

Herder Parents' Belief Systems for Preparing Un-preschooled Children for Schooling: A Qualitative Case Study in Rural Mongolia

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People that herd livestock for a living are known as herders, and they are found throughout Mongolia's wild vast steppe. The purpose of the study is to investigate herder parents' belief systems for preparing the un-preschooled children for schooling in the context of herder community in rural Mongolia. The belief systems of herder parents are shaped by three main characteristics: They lack a clear plan for their children's education, are deeply concerned about it, and feel incapable of preparing their children for formal schooling. Herders' lives revolve around their livestock, and they must remain flexible, moving when necessary due to factors like water scarcity and poor grazing conditions caused by insufficient rain. While they desire better education for their children, the nomadic lifestyle makes it difficult to achieve. Herder parents' attitudes are contradictory; they want their children to be educated and live in urban areas, yet they also prefer them to become herders rather than educated but unemployed individuals. The hard work of herding makes them reluctant to pass it on to the next generation.

Keywords: herder parents, belief systems, un-preschooled children, rural Mongolia

Introduction

Since 1990, providing education to the herder population has been a problem. One third of the population is considered to be herders. Officially, 19% of the national population is registered as full-time herders. In 2008, Mongolian government adopted preschool education programs for the herder population which was initiated by Save the Children. Rate of the preschool education enrollment increased by 20% after the implementation of alternative programs such as ger kindergartens, visiting teachers, and shift groups (Mongolian Ministry of Education, Culture, Science and Sports, 2012). Un-preschooled children tend to lack adjustment in the kindergarten environment, and it leads them to school dropouts (Save the Children, 2013). Family plays the central role in early learning and development (Heckman, 2008). Herder parents are the decision-makers regarding their children's preschool education and they often let their children stay home with them until the children start primary school.

Many of herder children are being un-preschooled in rural Mongolia although they have choice of immigrating to urban areas to provide better education for their children and employment opportunities (Ministry of Education, Culture, and Science, 2012; Lkhagvadorj, Hauck, Dulamsuren, & Tsogtbaatar, 2013). Researchers recommended that the focus is required to families who are choosing to stay in the remote countryside (United

Nations, 2018) and more qualitative study should be conducted to understand the situation of herder community regarding preschool education (World Bank, 2016) and further research is needed to understand what terms herders' value of education (Ahearn & Bumochir, 2016). World Bank (2016) examined kindergarten quality and early development outcomes among Mongolian children. The results revealed that while progress has been made in improving access to preschool overall in the country, opportunities for herder children are the riskiest with regard to inclusion in the educational system. Further, even after significant exposure to formal preschool services in the public sector, socioeconomic gaps in outcomes remain large (World Bank, 2016) between in urban and rural areas in Mongolia. At the same time, the report showed that areas where relatively low-cost investments could reap significant gains remain unexploited, such as collaboration between herder parents, teachers, and local communities. Researchers continue to point out that children in Mongolia need preschool programs, and a large number of children still do not have access to kindergartens (National Civil Society Coalition, 2015; Ministry of Education, Culture, Science and Sports, 2012; Steiner-Khamisi & Gerelmaa, 2008). Ahearn and Bumochir (2016), Steiner-Khamisi and Gerelmaa (2008), and Steiner-Khamisi and Stople (2006) have specifically criticized the neglect of herder population education in the education system in Mongolia. The core of such criticism has been that the education system focuses on schooling for urban-area residents while disregarding the formal educational needs of herder populations in rural areas (Ahearn & Bumochir, 2016; Steiner-Khamisi & Gerelmaa, 2008).

Theoretical Framework of Developmental Niche

According to Super and Harkness (1986) framework of developmental niche, human development may be viewed from different perspectives based on divergent disciplines. For instance, in psychology, the main focus is on the process of growth and the stages of the development of specific abilities. Additionally, in anthropology, development can be viewed as learning from a wider perspective, as a process of molding culturally particular patterns of behavior and thought (Super & Harkness, 1986). Thus, the developmental niche's theoretical framework draws from several disciplines' recent theories of the relationships between individual growth and the environmental context.

