Preservice Teachers' Views on Working With Diverse Families in Mongolia

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Abstract

This study used semi-structured interviews to examine 18 primary education preservice teachers' views on working with Mongolian parents across diverse family patterns, including: preservice teachers' understanding of parental involvement; parental involvement practices learned; their awareness of diverse family patterns; and the preservice teachers' feelings about their preparedness for working with parents from diverse family patterns. The preservice teachers themselves were also from diverse backgrounds including herders, single-parent, and low-income families. The findings suggest that the preservice teachers learned about parental involvement during their student teaching practice by observing classroom teachers carrying out parent–teacher meetings and by conducting their own activities. However, the preservice teachers realized that the importance given to parental involvement by classroom teachers and schools differed considerably in terms of both quantity and quality. All prospective teachers reported difficulty in having the attendance of every parent at parent–teacher meetings, and they recognized parental involvement in herder families and migrant worker-parents to be a significant challenge. The prospective teachers suggested some strategies and ideas to improve parental involvement practice and teacher education programs.

Key Words: parental involvement, diverse family patterns, student teaching practice, parent–teacher meetings, herder parents

Introduction

Education has been considered to be a leading sector in Mongolia for years. The State Education Policy for 2014–2024 (Ministry of Education, Culture, & Science [MECS], 2015), passed by the Parliament in 2015, states that education is a key factor in ensuring the quality of every single citizen's life, while also ensuring the social, economic, scientific, and technological development of the nation. As described in the State Education Policy (MECS, 2015), the aim of education is to ensure that every citizen is provided with opportunities to develop his or her talents and skills, to learn knowledge and competencies that are required to work effectively and to live happily, and to have lifelong learning opportunities.

The Mongolian government has emphasized the significance of parental involvement in education in fostering future citizens. Parental involvement is to be promoted in order for parents to contribute to the improvement of their child's learning. Policies require teachers to plan activities for promoting each child's success, together with the student and his/her parents, and then provide parents with regular reports of progress and results of their children's learning and mastery of grade-level standards (MECS, 2015). The current trends in the education policies of Mongolia thus require a close cooperation between school, family, and community to foster future citizens.

Teachers play a vital role in implementing educational system reform, since the "teacher's main duty is to foster and develop every child's talents and interests" (Ministry of Education & Science [MES], 2012). Teachers have to carefully examine problems faced in teaching in order to develop the talents and interests of each child. Teachers are expected to promote the development of every child (MES, 2012). However—while it is reasonable for teachers to play an important role in students' learning, development, and success—teachers, alone, cannot assure students' academic success. Parents and teachers should be aware of their shared responsibilities for fostering the learning and development of their children. Parents should understand they have to be involved not only to meet teachers' or schools' requests, but to nurture their children's learning and development and the whole family's well-being. Teachers should recognize that the teachers' role is essential for initiating parental involvement and for maintaining parental involvement as a useful strategy in their teaching.

The demands on 21st century teachers are increasing: Teachers are now required to have not only good professional skills, but also extraordinary personal skills (Darling-Hammond, 2006). Teacher education must provide programs that equip prospective teachers with a deep understanding about learning and teaching, as well as with the social and cultural contexts needed

to serve classrooms with increasingly diverse students including varying family backgrounds and community settings (Darling-Hammond, 2006). In many countries, one of the main competencies teachers are required to have is the ability to work with parents (Bruine et al., 2014). It is also a part of Mongolia's law that one of the teacher's responsibilities, stated in the General Education Law of Mongolia, is to work with parents or caretakers in order to identify and develop each child's talents and interests, to protect the child's rights, and to provide parents with child-related advice (Mongolian State Parliament, 2002, Article 22.1.6). In fact, when teachers and administrators experience difficulties, it is often because they are ill-prepared for parental involvement, since the areas of family diversity, family strengths, and cultural backgrounds are not adequately covered in many teacher education programs (Sewell, 2012; Sutterby, Rubin, & Abrego, 2007). Teacher education programs need to highlight issues related to diverse families. According to Pedro, Miller, and Bray (2012), knowing about and understanding the traditions, practices, and parameters of family life for children who are growing and developing in families who do not fit the traditional family structure would assist the developing teacher with concepts and expectations prior to entering the classroom.

Teacher education programs too often focus on subject matter learning that is abstract and general while leaving a gap in preparing prospective teachers to use specific tools useful in the classroom, such as successfully working with families (Darling-Hammond, 2006; Pedro, Miller, & Bray, 2012). This study investigated primary education preservice teachers' views on working with parents across diverse family patterns. Parental involvement in children's schooling is one of the areas that have been insufficiently studied in Mongolia. While Sosorbaram (2010) discussed the importance of evaluating children's noncognitive skills by involving parents, Sukhbaatar's study (2014) critiqued the primary education preservice training at one of the three state-owned teacher-training institutions as not adequately preparing teachers for parental involvement. The current study extends these earlier studies by investigating preservice teachers' views on working with parents across diverse family patterns within the Mongolian context, addressing the following questions: (1) How do preservice teachers define parental involvement at the primary school level? (2) What parental involvement practices have preservice teachers learned? (3) What family patterns do preservice teachers know? (4) How do preservice teachers perceive their preparation to work with parents from diverse family patterns?

