

Study on Parental Involvement Preparation at a Preservice Institution in Mongolia

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Abstract

In 2008, in order to meet global standards for basic education, Mongolia adopted a new educational system replacing an 11-year system, under which children started primary school at age seven, with a 12-year system in which schooling commences at age six. Since education should be an active collaboration between school and family, having younger students in the new school system means parental support becomes even more essential in assisting primary school teachers to manage the higher learning expectations implied by this change. This study is aimed at investigating how primary education preservice training at one of the three national teacher-training institutions in Mongolia prepares teachers for parental involvement. To meet this objective, the study conducted document analysis, questionnaire surveys, and key-informant interviews. Thirty-two primary education major senior students were surveyed, while 17 stakeholders were interviewed. Participants expressed their concerns about barriers to parental involvement and teachers' overall lack of skills in developing parental involvement approaches in schools. The student teaching practice was found to be what best prepared preservice teachers for the topic, but their supervising classroom teachers also played a key role in shaping preservice teachers for parental involvement. However, classroom teachers have dissimilar skills in and attitudes towards involving parents. In addition to teachers' lack of skills in implementing parental involvement activities, heavy workloads, a limited understanding of family diversity, and gender issues also contributed to a lack of parental involvement.

Key Words: Mongolia, education system, parental involvement, preservice teacher candidates, primary schools, classroom teachers, student achievement

Introduction

Background

The contemporary education system of Mongolia was established in 1921 with a primary school consisting of just two teachers and 40 students (Shagdar & Batsaihan, 2010). However, monastic schools based on Tibetan Buddhism, which started in the second half of the 16th century, still existed in the early 20th century (Steiner-Khamsi & Stolpe, 2006). During this time, parents themselves were able to decide where to send their children, whether to the contemporary model school or to monastic schools. Parental involvement in children's learning and development, therefore, is not a new topic in Mongolia.

Parental involvement in the contemporary education of Mongolia can be divided into the following two eras: (1) the socialist era (up to 1990); and (2) the post-socialist era (from 1990 to the present). During the socialist era, education and social policies took priority because these areas were considered the engine of development (Steiner-Khamsi & Stolpe, 2006). Teachers were pleased that their profession brought them a good reputation in the society and that it paid well. The teacher was expected to be "the one who knows" (Steiner-Khamsi & Stolpe, 2006), and teachers were well respected. Overall, during this period parental involvement was systematically managed by the People's Revolutionary Party policies, and teachers worked in close collaboration with parents on children's learning and development.

The new system of market economy since the 1990s brought many changes in social institutions. State-owned enterprises were closed, and the sudden withdrawal of social services intensified. As a result of the economic shock, there were job losses in many sectors. Beyond these sudden changes, there has also been an increase in domestic violence, alcohol abuse, insecurity, and family breakups due to migration to seek work (Asian Development Bank [ADB], 2005). Now family patterns differ greatly from the past with the social and economic phenomena of divorce, with single parents, with lengthened work hours, with poverty, and with other changes that are impacting family patterns.

Public attitudes towards the teaching profession have also changed. Since the dramatic changes of 1990, teachers' status has dropped, and public shaming and humiliation of teachers has been observed due to differences in institutional technology resources available in urban areas compared to the rest of Mongolia (Steiner-Khamsi & Stolpe, 2006). Less promising general education graduates are those who now decide to be teachers. Low salary seems to be one

of the main demotivating factors for the teaching profession. Since 1990, secondary school teachers nationwide have gone on strike a few times because of their low salaries. Unlike the socialist era, the collaboration between teacher and parent is no longer assured. However, schools and teachers both acknowledge the importance of parental involvement, and parental involvement still exists to certain degrees.

To successfully teach children, teacher–parent collaboration is very important. Prospective teachers should understand that educating children is a collaborative effort, and the collaboration of teachers, parents, and all other professionals working with children results in the successful education of children (Flanigan, 2007). In accordance with the new education system adoption in 2008 (see Table 1), a Curriculum Framework Document was developed by the three primary education teacher-training institutions in Mongolia. The new national curriculum for the 12-year system placed new demands on teachers’ skills, competencies, and knowledge, with which the previous preservice teacher training was ill-equipped to cope (UNESCO-IBE, 2010).

Table 1. Changes in the Education System of Mongolia

School Years	Before 2005/2006	2005/2006– 2007/2008	Since 2008/2009
Years of schooling	10	11	12
Grade level:			
<i>Primary</i>	4	5	5
<i>Lower secondary</i>	4	4	4
<i>Upper secondary</i>	2	2	3
Start age	8	7	6

Family background can be an important factor influencing the level of parental involvement in their child’s learning. Like in other countries, often preservice teachers’ backgrounds are different from very poor families, and new teachers may have little knowledge of the challenges disadvantaged parents face when they try to get involved in their children’s education (Ratcliff & Hunt, 2009). For this reason, teacher preparation programs need to provide knowledge and understanding of the diverse lives of families and provide skills to promote positive home–school communication (Baum & McMurray-Schwarz, 2004; Hiatt-Michael, 2001, 2006; Ratcliff & Hunt, 2009). These observations support the need for a serious investigation into how preservice training prepares prospective teachers for parental involvement at Dornod Institute, especially now as primary education teachers have begun working with younger age students.

Parental Involvement in Mongolia

Since educating children is a collaboration between school and family, parents can be a great help for primary teachers facing increased expectations due to starting with younger students in the school system. Mongolia already has a number of activities that are traditionally used by teachers to facilitate parental involvement. Sosorbaram (2010a) surveyed more than 500 teachers and managers from rural and urban areas in Mongolia and identified the following regular parental involvement activities: (a) parents attending meetings, (b) parents sitting in classes, (c) parents helping decorate classrooms, (d) parents attending pedagogical workshops, (e) parents receiving regular reports on students, (f) parents competing in sports competitions or quiz contests, and (g) parents attending graduation day.

Both primary education teachers' responsibilities and parents' responsibilities are essential for children's learning and their educational achievement. Parents or caretakers have responsibilities for supporting and developing their children's talents and skills from their early years, for providing a learning environment, for collaborating with teachers, and for assisting with choice of profession (Education Law of Mongolia, 2002, Article 46.2.1.).

