Boarding schools in transition: A post-socialist analysis of "relevance" as an education policy problem in Mongolia

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Abstract: The rural boarding schools that were established in the socialist era to serve children in Mongolia's herding communities remain integral to national policy for ensuring universal access to formal education. Education policy actors demonstrate commitment to the socialist legacy of the schooled herder child, while at the same posing legitimate questions as to boarding schools' quality and contemporary relevance. This questioning is framed with reference to a globally-orientated discourse of standards, outcomes measurement and skills for employability. The paper argues from a post-socialist perspective that this orientation forecloses a nuanced, contextualised understanding of "relevance" as a complex educational policy problem. Drawing on policy documents and secondary literature, it develops and applies a post-socialist conceptual framework to explore the temporal and spatial orientations of rural boarding schools and their "relevance". The analysis evidences multiple, intersecting layers of change which situate the schooled herder child and constitute Mongolia"s "unfinished business of socialism" in education. The paper concludes that the layering revealed in this analysis needs to be more visible to educational policy; and that to resist oversimplifying the complex problem of education"s relevance is an ontological imperative.

Introduction

Mongolia has changed in many ways since the early 1990s, when the economic and political structures that underpinned socialism were dismantled to make way for a democratic, marketised modern economy (Bat-Erdene et al., 1996; Morris and Bruun, 2005). Its ongoing national transition to a market-driven economy is characterised inter alia by fiscal and political crises, rapid urbanisation, hollowing out of rural areas, demise of nomadic herding collectives, and high rural-urban migration. Despite the diversification of land use, employment and opportunities, the heritage of nomadic herding remains a key co-ordinate of national identity. Herding continues to be the main livelihood for at least 20 per cent of the population (Batkyuyag and Dondogdulan, 2018) (while other sources e.g. Mongolia Institute of Educational Research [MIER], 2019 claim 30 per cent), and plays a major role not only in food security, income and employment (Morris and Bruun, 2005), but also as a cultural signifier which links the traditions of the past with the socio-political cultures of the future (Ahearn, 2020; Ahearn and Bumochir, 2016).

Mongolia has nearly universal rates of primary and lower secondary school enrolment (United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization [UNESCO], 2020). National commitment to ensuring that children in herding communities are able to access formal schooling is a socio-culturally embedded socialist legacy, which has been facilitated by rural boarding schools. These schools remain integral to Mongolia's approach to schooling for all (MIER, 2019). In 1970, Unesco awarded Mongolia the Nadejda Krupskaya prize for the achievement of near total literacy (Yembuu and Munch-Erdene, 2006), a

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figure that remains a unique achievement for a country with a high proportion of herders in its population (Dyer, 2014). Schooling is, however, producing cultural change within herder households and in social constructs of "respectable identities" which are creating "new difficulties" for livelihoods as herders (Ahearn, 2018, p. 90); and it is contributing to unsustainable trends of rural-urban migration (Morris and Bruun, 2005), often resulting in poverty among herding families (Sanjaa, 2015; UNESCO, 2020).

In in-depth discussions with Dyer and Sanjaa (authors) and other team members, held between 2018-2020 in the preparation of the 2020 Mongolia Education Policy Review (EPR) (UNESCO, 2020), supported by Unesco, national policy actors demonstrated ambivalence towards herding as livelihood in future, and favoured promoting economic growth and stability via industrial expansion and urban-based formal employment (see also Ministry of Education, Culture, Science and Sports [MECCS], 2020a; UNESCO, 2020). At the same time, however, they showed strong commitment to the rural boarding school provision that predominantly serves children in herding families. Such provision, albeit now costly to staff and maintain, continues to be seen as a practical form of education delivery in sparsely populated rural areas (UNESCO, 2020). Alongside these pragmatic considerations, boarding schools emerged in a somewhat different light: as being integral to the social imaginery of a rural childhood in what is often termed the "herding nation" (MECCS, 2020a). For all these reasons, boarding schools are, and will remain for the foreseeable future, central to the tradition of inclusive formal education for herding children in Mongolia.

While clearly committed to continuing boarding school provision, policy actors nevertheless articulated concern over their "quality" and "relevance", framed in terms of their aspirations of benchmarking (and improving) Mongolia's schools' performance in global rankings of learning outcomes, and improving the fit between education and employability outside the herding sector (MIER, 2019; UNESCO, 2019, 2020). While we see these as legitimate policy concerns, we find the increasingly dominant global use of performance ranking and outcomes measurement as proxy indicators of "quality" schooling generally problematic; and the more so if takes precedence over deeper reflection on schooling's "relevance" in a specific social - and here post-socialist – context (Marzluf, 2017).

Our objective in this paper, then, is to investigate the challenging question of "relevance", raised in the education policy review process, with a historical sensitivity. To do this, we use a post-socialist lens, which enables us to tease out continuities and contradictions that reflect a layering of change that characterises what we see as the "unfinished business of socialism" (Jelača and Lugarić, 2018, p. 1) in Mongolia. We focus on the case of rural boarding schools, to examine the spatial and temporal dimensions of change and continuity; and we will argue that in the layering which this examination reveals lie the foundations of a much deeper and complex notion of schooling "relevance" than that which a decontextualized, ahistorical global framing assumes. Moreover, whilst accepting that the periphery and peripherisation are contested terms, we posit that this paper explores a doubly-situated otherness: firstly within post-socialist studies, Mongolia is usually sidelined from the dominant Central and Eastern European lines of analysis (as is still the case in Kojanic, 2020, but refuted by Shore and Trnka, 2015) and therefore brings a valuable case to bear. Secondly, nomadic herding children are peripheral within studies of the experiences of schooled children, and generally often unschooled (UNESCO, 2010) (if not uneducated (Dyer, 2014)), but Mongolia presents us with a multi-generational exception to this, crossing the period of transition.