Literature Review and Context

Family Diversity in Mongolia

Over the past century, people all over the world have witnessed major changes in the nature of basic social institutions related to the economy, politics, religion, family, and education (Ratcliff & Hunt, 2009). In recent years, families have become smaller, divorce has dramatically increased the number of families headed by a single parent, hours of work have lengthened and diversified throughout the day, and many parents are overwhelmed trying to raise a family while being employed in different patterns of work hours which minimizes parents' time spent at home with their children (Flynn, 2007; Hiatt-Michael, 2006). Starting with the 1990s market economy reforms in Mongolia, big changes have occurred in Mongolian social institutions. Changes in family pattern are one good example of the ongoing changes in social institutions. Compared to the past, family patterns differ greatly now with the social and economic impact of divorce, with increased numbers of single parents, with dual income parents, with children living with relatives, with longer work hours, with an increase in poverty, and with many other post-Soviet changes that are impacting family patterns in Mongolia (Sukhbaatar, 2014).

Stayton, Miller, and Dinnebeil (2003), as cited in Sewell (2012), argued that different priorities, resources, concerns, and cultural backgrounds contribute to family diversity, along with varying views on education and family support for formal education. Becoming aware of different family backgrounds and different families' willingness to educate their children can help teachers initiate and foster meaningful parental involvement.

Family diversity is one of the factors that teachers need to understand to be successful with all students. It requires an especially sophisticated understanding when one teaches high-need students in low-income communities. One has to understand that all children truly have capabilities to learn, but there are almost overwhelming challenges in these communities. The reality is that there is a great difference in families depending on where students come to a Mongolian classroom. Consider one class of 30 students in a semi-urban school: up to 40% of families are headed by females. The educational background of parents varies considerably. While 26% of parents completed bachelor or higher degrees in the city center, on the outskirts of the city, the number is 0%. Conversely, 43% left school after primary and lower secondary grades in a city center school, but the number is 79% outside the city center (Sukhbaatar, 2014).

As Mongolia changes, households across Mongolia have become diverse, with more single-parent families, with more families headed by females, with more low-income families, and with more job migration of parents.

The government reported that females head 153,600 households or 21.5% of all the households in the country (National Statistical Office of Mongolia [NSOM], 2011b), and some 41.3% of all Mongolians living abroad were migrant workers. The largest percentage of these workers worked in South Korea (NSOM, 2011a).

Contextual Understanding of Education and Parental Involvement in Mongolia

Family is a primary social institution of a society, and it plays an important role in not only the stability of a society, but also the development of a child. Development of children occurs through formal and informal education by the major social institutions of family and school. However, family patterns have diversified dramatically due to global and local changes, and these changes result in challenges to the field of education generally and especially in the area parental involvement.

Historically, most Mongolians were herders living a nomadic life, dependent on their herds for meat, milk, and income. However, this lifestyle has changed over the years, and according to 2011 statistics, only 36.4% of Mongolian households lived in rural areas. Full-time herder households comprised 20.4% of these rural households (NSOM, 2012). Nomadic herders, who herded five types (horses, cattle, sheep, goats, Bactrian camels) of 36.3 million livestock head in 2012 (NSOM), face greater challenges when accessing public services such as education or health care compared with their urban counterparts due to poor infrastructure.

Boarding schools are making valuable contributions toward encouraging herder families to send their children to school. In the nomadic culture, herder families often must move around for better pastures during the school year, so the family has trouble finding a way for the child to attend school. In most cases, herder families' children stay in dormitories at boarding schools. In the 2014–15 school year, Mongolia had 628 public primary and secondary schools, and of those, 480 schools had dormitories (MES, 2014a). Mongolian school dormitories welcome students from the first to twelfth grades. According to the MES (2013) statistics, more than 80% of secondary school students staying in school dormitories nationwide were from herder families.

A new education system introduced in 2008–09 changed an 11-year system of schooling with students starting at age seven to a 12-year system with students starting school at age six. The new school system of 5+4+3 has resulted in sending six-year-olds, or first graders, usually from herder families, to live in dormitories along with higher-grade students if other relatives are not available. For example, in Dornod province (one of 21 provinces in Mongolia),

there are a total of 307 students of Grades 1–5 in 16 boarding schools, and 40 of these are six-year-old first graders (J. Bumtuya, personal communication, November 11, 2016).

In Mongolia, some particular activities have been traditionally used by classroom teachers to facilitate parental involvement. Sosorbaram (2010) states the following regular parental involvement activities were identified: (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. Another recent study (Sukhbaatar, 2014) investigated the same activities as Sosorbaram, but also included additional activities such as asking for financial support from parents, allowing parents to help prepare teaching materials, holding formal individual meetings, and having parents help organize Mongolian language or Mathematics Olympiads among students.

