Global Dialogues in Humanities and Pedagogy

Preserving Oral Traditions through School Curriculum A Qualitative Study in Northern Mongolia

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ARTICLE INFO	ABSTRACT
	This qualitative study investigates the integration of oral traditions into formal school curricula as a mechanism for cultural preservation in Northern Mongolia, where rapid modernization threatens indigenous knowledge transmission systems. Through ethnographic fieldwork across twelve schools in the Khövsgöl and Selenge provinces, including interviews with educators, community elders, students, and curriculum developers, the research examines how educational institutions navigate tensions between standardized national curricula and localized cultural preservation goals. Findings reveal that successful integration requires collaborative curriculum design involving community knowledge holders, pedagogical approaches honoring oral transmission methods, and institutional structures supporting intergenerational cultural exchange within educational settings. However, challenges including teacher preparation gaps, assessment difficulties, time constraints within standardized curricula, and generational disconnection impede effective implementation. The study demonstrates that schools can function as vital spaces for oral tradition preservation when curricula authentically incorporate indigenous epistemologies rather than merely adding superficial cultural content to conventional academic frameworks, suggesting broader implications for Indigenous education globally.

INTRODUCTION

Oral traditions constitute fundamental mechanisms through which human communities transmit cultural knowledge, historical memory, ethical frameworks, and collective identity across generations, particularly within Indigenous societies where oral transmission historically served as primary knowledge preservation systems (Vansina, 1985) (Muhsyanur, 2023). In Mongolia, oral traditions encompassing epic poetry, historical narratives, proverbs, music, and specialized knowledge about nomadic pastoralism have sustained cultural continuity for millennia despite political upheavals, environmental challenges, and social transformations (Pegg, 2001). However, contemporary globalization, urbanization, sedentarization, and technological change increasingly threaten these transmission systems as younger generations adopt lifestyles diverging dramatically from traditional nomadic practices that historically embedded oral knowledge within daily life.

Northern Mongolia, encompassing provinces characterized by sparse population density, continued pastoral nomadism, and relative geographic isolation from urban centers, represents a critical context for examining oral tradition preservation (Sneath, 2000). Communities in regions such as Khövsgöl and Selenge maintain stronger connections to traditional lifeways compared to more urbanized southern areas, yet face mounting pressures from economic development, climate change affecting pastoral viability, and educational policies emphasizing standardized academic achievement over localized cultural knowledge. The tension between modernization imperatives and cultural preservation constitutes a central dilemma for contemporary Mongolian society, raising urgent questions about mechanisms for sustaining Indigenous knowledge systems amid rapid social change.

Formal education systems occupy paradoxical positions regarding Indigenous knowledge preservation, simultaneously threatening traditional transmission through displacement of informal learning within families and communities, while offering potential institutional platforms for systematic cultural education reaching all children regardless of family circumstances (Smith, 2012) (Muhsyanur and Ramlee, 2023). Schools can undermine oral traditions by privileging literacy, Western epistemologies, and standardized curricula that marginalize Indigenous knowledge, or conversely can serve as deliberate preservation spaces when curricula intentionally incorporate cultural content, pedagogical methods honor oral transmission practices, and institutional structures facilitate intergenerational knowledge exchange (Battiste, 2013).

Curriculum integration of oral traditions presents distinct pedagogical challenges compared to conventional academic subjects, as oral knowledge transmission traditionally occurs through apprenticeship, observation, participation in cultural practices, and storytelling within authentic social contexts rather than through formal classroom instruction (Cajete, 1994) and (Muhsyanur, 2024). The

experiential, relational, and contextual nature of oral knowledge resists easy translation into standardized curricula, textbooks, and assessment mechanisms that formal education systems typically employ. Additionally, oral traditions embody living knowledge continuously adapted by communities rather than fixed content, raising questions about curriculum standardization potentially freezing dynamic cultural practices into static representations.