Section 2 draws on post-socialist literature to build the idea of "layered" change and to argue for analysing change and continuity on a temporal *and* a spatial axis, in order to understand and deconstruct the education policy problem of "relevance". It foregrounds the social construction of the "schooled child" in socialist modernity, which remains central to post-transition education policy and therefore to interrogating issues of relevance today, and explains how boarding schools emerged within the socialist tradition and still continue. Section 3 explores Mongolia's transition to a pluralistic, multiparty democracy and market-orientated economy, and then focuses on the historical positioning of herding as a livelihood and national emblem, and post-transitional changes to herding: it centres the idea of the schooled *herding* child and education's "relevance" in a spatial and temporal perspective. Section 4 examines the spatial and

temporal dimensions of change and continuity of rural boarding schools, teasing out the layers that shape "relevance" in transition and constitute it as a tension. We place spatial dimensions on one axis, as boarding schools move from symbolising the peak of aspirations of socialist modernity due to their rural situation, to contemporary struggles to meet urban-facing demands and the aspirations of neo-liberal modernity and new social relations. On the second axis, we place the temporal dimensions that see boarding schools as economic-cultural legacy of socialism and its construction of childhood, of which the boarding schools and their rural development ethos were central, but which continue today as a practical means of educating rural herder children in the light of global discourses of quality and relevance. The paper concludes that political, economic and social change since 1989 does not mean the wholesale erasure of multiple constructions, discourses and materialities: the complex but intractable continuity of the Mongolian boarding school, alongside the notion of a herder child who can also be schooled, shed light on the erasures that global universalised policy language and its concerns around "quality" and "relevance" produce - and which in our analysis, must be resisted.

(Post)socialism and Childhood

Why choose a post-socialist frame in which to analyse the apparent conundrum of "relevance" that policy makers express in relation to boarding schools as a cornerstone of education policy in Mongolia? And what exactly do we understand by post-socialism conceptually? We approach post-socialism on two axes: temporality and spatiality. Firstly, to avoid "dead ends created by linear conceptualisations of post-socialist transformations" (Silova, 2018, p. 199), we opt for Stenning and Horschelmann's (2008) notion of a post-socialism borrowing from the theoretical tools of post-colonialism to develop our temporal axis. We agree that the "shadows [of the socialist past] are multiple, sometimes unpredictable; they are not linear – post-socialism does not simply come after socialism, but also against it, reflected through it" (ibid: 325; see also Ahearn, 2020). From their conceptualisation we accept that there are multiple post-socialisms and multiple histories at play in the present day, thus heightening policy-makers' bewilderment over cause, effect, quality and relevance, but allowing us to see the layering of past, present, history and memory in our analysis here. History, in this framework (which itself draws from post-structuralism), is deconstructed in its linear or teleological sense, in order to make space for "multiple histories with uncertain determinisms" (ibid).

Despite its sensitivity to temporality, we see also some limits to Stenning& Horschelmann's theorisation, in its lack of spatial analysis and, within that, a lack of consideration of material cultures and the role of the physical and built environment that other scholars of both post-socialism (Pohrib, 2016) and childhood (Kraftl, 2020) have emphasised. For this reason, we deliberately add a second axis, of spatiality, to our analysis to add a deeper inflection to our understanding of what we call post-socialist modernity in Mongolia. Insofar as *socialist* modernity could be seen to have been "materialized in its objects and embodied in its subjects" (Golubev, 2020, p. 11) we see boarding schools in Mongolia as fulfilling these functions, as well as functioning as representative and discursive spaces that may look unchanging but are, in terms of a broader cultural understanding of space, "often uncertain and shifting, or perpetually in transition" (Jelača and Lugarić, 2018, p. 10). The continuity of those material elements into the post-socialist era forms a site of fracture, meaning-making and tension as education policy takes up the now well-known and rehearsed global/neo-liberal discourses of quality, and policy actors wrestle with the notion of relevance. The schools have their own afterlife as a form of communist artefact (Pohrib, 2016), whilst housing their own evolving cultural and social meanings.

Prior to 1989, multiple constructions of childhood co-existed across the socialist world as cultures, discourses, histories and materialities weaved and interacted (Hendrick, 1997; Prout and James, 1997; Wyness, 2012), thus necessitating a divergence from suggestions of a universal socialist model. However, certain commonalities co-existed - of which the most important was the focus on education. Accounts of childhood in modernity that speak of the "schooled child" often implicitly assume this development to be a precursor to the regulated child of the modern capitalist economy (Hendrick, 1997; Wells, 2021; Wyness, 2012), but often overlook that the "schooled child" was the central tenet of socialist modernity in the

twentieth century socialist world (Marzluf, 2017; Stearns, 2021). Despite the variable motives behind the creation of mass, free, compulsory schooling for all, it was celebrated in both socialist and capitalist worlds as a necessity to create productive and duly skilled workers for the future, and, to differing extents and in different ways, for the public good. Under socialism, the schooled child was collocated with a happy and moral child in representative form and pedagogical practice (Stearns, 2021). Thus, the emergent social construction of childhood at the point of transition saw the purpose and characteristics of childhood as deeply dependent on schooling as well as contingent upon multiple local variables across the erstwhile socialist world. Within Mongolia"s education system, socialist ideologies and values instilled an idea of the "happy child" held in the embrace of helping/caring for others and the public good, making contributions to the community and living a good moral life (Demberel and Penn, 2006; Marzluf, 2017; Penn, 2001). This aligns with the commonalities of socialist construction of childhood mentioned above, but our focus on boarding schools comes into play as a means of analysing the interaction of local cultural and socio-economic realities with this overarching construction, and what this tells us about the contemporary policy question of "relevance".