Asian researchers have noted that parental involvement also includes providing money or other material support directly to schools. Unlike western families, Asian families routinely provide material resources to schools (Nguon, 2012; Sukhbaatar, 2014). According to Nguon (2012), western studies identify two major types of parental involvement that improve their children's academic achievement and development, namely activities parents do at home and activities parents do at school. In Asian countries like Cambodia, parents also contribute directly to meet the costs and material needs of the school to make up for a lack of government resources. Like Cambodian parents, a recent Mongolian study (Sukhbaatar, 2014) found that Mongolian parents also provide these types of resources—money, labor, and material resources—to their children's schools. One interesting example of a material resource that parents used to provide in Mongolia was the "meat requirement" policy implemented in the years between 1996 and 2000. Because the government lacked funding to cover the annual costs for running boarding schools, herder parents were charged 70 kilograms of meat per child for sending a child to boarding schools for a school year (Steiner-Khamsi & Stolpe, 2006).

Ideally, teachers should involve parents to achieve successful learning and teaching objectives. According to the survey results conducted by the Center of Educational Assessment, issues related to teaching and parenting were identified as the most important factors influencing primary school children's learning achievement in Mongolia (Sosorbaram, 2010). It is therefore important for teachers to reach out to parents: A teacher's knowledge, skills, and attitudes can help foster better parental involvement and partnerships and thereby improve successful learning outcomes for their children.

Teacher Education for Primary Schools in Mongolia

An act by MECS (2014b), requires the Curriculum Framework Document (CFD) of teacher education to consist of three main parts: (1) liberal arts, (2) major basic courses, and (3) major courses. While liberal arts courses occupy no more than 30% of the total 120 credits, basic major and major courses occupy no more than 25% and 45% respectively. Given these percentages and a list of four required liberal arts courses, such as Mongolian language and Mongolian history, higher education institutions design their CFDs. The major basic part consists of courses addressing educational studies, psychology, teaching technology, and introduction to the teaching of the main subject areas of Mongolian language and mathematics. A part of the major courses in the CFD promotes preservice teachers' learning of different subject matter teaching methodologies. One important piece of this part is student teaching practice.

The aim of student teaching practice is to foster prospective teachers who invest in ongoing learning and development, to have teacher candidates get introduced to their supervising classroom teachers and related school activities, to promote teacher candidates' practice of teaching at the sites, to learn from the development process of teachers and schools, and to motivate teacher candidates to be good teachers (Jadambaa, Batsuuri, Purev-Ochir, & Purevdorj, 2005). Establishing close relationships between teacher education and schools is very important because connecting theory and practice cannot succeed without such relationships (Darling-Hammond, 2006).

A recent study (Sukhbaatar, 2014) carried out in one of the primary education preservice institutions in Mongolia determined that the prospective teachers found student teaching practice and some courses were helpful in learning about parental involvement, especially in conducting group parent–teacher meetings. The pedagogical practice helped the preservice teachers gain knowledge and skills in working with parents by learning from classroom teachers' practices and by conducting a parental activity on their own. There was no parental involvement course included in the preservice training. However, some courses such as pedagogy, psychology of child development, special needs education, and introduction to teaching facilitated their preparation for parental involvement, and these courses covered some useful topics, such as conducting parent–teacher meetings, conducting pedagogical workshops, and designing interactive homework for students to share with parents.

Method

Research Site and Instrument

This research study was conducted at one of the three state-owned primary education teacher-training institutions in Mongolia. The institution is a regional university that serves up to 1,000 students; half are teacher trainees majoring in different subject areas, and half are majoring in non-teaching fields. At the time of the study, the university had three departments altogether, and the researcher was the department head of Language Studies while the preservice teachers were in the department of Educational Studies. The researcher can be considered a "hybrid," one who is from a different field of study but is familiar with this research area.

An interview guide (see Appendix) was designed for this study by the researcher. The questions in each interview attempted to investigate (1) preservice teachers' understanding of parental involvement, (2) practices of parental involvement that preservice teachers have learned, (3) preservice teachers' awareness of different family patterns, and (4) preservice teachers' feelings of their preparedness for working with parents from diverse family patterns.

Participants and Data Collection

The participants were 18 preservice teachers in their senior year who had almost finished the four-year curriculum and were about to graduate in a month. During their four-year teacher education program, preservice teachers conducted 14 weeks of student teaching practice in primary schools under the supervision of primary school classroom teachers—six weeks in first grade classes and eight weeks in third through fifth grade classes. Only senior students majoring in primary education teaching were selected for the semistructured interview. In the year the study was conducted (2014), there were only 18 preservice teacher seniors at the university. The mean age of the respondents was 23.2 years, and all of them were female. It is interesting to note that the preservice teachers themselves were from different family backgrounds. While three of the preservice teachers were from single-parent families, seven were from herder families. Besides this, 11 were from low-income families, and no participant was from a family with higher education. All of the seven respondents from herder families lived with their grandparents or relatives during their primary school years, and no one stayed in school dormitories.

