educators' perceptions of family-school communication at elementary

schools serving a military population in the USA where serving members are frequently away from home.

The interview protocols were developed in English by the first author. The English was reviewed by two senior doctoral-level researchers, the second author and a native English speaker. After the review, the protocols were translated into Mongolian by the first author and the Mongolian translation was examined by a bilingual peer researcher and a Mongolian linguist.

The interview protocol for teachers included 12 questions covering three main areas: (a) teachers' own experiences in communicating with pastoralist parents (e.g., *Compared to mainstream parents, what is the involvement level of pastoralist parents generally like? How do you communicate with pastoralist parents?*); (b) teacher-parent communication challenges (e.g., *Serving this special group, a pastoralist population in particular, what unique school-family communication issues do you encounter?*); and (c) teacher education (e.g., *What experiences, if any, prepared you to engage in school and pastoralist family communication? What strategies and skills are required to manage communication challenges?*).

The second interview protocol for pastoralist parents included 10 questions. This interview guide consisted of three parts: (a) challenges pastoralist families face when they send their children to school (e.g., *What changes do you have in your family structure and roles in household/livestock chores?*); (b) pastoralist parents' own experiences in communicating with teachers (e.g., *How do you communicate with your child's teacher? How often do you attend parent-teacher meetings?*); and (c) challenges pastoralist parents face when they communicate with teachers and school (e.g., *What, if any, difficulties do you have when you communicate with teachers?*).

Prior to the data collection in the two remote county schools, the semi-structured interview questions were piloted with classroom teachers and herder parents for content validity from a school in the provincial center. The school is one of the two that provides dormitory for pupils from pastoralist families in the provincial center. The interview protocol for teachers was piloted with five primary education classroom teachers who had three to nine pastoralist pupils in their classes. The interview protocol for pastoralist parents was piloted with three pastoralist parents who had two to three schoolchildren.

### **Data collection**

The semi-structured interviews were conducted in Mongolian by the first author. The field visit was conducted in January and February in 2018 and the data were collected during the third quarter of the school year. During this time of the year temperatures reached -30 °C at night and -22 °C at the highest during the day. The data collection in School A was conducted in February and in School B in January. When the fieldwork was conducted in School A, they had a heavy snowfall in the county. There were some days of raging snowstorms in both counties. During the fieldwork, the researcher stayed in the school dormitories of the two schools; in the room for herder parents in School A dormitory and a spare residential room in School B dormitory.

Before each interview the participants were provided with an informed consent agreement in Mongolian. The participants signed the agreement if they decided to participate in the research.

The interviews were conducted in schools and in the dormitories as the weather did not allow the researcher to visit pastoralist families in remote countryside. The researcher interviewed pastoralist parents when they visited school dormitories taking their children after the second quarter break. However, one interview was conducted in a herder family's campsite, which was located 12 kilometers away from the county center. The interviews with herder



parents lasted for 25 to 45 minutes, but interviews with classroom teachers lasted for 45 to 65 minutes. The researcher asked for permission from all participants and recorded the interviews in addition to taking notes.

### ***Data analysis***

The interviews were transcribed in Mongolian by the first author. The text was then analyzed to find and understand the meaning of teachers' and pastoralist parents' experiences in relation to the phenomenon being studied in order to allow interpretation (Sloan & Bowe, 2014).

The first author conducted the analysis following the three-step-guideline by Pietkiewicz and Smith (2014). The three steps are as follows:

1. multiple reading and making notes,
2. transforming notes into emergent themes, and
3. seeking relationships and clustering themes.

The initial IPA using the Mongolian transcriptions was conducted by the first author. In the first step of the analysis, she read the transcript a number of times and listened to the audio recording a few times. After reading and listening, she made notes of reflections about the interview experience, other thoughts, and comments focusing on content and context in English. In the second step, she tried to formulate concise phrases in order to transform the English notes into emergent themes. Finally, in the third step, she looked for connections between the emerging themes and grouped them together according to conceptual similarities. Each cluster was provided with a descriptive label and the IPA was ended up with a list of major themes and sub-themes with relevant extracts from interviews followed by the first author's analytic comments (Pietkiewicz & Smith, 2014).