Boarding schools emerged in various locations across the socialist world, seeming to be a physical manifestation of the strong focus on, and investment in, childhood and youth under socialism. A key impetus behind this development derived from an expectation that youth would be key players in the construction of the new societies which were being built (Stearns, 2021), but there were other motivations. Whether it was due to a suspicion of the ability of families to do the job of bringing up these precious bodies appropriately (Kelly, 2007), whether children and young people were simply too important to be left predominantly in the care of the family, or whether (as in Mongolia's case) boarding schools presented the only route towards producing a schooled child due to socio-economic structures, or indeed various combinations of these motivations, the policy proposal remained the same – the boarding school. New methodologies emerged, such as Makarenko's approach to schooling as an education in integrating the individual personality within the collective, that dominated educational science (Caskey, 1979).

This broad overview, though, hides national stories that tell multiple tales of the boarding school; how those boarding schools in Cuba aimed to instil the rural ethos into children which was so important to a socialist revolution launched by a rural guerrilla army (Luke, 2018); how those in Soviet Lapland gave children of the indigenous Sami population opportunities for social mobility but imposed "ethnic depreciation" (Allemann, 2018); and of course, how those in Mongolia were created with the needs of children in mobile herding families in mind. Herder children in Mongolia grew up as fully integrated members of the family production unit, caring for animals and in close proximity to nature. They learned to walk and to ride at about the same time, and absorbed the values and skills associated with being a good herder via situated learning – watching and imitating more experienced others. Once old enough to go to school, they returned from boarding schools to herding for the long summer vacation, timed to enable children to combine schooling with their informal education in herding traditions (Steiner-Khamsi and Stolpe, 2005). Even as these socio-cultural traditions adapt to the post-socialist landscape, there is a (necessary) continuity in their imaginary and practices - how else can herding be learned? – which boarding schools, themselves both constant and adapting, both encounter and (re)shape.

Whilst its political systems were transformed by the transition, the histories and memories of the socialist era and their associated histories of childhood were and are not deleted. The post-socialist analytical lens enables us to see this, and to recognise change as a process of layering, rather than as an abrupt switch towards an alternative. It may be imperfect, but the post-socialist lens denotes "an intellectual space that has the potential to disrupt the hegemony of dominant globalisation narratives, while enabling us to see, experience and interpret ongoing post-socialist education transformations through the lens of pluralities" (Chankseliani & Silova, 2018, p. 8; see also Ahearn, 2020). To this we would add tranformations in childhoods and, to illustrate this point, that one of the key elements of the socialist experience is related to the predominance of the "schooled child" in socialist modernity. This means that children in herding families in Mongolia today are themselves children of formerly schooled children, which not only attests to the socialist legacy but is also a stark point of difference between Mongolia and

countries across South Asia and Africa, where high proportions of children in herding families are, and will remain for the foreseeable future, "unschooled" (Dyer, 2014; Dyer and Rajan, 2021; Krätli and Dyer, 2009).

The Layerings of Mongolia's Transition

Mongolia is one of the world"s mostly sparsely populated countries. Its land area of 1.56 million km² is populated by about 3.2 million people (49.2 percent male, and 50.8 percent female) (MIER, 2019). By 2017, the average population density in rural areas stood at just two persons per km² (32 percent of the population) (ibid).This figure starkly contrasts with the situation in the capital Ulaanbaatar, where waves of post-transition migration and urban-focused development have seen the population rise to 311.3 persons per km² (ibid). People under 35 years of age comprise nearly two thirds of the population, which grows at an annual rate of 1.9 percent.

Mongolia's ongoing process of transition from a socialist country in the Soviet sphere to an internationally facing, pluralistic, multiparty democracy and market-orientated economy began in 1990 (B[4]at-Erdene et al., 1996). The national commitment to human rights, democratic governance and private ownership was written into the new Constitution of 1992. Extensive structural adjustment reforms were undertaken, as advocated by the international agencies who have ever since remained prominent actors, and influential globalisers, in Mongolia's development (Steiner-Khamsi and Stolpe, 2005; UNESCO, 2020). Controls on the movement of people, imposed to meet the needs of industrialisation and collectivisation within the command economy, were found to contradict new notions of rights, and lifted. In-migration to urban areas, where better markets, job opportunities and higher education provision were available, became a prominent trend (Ahearn, 2018; United Nations International Children's Emergency Fund [UNICEF], 2017).

In the education sector, the Education Law of 1991 (cit MIER, 2019) set out the basic principles of a democratically functioning education system underpinned by legislative rights: the administration and financing of public schools were decentralised; school governance was transferred to local educational boards in the *aimag;* and private schooling was authorised. This changing of educational structures away from the socialist centralised model marked a change at the macro level: but despite its high visibility, to overstate this as a "transformation" would be to erase, or at the very least to undermine, the continuities onto which these changes were layered.