Learning not only goes on in classrooms, but it must continue outside the classroom at home. Therefore, beyond the common Mongolian practice of simply providing financial support, parents should also get actively involved in their children's learning (Sosorbaram, 2010b). One of the responsibilities of parents stated in the Education Law of Mongolia is to learn to teach their children at home (Article 46.2.4.). Parental involvement in school work done at home has been shown to improve students' understanding of what was taught and also was found to motivate students to learn more (Dashdolgors, 2011). Thus, practical parental involvement in children's learning at home is a valuable asset. According to the results of a survey conducted among 42 parents of primary level 4th year students at public school №17 in Ulaanbaatar, 70% of parents responded that they talk to their children about their classes, and 60% of them said they help their children with homework (Shurenchimeg, 2011). Parental involvement activities—ranging from parents talking to children about their classes to parents helping children at home—can make a significant impact on student achievement.

The project of supporting education in rural areas, initiated by the Ministry of Education, Culture, and Science of Mongolia and implemented in 2007–2008 with financial support from the World Bank, discussed factors affecting lower academic achievement of primary school students. Sosorbaram (2010a) argues those factors could be categorized in the following ways: (1) related to

teaching or teachers—33.3%, (2) related to parents—28.6%, (3) related to social issues—23.8%, and (4) related to students—14.3%. The factors related to teachers or teaching and parents make up the highest percentages. This raises questions as to how parents impact academic achievement and why teachers do not encourage parents and improve parental involvement.

Improving parental involvement in teaching and learning is beneficial to families in that they support educational reforms, to children in that they improve their educational achievement, and to teachers in that they obtain a better reputation (Sosorbaram, 2010b). However, when parents lack the knowledge and skills necessary to foster the self-esteem and motivation that children need for successful learning, the children's overall educational achievement suffers. As such, the Ministry of Education, Culture, and Science believes it is essential to improve parental involvement in students' learning (Ministry of Education, Culture, and Science, Mongolia, 2009). Parents alone cannot accomplish parental involvement; teachers must facilitate this process. Therefore, in order to help students improve school achievement, it is critical that primary education teachers be trained to have good skills in facilitating collaborations between schools and parents.

Literature Review

Defining Parental Involvement

Many studies in North America and elsewhere have shown that parental involvement is one of the main factors influencing children's academic achievement and development (Broussard, 2000; DeHass, 2005; Hiatt-Michael, 2001; Hoover-Dempsey, Walker, Jones, & Reed, 2002; Katz & Bauch, 1999; Lemmer, 2007; Ratcliff & Hunt, 2009; Uludag, 2008). There are many different ways that parents could be involved in their children's education. Ratcliff and Hunt (2009) stated that all types of family interaction with educators (policymaking, parent education, volunteer activities, fundraising, and the simple exchange of information) can be used to describe family involvement. In their qualitative study on school personnels' perceptions of family-school communication, Farrell and Collier (2010) used the term "family involvement" to refer to parental participation in school-related activities. However, Abdullah et al. (2011) noted that the activities at home between a parent and child or at school between a teacher and a parent could define parental involvement. Epstein introduced a theory of overlapping spheres of influence in 1987 (Epstein, 2011), explaining how school, family, and community affect children's learning and development, with the family and school spheres generally overlapping the most when children are in preschool and early primary grades.

When teachers invite parents to be part of their child's education, a greater overlap of these spheres occurs, benefitting the child.

Apart from the aforementioned parental involvement formats, types, and activities identified in Western studies, Nguon (2012) reported three dimensions of parental involvement in his work conducted in Cambodia: school-based involvement, home-based involvement, and parental resourcing of schooling. It was found in his study that of the three dimensions, parental resourcing of schooling was most significantly associated with students' achievement.

Benefits of Parental Involvement

Studies have shown that when home and school work together effectively, students have greater success in their learning and development with better academic results and social and emotional benefits (Abdullah et al., 2011; Epstein & Sanders, 2006; Flynn, 2007). According to studies on parental involvement (Abdullah et al., 2011; Broussard, 2000; DeHass 2005; Garcia, 2004; Graue & Brown, 2003; Hiatt-Michael, 2001; Lemmer, 2007; Poulou & Marsagouras, 2007), good partnerships between school and family related positively to many beneficial results for children, parents, teachers, schools, and the community.

Parents are their children's very first educators, and they have knowledge of their children that nobody else has (Fullan, 2007); if shared through communication with teachers, this knowledge can improve teaching and learning at school. From the beginning of schooling, the joint support of the home and the school is very important (Katz & Bauch, 1999).

Barriers to Parental Involvement

Barriers to parental involvement have also been identified in many studies. Moles (as cited in Morris & Taylor, 1998) identified three categories of barriers to parental involvement: (1) limited skills and knowledge of teachers and parents, (2) restricted opportunities for interaction, and (3) psychological and cultural barriers.

A prime source of barriers is schools and families themselves. School staff and families usually have different perspectives on what is wanted and needed, and their lack of knowledge and skills about a successful collaboration makes up the most crucial barrier (Lemmer, 2007; Poulou & Matsagouras, 2007). Often schools seem unwelcoming to parents, especially to parents from low-income families (DeHass, 2005; Lemmer, 2007). In school, parents do not feel they are partners, and their initial reaction when communicating with teachers is that they are interfering (DeHass, 2005). Like these parents, most new teachers who are not prepared for working with parents have the same problem (DeHass, 2005; Ratcliff & Hunt, 2009). For them, interacting with parents

is a tense and frightening experience. This kind of early experience may shape those beginning teachers' perceptions of parental involvement and influence their attitude toward this area for the rest of their career (Katz & Bauch, 1999). Furthermore, schools' and managers' practices and attitudes towards parental involvement influence classroom teachers' opinions and experiences in this area. People tend to think that educating children is solely direct teaching at school (Sosorbaram, 2010b). In Mongolia, where academic competitions are very important and popular, schools and managers are more than likely to emphasize teaching and discourage teachers from other activities. This kind of school atmosphere and practice brings about a lack of parental involvement among classroom teachers. In this regard, raising awareness of parental involvement benefits among educators and preparing teachers for parental involvement can be among the most important factors to remove barriers to engaging parents effectively.