Representing an attempt to synthesize anthropology and developmental psychology, the framework of the developmental niche consists of three components or subsystems: the physical and social settings of daily life, the customs and practices of care, and parental ethno-theories (psychology of caretakers) (Super & Harkness, 1981; 1982; 1986). The first of these—the child's physical and social settings—discusses where, with whom, and in what activities the child engages. The caretakers' repertoire of normative strategies for child rearing is included in the customs and practices of care, the second subsystem of the niche. Finally, the third subsystem, the psychology of caretakers, involves parental ethno-theories or parents' cultural belief systems (Harkness & Super, 1996; 2010). Broader environments impact parents' decision making, such as for religion and traditional rituals.

According to Super and Harkness (Super & Harkness, 1981; 2009), the concept of the developmental niche can be used to delineate the environment of a particular child at a particular developmental stage. More powerful for research purposes, aspects of the niche commonly found in one community can be summarized and contrasted with those in another. For example, in a study of the developmental niche with newborns in Kenya, Super and Harkness (1981; 2009) described three subsystems qualitatively in detail. These subsystems include the physical environment of the newborns, how they were treated during and after labor and delivery until six months old,

including what mothers and other caretakers did to promote the newborns' development, and the reasons for their decisions. This descriptive information provides a broad understanding of developmental niche for other researchers.

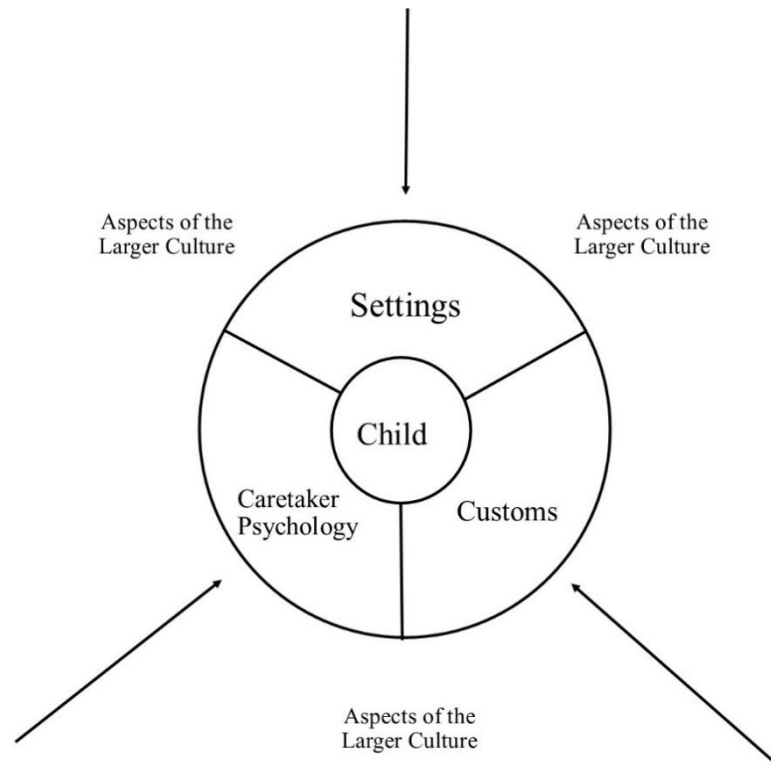


Figure 1. Theory of developmental niche. Source: Super and Harkness (2009).

Studies using the developmental niche theory are grounded in cultural contexts that expose parental ethno-theories or belief systems. The related research suggests that a qualitative approach requires researchers to be observant and keen to learn the underlying meanings in a given cultural context. From my perspective, one characteristic of the developmental niche is that this framework would not be attractive to researchers who are eager to evaluate the results of their study from a universal perspective using a more quantitative approach in developing countries. According to the research purpose and research questions, main focus of the study is herder parents' belief systems regarding their un-preschooled children's preparation for schooling. The belief systems (parental ethnotheory) are the one of the three subsystems in the developmental niche theory which is the main focus of the study.