The researcher met with these preservice teachers to ask for their participation and explained the main purpose of the study. After they agreed to participate, a schedule for interviews was set. The interviews were conducted at the university after classes in the afternoons and evenings over the course of one month. The 18 interviews each lasted for 28–37 minutes.

Data Analysis

The interviews were conducted in Mongolian, the native language of the participants. All of the interviews were recorded with the permission of participants. A voice recorder was used to collect data, and then interviews were transcribed in Mongolian. All transcriptions were then translated into English with an effort to reflect the contextual meaning of the participants. Narrative formats were utilized to interpret qualitative responses. The transcriptions for all data were made for reading and reflecting, then data were interpreted and summarized following qualitative data analysis methods (Jacobs, Sorensen, & Walker, 2014). First, all the transcriptions were reread and coded with units of particular meanings and concepts according to the actual words of respondents. The technique of highlighting was used for coding. After that, all units with the same or similar meaning were grouped together. Next the relatively large number of individual codes were reviewed and reduced into a smaller number of categories. Then groupings were developed from the similar categories identified from this analysis to create the themes discussed in the Results section below.

Respondent validation, or member checking, was used to ensure the trustworthiness of the findings. A summary of the analysis in Mongolian was provided to three preservice teachers who had participated in the study. The preservice teachers were asked to critically comment upon the adequacy of the findings and ascertain whether the findings reflected their views and experience.

Results

This section is organized around key themes that emerged from specific research objectives. The theme selections were based on how frequently they were mentioned by different participants and how they were related to the questions of this study. Additionally, a new theme was developed reflecting the respondents' interests in doing things differently.

Preservice Teachers' Understanding of Parental Involvement

The preservice teachers recognized that parental involvement is very important in students' learning. The most common response was the importance of a triangular relationship between teachers, parents, and children. The preservice teachers believed that parental involvement has a strong influence on children's academic achievement and development. It was mentioned several times that if parents and teachers do not work together, children are left behind.

When asked to describe their understanding of parental involvement, some preservice teachers mentioned their student teaching practice and their own parents' involvement in their schooling during their primary school years:

> I learned from student teaching practice that teachers should work closely together with parents for children's development.
>
> It is very crucial to work with parents. What I could observe from my student teaching practice is that there should be close parent–teacher contact.
>
> When I was at a primary school, my parents attended parent–teacher meetings and participated in sport contests like "mother and daughter." Therefore, [I believe] parental involvement means any activity carried out by teachers in cooperation with parents for child development.

Parental Involvement Practices Learned by Preservice Teachers

Preservice teachers learned about parental involvement through the following four experiences: (a) courses, (b) classroom teachers during student teaching practice, (c) activities that preservice teachers conducted during student teaching practice, and (d) activities that involved preservice teachers' own parents.

Some Courses Covered Aspects of Parental Involvement

The preservice teachers replied that there was no particular course addressing parental involvement in the teacher education. However, the topic was mentioned in some pedagogical courses:

> In one of the courses I learned that the triangular relationship needs to be established. It is important.
>
> I learned that parental involvement helps improve students' motivation and engagement with their learning.
>
> I learned that teachers have to listen to parents. Teachers should learn what parents want their children to be.

Parental involvement tended to be one area which the teacher education did not emphasize. Parental involvement topics that preservice teachers learned seemed very general and vague:

> We were taught parental involvement is important, but we did not learn how to work with parents.
>
> In pedagogical courses I learned how to teach the 6-year-old students, but not about parental involvement.
>
> The topic was mentioned in one of the pedagogical courses, but it was time to break, and we were asked to read more about parental

> involvement out of the classroom. I hope there are some books; however, I have not taken any notice.

It was not easy for some preservice teachers to name parental involvement topics they learned in the courses:

> I think the topic was discussed in some courses, but I do not remember clearly now.
>
> I cannot recall what I learned about parental involvement in courses.

Parental Involvement Activities Learned From Classroom Teachers

It was interesting to learn that all of the preservice teachers replied that they learned more about parental involvement during their student teaching practice. Most of the preservice teachers said they learned how to conduct collective parent–teacher meetings by watching their classroom teachers. However, frequency of parent–teacher meetings differed considerably among different classrooms. During their eight-week student teaching practice, most of the preservice teachers experienced one parent–teacher meeting. Some experienced two parent–teacher meetings, but a couple of them experienced none.

The preservice teachers learned that classroom teachers often find it difficult to have high parental attendance rates in parent–teacher meetings. It has been a long-standing strategy for those teachers with attendance difficulties to ask their students to leave their schoolbags in the classroom after class. Later, parents would pick up the schoolbags when they came to the meeting. Preservice teachers noticed there was higher parental attendance when the "schoolbag" strategy was used:

> During my student teaching practice there were two parent–teacher meetings held. In the first meeting the classroom teacher let students take their schoolbags, but then only around 40% of parents showed up. The next time students were asked to leave their schoolbags, and then more than 80% of parents showed up. When schoolbags are left in the classroom more parents come to meetings.
>
> Primary education teachers are overloaded with paper tasks. But they find time and want to conduct meetings. In fact, only some parents come. Then teachers use the "schoolbag" strategy.
>
> It is hoped that parents would come to the meeting to get their children's schoolbags.