The teacher should be considered as a resource person who understands and helps families by talking to them and sharing their concerns (Pang & Wert, 2010). A growing consensus of opinion shows that it is necessary for future teachers to gain competencies in working as team members, sharing responsibilities for leadership, and working as partners with families in diverse communities (Epstein & Sanders, 2006). Becoming aware of the importance of parental involvement, its different strategies and forms, and their benefits could help teachers initiate and conduct meaningful parental involvement (DeHass, 2005). Facilitating effective collaboration of school and family is paid very little attention in many teacher preparation programs (Graue & Brown, 2003; Katz & Bauch, 1999; Patte, 2011; Uludag, 2008); many programs do not provide the skills necessary to promote parental involvement (Bartels & Eskow, 2010; Ratcliff & Hunt, 2009; Uludag, 2008). Because teachers are not well trained, they often rely on very limited, traditional types of parental involvement (DeHass, 2005; Ratcliff & Hunt, 2009). This means teachers do not know how to organize parental involvement activities that lead to good results in parent–teacher collaboration, interaction, and reputation. According to Sosorbaram (2010a), classroom teachers in Mongolia restrict parental involvement to just a few traditional activities, such as parent–teacher meetings and expecting parents to provide financial support; hence, parents are likely to complain more about schooling than to participate more actively in supporting the school. Unless prospective teachers receive training related to parental involvement in their teacher education programs, teachers will continue facing difficulties collaborating with parents. The study by Abdullah et al. (2011) suggests that offering courses on parental involvement during preservice teacher education programs is greatly needed.

Methodology

Parental involvement preparation in the primary education preservice training at Dornod Institute—one of the three primary (i.e., elementary) education teacher training institutions in Mongolia—was investigated in this study. A questionnaire survey, key-informant interviews, and a document analysis were utilized to investigate primary education preservice training on parental involvement. These instruments explored parental involvement content coverage in the preservice training and identified preservice and classroom teachers' perceptions of their preparedness and practices in parental involvement as well as stakeholders' perceptions of primary education teacher preparation in this area.

Research Tools

The survey questionnaire was adapted from the works of Uludag (2006), Flanigan (2005), and Morris and Taylor (1998), and it consisted of four parts: (1) demographic information, (2) the preservice training on parental involvement, (3) professional evaluations of preservice teachers, and (4) open-ended questions.

Eight different interview guides, based on earlier studies (Epstein & Sanders, 2006; Flanigan, 2007; Uludag, 2006), were designed for 17 stakeholders. In addition, the Curriculum Framework Document, syllabi, and student teaching practice guidelines for preservice training at Dornod Institute were examined.

Participants

Dornod Institute seniors who completed the five cluster courses for facilitating the teaching profession, who also completed 12 weeks of student teaching practice, were invited to complete the questionnaire survey. Because Dornod Institute, located in sparsely populated eastern Mongolia, is a small local institution, there were limited numbers of respondents for the survey questionnaire. In the case study school year, there were two classes with 32 primary education major seniors available, all of whom participated in this study. All 32 respondents were female, and the mean age was 22.7 years.

Most of the stakeholders interviewed were from two different primary schools in Choibalsan, the capital of Dornod province. Out of nine schools in Choibalsan, School A and School B were chosen to represent the stakeholders in this study, because more than 71% of the classroom teachers at the two schools graduated from Dornod Institute. School A is located on the outskirts of the city, with 630 students for the 2011–2012 enrollment; School B is located in the city center, with 740 students for the same school year (see Table 2).

Table 2. Profile of the Two Primary Schools

Schools	School A	School B
Total number of teachers:	24	21
Male	2	-
Female	22	21
Number of teachers who graduated from Dornod Institute	18	15
Total number of students (Grades 1–5)	630	740
School location	in the outskirts of the city	in the city center

Source: School managers' portfolio

Eight different interview guides were utilized in the key informant interviews, in accordance with the eight different roles of the 17 stakeholders. The stakeholders included: (1) three Dornod Institute lecturers, (2) one head of the Institute's training office, (3) one official in charge of primary education at the Provincial Education Board, (4) two primary school managers (similar to U.S. vice principals), (5) two classroom teachers who supervise student teaching practice, (6) two less experienced classroom teachers, (7) four parents, and (8) two preservice teachers. All of the stakeholders were female, and their work experience ranged from 2–15 years. Most of the stakeholders, excluding parents, had graduated from Dornod Institute (see Table 3).

The managers recommended the classroom teachers, and the classroom teachers recommended the parents. Four parents were invited to participate in the key informant interviews, and all were mothers. Three of them were unemployed, including one who was taking a hairdresser's course and two who were single parents. Regarding educational background, one of them completed secondary school, and three completed vocational training.

Results

Overall, participants considered parental involvement to be an important part of the preservice training because they believed students achieved more when teachers and parents collaborate. One participant stated, "At school, the relationship between a classroom teacher, student, and parent ought to be strong, and the classroom teacher is the one who has to establish this relationship." Students training to be teachers, however, do not feel prepared to create this strong relationship.

Table 3. Stakeholders Interviewed

Position	Work experience /years	Current position/ years	Educational Background
Dornod Institute Lecturers: 1. Pedagogy 2. Special needs education 3. Psychology of child development	18 9 5	15 2 3	State Univ. of Education State Univ. of Education National Univ. of Mongolia
Head of training office of Dornod Institute	13	3	State Univ. of Education
Official in charge of primary education at the Provincial Education Board under Ministry of Ed., Culture, and Science	17	7	Dornod Institute
Primary school managers: School A School B	16 18	5 2	Dornod Institute Dornod Institute
Classroom teachers who supervised student teaching: School A School B	18 18	5 6	Dornod Institute Dornod Institute
Classroom teachers with 1–3 years of teaching experience: School A School B	3 3	3 3	Dornod Institute Dornod Institute
Parents: School A School B	2 persons 2 persons		
Preservice teachers	2 persons		Dornod Institute

Parental Involvement Practices in Primary Schools

Parental involvement is an area which teacher educators and classroom teachers fail to address. One prospective teacher concluded that “in preservice training the topic of parental involvement was left out, so we did not value it or put emphasis on it.” Another lecturer mentioned, “Classroom teachers have the common experience that they put more time, effort, and emphasis on mathematics and the Mongolian language as opposed to working with parents.”