The purpose of the study is to investigate herder parents' belief systems for preparing the un-preschooled children for schooling in the context of herder community in rural Mongolia with following research questions:

1. What are the reasons for un-preschooling?
2. How do herder parents prepare their children for formal schooling?
3. What are the herder parents' belief systems regarding preparing their un-preschooled children for formal schooling?
4. What cultural, social, political, economic, and environmental attributes influence herder parents' belief systems for preparing their children for formal schooling?

Based on the theoretical framework of developmental niche theory by Super and Harkness (1986), the data collection and analysis in the proposed study focused on herder parents' belief systems regarding their children's education and fieldwork in one rural province of rural Mongolia. Analysis of the findings will describe conditions of the un-preschooled child.

The research methodology used a qualitative case study approach (Creswell & Poth, 2018). To acquire data for exploring the situation of the un-preschooled child, field work proceeded for five weeks in two districts in the same province. The data include semi-structured interviews with herder parents and unstructured observations in home environment (Cohen, Manion, & Morrison, 2018). As for data triangulation, local kindergarten teachers, directors, and a preschool education officer were interviewed once each. The fieldwork focused on 12 cases of un-preschooled children who are five years old children's family members (parents, grandparents, and other members), kindergarten teachers, and preschool directors using observations and semi-structured interviews (Miles, Huberman, & Saldaña, 2014).

Table 1

Data Collection Methods, Instruments, and Data Analysis

	Research Question 1, 2, 3, and 4
Data sources	Herder parents, kindergarten teachers, kindergarten director, and a preschool education officer
Data collection instruments	Interview questions, voice recordings, notes, and photography
Data collection methods	Semi-structured interviews and unstructured observation
Data analysis technique	Thematic analysis

The following three main criteria will be used to choose each purposive sample: (a) a child from a herder family; (b) a preschool-aged child, and (c) the child is un-preschooled. The sample size will consist of 12 cases of un-preschooled children from herder families (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

Table 2

Sample Size

Participants	District A	District B
A female child's parent	3	3
A male child's parents	3	3
Local kindergarten teacher	1	1
Local kindergarten headmaster/director	1	1
Province-level official responsible for preschool education	1	
Official responsible for preschool education at the Ministry of Education	1	

For ethical consideration, when the researcher meets the participants first time, the study is introduced, and participants are encouraged to ask question regarding the study before they decide if they want to be the part of the study. Parents will decide if they will participate to the study with the consent or not after they are invited. They will be informed about the confidentiality of their identification during all stages of study.

Research Findings

According to the study results, there are mainly five reasons of un-preschooling. First, herder parents avoid being separated from their children. Herder parents spend most of the time with their children. Therefore, they have a strong relationship with them, and the children have no experience of being separated from their parents.

Parents will miss their children if they are away from home. Second, families move due to climate conditions. Climate conditions are unpredictable for the herder community. Livestock depends on good pasture. Herders move to places where there is good pasture. When there is enough rain, they have good pasture. If the grass is dry due to insufficient precipitation, they move to better place. Sometimes they move up to 10 times in one year. Third, children have negative experiences in kindergarten. The children lack social skills and have negative experiences at kindergarten. Four of the un-preschooled children had negative experiences after even a few days in kindergarten. The children were enrolled in kindergarten but quit because they could not adjust to the daily schedule of the program such as day nap, and timely lunch and snacks. Fourth, herder parents lack financial means. Although preschool education is free, economic conditions such as lack of extra gers (yurt) or insufficient transportation make it impossible for some families to send their children to kindergarten. In order to send their children herder families, they have to have enough money. Fifth, the family has few members or lack work force. That is, for logistical reasons, the children cannot go to kindergarten if their family has a few members.