There are numerous validity procedures used by researchers to establish the credibility of their qualitative works, including member checking, triangulation, thick description, peer reviews and so on. Researchers employ one or more of these procedures to report their research findings (Creswell & Miller, 2000). This study followed Creswell and Miller's (2000) recommendations of applying peer debriefing to establish validity. A reviewer is someone who is familiar with the area of interest being explored and reviews the research process, and provides feedback to researchers (Creswell & Miller, 2000). The second author along with a researcher, familiar with educational research in Mongolia, conducted the peer debriefing reviews. After the first author finalized the initial analysis, the reviewers reviewed the findings and themes and provided additional feedback. With the feedback provided by the reviewers, the authors further analyzed all findings in terms of analytical reduction of the data, and some sub-themes were dropped. As a result, eight factors impacting school communication with pastoralist families emerged from the data analysis at the exosystem and macrosystem levels based on the proposed framework by Sukhbaatar and Tarkó (2018).

In IPA studies, reflexivity is very important in the data analysis. The researcher's prior understandings and personal experiences influence the data analysis and the researcher acknowledges his or her use of relevant prior experiences for interpreting meanings (Clarke, 2009; Sloan & Bowe, 2014). In this regard, the authors used their relevant prior experiences in previous studies "as an aid to data analysis and/or interpretation of meanings" (Sloan & Bowe, 2014, p. 12). This study builds on the reflections of authors based on their 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), on pre-service teachers' preparation for parental involvement (Sukhbaatar, 2014), on the history and challenges of teacher education in Mongolia (Sukhbaatar & Sukhbaatar, 2019) and on teachers' experiences in communicating with pastoralist parents (Sukhbaatar & Tarkó, 2022).

### *Ethical consideration*

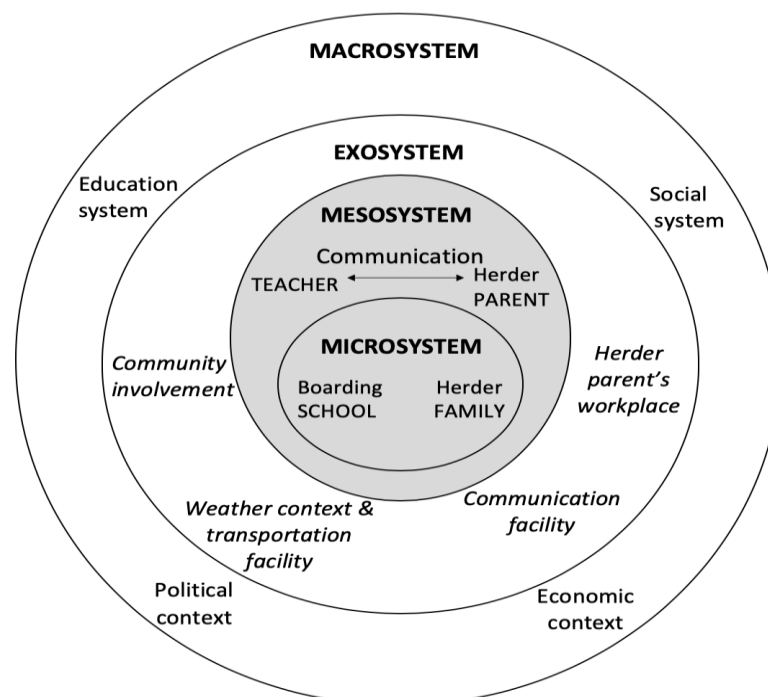
The research was approved by the Institutional Review Board of the Doctoral School of Education at the University of Szeged. Informed consent was obtained from all individual participants included in the study. The two illiterate parents were read the informed consent in Mongolian and they signed the agreement. They could learn to write their names.

### **Findings**

The findings presented in this research are organized following the proposed ecological model of contexts of school and pastoralist family communication (Sukhbaatar & Tarkó, 2018). In other words, we used the Sukhbaatar and Tarkó model (2018) as the conceptual framework to organize our findings in our partial ecological model.

#### **Figure 1**

*Contextual Factors Impacting Communication between School and Pastoralist Family in Rural Mongolia*



A partial ecological model of contextual factors impacting communication between school and pastoralist family in rural Mongolia is developed based on the 20 semi-structured interviews and IPA. Unlike the Sukhbaatar and Tarkó (2018) model this validated model has eight factors, including some new factors such as communication facility and social system. At the exosystem level, four factors were found during the analysis: the herder parent's workplace; communication facilities; the weather context and transportation facilities; and the community involvement. Four more factors emerged from the analysis at the macrosystem level: the social

system; the education system; the economic context; and the political context (Figure 1). The findings included both the participants' account of their experiences in their own words and our interpretative comments.