Classroom teachers become more practiced in the area of parental involvement through their hands-on experiences. According to narrative responses, classroom teachers conduct the following activities involving parents: (1) conducting parent–teacher meetings, (2) asking for financial support from parents,

(3) inviting parents to help provide a better learning environment in the classroom, (4) inviting parents to sit in class, (5) holding informal individual meetings, (6) conducting sports competitions and other contests for parents, (7) allowing parents to help prepare teaching materials, (8) holding formal individual meetings, and (9) helping parents organize Mongolian language or Mathematics Olympiads among students.

Findings from this study revealed that conducting parent–teacher meetings is the most common parental involvement activity among classroom teachers. At parent–teacher meetings, classroom teachers usually discuss students’ progress, problems, grades, attendance, attitudes toward learning, information about the upcoming exams, class- and school-related news, and requests for fundraising. A preservice teacher who observed a classroom teacher conducting a parent–teacher meeting reported, “At a parent–teacher meeting, a teacher passes on information and asks for fundraising, but there is no possibility to talk to parents individually.”

Interestingly, all the classroom teachers who were invited to participate in this study previously graduated from the same preservice training at Dornod Institute. Most of them complained that no class sessions facilitating parental involvement were offered during their four years of preservice training. However, the classroom teachers interviewed have been dealing with parental involvement through their hands-on experiences. One of the teachers mentioned that it is up to a classroom teacher to control whether parental involvement is better or worse. Yet another classroom teacher who supervises student teaching practice explained, “We expect to get updated information/knowledge from preservice teachers and learn from them.”

The interviews uncovered some good practices among classroom teachers who are tackling the parental involvement issue. One classroom teacher shared her experience of inviting parents to come and study with their children once a month. Even though not all parents come, usually three to seven parents who are eager to support their children attend. So these parents are better able to monitor homework and help their children practice what is being taught at school. Another classroom teacher added, “I plan activities with clear and specific purposes, such as activities for good behavior, health, and art performing skills of students, so parents get more involved.”

In contrast, there are teachers who find it very difficult to improve parental involvement. Classroom teachers with less working experience tend to struggle more in dealing with parental involvement. A teacher with three years of teaching experience from School A on the outskirts of the city shared her experience in trying to communicate with her students’ parents by using notes. However, she realized that a few parents were illiterate, so her idea would not

work. She concluded that parents’ educational background is more likely to influence parental involvement level. In her class there was no parent who had a higher education degree. In fact, two (4%) of the parents had only completed primary school. However, parental backgrounds were different in the class of a teacher with the same teaching experience from School B in the city center (see Table 4).

Table 4. Diversity in Family Backgrounds

	School A	School B
Grade level	5th	5th
Number of students	30	32
Number of single parents	12	8
Parents’ highest educational background (in percentage)		
Completed higher education	0%	26%
Completed vocational training	4%	0%
Completed upper secondary school	17%	31%
Completed lower secondary school	75%	43%
Completed primary school	4%	0%

Source: Classroom teachers’ portfolio

At school A, the teacher reported that more than one third of her students’ families were headed by a single parent. She stated that only one third of parents came to parent–teacher meetings, and during her three years as a classroom teacher there were some parents she had never seen. As a result she decided to conduct fewer parent–teacher meetings. In the school year when this fieldwork was conducted, she had held only one parent–teacher meeting at the beginning of school. She was planning to hold one more at the end of the school year. But the teacher from school B, who had the same number of years of teaching experience, noted she held parent–teacher meetings at least twice a quarter. More than 80% of parents often showed up to the meetings. The parent–teacher meeting attendance seemed to vary enormously depending on teachers’ attitudes and skills in implementing parental involvement, as well as on the emphasis and attention schools put on this area.

The reasons why parents do not regularly show up for parent–teacher meetings vary significantly. In some cases, employed parents cannot always attend meetings. Two of the four interviewed mothers in our sample stated that they worked eight to eleven hours a day. Usually they could not find time to attend parent–teacher meetings, although they said they saw classroom teachers when they had time. Often times they talked to teachers on the phone and

got information on their children's performance. One more possible reason that parents do not attend meetings is that parents are not motivated to attend meetings due to the teacher's negative attitude towards children from poor families. Preservice teachers shared their notions of this issue saying, "Teachers [just] ignore disadvantaged children," and "Teachers must avoid discriminating against children and families from deprived backgrounds." This kind of negative attitude of teachers discourages parents from getting involved in school-based activities.

Preservice Teachers' Preparedness for Parental Involvement

During their training, preservice teachers did have a few class sessions addressing parental involvement, and eight respondents (25.0%) replied that they became prepared for the area of parental involvement by taking courses. But the mean number of class sessions they took to cover the topic of parental involvement was just four.

For current teacher candidates attending Dornod, it is important to note that the parental involvement topic was included in the preservice teacher program recently, showing that progress has been made in preparing teachers in this area. Now prospective teachers have some impression of and experiences in involving parents in children's learning, compared to most of the former Dornod Institute graduates who have been dealing with parental involvement only through their hands-on experiences after they were on the job.

Findings from this study suggest that preservice teachers found parental involvement topics and activities in the courses, in textbooks, and in student teaching practice helpful. According to multiple responses of preservice teachers, the topic was presented in the courses of pedagogy, psychology of child development, special needs education, and introduction to teaching.

The 32 preservice respondents reported their courses included some coverage of topics such as how to conduct parent-teacher meetings (84.4%), how to plan and conduct a workshop for parents (62.5%), and how to design interactive homework for students to share with parents (59.4%). Many topics concerned conducting parent meetings. Other topics were less prominent in the courses, such as how to organize and involve parents at school (56.3%), the benefits of parental involvement (56.3%), ways to involve parents helping their children in school and outside school (56.3%), the barriers to parental involvement (53.1%), and readings about working with parents (40.6%). Additional materials such as research on school and parent partnership (21.9%) and techniques for improving two-way communication between home and school (34.4%) were hardly noticeable in the courses. There seems to be a lack of research results and reading materials on the topic of parental involvement in preservice teachers' courses.