Herding as a Livelihood and Emblem of the Mongolian Nation

The socialist state had invested massively in modernising rural society, through resource inputs, subsidies and favourable pricing policies. Livestock collectives (*negdels*) were set up, with compulsory membership from the 1960s, to institutionalise efficient management and ensure production. The *negdel* production unit was matched to the size and location of the administrative unit of the *soum*, an alignment that enabled *negdel* and *soum* to function jointly. *Negdels* developed processing, manufacturing, service, storage and trading facilities (Morris and Bruun, 2005, p. 6). *Soums* built stadiums and cultural palaces, marketing stations, public libraries and power stations, etc. through the 1960s-70s, and added larger schools with dormitories to the network of schools built in the 1950s. Herding was integral to the rural economy, and provision of boarding facilities for school-going children from remote rural districts further affirmed schooling's instrumental role in the state project of rural modernisation and industrialisation.

This thirty year long "golden era" (Morris and Bruun, 2005, p. 5) came to an end when, in the first transformation decade, *negdels* were dismantled and collective assets privatised. Some 75,000 nomadic herding families rapidly transitioned into private livestock ownership. The *soum* was de-linked from pastoralist production and placed under an elected governor: some 100,000 workers and *negdel* staff lost their employment when *soum*-based manufacturing and agro-processing units were closed down and assets were stripped. The services provided to livestock production as a modern agro-business vanished.

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[4] An *aimag* is a province, within which the major settlement is the "aimag centre"; we will also refer to the *soum*, a district within an *aimag*, the major settlement within which is the "soum centre".

In the instability that followed, the number of households in herding more than doubled in one decade (from 75,000 to 192,000 by 2000) as herding was largely reformed as subsistence household production, characterised by small individual livestock holdings and many "new" herders, who had previously worked in other sectors. The changing economic structures imposed uncertainties which were unknown to herders during the socialist era - privatisation, inexperience of herding, breakdown of traditional seasonal pasture use, the cash economy and loss of transport - all of which contributed to overgrazing of pastures, soil degradation and a drift to urban centres (Morris and Bruun, 2005). The high vulnerability to stress and shock that these conditions created was manifest in extensive loss of livestock in the 1999-2001 *dzud*[5] (Ahearn, 2018). Since then, recurrent *dzud*s, reflecting climate change and a lack of mechanisms at household and governance levels to manage them, have led to animal loss. Such loss engenders household-level distress, which may precipitate rural-urban migration that, in turn, exacerbates socio-economic problems in urban settings. Herding nevertheless remains a significant livelihood and sector of the national economy.

As well as new uncertainties around herding as a secure livelihood, a counter-discourse of herding is emerging. While nomadic herder identities are still celebrated in nationalist discourse (Marzluf, 2015; UNESCO, 2020) they are now also subject to being appraised as uncultured (Ahearn, 2018). Although the socialist tradition of associating formal education with holding cultured and skilled worldviews still pertains, formal education in post-socialist times is also becoming instrumental in disassociating these favoured attributes from rural spaces, and contributing to deficit discourses that inaccurately conflate herding with unskilled work (Ahearn and Bumochir, 2016; Dyer, 2014). Successful herding requires not only applied skills about animal management, but also depends on deep knowledge about the interrelations of humanity, nature and sustainability, which children learn from family members through oral traditions that pass on their culture and heritage, accompanied by hands-on experience in daily life. Increasingly, however, neither the education system - nor indeed herding families themselves – seem to validate this as knowledge that has important contemporary standing (Ahearn and Bumochir, 2016; UNESCO, 2020).

The dimensions of transition that we have outlined in this section inform our argument that the policy concern over the relevance of boarding schools must be seen in the historical and spatial perspective that a "post-socialist" analytical lens affords, rather than as an abrupt contemporary "problem" for policy. The state funded boarding schooling as a model of education provision that is uniquely suited to herder children is a signifier that post-socialist modernity is an urban *and* rural modernity and incorporates the tenets of the "schooled child" - even amidst a questioning of longstanding cultural narratives and norms pertaining to rural and herder lives. We provide further evidence for this claim in the next section.

Boarding Schools in Spatial and Temporal Perspective

As we have argued, provision of boarding schools represents both a symbolic and practical state commitment to ensuring that a herder child can also be a "schooled child". The state's current positioning is clearly demonstrated in its national development policy "Towards Mongolia"s Long-term Development Policy Vision 2050" (MECCS, 2020a). The following paragraphs from its section on "general education" (MECCS, 2020a, pp. 46-47) illustrate:

> 2.1.19. Create an enabling environment for educational institutions as per required standards by improving the school dormitory, green development facilities, sports and art halls, canteen, and information technology classrooms following the specific rules, provide an accessible learning environment for those students with disabilities, and make the child and user-friendly, safe water, toilet, hygiene facilities available in schools.

> 2.1.20. Improve the quality of education from the primary and secondary schools and the teaching contents and methods reflecting the Mongolian history, language, culture, national heritage, customs, patriotic views, personality formation and development, dual language, and universal values of humanity.

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[5] *Dzud* is caused by a sequence of summertime drought, followed by extreme cold and/or deep snowfall in winter.

2.1.24. Improve the management of the school dormitory system and child protection at the dormitories, setting the regulations that up to 10 teaching hours of those teachers who worked in the pieces of training and other activities for dormitory students to include in teachers' overall workload.