## **Contextual Factors in the Exosystem**

### ***Herder Parent's Workplace***

Most of the teachers admitted that in-person communication with herder parents does not often exist between them and herder parents because herder parents live in remote areas. The parents reported that they lived 10–100 kilometers away from the schools in the two counties. However, the distance was not always the same all year around. The families moved between three to 10 times a year and they had different camps for winter, spring, summer, and fall. One mother, whose child stayed with relatives, reported the following:

While we are in our winter camp, we comb the cashmere wool of our goats in March. After that we move to our spring camp, which is located three kilometers away from the winter camp. In our spring camp, we have baby animals. After the lambing season ends, we move frequently starting from June till October. In October, when it starts snowing, we come back to our winter camp.

Most of the herder participants reported that they herded their livestock by themselves as a husband-and-wife team. However, sometimes husbands herded alone when families split households to allow mothers to stay with their children in the county center. A mother said this was tough for the husband working alone:

After breakfast a regular day was followed by continuous herding tasks such as removing cow dung, milking cows, watering cows, bringing back horses from the pasture where they stayed for the night, and grazing sheep in the pasture during the day.

The herders said their children assisted them when they came back home during school breaks. It seems children were good herding assistants for their parents:

The third quarter break coincides with the lambing season. My husband, me, and our three schoolchildren [aged 13, 9, and 8] all ride horses and collect the newborn in the pastures and bring back to the warm stable.

During the breaks, herder children seemed to be busy assisting their parents with livestock herds, but they were also expected to complete homework tasks. However, after the quarter breaks teachers often contacted herder parents to inform them that their children did not complete their homework. A teacher, who had 15 herder pupils in her 4th grade class, said,

The 15 herder children did not complete homework assignments during the quarter break. I am planning to conduct a parent-teacher meeting next week about it.

It was obvious why the children did not usually complete their HW tasks over the breaks. It was interesting that some teachers seemed to not fully understand the special lifestyle situation of herders.

### ***Communication Facilities***

Teachers and parents reported that they mainly communicated with each other by making phone calls. However, sometimes mobile signals were not good enough in remote areas. In these cases, teachers' attempts to make calls to parents fail. A teacher said,

I communicate with herder parents when they come to school to pick up their children when a quarter break starts.

Usually, herder parents made phone calls by finding spots where there would be better mobile signals as one parent asserted:

The last time we [I and my husband] brought our three children to our countryside home during the weekend, but we couldn't take them back to school by Sunday night. We were busy cleaning our stable with the children all day. We needed to inform the teachers that our children were not able to come to classes on Monday, but we could not make phone calls from home because of a poor mobile signal. I and my husband rode a motorcycle at night for about two to three kilometers to find a place where we could call the three teachers. It was freezing cold, but all three teachers said OK.

This indicates that some herder parents could not get access to information on time or they missed some information due to poor mobile signals in more remote areas. In these cases, herder parents could not fully participate in class activities and teachers usually had to communicate with such herder parents just once a quarter.

### ***Weather Context and Transportation Facilities***

The participants reported that weather condition, such as heavy snowfall, restricted in-person communication due to poor infrastructure and transportation. When there was a lot of snow, herder families used different routes covered with thinner snow; as one participant mother, who brought her children back to school after the quarter break, reported, "A surrounding area of our winter camp is covered with a lot of snow. Our winter camp is 20 kilometers away. But this time we drove 45 kilometers using different routes to come to school."

One of the parents was interviewed when she brought back her two children to the school dormitory after the quarter break. She said they did not have their own vehicle, so they took a taxi. They came from their winter camp located 22 kilometers away. The family herded someone else's livestock herds mixed with their small number of livestock. The mother said she and her husband got paid 200,000 tugrik (\$83) monthly. When she was asked how much she paid for the taxi, it was 25,000 tugrik (\$10.50).

Coming to school from their winter camps seemed to be tough both economically, if they did not have their own vehicles, as well as risky and time-consuming even when they drove their own vehicles. However, when it was warmer, herder parents, who resided in less remote areas, drove their own cars or motorcycles to school. Two mothers, whose children stayed with their extended family members during school days, reported they frequently visited

their children and sometimes they drove their children back to their camps 30-40 kilometers away for weekends. When herder parents are able to come to school from their remote camps, they communicate with teachers in-person, which is the more preferable form of communication for some teachers.