There are two textbooks (Erdenetsetseg et al., 2010; Ichinkhorloo, 2010) mainly used by preservice teachers in the course on pedagogy. Only two respondents (6.3%) mentioned that textbooks had prepared them for parental involvement. While the textbooks discuss what can or should be done to increase parental involvement, they do not include practical tasks or activities to help preservice teachers gain the skills and confidence needed to put these ideas into practice in their classes. Preservice teachers learn better about parental involvement when they learn from classroom teachers and conduct their own activities for parents at primary schools. Most of the preservice teachers mentioned that their student teaching practice was what best prepared them for engaging with parents.

Preservice teachers had two different student teaching practices during their four years of training, and only one of these—the pedagogical practice—required them to gain knowledge and skills through hands-on experiences by learning from classroom teachers' practices and by planning activities for parents. The student teaching practice requirement for the area of parental involvement seemed to be vague and easy to ignore. The full number of points that preservice teachers needed to fulfill their pedagogical practice requirement was 100 points. To earn these points, they had to conduct nine different activities during six weeks. Of the 100 points, only up to five points were given for conducting activities addressing parental involvement. Conducting parental involvement activities was given the least number of points among the nine categories.

The data suggest that most of the preservice teachers (71.9%) believed they were somewhat prepared for parental involvement. While only one respondent (3.1%) felt very prepared for parental involvement, one fourth of respondents ($n = 8$) described their readiness to work with parents as somewhat unprepared (see Table 5).

Table 5. Readiness to Work With Parents

Readiness	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Very unprepared	-	-
Somewhat unprepared	8	25.0
Somewhat prepared	23	71.9
Very prepared	1	3.1
Total	32	100.0

Most preservice teachers felt they were somewhat adequately prepared for parental involvement, though some felt unprepared. Preservice teachers' self-

assessment of their parental involvement knowledge and skills may have been shaped by their experiences during their student teaching practices. This finding is consistent with the finding of an earlier study (Katz & Bauch, 1999), which found differences in perceptions on preparedness among preservice teachers could result from differences in their student teaching experiences. Analysis of the interviews indicated that activities preservice teachers conducted in classrooms and what they learned from classroom teachers regarding parental involvement during their student teaching practices varied depending on the experiences of the classroom teachers. One preservice teacher stated, "For parental involvement, classroom teachers often [just] conduct parent-teacher meetings." It seems that classroom teachers play a key role in shaping preservice teachers for parental involvement activities and attitudes. Opportunities to learn about parental involvement differed during student teaching practices based on skills, attitudes, and experiences of the classroom teachers in this area and on the preservice teacher's own initiative.

According to the participants, communication is important in enhancing parental involvement. However, most of the respondents mentioned that the preservice training does not teach how to communicate with adults/parents or understand the psychology of adults/parents, but only teaches how to communicate with children and the psychology of children. As is stated in many studies (Baum & McMurray-Schwarz, 2004; Denessen, Bakker, Kloppenburg, & Kerkhof, 2009; Katz & Bauch, 1999; Uludag, 2008), preservice training should provide specific guidance, suggestions, and practice on how to communicate effectively with parents along with providing theoretical knowledge.

Effective communication between teacher and parents can result in better understanding of diverse families and their expectations for their children and the teacher. However, all mothers who were interviewed stated that they had not shared their goals and expectations for their child with classroom teachers. Preservice teachers believed one of the major reasons teachers do not encourage more parental involvement in their classroom and schools is teachers' lack of communication. Although preservice teachers considered communication important for good parental involvement, most were not able to learn communication strategies from their classroom teacher mentors.

Preservice teachers surveyed thought the topic of parental involvement should be offered as a separate course in preservice training. They felt it was not a good idea to include the topic in other courses. These results are inconsistent with findings of an earlier researcher (Uludag, 2008) who found preservice teachers preferred specific information on the topic of parental involvement rather than taking an extra separate course.

Discussion

The current primary education preservice training somewhat prepares prospective teachers for parental involvement by offering some relevant class sessions and student teaching practices at the Dornod Institute in Mongolia. However, not all preservice teachers feel prepared for engaging effectively with parents. Interestingly, out of all components in the Curriculum Framework Document which facilitated preservice teachers in parental involvement, the student teaching practice is what best prepared them for parental involvement. However, for some preservice teachers, parental involvement is not a part of their student teaching practice experiences. This indicates that student teaching has two sides. On the one hand, student teaching is an important component of teacher training, which allows preservice teachers to move beyond theory and lectures to “the real world” and experience and learn from the reality of the classroom. But on the other hand, the reality of school and some classroom teachers’ negative attitudes, lack of practice, and poor preparation for working with parents is not a good model for prospective teachers. Without a solid design and course content on parental involvement in preservice training and more attention and emphasis on the area among classroom teachers in primary schools, it appears likely that future teacher beliefs are being shaped by dissimilar experiences during their student teaching. Therefore, it can be said that opportunities for learning about parental involvement are very limited for preservice teachers. Current practices of parental involvement implementation in primary schools and parental involvement content coverage in teacher education both appear to be suboptimal.

The possible reasons behind the little attention and emphasis on parental involvement practices and challenges faced by faculty and classroom teachers are discussed in the following subthemes:

- Parental involvement practices in primary schools;
- Limited understanding of family diversity;
- Heavy workloads;
- Social changes and gender issues; and
- Lack of awareness and attitudes of faculty.

Parental Involvement Practices in Primary Schools

Classroom teachers play the key role in preparing preservice teachers for parental involvement. However, most classroom teachers themselves struggle to deal with parental involvement. Parental involvement experiences among teachers and schools vary enormously, and they influence preservice teachers’ professional judgment. School encouragement for parental involvement is not

clear, and it is easy to ignore in schools where parents are less involved and family background is more diverse.