Theoretical frameworks addressing Indigenous education emphasize the importance of cultural responsiveness, community control over educational content, and pedagogical approaches aligning with Indigenous epistemologies rather than imposing Western educational models onto Indigenous communities (Castagno & Brayboy, 2008). The concept of "two-way learning" developed within Indigenous education scholarship recognizes that effective education for Indigenous students requires bridging Indigenous and Western knowledge systems, creating spaces where both perspectives receive genuine respect rather than positioning Western knowledge as superior and Indigenous knowledge as supplementary or decorative (Lewthwaite & Renaud, 2009).

Research on language revitalization demonstrates that educational institutions play crucial roles in sustaining Indigenous languages facing extinction, with immersion programs, mother-tongue instruction, and community-based curriculum development showing effectiveness in reversing language shift among younger generations (McCarty & Nicholas, 2014). These findings suggest potential parallels for oral tradition preservation, though oral traditions encompass broader cultural dimensions beyond language alone. The integration of storytelling, oral history, and Indigenous knowledge into curricula has shown promise in various contexts including Native American, Aboriginal Australian, and Māori education, though contextual differences necessitate locally developed approaches rather than universal models.

Mongolia's educational system underwent dramatic transformations following socialist period collectivization and subsequent post-socialist liberalization, creating complex legacies affecting contemporary curriculum development (Steiner-Khamsi & Stolpe, 2006). Soviet-era education emphasized literacy, scientific rationalism, and ideological formation often at the expense of traditional cultural practices, while post-socialist reforms introduced market-oriented educational policies and international partnerships sometimes promoting Western pedagogical approaches with limited attention to Indigenous knowledge preservation. Recent government initiatives have increasingly emphasized cultural heritage and national identity within education, creating policy openings for oral tradition integration though implementation challenges persist.

Despite growing scholarly attention to Indigenous education globally and increasing policy recognition of cultural preservation needs in Mongolia, limited research systematically examines how Northern Mongolian schools specifically integrate oral traditions into curricula and with what effects on both educational outcomes and cultural preservation (Billé, 2015). Most existing scholarship addresses

either Mongolian education generally without focusing on cultural content, or examines oral traditions anthropologically without analyzing educational dimensions. This study addresses these gaps through in-depth qualitative investigation of oral tradition integration practices across diverse Northern Mongolian school contexts, examining implementation strategies, stakeholder perspectives, facilitating and constraining factors, and implications for both student learning and cultural preservation outcomes. The research seeks to illuminate effective approaches for leveraging educational institutions as cultural preservation spaces while identifying challenges requiring attention from educators, policymakers, and communities concerned with sustaining Indigenous knowledge systems amid modernization (Muhsyanur, 2025; Muhsyanur et al., 2022).

METHOD

This qualitative study employed ethnographic methods to investigate oral tradition integration in twelve schools across Khövsgöl and Selenge provinces in Northern Mongolia over an eighteen-month fieldwork period. School selection utilized purposive sampling targeting institutions identified by provincial education departments as actively incorporating cultural content, representing diverse contexts including rural boarding schools serving nomadic communities, village-based schools in settled areas, and provincial center schools serving mixed populations. Data collection incorporated multiple qualitative approaches to capture comprehensive perspectives on curriculum integration processes and outcomes. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with forty-eight teachers, sixteen school administrators, thirty-two community elders recognized as oral tradition knowledge holders, twenty-four curriculum developers and education officials, and sixty-four students across various grade levels, exploring curriculum design processes, pedagogical practices, cultural transmission experiences, and perceptions of oral tradition education value (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016).