### ***Community Involvement***

The interviews revealed that community involvement was one factor affecting school and herder family communication. One recent project, titled “Improving primary education outcomes for the most vulnerable children in rural Mongolia,” implemented between 2012-2017 with the Save the Children Japan (SCJ, 2017) support in one of the schools, was found to have a good communication outcome.

One teacher interviewed had been a member of a community education council for the project. The council consisted of 11 stakeholders in the county including the kindergarten director, the school social worker, a primary school teacher, the county social worker, a kindergarten teacher, a *bagh* (an administrative unit under a county) governor, a parent, and the school librarian. This teacher said that they visited herder families during the project implementation and herder parents were very happy to talk to them at their homes. The teacher said one part of the project was a home-based school preparation program for five-year-old children. Herder parents facilitated their children’s school preparation at home using learning materials they borrowed from the project. This program was well received by herder parents as the teacher said, “They liked this program because they could take the preschool program for their children and stay together at home while herding together.”

Unfortunately, the project is over now, and the community council no longer visits herder families any more due to a lack of budget to sustain the project.

Another teacher said that *bagh* governors could help strengthen school and community communication and cooperation. She added *bagh* governors could ask the school to join their *bagh* meetings. This way teachers and schools can communicate more frequently with pastoralist parents.

### **Contextual Factors in the Macrosystem**

#### ***Social System***

This factor covers herder parents’ education level, herder family structure, and teacher’s socioeconomic status. Teachers sometimes faced difficulties when they communicated with herder parents using written communication forms such as letters and text messages. Two parents, who participated in this study, were illiterate. This does not appear to be unusual: Teachers from both schools reported they had a few illiterate herder parents in their classes. A teacher said it would be better to talk to them individually because those illiterate parents were shy in group settings.

Teachers reported that after the first grade some herder mothers, who lived in split households, went back to their remote camps, and placed their children either in the school dormitories or with their extended family members. However, some teachers reported that extended family members did not feel the children’s studies were as important as the herder parents. Because of this, one teacher tended to avoid communicating with extended family members:

In my over 20 years of experience, I always try to tell herder parents not to have their children stay with their extended family members. Those relatives do not

take a good care of children and they do not help the children to do their homework.

When herder families split their households, mothers communicated with teachers frequently and facilitated their children's study at home. A teacher, who taught first-grade, said she met all her parents once a week and she informed parents about what their children learned each week. Teachers reported some herder parents tried hard to stay with their children in split households. But, as one teacher said, splitting households was also not an ideal solution.

Some teachers, especially young teachers, found it difficult to deal with some parents. Sometimes there were arguments between teachers and parents. A teacher said:

There was a parent who chided at me when I taught her left-behind child after class. The parent chided at me saying I was pressuring the child into studying extra hours however, she did not facilitate her child's learning at home.

A teacher raised concerns about the reason why parents did not understand the teachers' role: "I think the education system should be blamed for the low reputation of the teaching profession. Especially, in the primary education level, the curriculum is too much loaded."

In addition, teachers said, there were different activities besides teaching, related to project and programs with donor support, that they had to conduct. Further, they were not paid well enough: "The projects are good for pupils' development, but they make teachers more overloaded. Teachers are not paid for conducting project activities."

Teachers' salary has been an issue over the years. After a lapse of some years, teachers started protesting their poor salary again in August 2017; there has been, as a result, some increase in their salary.

### ***Education System***

Findings emerged from our IPA are related to school dormitory, homework and exams, and the quality of rural education. Most of the teachers shared their thoughts that herder children should stay in school dormitories, so there would be no more miscommunication with extended family members. Teachers said when herder children stay in school dormitories it is the dormitory teachers' responsibility to take care of the children. However, some teachers reported the pupils staying in the dormitories were not well cared for. A teacher reported: "Last year I had the 5th graders. I communicated with the dormitory teacher when the children had some problems. For instance, some pupils overslept and came to class late."

As discussed in the previous section, herder children were good assistants for their parents during their quarter breaks. At the same time, however, classroom teachers gave pupils homework assignments during the holidays. The schools and teachers seemed to be mainly concerned about homework. Moreover, the participants talked about different exams where it seemed homework could help pupils do better on these exams. A parent said, "Teachers give exams after every new lesson and inform us about our children's performance at parent-teacher meetings."