Schools or managers should have a positive effect on classroom teachers' attitudes and motivation towards parental involvement improvement. However, Katz and Bauch (1999) found that teachers who had not gained knowledge, skills, and confidence in parental involvement during their teacher preparation were more likely to have low confidence in this area, and therefore were less likely to initiate parental involvement activities. Because classroom teachers often do not have parental involvement training during their preservice training and, furthermore, the school or manager does not support or motivate teachers to pursue this activity, it is understandable that the topic is often ignored.

Being aware of what parental involvement forms and activities are implemented in primary schools is important for preparing prospective teachers in this area. The current study identified three parental involvement dimensions, namely home-based, school-based, and parental resourcing, along with seven types of activities related to each dimension. The parental involvement dimensions were expanded from the work of Nguon (2012) and from other items identified during the literature review and fieldwork by the author (see Table 6).

Home-based involvement refers to what parents do at home and school-based refers to what parents do at school in order to enhance children's learning achievement and development. Parental resourcing refers to efforts parents put into supporting children's learning and fostering children's social lives.

Communication forms the basis of the three dimensions. Because findings of this study indicate that communication plays the key role in parental involvement, home-school communication appears to be vital to foster parental involvement. When parents and teachers communicate, understand each other, recognize their expectations for the child, and work together in order to meet goals for the child, the child's learning outcomes are improved. In this regard, communication should encompass all parental involvement dimensions: home-based, school-based, and parental resourcing.

But despite the fact that parent-teacher meetings are more frequently observed in schools and are a common way for teachers and parents to communicate, there is a considerable disadvantage with this activity as currently practiced in Mongolian primary schools. Current parent-teacher meetings limit interaction and communication between parents and teachers. At these meetings, all parents get together, and the teacher is the one who speaks and provides information. Most parent-teacher meetings are conducted in the evenings when classrooms are available after afternoon classes and parents get back from work. A general picture of this kind of meeting is that a teacher talks and parents listen, and then they discuss some issues such as fundraising, classroom

cleaning and decoration, and so on. It is common that during meetings parents get to know their children’s grade record by passing among each other the same sheet of paper where students’ names are put in alphabetical order and the grades for each subject are marked next to each name. In this case, the grade record of each student does not remain anonymous, and parents do not have a chance to have a private talk with a teacher to ask more about their children’s academic performance and social development. Parent–teacher meetings could be more meaningful if a parent and a teacher meet one on one.

Table 6. Parental Involvement Dimensions

	Dimensions	Types	Items
COMMUNICATION	Home-based	Child care	Providing learning environment; making sure of child’s school attendance; discussing school lives, providing encouragement, etc.
		Learning	Monitoring homework; helping with homework, etc.
	School-based	Meetings	Attending parent–teacher meetings and formal individual meetings; attending parent council meetings; consulting about student performance, etc.
		School events	Sitting in class; taking part in sports competitions and other contests by themselves or with children; attending pedagogical workshops; cleaning classroom, etc.
	Parental resourcing	Monetary contribution	Contributing cash for classroom cleaning, decoration, school graduation, and school supplies; paying for private tutoring, etc.
		Labor contribution	Contributing to classroom decoration; helping with teaching materials preparation; organizing Olympiad and graduation day activities; conducting sports competitions and other contests for students; giving a talk to class, etc.
		Material contribution	Contributing materials such as mittens and baby animal coats to campaigns’ for herders in zud disaster; donating clothes and learning materials to students from vulnerable households, etc.

Source: Adapted from three indexes of parental involvement (Nguon, 2012).

One important and interesting parental involvement activity might be to hold Olympiad (academic competitions) practice sessions within a class—parents could contribute by marking papers and awarding prizes. In Mongolian school settings, much attention is paid to teaching and learning mathematics and the Mongolian language. Primary schools and managers encourage teachers to improve their students' performance in these two “main” subjects by winning at Olympiads and performing well on placement tests conducted by the Provincial Education Board. In primary schools, the whole class competes as a unit in the Olympiads with a few better students competing individually, but in secondary schools only individual students compete. Coaching a whole primary class requires much more work for the teacher than coaching one or two students on a particular subject that the teacher regularly teaches at a secondary school.

There are two important reasons schools, managers, and teachers often emphasize the Olympiads: First, schools are ranked by their placements regarding their Olympiad results; and second, teachers are paid bonuses if their class and students finish in the top three places. Also, good Olympiad and the Provincial Education Board exam results help teachers get promotions to higher ranks in teaching with a higher salary and are vital for a school's reputation. Olympiads have been popular among schools, teachers, students, and parents since the socialist era (Steiner-Khamsi & Stolpe, 2006). Focusing on the two main subjects for Olympiads and the Education Board exams is considered by teachers to be more important and useful than investing time and effort in parental involvement, especially since teachers lack skills and encouragement in this area. Additionally, helping classroom teachers coach a whole class or individual students for Olympiads is also one of the tasks some preservice teachers conduct during their student teaching practice voluntarily. From this kind of experience, preservice teachers may learn from classroom teachers that Olympiads are very important in their future teaching career.

Parents of individual students who are being coached also emphasize the importance of Olympiads. Parents provide extra learning materials and private tutoring for their children to achieve good results. Linking Olympiads with parental involvement seems to be a valuable strategy for improving parental involvement, at least in the primary grades. However, schools and teachers putting too much attention and emphasis on Olympiads tend to set a limit on implementing other types of parental involvement which might be even more effective and beneficial. Moreover, teachers are encouraged to focus solely on a few promising students by coaching them for Olympiads (Steiner-Khamsi & Stolpe, 2006). Only those promising students and their parents benefit from this activity, but the remaining students and their parents remain outside the circle and are neglected.

Parental involvement activities in which both parents and teachers invest time and effort should aim at enhancing all students' learning and development. Parental involvement activities should be selected, planned, and implemented in accordance with students' age and grade levels and with students' and parents' needs in order to maximize the learning opportunities of all children.