The second paragraph cited here clearly sets out the qualities and values that the current government wants to be promoted in the schooling of children, which give us an insight into broad parameters of "relevance" in policy discourse. With regard to the "quality" it invokes, and which is implicit in the other two paragraphs: no studies have so far compared the "quality" of the boarding schools under and post socialist period, although once the socially and temporally constructed nature of "quality" is recognised (Penn, 2011), this would seem a problematic undertaking. We know, however, that during the socialist period the teachers who worked in rural areas were well paid and had a good reputation, and that rural children had the same access to "quality" education as children in urban areas. This is no longer the case (Sanjaa, 2015; UNESCO, 2020), reflecting a post-socialist layering of rural structural disadvantage (Sanjaa, 2015; Maruyama et al., 2019). Highly teacher-directed learning of substantive content was, however, everywhere characteristic; and shifting this to enable "21st century education" (typically, evaluating and analyzing information and thinking creatively about how to solve real-world problems) is a dominant policy preoccupation (MIER, 2019; UNESCO, 2020). The discourses of standards, quality, management and child protection that can be read in, and from, the paragraphs of policy above comprise a further temporal layering of what "relevance" means.

Boarding Schools in Transition

The story of the creation and trajectory of boarding school provision before and after 1990 merits some attention. Education provision in Mongolia is founded on a Soviet-inspired model of secular education that displaced pre-socialist traditions prevailing when the Mongolian People's Republic was formed in the early 1920s (UNESCO, 2020). Decision-making, planning and policy formulation were the prerogative of the Party. Educational institutions were run by the government in a highly uniform system that operated under the oversight of the Ministry of Education, which directed regional and local agencies (Bat-Erdene et al., 1996). Formal schooling was made compulsory in the 1950s, and under socialist state policies, it was well funded and reached the majority of the population (Steiner-Khamsi and Stolpe, 2005; UNESCO, 2020). The education system expanded quickly in the 1970s and 1980s, as the idea of the "schooled child" took hold in Mongolia. Via its provision of secondary education for those in *negdels*, state farms and rural industries, the socialist regime established being educated as a social norm among the rural population. The school dormitory system, supported since 1982 by special provisions in the Education Law (Maruyama et al., 2019), played a crucial role in enabling schooling and rural childhoods to be integrated by offering accommodation at school to all children who needed it, including those of workers, civil servants, employees, and members of agricultural farms and *negdels* (Steiner-Khamsi and Stolpe, 2005, p. 26).

This was particularly important for families in herding, leading Steiner-Khamsi and Stolpe (2005) to identify Mongolia's boarding schools as a "best practice" model in nomadic education (with which more recent scholarship concurs, see Dyer, 2014; Krätli and Dyer, 2009; UNESCO, 2010). Integrative, child-friendly, and geographically close to the family, these schools ensured that "children did not emotionally distance themselves from the life of nomadic pastoralists and continued identifying with the parents' lifestyle" (Steiner-Khamsi and Stolpe, 2005, p. 26).

When the Soviet Union broke up, the Soviet subsidies that had supported free education for every child ceased (Engel et al., 2014). Between 1990-92, public spending on education as a share of GDP almost halved (ibid). Fiscal deficits constrained public spending on education, the *negdels* that had contributed some 10 per cent of capital costs for school and dormitory buildings had dissolved (Steiner-Khamsi and Stolpe, 2005), and families had to absorb education costs that the state had previously borne, despite the changed and difficult circumstances of economic transition and widespread unemployment. Many rural schools went bankrupt and teachers were either not paid, or paid in-kind with flour or meat, resulting in many teachers leaving the profession (UNESCO, 2020). The secondary school Gross Enrolment Rate, which had grown to 87% by the mid-1980s, declined to a 30-year low of 61% in 1997 (Engel et al., 2014). While

withdrawing children from school was a common response to the economic collapse of the 1990s, many more girls than boys stayed in school (71% against 50% (ibid)), as boys were more likely to be withdrawn to work. The boarding school model managed to withstand this tide of change, although costs negatively affected enrolments and teacher attrition was high.

Although Mongolia's education decline was the most rapid and deepest of all the Central Asian transition economies, recovery was spectacular (UNESCO, 2020), and by 2003, enrolment for both genders had returned to pre-1990 levels. Fees for dormitory services had been introduced in 1995, but state funding was reinstated in 2000 to arrest the decline in enrolment, retention and dormitory use (Maruyama et al., 2019; Batkhyuyag & Dondogdulam, 2018). The will to maintain the schools – and with it, to ensure universal access to schooling – remained, and still does. Yet there is a persistent post 1990s trend of boys dropping out of secondary schooling, usually to help with herding (MIER, 2019), which problematizes the contemporary relationship between herding and schooling. There remains, too, a marked trend of higher female retention throughout secondary schooling, and of higher female enrolment and graduation from tertiary education (MIER, 2019; UNESCO, 2020) which fuel a pattern of "winters without women" (Ahearn, 2018) among herders, to which we will return below.

We pause here to note that this is another argument for a post-socialist analytical lens, which sees beyond the narrative associated with a lens of globalisation. International initiatives are heavily focused on the "global" problem of ensuring girls" education at least becomes at par with that of boys' (on which the UN-commissioned Global Education Monitoring Reports regularly report). Mongolia's history and specifics of its socialist trajectory are at odds with this trend. This is evidence that local specificities need to be articulated and not subsumed into an assumed "global" position. Indeed, the global neoliberal model might lead to a celebration of Mongolia's very evident gender "counter trend" (UNESCO, 2020) in education, and obscure the boys who are withdrawn from school – at the cost, we propose, of probing what both trends might reveal about the policy question of schooling's "relevance".