However, this strategy for increasing parental attendance tends to have serious consequences:

> I think the "schoolbag" strategy makes parents feel annoyed with classroom teachers. Some parents come and sit in the meetings, but they seem to ignore teachers.
>
> When my supervising classroom teacher conducted a parent–teacher meeting using the "schoolbag" strategy, some parents came late, and a few did not come. I remember that three schoolbags were left in the classroom after the meeting. Then those students came to school the next day without doing their homework.

According to the preservice teachers, how teachers conduct these meetings is almost always the same: Teachers give general information about the academic progress of the class as a whole, followed by sharing each student's performance privately on a paper or sometimes publicly. Classroom and school news is given to all parents at once while parents listen passively. Many of the preservice teachers noticed that, after the meeting, parents joined a queue for individual talks with classroom teachers. One preservice teacher criticized her teacher's long and boring talks:

> I was asked to take the meeting minutes. My teacher talked throughout the meeting when it started at 6:10 pm and ended at 8:00 pm. During this period, only a few parents expressed their opinions—only about the amount of monetary contribution to the classroom decoration.

Most of the preservice teachers stated that parents seem to prefer meeting teachers individually:

> When a teacher talks at meetings, parents just listen, but they rarely talk. However, after meetings parents usually come to the teacher one by one and ask how their child is doing.

One preservice teacher uncovered an issue when the classroom teacher talked about personal issues publicly, which made some parents get annoyed at the meeting. The classroom teacher named some students who were falling behind and asked the parents to hire private tutors for their children. Even though those parents did not say anything to the teacher in the public meeting, the preservice teacher said she could see their unpleasant feelings in their faces.

There were some other parental involvement activities that the preservice teachers observed which the classroom teachers carried out. However, the parental involvement activities differed depending on the grade level. In the first or second grades, they noticed classroom teachers involved parents more in their children's learning such as reading, writing, and mathematics. Some examples of parental involvement activities that the preservice teachers learned from the classroom teachers included: encouraging parents in reading in the

first grade; inviting parents to watch the school annual sport competition; asking parents to help decorate classrooms; allowing parents to organize students' birthday parties and sport and quiz contests; encouraging parents to contribute money to classroom decorations and to students' talent shows; organizing workshops for parents to help children do homework and on nurturing children; and requesting parents to contribute materials to a classroom teacher to make visual aids.

What the preservice teachers learned about parental involvement from their student teaching practice varied considerably in types. Also, the preservice teachers realized that the importance given to parental involvement by classroom teachers and schools were different:

> Classroom teachers carry out parent–teacher meetings as a main parental involvement activity.
>
> Schools have different practices of and attitudes toward parental involvement. For instance, [School A] has a special event to listen to parents, but there is no such an event in [School B].
>
> One of my supervising classroom teachers divides the parents into three groups. These groups of parents help organize academic, sports, and music and song activities, respectively.

Parental Involvement Activities Preservice Teachers Conducted During Student Teaching Practice

One of the tasks the preservice teachers completed during their eight-week student teaching practice was carrying out one parental involvement activity. For some preservice teachers, it was a big challenge:

> I had to organize a parental involvement activity during my student teaching practice. In the student teaching practice guidelines, it only said "organization of parental involvement activity," but it did not say what activity and how. I asked my supervising classroom teacher for some ideas and conducted a workshop on characteristics of 10-year-olds and how to interact with them as a parent.
>
> I tried to carry out an interesting and effective parental involvement activity among the fourth graders' parents, but it was not easy. I noticed that parents are very busy, and they do not have enough time to listen to their children. Then I decided to organize an activity where children wrote letters to their parents describing what they dream and what they want their parents to do for them to make their dreams come true. I helped the students to write accurately and decorate envelopes. However, I could not get any feedback or comments from parents because, after

> my activity, there was no parent–teacher meeting held where parents could get together before my student teaching practice was over.

Most of the preservice teachers asked their supervising classroom teachers for parental involvement activity ideas, and they conducted mostly quizzes covering general knowledge or school subject knowledge where a parent and a child paired up and competed with other pairs. Some preservice teachers organized workshops on how parents could help their children do homework or on child development, and very few carried out activities such as children writing letters to parents or parents writing to their children. All preservice teachers carried out some type of parental involvement activity, but another challenge was the low rate of parental participation for most of the preservice teachers. For example, one preservice teacher carried out a general knowledge quiz, but only 7 parents and caretakers out of 27 participated. However, a few preservice teachers were able to involve more parents compared to their classroom teachers:

> I asked my fourth graders to inform their parents about my parental involvement activity. I said if your parents showed up they would learn what their children were currently studying at school. Then I led a school subject knowledge quiz among parents and caretakers with an 80% attendance rate. But two weeks earlier the classroom teacher conducted a parent–teacher meeting and only 50% of parents or caretakers showed up. The teacher just asked children to inform their parents about the meeting without telling them the aim of the meeting.