Further, teachers tended to believe that parental involvement and communication in rural schools was not as good as it is compared to schools in semi-urban and urban areas. A teacher said, "Those families, who are more concerned with their children's education transfer their children to schools in the provincial center or the capital. These parents realize the education quality is different there."

The quality of education in rural schools was mentioned by herder parents in some interviews. A parent of four children also reported he was thinking of transferring his children

to schools in the provincial center. He said he thought the quality of education in the rural school was not good. He shared the following case:

My oldest daughter moved to a school in provincial center. When she studied there, she told me that she was far behind the rest of her class. However, when she studied in this [the rural] school she was considered as a good learner.

The father added that the daughter advised him to transfer her siblings to schools in the provincial center.

### ***Economic Context***

Three issues related to the economic context of the rural schools emerged from the findings which may restrict good communication with herder parents. First, the school dormitories seemed to lack human resources. It is worth noting that there was only one dormitory teacher who worked in each school, even though there were only 40 pupils who resided in one school dormitory, but 110 pupils in the other. A teacher articulated: “There should be specialized teachers or assistant teachers to facilitate younger children’s learning and well-being for those staying in the dormitory. However, the school does not have a budget for them.”

Second, the schools lacked a budget for organizing more varieties of parental involvement activities. A budget for visiting herder families in remote areas would be very helpful. Currently teachers can only ask herder parents to visit them at schools. A teacher said:

It is better to meet herder parents in-person. If it was possible [if the school budget allowed] teachers could visit herder families in remote areas during a quarter informing them what we and children do at school and what parents should do.

Third, the interviews revealed that herder parents contribute some amount of money monthly for regular classroom maintenance and cleaning. A teacher said, “When herder parents call me, they make sure if they already contributed to the monthly money contribution besides asking how their children are doing at school.”

There are also other monetary contributions parents provide depending on school activities: “Besides the monthly cash contribution, we collect some money for the classroom painting and repair when the school year ends [in May or June].”

It can be said that one of the reasons that teachers require herder parents’ presence at collective parent-teacher meetings is to discuss these monetary contributions at meetings and to make decisions collectively: “Parents discuss money contributions at parent-teacher meetings, and they make decisions on the amount altogether. Some parents, who missed the meetings, come later to meet me.”

Some parents, however, found it was not easy to provide this kind of contribution. A parent, whose family did not own their own livestock and were enrolled in the Government Food Stamp program, said the following:

I provide monetary contributions for my three schoolchildren’s classes when there is money available for my family. I contribute when their classrooms need curtains, linoleum, painting, and some other [needs]. I need to provide the contribution because teachers and parents make these decisions together at parent-teacher meetings.

All the six full-time herder families who had their own livestock herds reported that they did not have a regular family income. They usually earn income three times a year. When it is winter, they sell meat and hides from their sheep, cows, and horses. In the spring, herders sell their goats' cashmere wool. And in the summer, they make a small income from selling their sheep's wool. These herder parents reported that providing a monthly monetary contribution was fine, as one parent said, since "the money was spent for the wellness of their children."

A lack of budgets in rural schools requires parents to make monetary contributions. For teachers, asking parents for monetary contributions is one of the reasons to communicate with pastoralist parents.

### ***Political Context***

The political context covers two issues of projects and programs by donor agencies and government policy on teacher education. Politics affects government investments in education and development and implementation of education policies (Sukhbaatar & Tarkó, 2018).

The teachers reported that there were extra projects and programs with donor support being implemented in their schools. However, almost all teachers complained about their excessive workload due to the implementation of these projects and programs. The teachers, however, acknowledged the effectiveness of some projects and programs, but felt they should be implemented more systematically: "Projects and programs yield effective results in investments in school and child development. However, they should be implemented more systematically. For example, there could be only one project or program in each academic year."

The teachers appeared to recognize the importance of communicating with herder parents. One teacher said, "When teachers communicate with parents effectively, it helps teachers finish their work on time and to reduce the risk of pupils failing in their learning and development."

As discussed, collective parent-teacher meetings and phone calls were the main modes of communication, but they were not working well with all herder parents. Clearly teachers needed to use different strategies to communicate effectively with herder parents who were living a special lifestyle and residing in isolated areas. Most of the teachers did recognize the special lifestyle of herder families and admitted that collective parent-teacher meetings were not working well for this group as one said,

Almost none of the herder parents come to parent-teacher, so parent-teacher meetings are not a very appropriate form of communication.