Boarding Schools - In Decline?

By 2018-19, official statistics show that the vast majority of those applying for a dormitory place were from herding families (76.1 percent - 5,492 applicants of which 4,182 were from herder families (MIER, 2019)); for the 2016/17 academic year, herders" children comprised over two thirds of all children using dormitories. To give some spatial contours to this, we note that 80 percent of Mongolia's 341 *soums* are located more than 100 km from the *aimag* centres and herder households live well outside the *soum* centres (MIER, 2019). Sanjaa (2015) reminds us, too, that distance from the nomadic *ger* [tent] home to school in the *soum* centre is not fixed, but temporally variable - from 30-200 km, depending on the season and influences of weather on pasture availability.

Between 2014-17, 37 new dormitories were built and there are plans for 19 more (UNESCO, 2020). Demand continues to outstrip the supply of dormitory places - in 2018-19, only 87 per cent of those who applied gained a place. This demonstrates their continued importance and relevance as a form of rural provision that can enable herder families' access to schooling, sustaining the progress made both pre- and post-transition in universalising enrolment. This spatial stability is, however, now intersected by a contemporary discourse of concern over "quality" and child protection (Sanjaa, 2015). International reports have highlighted that the "chronically low" level of capital investment in the post-command economy's education sector (Maruyama et al., 2019) has been insufficient to ensure either that there are enough dormitories, or that they are fit to accommodate students. Many were built in the 1970s and 1980s (ibid) and despite renovations, by 2016/17, of the 513 functional dormitories, 99 (19 per cent) did not meet national standards for school buildings (ibid; MIER, 2019), nor provide adequate protection from precipitation and wind, or have adequate heating systems.

We see a further layering of global discourses in reports interrogating the material inadequacies of the dormitories themselves, which are now cast in terms of child protection. This is a constituent part of the move towards a new construction of "global" childhood influenced by the concept of risk (Prout, 2005) and rights. The post-socialist funding model excepts dormitory staff salaries and dormitory meals, but

places other funding requirements for dormitories in competition with calls on a school budget. Dormitories are often not only structurally poor, but deficient in material conditions. Although national norms for WASH in school, kindergarten and dormitory facilities were established in 2015 (MIER, 2019), there are many reports of provision that is substandard (MIER, 2019; UNESCO, 2020). The Asian Development Bank's 2019 baseline survey, which sampled 78 of the country's 158 dormitories, found that fewer than 40 per cent had indoor latrines (and nearly two thirds of those lacked individual doors, and less than one third had locks). For many children, this means having to use outdoor latrines at all times, in extremely harsh winter weather - including during the night - which is now interpreted as intimidating for early-grade students, girls, and students with disabilities (Maruyama et al., 2019). A shortage of beds means that one fifth of sampled children have to share; about a quarter of dormitories had enough chairs and less than a third had enough tables (ibid). Dormitories almost everywhere are a far cry from the "home from home" they are supposed to be (Sanjaa, 2015).

Other studies show that children who use dormitories are exposed to intimidation, bullying and abuse that includes corporal punishment, and to group discrimination that targets herder children (Save the Children Japan, 2015). Another study (NLM and MECSS, 2017, cit Batkhyuyag & Dondogdulam, 2018) found that 25 per cent of 6-8 year old children in dormitories were in poor facilities and on their own. Calls for a child protection system to safeguard all potentially vulnerable children using dormitories are not new (cf. Sanjaa, 2015; Save the Children Japan, 2015). The Asia Development Bank-commissioned study (Maruyama et al., 2019) also notes that in 2015, less than one third of primary students in dormitories regularly participated in study, reading, and extracurricular activities in dormitories, which it attributes to high student–staff ratios and lack of appropriately qualified and skilled dormitory teachers and staff. There is no system for preparing dormitory teachers: generally, one teacher is made responsible for dormitory operation under the supervision of the school principal, and teachers take turns to engage in extracurricular, dormitory activities.

All the studies cited here conclude that these issues act as disincentives for parents to send children to boarding school, especially very young children. But, returning to the matter of "relevance", we find that this globally orientated discourse around "quality" tends to overshadow the locally significant problem, for herding families, of lowering the age of compulsory schooling in the early post-socialist period. This is insightful in relation to considering "relevance" when we juxtapose the construct of the "at risk" child with other temporal dimensions that affect herding children's take-up of dormitory places. First, reflecting globalisation, came the national political aspiration of international parity around the temporality of being a "schooled child". Two laws, passed in quick succession, lowered the age for compulsory enrolment: from eight to seven years in 2004, and then to six 2008. These brought Mongolia in line with international norms regarding the starting age and duration of schooling (UNESCO, 2020) but displaced the norm, established in socialist times, of enabling children to gain a solid foundation in herding skills before adding formal schooling, and of starting school at an age when parents felt they were ready to live away from the family setting. In response, to deal with the earlier age of enrolment, parental coping strategies have included withdrawing a young child and re-enrolling him/her when parents feel s/he is physically and emotionally more mature. This practice contributes to the presence of "over-age" children (MIER, 2019) in the system, which is now a global signifier of an inefficient education system (and hence interpreted as a dimension of poor "quality"), rather than understood to reflect norms about age-appropriate initial enrolment that have become misaligned.