Based on children's age, grade level, and level of social and cognitive development, parental involvement activities should be different (Epstein, 2011). There should naturally be changes in parental involvement activities as students advance to upper grades. As mentioned in the results section, parental involvement dimensions are practiced differently in different grade levels. Parents become more involved in academic matters in the lower grades compared to higher grades. This may be because parental involvement in academic matters is more valued at lower grades (Jeynes, 2012) and learning materials become more difficult for parents to handle in higher grades (Tam & Chan, 2009). Teachers should recognize this pattern and admit that pushing parents to get involved in home-based academic activities of upper grade primary students is not as appropriate as it is for lower grade students. It is important for teachers to understand which parental involvement activities are more effective and more beneficial in what grade levels in order to improve the academic outcomes of all students.

Limited Understanding of Family Diversity

Teachers tend to believe that the more educated the parents, the more involved they are in their children's learning. This notion indicates that family background influences parental involvement. Other studies (Ho, 2003; Hung, 2005; Tam & Chan, 2009) support this finding that parents' educational background is associated with their involvement in children's schooling, and better educated parents are more likely to be involved than those with lower educational attainment.

Teachers appear to treat children and parents differently regarding their background. Because teachers' backgrounds are often different from many parents, and because they do not have adequate training in student diversity and working with parents from different backgrounds, teachers may be more likely to neglect disadvantaged groups. Wanat (2010) reported that those parents who had different backgrounds and experiences from teachers felt more isolated and frustrated. Classroom teachers should understand that an important aspect of their job is improving parental involvement, which includes getting to know and understand all of their children's backgrounds. Christenson (2004) stated that parents have the capability and responsibility to support their children's learning regardless of economic or educational background. All of the mothers

interviewed for this study wished their children to be well-educated and to live in better conditions than they are now. However, the time and effort they invested in supporting their children's learning varied depending on parents' circumstances. Unsurprisingly, this study found that teachers complain about parents' inadequate involvement, saying that they do not take the initiative, and many teachers had a negative attitude towards engaging with parents. However, many parents want to be more involved in their child's learning and to collaborate with teachers, but they do not have an effective way to engage with teachers and the schools, so they are unhappy with their child's performance.

A common belief among teachers is that the more years you work, the more experienced you become in dealing with parents. But classroom teachers are left to decide for themselves whether parental involvement is a positive or negative teaching strategy. This in turn impacts preservice teachers greatly. According to Flanigan (2007), negative parental involvement attitudes of experienced teachers impact preservice teachers. By not adequately preparing teachers to collaborate with families from diverse backgrounds, negative parental involvement attitudes are perpetuated.

In addition to learning about family diversity, it is also important for teachers to learn more about the cultural changes families are experiencing. In recent years, parents in Mongolia have had to pay more attention to their business and family livelihood, which limits their time and effort in childrearing, child development, and involvement in their children's schooling (Badamkhand, 2011). Parents are historically more likely to believe that the "teacher's role is to teach and foster moral development" (Trumbull, Rothstein-Fisch, & Hernandez, 2003), and this cultural belief restricts their involvement to just providing financial support.

Like rural Cambodian parents who often receive support from their extended family network (Nguon, 2012), it is common in Mongolia for family members and relatives to provide mutual help facilitating home-based and school-based activities of children in times of need. Interviews with parents revealed that two out of four mothers interviewed did not permanently live with their children in the same household. While the mothers were self-employed in other areas, children lived with their grandparents. A mother reported, "Because I usually stay in a rural district, I cannot communicate with my child's teacher. But my mother [the child's grandmother] takes care of my child and communicates with the teacher."

It is not unusual in Mongolia that not only parents, but also other family members are allowed to attend parent-teacher meetings. Classroom teachers, especially outside of city centers, need to recognize that "parents" are often actually grandparents, adult siblings, or other relatives.

The relatively new political system, market economy, and social relations which have been formed in Mongolia have changed people in different ways, affecting their traditions, ways of thinking, livelihood skills, and ways of understanding lives (Namjil, 2010). Understanding family structures, family traditions, and family background should be a first step before planning and carrying out family involvement activities.

Heavy Workloads

In addition to inadequate preparation of classroom teachers for parental involvement and diversity in family backgrounds, the heavy workloads of teachers contribute to a lack of parental involvement. Oftentimes, primary education teachers complain about their workload compared to other levels of school teachers. They say they do more additional tasks, such as marking papers more regularly, preparing more teaching and learning materials, coaching a whole class for Olympiads, working with slower learners after class, and so on. This seems to be one of the main reasons teachers cannot find enough time to improve parental involvement or to initiate effective communication with their students' families.

Teachers acknowledge the importance of parental involvement by explaining that good parental involvement implementation helps prevent teachers from becoming overloaded. Teachers tend to believe that if parents get involved in their children's learning and development, it helps teachers to find the time and effort they need to put into additional tasks like working with slower learners, preparing teaching materials, and so on. However, there is a discrepancy between practice and belief; the practices of many teachers show they fear involving parents would cause extra work. Even though teachers acknowledge the importance of parental involvement and generally have positive beliefs about parental involvement, they seem to fail to put these beliefs into practice. There must be reasons why teachers dismiss parental involvement. The main reason seems to be that teachers lack positive attitudes towards and skills in initiating meaningful parent-teacher relationships and parental involvement. Oftentimes, schools do not encourage and support teachers in this area, but rather emphasize Olympiads, placement tests, and other academic competitions from which teachers benefit.

Teachers do not conduct effective strategies for initiating and maintaining parental involvement, even though they acknowledge that working effectively with parents can decrease their teaching loads. The fact that managers and schools do not usually push teachers to implement parental involvement might be one of the likely causes for this lack. Moreover, teachers are not motivated to engage with parents, and their attitudes towards their teaching profession

tend to restrict them from putting more time and effort into parental involvement implementation. Teachers in Mongolian schools were found to convey a feeling of professional tragedy regarding their low pay (Steiner-Khamsi & Stolpe, 2006). Low pay might be another factor discouraging teachers from developing more positive attitudes and a more powerful motivation towards the teaching profession. Thus teachers believe they are already overloaded and underpaid and tend to prefer completing regular tasks.

Social Changes and Gender Issues

Changes in the basic social institutions, particularly those involving families, raise more challenges for school and teachers. Increases in single-parent families and dual parental employment decrease the amount of time available for these parents to support their children's learning (Christenson, 2004). Earning a living and supporting their children's learning at the same time is a serious challenge for single parents, especially in disadvantaged areas.