Activities That Involved Preservice Teachers' Own Parents

When current preservice teachers were primary school students themselves, their parents and relatives often attend parent–teacher meetings. There were not many other parental involvement activities held, although sometimes preservice teachers' parents helped classroom teachers to rehearse classroom talent shows. A very few preservice teachers mentioned that their parents or grandparents checked their homework in lower grades, but when the preservice teachers were in upper grades, their parents or relatives just asked them to do homework. One preservice teacher said that her mother used to attend workshops on child development. Another mentioned her parent organized a concert with other parents and caretakers for the classroom teacher on the Teachers' Day.

However, most of the participants from herder families replied that their parents rarely met teachers. The herder parents lived in the countryside, and sometimes the relatives with whom the preservice teachers lived (when young) attended parent–teacher meetings. Only when it was time for a quarter break did some herder parents come to school to pick up their children and, after the break, brought the children back to school. One of the preservice teachers shared her experience of being a child from a herder family:

> My parents were away in the countryside. They rarely came to school to meet my classroom teacher. This poor communication affected my development. My parents did not know what my interests and talents were. I was shy, and I could not express myself to the teacher. Other children whose parents were in close contact with the teachers could participate in talent shows and other contests.

Preservice Teachers' Awareness of Different Family Patterns

The prospective teachers recognized different family patterns during their student teaching practice. They emphasized the following two types of parents as the main representatives of this diversity.

Herder Parents

From the responses of the participants it can be seen that herder families present special challenges and are an important group to consider:

> Herder parents live in the countryside. They are busy herding and cannot find time to come to school.
>
> Herders' children live in the dormitories of boarding schools, but the children who are in non-boarding schools stay with their grandparents or other relatives.
>
> It is hard to see herder parents. During my student teaching practice, I never saw a herder parent come to school.

Some of the respondents replied that when herder families live in the countryside, the parents are able to see classroom teachers a maximum of only once a quarter when they pick up or take their children from or to school for a quarter break. Most of the preservice teachers also reported that the herders' children staying with relatives had a lower level of parental or caretaker involvement. However, when a child was in the first grade, the herders were much more involved:

> When a child enters a school, herder families are usually split so that mothers move to the county centers and stay with their children, but fathers stay in the countryside herding. When I did my student teaching practice in a county center school, at the first grade, there were seven or eight herder mothers staying with their children. So, they got involved in their children's schooling very well. However, when I did my next student teaching practice at the fourth grade, my supervising classroom teachers said that herder parents rarely show up to school.

According to some preservice teachers, herder mothers often live in the county centers with their first-grade children for a school year, and then children are left with relatives or stay in the dormitory.

The preservice teachers wished herder parents could get more involved in their children's schooling:

> At least one of the herder parents should be able to come and see classroom teachers.
>
> It is preferable to see the herder parents rather than the relatives staying with the child.

Migrant Worker Parents

There is another group of parents who do not stay with their children. In some families, parents are away at work, so the child stays with grandparents or relatives and sometimes even with siblings:

> Students do not live with their parents. Their parents are away working.
>
> Some students stay with relatives while parents are away working. Compared to children who live with their parents, those children usually do not do homework, and sometimes they are absent from classes.

The prospective teachers recognized some parents are away at work, and they cannot be as involved as parents who live locally. Some of those migrant worker parents are abroad, and some are in different places in the country.

Besides the main two types of parents aforementioned, the preservice teachers named some other patterns such as locally employed parents who had trouble finding time to get involved in their children's schooling; civil servants or more educated parents who were more active participants in parent–teacher meetings; a low-income parent who could not provide special costumes for contests for his child; a parent with less education who could not assist his child with homework; a military parent whose child's performance was lower because of regular mobility and deployment; an alcoholic parent who came to school drunk; and an illiterate parent whose child was left behind. Here are some quotations illustrating how these parents were described:

> When I was at student teaching practice in the first grade, there was a father who often came to the classroom drunk to pick up his child.
>
> I asked a first-year student why he did not do homework. Then he said that his father was taken to a sobering-up station, and the mother cried. So no one could help him to do homework.
>
> My classroom teacher asked me to collect parents' signatures. Then she warned me not to ask a mother for her signature because she is illiterate. The teacher said because the mother is illiterate, the child can get easily left behind.

Preservice Teachers' Feelings of Their Preparedness for Working With Parents From Different Family Patterns

The prospective teachers learned some diverse family patterns during their student teaching practice. Also, they learned some parental involvement activities by looking at their supervising classroom teachers' parental involvement activities and by conducting their own parental involvement activities.

Even though the preservice teachers recognized that some parents are away from their children, most of them seemed to believe that all parents need to come to school to meet teachers:

> Some parents rarely come to parent–teacher meetings, but they need to always come and learn about their children.
>
> When it is time for a parent–teacher meeting, some parents are annoyed at coming to school. They think the meeting is not important.
>
> Herder parents need to come to school themselves rather than making the others [their relatives] responsible for coming.
>
> Sometimes grandparents and other relatives come to parent–teacher meetings, but I prefer parents themselves to come, because when parents discover how their children are studying, they can influence their children better.

