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THESIS TITLE: On Being Education Nomads

SUBTITLE: Mongolian Herders' Children Straddling Ways of Knowing and Relating

ABSTRACT:

This thesis examines how the convergence of pastoralism, schooling and digital ICT development shapes the education and future aspirations of Mongolian herders' children. My research shows that Mongolian herders' children become education nomads by straddling the herder and schooled urbanite communities of practice. I use education nomads as a generational identity to bring attention to Mongolian rural youths' concurrent participation in herding, schooling, and digital practices. This straddling enables herders' children to orient towards urban professional aspirations while also building their capacity to navigate Mongolia's rural-urban continuum for multiple futures.

Using a 'generationed' (Huijsmans, 2016) and socio-ecological approach to development, I designed a youth-centred methodology to explore how rural Mongolian youths' multiple mobilities, learning, and digital practices in different place-based 'communities of practice' (Lave & Wenger, 1991) inform their life trajectories and aspirations. Deploying the community of practice lens to conceptualise education development from a socio-ecological perspective, I juxtapose young people's schooling practices with their learning practices in other educational settings. This approach offers a more critical understanding of education development. It looks not only at how education shapes learners and the social and ecological places which learners inhabit but also at how learners shape education and their learning socio-ecologies. Methodologically, my research provides an example of how multi-modality can be used to centre young people in a generationed research approach. I developed a multi-method participatory methodology in which visual participatory research techniques (diagramming/mapping and photo voice), semi-structured interviews, and qualitative surveying methods are embedded in a multi-sited ethnography.

Tracing education nomads' mobility trajectories, I highlight the importance of their high and diverse mobilities, including digital mobility, for their concurrent participation in the herder and schooled urbanite communities of practice. Unpacking education nomads' learning in the herder community of practice, I show how rural communal living and socio-ecological learning among herders enable these rural youths to participate in inter- and intra-generational knowledge co-construction processes. Through their engagement with digital practices in rural spaces, playing and doing productive work, education nomads contribute to the continuities as well as the discontinuities of rural knowledge production. My exploration of education nomads' learning in the schooled urbanite community of practice goes beyond a classroom-centred and adult-centric gaze. Instead, I examine education nomads' boarding experiences and educational digital practices both inside and outside of the school. By laying out how dormitory living facilitates the peripheral participation of education nomads in urban living and orientation

(Huijsmans et al., 2021) towards urban professional aspirations, I underline the duality of Mongolia's boarding schools as 'institutions of hope' and 'total institutions' (Finnan, 2022). However, this research also reveals a persistent inequality in Mongolia's contemporary education: the digital divide. By examining reasons underpinning students' reliance on personal digital resources for digital education practices, I show that the divide in 'digital capital' (Gomez, 2021) between students from different socio-economic backgrounds and household trajectories amplifies existing inequalities (Toyama, 2011). I bring attention to how the contemporary digital divide contributes to the uneven distribution of youths' capacity to orient towards urban professional futures. Finally, I map out education nomads' ideas of a good life and unpack the place-based interdependencies in their capacity to aspire (Appadurai, 2004). Thereby, I demonstrate that their concurrent educational experiences among herders and in formal schooling enable these rural youths to build trajectories for multiple futures and expand their capacity to navigate Mongolia's rural-urban continuum.

With generational relations as a central relationality in my research, I join the growing number of researchers who engage in 'generationing' (Alanen & Mayall, 2001) childhood and youth (Bühler-Niederberger et al., 2023; Huijsmans, 2016). Moreover, by tracing the diverse ways in which digital ICT is integrated into the different place-based ideas of a good life among youth, this research also contributes to Information Communication Technologies for Development (ICT4D) studies that put people and their aspirations at the centre of inquiry instead of technologies. Furthermore, this research adds young people's experiences to the literature on Mongolia's development and brings a development perspective to the sparse body of literature on Mongolian childhood and youth. The Mongolian context in my research also brings a non-sedentary perspective to the literature on education development, migration, ICT4D, and youth aspirations.