Participant observation comprised extended periods in classrooms observing oral tradition lessons, attendance at cultural events and community gatherings where traditional knowledge transmission occurred, and participation in curriculum planning meetings involving teachers and community members. Field notes documented pedagogical approaches, student engagement patterns, intergenerational interactions, and contextual factors shaping implementation. Document analysis examined curriculum materials, lesson plans, student work samples, and policy documents to understand formal structures guiding oral tradition education. Focus group discussions with students, teachers, and community members explored collective perspectives on challenges and successes. Data analysis followed constructivist grounded theory procedures outlined by Charmaz (2014), employing iterative coding processes identifying themes emerging from participant perspectives rather than imposing predetermined categories. Initial open coding identified concepts within interview transcripts and field notes, followed by focused coding clustering related concepts into broader themes, and

theoretical coding establishing relationships between themes to develop explanatory frameworks. Member checking with participant validation of interpretations, triangulation across data sources, prolonged engagement establishing researcher credibility, and reflexive acknowledgment of researcher positionality enhanced trustworthiness (Lincoln & Guba, 1985) (Muhsyanur et al., 2021). Ethical protocols included approval from Mongolian education authorities, informed consent in participants' preferred language, particular attention to protocols for elder participation respecting cultural norms, and child assent procedures appropriate for student participants.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

Community-School Collaboration and Intergenerational Knowledge Exchange

Analysis revealed that successful oral tradition integration fundamentally depended on authentic collaboration between schools and community knowledge holders, moving beyond tokenistic cultural performances toward substantive partnerships positioning elders as co-educators possessing expertise teachers themselves lacked. Schools implementing effective programs established formal mechanisms for elder involvement including designated community educator positions, regular elder classroom visits, joint curriculum planning sessions involving teachers and knowledge holders, and community-school cultural events facilitating intergenerational exchange. One Khövsgöl boarding school exemplified this approach by employing three retired herders as cultural instructors who taught traditional skills including horse training, felt-making, and epic singing alongside conventional academic subjects, creating institutional legitimacy for oral knowledge comparable to formal academic content.

Teachers consistently emphasized that their own limited knowledge of oral traditions necessitated community partnership, as most educators came from urbanized backgrounds with incomplete cultural training despite being ethnically Mongolian. Several teachers described initially attempting to teach traditional content using textbook resources but recognizing that authentic transmission required knowledge holders who had learned through traditional apprenticeship rather than formal study. This realization led to collaborative teaching arrangements where elders provided cultural content and traditional pedagogical approaches while teachers offered organizational skills and connections to broader curriculum frameworks, creating complementary roles honoring both Indigenous and academic expertise.

Students demonstrated markedly different engagement when learning from elders compared to teacher-led cultural lessons, with observations documenting heightened attention, respectful behavior, and authentic interest during elder instruction. Interviews revealed students perceived elder teaching as accessing "real" knowledge connected to lived experience rather than abstract academic content, creating motivational dynamics rarely present in conventional classroom instruction. One student described learning epic poetry from a renowned bard as "hearing the

stories my grandfather heard" rather than studying literature, illustrating how elder presence created tangible connections to cultural continuity transcending generic cultural education.

However, community-school collaboration faced significant challenges including logistical difficulties coordinating elder availability with school schedules, limited financial resources for elder compensation, communication barriers between education-oriented teachers and practice-oriented knowledge holders, and occasionally conflicting expectations regarding appropriate pedagogical approaches. Some elders expressed discomfort with classroom environments and formal teaching requirements, preferring traditional informal transmission contexts. Schools successfully navigating these challenges developed flexible structures accommodating traditional learning patterns, provided modest compensation recognizing elder contributions, and cultivated relationships built on mutual respect rather than merely extracting cultural content from communities for institutional purposes.

Pedagogical Adaptation: Honoring Oral Transmission Methods Within Formal Education

The research identified critical tensions between conventional school pedagogical approaches and traditional oral knowledge transmission methods, requiring creative adaptations honoring Indigenous epistemologies within institutional constraints. Traditional oral transmission typically occurs through observation, apprenticeship, storytelling, and participation in authentic practices embedded within daily life rather than through explicit verbal instruction, written exercises, and assessment that schools standardly employ (Cajete, 1994). Teachers successfully integrating oral traditions adapted pedagogical approaches to align with traditional transmission patterns, including extended storytelling sessions without interruption for comprehension questions, hands-on skill practice with master practitioners, experiential learning through cultural activities, and assessment through demonstration rather than written tests.