As an indication that the socialist schooled-happy child may well have been rather more of a discursive construct than a material reality, Steiner-Khamsi and Stolpe (2005) found that parents' own unhappy memories of boarding schools prompt them to seek an alternative for their own children. Among herders, Maruyama et al., (2019) report (as, earlier, did Sanjaa (2015)), that most parents place their children in dormitories by necessity and despite concerns over school quality, etc.:

> "In Erdenedalai, a good dormitory was noted by participants as one of the reasons why children are sent to the school.
> "Children are quite comfortable in these dormitories. Sometimes I ask the children how they are. They say OK. Children have iron, water boiler and TV. They eat 3-4 times a day. Sometimes teachers visit the kitchen. Food was

good. The dormitory has electricity 24 hours. 3-4 children live in one room. Children like to live in dormitory. Nobody escapes or wants to leave" (Parents' focus group, Dundgobi, Erdenedalai). Other areas tell a more mixed story. In areas like Khalkhgol, families preferred to place children within the houses of relatives or other people. Their *soum* school's dormitory was only accommodating 15 children at the time of the research, much less than its capacity of 300. One expert from one of the sites told us: "Food quality at dormitory is very low. The current cook is not a professional cook. When we visit the dormitory, children say 'uncle, we are hungry'". (Maruyama et al., 2019, p. 39)

Conceptualising the dormitories in terms of risk, as the reports cited do, highlights an important children's right deficit whilst also demonstrating a new social layering that stems from the fractures in the boarding model that we have drawn out, and that acts to the disadvantage of herder children. This deficit must be attended to, but we would argue against allowing this layering to contribute to an under-representation of the persisting importance of boarding schooling to national commitment to sustaining the norm of the schooled herder child. Nevertheless, the positive discourse of education for all children combined with the negative discourse of low quality material culture makes the boarding school an uneasy and complex policy proposition. This is reflected in policy actors' concern over "relevance" in the context of a post-socialist modernity which shares with its socialist antecedents a future orientation, but does not share with socialist modernity the commitment to rural development. Then, the notion of high levels of investment in a highly costly educational product such as the boarding school is a difficult policy call if the argument for "relevance" (as relevance is understood) cannot be strengthened. Since it is now predominantly herding families in financial hardship who rely on them, dormitories also embody post-socialist social stratification, the beginnings of which Steiner-Khamsi and Stolpe's (2005) study reported.

Changes in Herding Catalysed by Schooling

The at-once changed and unchanging materiality of boarding schools in the production of a "schooled child" in post-socialist transition also contributes a layer of change in how herding households are organising and practising herding (Ahearn, 2018). In 2016/17, only about one fifth of herder children enrolled in Grade 1 were staying in dormitories (MIER 2019; Batkhyuyag & Dondogdulam, 2018). This phenomenon is produced by "household splitting" (Ahearn 2018; Batkhyuyag & Dondogdulam, 2018): the adult male(s) remain in the rural area for the winter to herd animals; the mother / adult female(s) migrate in the autumn with children to the *soum* centres, preferably to live with urban-based relatives (Sanjaa, 2015). In-migrating women establish a "home" from which young children can attend school, and/or access early childhood education. This strategy enables children to benefit from urban advantage: to access schools whose quality is perceived to be higher than in rural boarding schools, and early childhood provision that is less available in rural settings (UNESCO, 2020). Splitting a household between remote seasonal winter pastures and school locations in the winter months is a spatio-temporal strategy that enables a family to sustain the tradition of schooling within new parameters set by the state in the post-socialist period, but the resulting "winters without women" (Ahearn, 2018) in rural areas are re-shaping childhoods. Long parental separations can contribute to decisions to divorce (ibid), undermining the family structure; material poverty increases for the family when mothers cannot gain employment in semi-urban areas (International Organization for Migration, 2018); mothers working in the urban economy offer role models for income generation that are no longer closely linked to herding; and urban living may undermine children's desire for a rural livelihood in the increasingly urban-oriented frame. Education policy communities are highly aware of these socio-economic dynamics, which inform their questioning of boarding schools' "relevance".

Schooling and boarding, while nominally free, have associated costs that can undermine herder livelihoods by changing how households invest time, labour, and financial resources, and hence the prospects for children's futures. While a herding household has a composition and life cycle that will change over time, its wealth is mostly in animal assets. Combining schooling with herding in the contemporary market economy may require a household to hire in labour to avoid withdrawing older boys from school. In the likely absence of other economic capital, livestock has be used as collateral for a bank loan to cover costs, which "financialises" a household (Ahearn and Bumochir, 2016) but avoids having to sell off livestock to raise cash in the short term, with the potentially enduring consequence of reducing reproductive capital. This has impoverishing effects which are reflected in national measures of rural

poverty which – with nearly 30 per cent of households below the poverty line - remain high (Sanjaa, 2015; UNESCO, 2020).

Temporal and Spatial Intersections in Rural (Herding) Perspective

Tensions of these intersections play out in the persistently gendered trend of boys dropping out of secondary school to return to herding (UNESCO, 2020), and, as we noted earlier, an emerging public and private discourse of herding as "uncultured" and "unskilled" (Ahearn and Bumochir, 2016), rather than as dependent on people whose skills in herding derive from a substantial informal knowledge base that is not augmented by the contents of the formal school curriculum (Sanjaa, 2015).