For about the herder parents' preparing their children for schooling, herder parents do not intentionally prepare their children for formal schooling which were observed with eight cases. Other four cases, parents said they attempt to prepare their children by teaching them basic numbers and letters, but they face difficulties. They do not know how to effectively teach them, and they lack confidence. Instead, they encourage their children to obtain herding and living skills and children enjoy playing with natural toys and games. Instead, herder parents encourage their children to obtain the necessary living skills as herders rather than academic knowledge and skills. The children are involved in home chores, herding, and assisting family members in many other ways. Herder parents have certain expectations according to the children's age and gender. Although herder parents have a desire to prepare their children for school by teaching them basic numbers and letters at home, they do not have enough knowledge and confidence to prepare un-preschooled children for school. Besides, they do not have enough time due to constant involvement in herding. Children find everything playful. They play with what is available around their home, natural items such as stones, rock, tree branches, and so on. The most common play with stones is pretend play as a family in a home (ger).

There three main characteristics of the herder parents' belief systems are: There is no solid plan for their children's education, they concern a lot about their children's education, and they consider themselves as incapable for preparing formal schooling. Herders' lives totally rely on their livestock. They can decide to move anytime if the place is not good for the livestock. Lack of water and good grass due to insufficient rain are the main reasons for their constant movement. Herders do not have specific plans for their children's education, and they have to be very flexible due to climate change. They consider themselves people who depend on nature. Parents concern about their children's education very much. All the parents expressed that they want better education for their children. However, by living as herders it is impossible to achieve for them. Otherwise, they must move to urban areas by quitting herding in rural areas. Herder parents' attitudes toward their children's education are contradictory in several ways. On one hand, they want a better education for their children. Herders prefer their children to be herders instead of being unemployed educated persons who cannot do anything. On the other hand, they criticize the value of education. Herder parents want a better education for their children. They want their children to be educated people with a certain profession and living in suburban or urban areas. The main reason herder families do not want their children to be herders in the future is that herding livestock is very hard work.

All the social, cultural, economic, political, and environmental attributes are interrelated, as illustrated in the following. Socially, herders identified their participation in society as being low. Herders think they have been left out of society. If they face any difficulties, they solve them by themselves as they lack support from their local administration and community. Herders are willing to participate in social events and activities, but sometimes they cannot get the latest information because of their location. For example, if they are in a place where there is no mobile service, they cannot be reached, and cannot contact other people or access the internet. Herders feel insecure. The rural countryside used to be considered a secure place. But things are changing—herders do not feel secure anymore. For example, last year a number of livestock were stolen by strangers. Herders must protect their livestock by themselves as the local police are available only in the center of town.

Herders increasingly lack workforce. Participant households' average number of livestock was 450, and the average number of family members was five. Usually, both parents lived with their children. Culturally, herders identified themselves as people who keep the heritage of the Mongolian culture, and the way of life as herders is the national culture. Herders said by living this way they are preserving a part of culture. However, they are losing part of the culture due to innovation and technology. In modern times, people prefer convenient life and work to the hard work of a herder's life. Politically, herders state that herders should be elected for parliament because they think people who know their life condition should make decisions. At the local level, administration leaders are not elected by their plans for action but by the number of their relatives. The natural environment such as climate conditions (no rain—no grass), white mice destroying the roots of the grass, and harsh winters (-40 °C) influence parents' decisions related to their children's education.

Conclusion

The study aimed to investigate herder parents' belief systems regarding preparing their children for schooling in two towns of GobiAltai Province in rural Mongolia and the fieldwork lasted for one month in two towns. The researcher stayed only for one or two days with each herder family as the main participants to interview herder parents and observe them in the home environment.

As for additional participants, local kindergartens directors and teachers and the province preschool education officer were interviewed for data triangulation. Sample size was enough for data gathering; however, the time that spent was not sufficient enough for gaining full understanding of the belief systems of herder parents regarding their children's preparation for schooling. As for qualitative study, to understand the meanings of herder parents' speech and actions should have had more time.

Preschool alternative programs implementation needs to be constantly improved based on feedback from herder community and alternative program teachers. Twelve of the 18 town have preschool alternative programs teachers. Other six towns do not have any form of alternative programs such as ger kindergarten, visiting teacher, and shift groups. Although these towns have alternative program teachers, communication and collaboration with the herder parents are essential for successful implementation of the programs and it can reach more herder families' un-preschooled children.

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