Some preservice teachers thought that parents should take the initiative to work with teachers. Most of the prospective teachers tended to think that it was solely the parents' responsibility to improve parental involvement:

> Parents need to establish a relationship with teachers.
>
> Parents should regularly make contact with teachers on their own initiative and be informed about their children's performance. It is not good for parents if they do not learn how their children are doing.
>
> Parents should not leave their children with teachers; instead they have to work with teachers for their children's development.

The preservice teachers acknowledged the importance of parental involvement, and they learned more during their student teaching practice to some extent. However, the prospective teachers felt they lacked knowledge and skills to work with different patterns of families, saying the following:

> I need to learn how to make all parents attend parent–teacher meetings.
>
> I feel fear to work with parents.
>
> Actually, it will be a big problem to communicate with herder parents and with some others.

I do not think I am well-prepared for working with parents. Those parents are older than me, so I need to know what to do with them.

When I was doing my student teaching practice in the fourth year, I realized I should have considered working with parents earlier.

From your questions I realized that I have to learn more about parental involvement.

I will learn about parental involvement through my hands-on experiences when I become a classroom teacher. I do not think there are enough reading materials on this topic.

I want to be a classroom teacher of the first graders, because parental involvement in the first grade is good enough.

Perceptions of Changes for Better Parental Involvement and Teacher Education

Conducting parent–teacher meetings is the most common activity the preservice teachers will do for parental involvement when they become classroom teachers. Surprisingly, some preservice teachers want to develop their own strategies to work with parents and wish to do it differently from their supervising classroom teachers:

First of all, I will visit all of the families. Classroom teachers rarely visit families. They only visit families when children cause problems.

During my student teaching practice there was a student who had not showed up for a couple of weeks. The classroom teacher said she would visit the family the next week. I did not know whether she did or not, because my student teaching practice was over then. I wished she had visited the family earlier.

I prefer parent–teacher meeting in small groups, so then I can hear from every parent.

I will inform parents about the purposes of parental involvement activities and parent–teacher meetings in advance.

Some ideas to help improve teacher education, moving beyond just student teaching practices, were mentioned by the respondents. Participants wished that the teacher education could include some content on how to work with parents and not only the importance of parental involvement. A couple of preservice teachers said that the teacher education should draw their attention to the importance of parental involvement from the beginning instead of letting them realize it when they are at student teaching practice. One preservice teacher reflected that she did not think carefully before about children from

diverse family patterns. The pedagogical courses almost exclusively focused on what and how to teach children; they did not really go beyond teaching children. Many preservice teachers wished to have been given some examples of parental involvement activities beyond parent–teacher meetings and quizzes during their courses. They said it was hard for them to conduct their own parental involvement activities during their student teaching practice. One preservice teacher shared her thoughts on giving lectures differently, suggesting that when power point presentations were given, they were easily forgotten. She preferred interactive teaching methods that let preservice teachers work in groups on different cases and share their thoughts and learn from each other. This way, she thought, the preservice teachers would be able to learn independently and better.

Discussion and Conclusion

The prospective teachers were aware of the crucial importance of parental involvement in children's academic achievement and development. The student teaching practice, an important part of teacher education, contributed greatly to their current level of parental involvement preparation and an awareness of diverse family patterns. However, the course sessions seemed to lack systematic introduction, understanding, and strategies to work with different patterns of families. Therefore, it can be concluded that their experience with the supervising classroom teacher during their student teaching practice was likely to shape the preservice teachers' approach to parental involvement, since the extensive coverage of parental involvement was a missing piece in their teacher education.

Even though the classroom teachers were supportive of the preservice teachers' views on working with diverse families, the practices of the classroom teachers working with families varied considerably in both quantity and quality. Collective parent–teacher meetings, the most common activity, provided the preservice teachers the best possible practice of working with parents. Unfortunately, some preservice teachers did not experience any parent–teacher meetings during their student teaching practice. How they defined parental involvement was based on their childhood memories of their parents' involvement in their schooling.

Often, different types of parental involvement activities were ignored, and only a few traditional activities were practiced. This finding is in line with the previous studies (Sosorbaram, 2010; Sukhbaatar, 2014) that stated the most common way of working with parents in Mongolia was parent–teacher meetings. For some preservice teachers, the parent–teacher meeting was a strong

point to develop in their own parental involvement strategies that they would adopt in the future. These preservice teachers looked at the current parent–teacher meetings with critical eyes and developed their own strategies to improve parental involvement such as visiting families, conducting the meetings in small groups so that every parent can be heard and a flexible meeting time can be arranged, and having purposes of the meetings made familiar to parents. This way the needs of parents could be met and opportunities provided to plan activities for promoting each child's success, together with the student and parents, as it is stated in the policy documents. In addition, these preservice teachers should be able to abolish the longstanding "schoolbag" strategy which often has unfortunate consequences.