Teachers used only a few traditional ways to communicate with herder parents. One of the reasons behind this could be the teacher's lack of skills in working with herder parents. As one teacher reported,

I do not know how to encourage herder parents to partner with me.  
The participant teachers reported they missed having any related parental involvement topics in their pre-service teacher education as one saying:

There was no topic related to school and herder family communication in my pre-service teacher education program.



This concern leads to an important issue in Mongolian teacher education. Government policy on teacher education seems to disregard the significance of equipping teachers with skills and strategies for working with diverse families.

### **Discussion**

Building on the proposed contextual factors within the conceptual framework (Sukhbaatar & Tarkó, 2018), the present study added community involvement, communication facility, social system, and educational system to the model. However, most of these factors interacted with the factors in the proposed model. For instance, the government policies on education and teacher's workplace are grouped as part of the education system factor. The marriage institution, which was proposed as a single factor at the exosystem level is included as a part of the social system at the macrosystem level in the present model. These factors are rearranged and added in the current model in order to provide a greater insight into the communicating experiences of school and pastoralist family within these larger social systems. Unlike other studies on home-school cooperation and communication (Farrell & Collier, 2010; Pang, 2011) which used the Bronfenbrenner's model (1977), the present model included weather as an important contextual factor. The IPA results appeared to validate weather as an impacting factor in connection with transportation facilities.

The findings show that there are relationships between contextual factors at each level and also between the two levels explored in this report. This supports Pang's discussion (2011) of existing reciprocal interactions between the levels. For instance, the government policy on education, as a part of the political context at the macrosystem level, has impacts on all the factors identified. Government policies related to a tight budget of schools restrict more effective forms of rural school and pastoralist family communication such as home visits. Excessive workloads and low payment of teachers, and a lack of teacher education tend to demotivate more meaningful teacher-parent communication. Government policies and financial strains on dormitory conditions also impact school-family communication. Some findings show the relationships between the exosystem and the macrosystem in terms of government policies and a lack of infrastructure led to frustrations on both ends of the communication effort. However, government policies supporting some projects, with donor support and community involvement, were found to have effective communication results. Thus, government policies were found to play a critical role in overall school-family communication. The policy impacts in the findings are presented in order to provide a deeper and broader explanation and interpretation.

### **Political Commitment and Donor Coordination**

Previously the Soviet Union provided one third of the country's GDP (Ahearn, 2018; Weidman & Yoder, 2010) but since the breakup of the Soviet Union in the beginning of the 1990s, Mongolia had been progressing in a democratic, market-oriented direction (Weidman & Yoder, 2010) with a large reduction in Soviet economic activity. Mongolia has subsequently established and developed relations with western countries to implement educational reforms. Interestingly, "most educational reforms in Mongolia are modeled after reforms from high-income countries with sedentary populations" (Steiner-Khamsi & Stolpe, 2006, p. 1), whereas livelihoods of more than one-fourth of Mongolian households are dependent on pastoralism. This is, however, not to downplay the importance of donor coordination in educational development in Mongolia.

One example of good practices of donor coordination, and an example of accessible and acceptable formal education for nomadic pastoralists, was the project titled "Improving

primary education outcomes for the most vulnerable children in rural Mongolia” by SCJ (2017). This five-year project was implemented in four provinces and helped improve primary education outcomes for herder children. The project addressed problems faced by pastoralists including a home-based school preparation program, Child Development Centers in dormitories, and a home-based education program for dropouts.

One problem addressed was the fact that early childhood education enrollment rate among herder children had been significantly low. According to the statistics (NSOM, 2018), only 25.8% of all herder children aged under six were able to attend early childhood education in 2017. As a result of the home-based preschool preparation program, implemented in four provinces, over 4,000 five-year-old herder children completed the SCJ preschool program with the support of their herder parents at home and these children performed better in school than those who did not attend such preschool programs (SCJ, 2017).