The curriculum itself has acquired a post-socialist temporal layering, from which we pick out two dimensions for consideration here: the alignment of curriculum policy with global discourse, and the subtle, simultaneous (re)positioning of herding. Prior to 1998, secondary schools followed a "lesson programme" which listed the items to be studied within a certain subject. Global terminology began to make itself visible in the "standard of primary and secondary education content", approved in 1998, which was renewed and overlaid in 2004 by the Mongolian "competency based education standard". Amidst the policy level discourse of curriculum standards and competencies, textbooks include content about herding traditions and life skills which reflects an idea of herding as national heritage - rather than of formal education as a means of sustaining herding in the future. This same discourse shapes a notion of schooling "relevance" that, located within the post-socialist economic transition, is prominently associated with employability and which, in turn, drives the current emphasis (on which donors exert considerable influence) on improving technical and vocational training programmes that stress industrial and professional occupations - and hardly mention herding (UNESCO, 2020).

The newly published Education Sector Mid-Term Development Plan (ESMTDP) 2021-2030 (MECSS, 2020b), developed with external agency support, exemplifies the shifting post-socialist national-global imaginary of children's life trajectories that are caught up in concerns of "relevance". This core policy framework erases herding entirely from its pages (neither herding nor boarding schools are mentioned at all). It frames a view of education as central to shaping the citizens of the future, which is familiar from the socialist tradition and now presents in a global temporality:

> The aim of the ESMTDP is to ensure the holistic development of Mongolian citizens, with competencies to work and live in the digital era, actively participate in knowledge-based society, and engage in lifelong learning through quality, open, inclusive and flexible education services that meet their development needs. The Plan envisions the continuous development of the human being from birth throughout life by keeping pace with the Industrial Revolution 4.0, while considering the fact that new technologies such as the Internet of Things, Big Data and Artificial Intelligence are concretely influencing the industrial sectors (MECSS, 2020b, p. 46).

Across the education sector, then, the temporal dimension of post-socialism intersects with a spatiality that is framed in relation to the urban / industrial, and neglects rural futures (including the decimation of fragile rangeland ecologies by relentless expansion of extractive heavy industries, on which national economic development is predicated (UNESCO, 2020)). This intersection is reflected in the new, globally-referent discourses of schooling standards and "quality", and the relationship between learning outcomes, certification and employment – all of which are contemporary indicators of educational "relevance" in contexts of urbanised modernity. Out-migration and demographic decline in rural areas are accompanied by overcrowded schools in urban centres and such low student numbers in rural areas that subject-specialist teaching is compromised. This further reinforces the negative perceptions of rural boarding school quality that already surface in repeated demands to improve the supply of textbooks and, indeed, of teachers, alongside calls for training to update rural teachers' knowledge of content and pedagogical approaches (MIER, 2019; UNESCO, 2020). This is a particularly challenging cycle for schools in the *soums*, the erstwhile spatial anchors of rural life, for whom the de-registration of children that enables them to attend school elsewhere cannot do other than reduce their own budget (Batbaatar et al., 2005, p. 30).

Meanwhile, in urban school settings, in-migrating children from herding families who have been

attending school in rural settings have been able, by virtue of dormitory provision, to embark on being "schooled children". Their re-registration in urban schools marks parental success and capacity to source an alternative that is now associated with better quality provision; yet these children are widely found to be behind in their studies and subject to a identity-related discrimination against herders (Batbaatar et al., 2005, p. 37) that conflicts with the projection in policy discourses of herding as Mongolia's distinctive national emblem.

Conclusion

By focusing on the boarding school as a case study that was both somewhat typical within the socialist world and unique for mobile herding children, we have uncovered not only the complexities of the policy problem of "relevance", but also the potentialities of a theoretically and historically sensitive approach to education policy in one of many post-socialisms. The exploration of tensions in the spatial and temporal orientations of Mongolian schooling has shown that the alignment of socialism with national identity was writ large on the rural landscape in the form of boarding schools; and they remain a material legacy and a space of national identity. As a policy proposition to attain full schooling for the herder child, the rural boarding school remains pragmatic and viable (if not uncomplicated) and enjoys policy support. But, as we have shown in our analysis of boarding schools and what they tell us about formal schooling's "relevance" in place and time, change is layered in ways that create complex realities. The meaning of both the boarding school and the herding nation continue to evolve, and through our exploration we have shed some light on those changes in meaning and the ways in which these intersect with social relations, cultures and policy.

Our analysis worked with the reality that there are clear fractures emerging in herder childhoods in Mongolia. The "schooled" rural child, comprising the education of herder children whose future is to maintain the core rural culture that is central to national identity, begins to recede as post-socialist modernity sees both a rural *and* urban future for Mongolia's children. Yet simultaneously, the rural boarding schools remain to educate the children of herders. While their material force stays and is expanded, they act as spaces of fracture and encounter where long standing ideologies and cultures meet - but do not necessarily integrate with - globalised forces and discourses and new material and socio-economic realities, as we have shown.

The case presented here, of how herder children in contemporary Mongolia continue to be schooled, kicks back against global-dominated policy initiatives that invoke "relevance" as a means of suppression or erasure of the realities and localised identities of everyday lives (MECSS, 2020b). The deep complexity of layered change, revealed through our post-socialist lens, is largely foreclosed from scrutiny in the neo-liberal, globalised frame of reference that now exerts a strong influence over national education policy actors (UNESCO, 2020). In the education sector, that frame lends itself to a perhaps convenient, yet ahistorical and socio-spatially dislocated, over-simplification in how schooling's "relevance" is conceptualised. Our analysis refutes this simplification: indeed, we would argue that it is an ontological imperative to refuse this pressure.

Declarations

Author's Declarations

Publisher's Declarations

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