However, for some preservice teachers, traditional parent–teacher meetings seemed to mean parental involvement, and they tended to believe that every parent needs to show-up to parent–teacher meetings. All prospective teachers reported difficulty in having the attendance of every parent at parent–teacher meetings. Parents are fully aware of the importance of education, and the desire for schooling is increasing (Bharati & Takao, 2010). However, even though every parent wishes their children to be well educated and to live in better conditions than they are now, the time parents spend on and the efforts they put into their children's schooling differ depending on their living conditions and circumstances (Sukhbaatar, 2014).

This study helped the preservice teachers reflect on their student practice experience and raise an awareness of diverse family patterns. One important issue is dealing with children whose parents are away and making contact with their caretakers or relatives. Because herder parents and migrant worker parents are not able to stay with their children during the school year, these parents have caretakers or relatives who act in place of the parent and take care of the children. Despite the reality that parents are unavailable, these caretakers are not usually encouraged to participate in parental involvement activities. One reason for this seems to be that teachers prefer parents over caretakers. However, the General Education Law (Mongolian State Parliament, 2002) states that teachers have responsibilities to partner with caretakers as well as parents. Teachers should understand the need to involve caretakers and encourage them to help students complete their homework and be diligent in their studies, and promote caretakers taking an interest in the academic achievement of the children in their care. For this reason, prospective teachers need to study and understand each family's particular circumstances and to guide, support, and cooperate with parents and caretakers to get the desired educational result. Schools need to offer various types of parental involvement by making available alternative times and alternative formats for different patterns of families

(Zhang, Hsu, Kwok, Benz, & Bowman-Perrott, 2011). Earning a living and getting involved in their children's schooling at the same time is a big challenge for single parents, for herder parents, or for cases where both parents are working. Zhang et al. (2011) found that struggle with daily living needs contributes greatly to low parental involvement.

Often, how the preservice teachers defined parental involvement seemed lacking, and what they learned about working with families of different patterns was likely to be limited with some activities which did not have clear purposes. Thus, teacher education courses need to include content beyond the current traditional activities practiced in primary schools. In addition, schools of education have to teach students the learning, social, and cultural contexts that will help preservice teachers teach in classrooms serving increasingly diverse students (Darling-Hammond, 2006). Teaching "what" to prospective teachers is not enough; knowing "how" to interact with families is also important. With proper instruction, preservice teachers should learn how and when to use strategies and practices with different students and parents or caretakers in different contexts (Darling-Hammond, 2006). The teacher education program could also provide ways for preservice teachers to share their experiences during their student teaching practice with others by assigning them tasks to reflect on their experiences during the practice that they found difficult to solve and discussing these with their peers. Using solid and real examples of challenges that the preservice teachers faced as a learning tool could be beneficial. In addition, the findings of this study suggest that systematic coverage of parental involvement is needed in course sessions in order to allow the preservice teachers to perform better during their student teaching practice. The student teaching practice should not be the first place to start learning about parental involvement. On the contrary, the student teaching practice needs to allow the preservice teachers to practice what they have learned in classroom sessions in real life contexts. Without such learning and practice, teacher education leaves the prospective teachers feeling unprepared to work with families.

Teachers' and schools' emphasis on increasing attendance of parents or caretakers at parent–teacher meetings may prevent prospective teachers from initiating and practicing other parental involvement activities which can be more meaningful. Current Mongolian teacher education continues to stress traditional strategies for parental involvement to preservice candidates and does not promote new ways to engage parents and caretakers (for similar findings in the U.S., see Patte, 2011). Prospective teachers can be change agents if they are adequately prepared to work with parents during teacher education. Prospective teachers may be able to change the schools' and classroom teachers' attitudes and practices related to parental involvement by becoming a positive

influence and advocating for improved parental involvement, especially with the right preparation towards families with diverse backgrounds and towards partnership with caretakers.

By understanding different patterns of families, parents' needs, and parental workload, teachers can plan activities and improve parental involvement, making it more meaningful. Teacher educators need to stress the importance of the context in which the family lives to help preservice teachers consider the diverse backgrounds and the variety of needs of families they will encounter (Baum & McMurray-Schwarz, 2004). The teacher trainers' role is crucial in preparing prospective teachers for parental involvement. If teacher trainers hold negative opinions about working with families, it will influence preservice teachers, resulting in prospective teachers who are more likely to develop similar attitudes (Bruine et al., 2014). Further work is needed to develop curriculum materials for teacher education programs to provide new strategies and new parental involvement resources by going beyond the main focus of teaching methodology of subject matter to meet the demands of 21st century teachers.

Communicating with herder parents and partnering with school dormitory staff could be another strategy to be considered in teacher education. A further in-depth investigation could explore the communication between herder families and school personnel and how classroom teachers can establish and maintain contact with herder parents.

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Appendix. Interview Guide

1. What type of family pattern are you from?
2. How do you define parental involvement at the primary school level?
3. What parental involvement activities did your parents get involved in when you were in primary school?
4. What have you learned about parental involvement during your teacher education in general? How did you learn this material?
5. What types of family patterns have you experienced during your teacher education? What do you know about parental attendance rates in involvement activities?
6. How do you feel about your preparation to work with parents from diverse families?