Another problem, researchers (Steiner-Khamsi & Gerelmaa 2008) focused on, was noting that herders’ children living in boarding school dormitories were one group that was educationally underserved due to unhealthy conditions in dormitories, emotional distress caused by the child’s homesickness, poor educational performance of the child, and bullying by other pupils. The project thus included extra-curricular after-school programs and provided children with opportunities to improve their personal development, reading, writing, and creative thinking skills by effectively spending their free time in the Child Development Centers. In addition to children living in dormitories, those herder children who lived with their relatives were also allowed to spend their after-school time in the centers (SCJ, 2017).

Generally speaking, the project helped to improve herder parent involvement in children’s learning and curriculum development, helped to improve community involvement in herder children’s education, helped to develop good practices in dormitory life, and nurtured the development of those herder children who were living away from home and parents. More importantly, the project helped to improve communication between rural schools and herder families with regular visits of the community education teams to herder households in their campsites. It is a good example of “illustrat[ing] policy and practices on the ground” (Dyer, 2016, p. 39).

### **Rural School and School-Related Migration**

Mongolian boarding school dormitories are subsidized by the government and serve rural families free of charge. The boarding school system itself, however, is very expensive. The system is expensive because of subsidies for food and the long period of heating from October to May (Steiner-Khamsi & Stolpe, 2006). Even though the government has invested a lot in the school dormitories, herder children staying in these dormitories remain one of the groups that are underserved in the Mongolian education sector (Steiner-Khamsi & Stolpe, 2006). It is important to note that nationwide around 14% of school dormitories housed children in the 2017-2018 school year even though they were assessed as not meeting the government dormitory standards (MECSS, 2018). In response to this issue, the pastoralists “pursue a variety of strategies to combine mobile livestock husbandry in remote areas with accessing needed resources in settled areas” (Ahearn, 2018, p. 14). One of the strategies of split households seemed to be more likely to put pressure on herder parents.

School dormitories need more investments in provision of specialized and assistant teachers for six-year-olds, human resource development, dormitory capacity expansion, and better living conditions. This study found that currently more resource-poor and financially vulnerable families tend to accept the current dormitory conditions while other groups of herders sought better living arrangements for their children, even at the risk of their livelihoods. This finding is in line with a previous study (Steiner-Khamsi & Stolpe, 2006).

One important issue for schools is related to strictly fixed school budgets. The school budgets provided by the Mongolian government restricts school managers' abilities to plan and budget by not allowing them to adjust to the circumstances of their schools (World Bank, 2018). Low school autonomy, along with limited government subsidies to schools, force schools and teachers to request monetary contribution from parents. In fact, this is rather like Nguon's (2012) finding in Cambodia where, as a resource-poor country, they have strategies for cost-sharing between the government and parents. In Cambodia, parents respond to teachers' requests for meetings regarding monetary contribution and parents contribute cash for capital improvement, school supplies, and teacher salaries. However, the current study did not find any monetary requests related to parents' contribution to teacher salaries.

In addition, the current study revealed what was noted in a previous study (Steiner-Khamsi & Stolpe, 2006) involving school-related migration. Removing children from rural schools and sending them to better province-center schools appeared to be another common phenomenon among herder families. This finding is rather like the situation of Tibetan nomadic and semi-nomadic lifestyle families who send their children to faraway boarding schools because the schools in their hometown and villages do not offer adequate educational opportunities (Cao, 2016).

Providing well-functioning school dormitories can help ensure a balanced distribution of educational services between urban and rural areas. School-related migration of herder families with good resources seeking a better-quality education contributes to making overcrowded classes in urban areas. For instance, in the capital it is common to have classes with 50 and more pupils, but in remote rural areas sometimes there are classes with less than 20 pupils.

Krätli's 2001 study (as cited in Ahearn & Bumochir, 2016) suggested that the Mongolian boarding school system for pastoralists, even today, has been seen as a best practice compared to many other pastoralist societies in other countries. Recognizing the economic and cultural importance of these people, the Mongolian government, local governments, local communities, schools, and potential herder parents should invest more in boarding schools to make them healthier, more child-friendly, and more attractive for herders.

### **Teacher Education and the Teaching Profession**

Working with indigenous and cultural minority families should be an important part of teacher education. A study conducted in Australia (Benveniste et al., 2014) concluded that many teachers wanted improvement in their teacher education programs to be well-prepared for working with Aboriginal families. Sukhbaatar's study (2018a) noted that pre-service teachers suggested teacher education should consider herder families as an important group to deal with as working with herder parents would be more challenging than working with other parents.