These changes in social institutions contribute to a lack of parental involvement and are also related to gender issues in Mongolia. There are two gender issues related to parental involvement that are worth discussing:

1. the gender gap in education employment, and
2. the gender imbalance in households.

It is worth noting that all participants in this study were female. Women make up the predominant part of the teaching staff at all levels of Mongolia's education system and of the tertiary education graduates in Mongolia. Some 94% of teaching staff in primary schools are female (ADB, 2005), and nearly two-thirds of higher education graduates are women (United Nations Development Programme, 2011). The gender imbalance of the school staff has been identified as the source of a reverse gender gap problem (Steiner-Khamsi & Stolpe, 2006). An explanation for this is that there is a lack of male role models in the teaching staff.

Gender issues in the teaching staff of primary schools also play a role in reducing the morale of teachers and the quality of their professional skills. Female teachers themselves have little time for extra training because they also carry double work burdens (ADB, 2005). Many teachers are also mothers, and, as mothers, they often get involved in their own children's learning and carry the extra work burdens of balancing career and family duties. This suggests that finding extra time for activities such as initiating effective communication in order to improve parental involvement is limited because these teachers are already overloaded.

Another issue is an increase in female-headed households. Nationwide, 21.5% of households are headed by females (National Statistical Office of Mongolia, 2011), and these households continue to be vulnerable. Such women

have more household tasks (ADB, 2005) which restrict their time for helping with their child's learning. Extra demands and efforts of earning a living typically prevent these women from getting as involved in their child's learning as women in two-parent households.

Lack of Awareness and Attitudes of Faculty

It is perceived that a separate course would be useful for preservice training in order to prepare prospective teachers for parental involvement. However, offering such a course is only the first step; offering a course does not mean that preservice teachers will be fully prepared for parental involvement (Katz & Bauch, 1999). Who teaches the course and how the course is taught is another issue. Whether the parental involvement topic is included in courses and sessions currently depends on who is teaching, what their interest and skills are, and if they want to spend time on this topic (Flanigan, 2007). The availability of teaching resources and of teacher educators is another issue since there is usually a shortage of professional teaching staff at the local institute. According to academic protocol, a teacher trainer who majored in pedagogy has to teach the topic of parental involvement. But there is typically only one pedagogy lecturer, so psychology lecturers are often asked to teach pedagogy courses at the institute, and they may not have the experience to teach parental involvement strategies effectively.

It was found that one of the significant changes in the new Curriculum Framework Document is a cluster of five courses called "Cluster courses for facilitating the teaching profession" which includes pedagogy, introduction to teaching, psychology of child development, special needs education, and student teaching. Despite the fact that the idea of the cluster courses was to ensure that prospective teachers were provided with the necessary skills and competence in educating primary students, lecturers design their syllabi by themselves and teach the courses according to their own interests. This suggests that interests and attitudes of faculty members could be an important factor in making meaningful changes in this area at Dornod Institute. Positive attitudes of the faculty are therefore the key to positive changes (Epstein & Sanders, 2006).

Lastly, it is often difficult to change the Curriculum Framework Document to include new courses. At the beginning stage, an awareness of the importance of the topic, a positive attitude towards the topic, a strong desire for implementation, and good teamwork related to existing courses may be more important than investing more time and effort in designing and offering a new course before everyone involved agrees it is needed. Until then, the cluster courses can ensure that preservice teachers will be equipped with the necessary skills in helping enhance students' learning achievement in collaboration with parents.

Conclusions and Implications

This study has found the importance of parental involvement in Mongolian schools is recognized, and it has surveyed current practices of parental involvement activities and important components of preparing preservice teachers to work with parents. However, current preservice teacher preparation for parental involvement has been found to be lacking and to have too little emphasis.

Classroom teachers supervising student teachers currently play the most important role for shaping preservice teachers in parental involvement. Different experiences among classroom teachers and schools have a large impact on preservice teachers' professional judgments related to parental involvement. Too often, classroom teachers infrequently practice effective parental involvement because of their workload and attitudes towards engaging with parents.

Three parental involvement dimensions were identified: home-based, school-based, and parental resourcing. Each of these dimensions is implemented in this study's primary schools to a certain degree. However, although communication between home and school forms the basis for each dimension, communication between teacher and parent usually stays limited to such activities as parent-teacher meetings. Despite the fact that these parent-teacher meetings are a critical part of parental involvement in primary schools, classroom teachers struggle to get good attendance of parents at the meetings. This study suggests the key issue is not how to improve parent-teacher meeting attendance, but how to train future teachers to conduct more meaningful parental involvement activities depending on students' grade levels and students' and parents' needs.

The preservice teacher training program currently includes some parental involvement topics, however the content is mainly focused on traditional and limited activities such as parent-teacher meetings. The parental involvement content should move beyond the existing practices and allow class sessions to integrate lectures with activities such as role playing, videos, and case studies. Besides this, prospective teachers may complete tasks like "designing family action plans, developing a philosophy of working with diverse families, designing an electronic [or paper] community resource directory, creating a...workshop relating to family-school partnerships, developing a file of articles beneficial to families, and analyzing a variety of teaching cases related to family-school partnerships" (Patte, 2011, p. 156). These activities should provide preservice teachers with better opportunities to gain good skills. In this way, prospective teachers can learn how a particular theory taught in lectures can be applied in real-life primary school settings.

New teachers can become agents of change with classroom teachers because they are often more up to date with knowledge of the new curriculum and

government requirements. The existing teaching population, with little formal preparation in parental involvement, seems to expect current information from preservice teachers in student teaching practice. If prospective teachers are well prepared in this area and have positive attitudes and good experiences with parental involvement practices, they should be motivated and able to make improvements to parental involvement practices in their schools.

Good improvements can be made if such training is accompanied by a change of emphasis and attitudes toward parental involvement. Survey results suggest that improving and changing these attitudes and emphases seems very possible given the reported realization of participants of the importance of the issue. New policies could be the next step to promote preservice teacher preparation in and classroom teacher or school practices of parental involvement.

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