Teacher education programs should provide specific topics addressing effective communication skills and strategies for communicating with parents, along with topics addressing the importance of, and barriers to, teacher-parent communication (Gisewhite et al., 2019) including contextual factors, located at ecological levels, impacting this communication beyond teacher and parent factors. Without this specific training and educating teachers for partnering with parents or caregivers, along with a mechanism for feedback to policymakers, effective government policies and school practices might not be possible.

Policies related to Mongolia's new core curricula were also seen to have an impact on the findings of this study. The newly adopted core curricula for primary-, lower secondary-, and upper secondary education have always been at the center of education policy discussions among teachers. The curricula have been criticized for not considering differences in urban and

rural school conditions, for overloading both teachers' and pupils' workloads, and for increasing the number of subject matters and lessons (MECSS, 2019). By increasing the number of subject matters, teachers have less time per topic for teaching lessons in classes and this makes teachers give more homework to pupils. The findings especially showed a conflict between homework given during quarter breaks and the busy schedule associated with livestock herding for herder pupils. This usually led to incomplete homework assignments when a new quarter started.

In the current study, most of the teachers reported they had excessive workloads due to the new core curriculum, projects, and required paperwork for which they were not paid sufficiently. Sukhbaatar (2018b) argued that a low teacher salary seemed to be one possible contributor to the overall decline in teachers' status in Mongolia. Less promising candidates are accepted, with low scores in their university entrance exams, and they join the teaching profession (Sukhbaatar, 2018b) where the amount of salary that teachers receive appear to be much lower than the workload they are expected to manage (Tsanjid, 2011). However, the aims of the State education policy (Mongolian State Parliament, 2015) and the Teacher development program (MES, 2012) is to establish a good reputation for the teaching profession by providing a concrete evaluation system of teaching; by increasing teaching skills, ethics, requirements, and responsibilities; and by improving the quality of entrants to teacher education programs (Sukhbaatar, 2018b). However, the strategies have not succeeded yet as, for instance, less promising general education graduates are still being accepted into teacher education programs.

The findings showed specific Mongolian education problems for this group which were discussed in relation to the contextual factors impacting rural school and herder family communication to inform policy makers and other educational researchers about current problems rural schools face serving and communicating with herder families. This study addresses the following three main points including some novel ideas and pedagogical relevance:

1. First, it is important to train pre-service and in-service teachers more effectively to work with herder parents and equip them with more appropriate and effective strategies that consider herder parents' special lifestyle. Schools could also allocate a budget for home visits and could cooperate with the local administration and community to visit herder families.
2. Second, the government should invest heavily in rural school dormitories to help reduce challenges (e.g., splitting households, financial burdens, etc.) posed to herders' livelihoods in relation to educating their children and to improve herder children's learning outcomes by providing professional staff and better utilities.
3. Third, there is a need to interrelate educational policies to each other and adopt them carefully considering the effectiveness for teachers, students, and diverse families. For instance, homework workloads, types of exams, curriculum expectations, teacher's workloads, amount of teacher's salaries, and family diversity should be carefully considered when educational policies are adopted. Moreover, ensuring the sustainability of successful projects by donors should be an important part of the education system.

The current research could be a good example to Gisewhite and her colleague's proposal (2019). Their call for ecologically based teacher-parent communication skills training in pre-service teacher education programs aligns quite well with the ecological argument presented in the current research. The ecological approach seems to be a viable way to approach

a deeper understanding of how to involve parents and to understand barriers to children's learning. Thus, the partial ecological model of contextual factors impacting communication between school and pastoralist family in rural Mongolia, presented in the current study, could be a foundational model for communication training in future teacher education courses. In this respect, the current study may have implications for teacher educators, researchers and education policy makers not only in Mongolia but also in other cultural settings.

The ecological systems theory reminds us that education for children involves complex contextual factors, not only home and school factors (Pang, 2011). By adapting the ecological model in this study and collecting the various factors together in the model researchers could provide a greater insight into the minority education within different cultures along with the range of helping and hindering factors (Hornby & Lafaele, 2011).

This research study is limited in that it only invited classroom teachers and herder parents whereas extended family members of pastoralist families and dormitory teachers also communicated with classroom teachers on behalf of pastoralist parents. The sample of different stakeholders including the caretakers and dormitory staff could help confirm issues raised in the study and possibly uncover other contextual factors impacting rural school and pastoralist family communication.

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