One particularly effective pedagogical innovation involved multi-day cultural immersion programs where students spent time with herding families learning pastoral skills, oral histories, and traditional knowledge in authentic contexts rather than classroom settings. These immersions addressed limitations of decontextualized classroom cultural education by situating learning within living cultural practices, creating memorable experiences students referenced years later as foundational to cultural understanding. Teachers noted that immersion learning generated insights and competencies impossible to achieve through conventional classroom instruction alone, though practical and financial constraints limited frequency of such programs.

The role of repetition in oral tradition transmission presented particular challenges for time-constrained school curricula. Traditional knowledge transmission involves repeated exposure across years as learners progressively

deepen understanding through multiple encounters with content in varying contexts, contrasting sharply with schools' linear curriculum progression where topics receive brief coverage before moving to new content. Several schools addressed this through spiral curriculum designs where cultural content recurred across grade levels with increasing sophistication, allowing cumulative knowledge building resembling traditional transmission patterns. One teacher described teaching the same epic across three consecutive years with different analytical focuses each year, enabling students to develop familiarity and appreciation through repeated engagement impossible within single-year treatment.

The balance between preservation and adaptation of oral traditions within educational contexts generated philosophical tensions among stakeholders. Some elders and community members emphasized faithful preservation of traditional forms without modification, expressing concern that pedagogical adaptation might corrupt authentic transmission. Others argued that survival of oral traditions in contemporary contexts required creative adaptation allowing traditional knowledge to remain relevant for modernized younger generations, suggesting that rigid preservation efforts might paradoxically accelerate tradition obsolescence by positioning oral knowledge as museum artifacts rather than living practices. Schools navigating this tension most successfully maintained core traditional elements while developing age-appropriate and contextually relevant pedagogical approaches, consulting community members to ensure adaptations preserved cultural integrity while acknowledging contemporary realities.

Challenges and Constraints in Curriculum Integration

Despite successes in some contexts, the research identified substantial systemic challenges constraining oral tradition integration across Northern Mongolian schools. Time allocation within standardized national curricula emerged as the most frequently cited obstacle, with teachers describing intense pressure to cover mandated academic content for national examinations leaving minimal time for cultural education regardless of personal or institutional commitment to preservation. The Mongolian education system's emphasis on standardized testing in core academic subjects created implicit hierarchies devaluing oral tradition content as supplementary rather than central to student learning, contradicting policy rhetoric emphasizing cultural preservation importance.

Teacher preparation gaps significantly impeded implementation quality, as most teacher education programs provided minimal training in cultural pedagogy, oral tradition content, or methods for community collaboration. Teachers frequently described feeling inadequately prepared to teach cultural content effectively, particularly those from urban backgrounds lacking personal experience with traditional practices. Professional development opportunities specifically addressing cultural education remained limited, leaving teachers to develop approaches through trial and error without systematic pedagogical guidance. Several teachers expressed frustration that despite policy mandates for cultural education,

institutional support structures necessary for effective implementation remained underdeveloped.

Assessment presented particularly vexing challenges, as oral traditions' experiential and performative nature resisted conventional testing methods emphasizing written responses and objective scoring. Teachers struggled to develop assessment approaches capturing authentic cultural learning while satisfying administrative requirements for documented student achievement. The challenge intensified for oral traditions like epic performance or traditional music where competency develops gradually over years, defying semester-based assessment timelines. Some teachers resolved this tension by creating alternative assessment methods including performance demonstrations, elder evaluations, and portfolio documentation, though these approaches required additional time and received limited recognition within official accountability systems.

Generational disconnection between students and traditional culture created motivational challenges, particularly as students increasingly viewed traditional knowledge as irrelevant to anticipated futures in modernized contexts. Several students candidly expressed greater interest in technology, urban culture, and globally oriented knowledge than traditional pastoral practices they perceived as outdated, reflecting broader social transformations reducing cultural transmission within families. Teachers noted that even students from herding families sometimes demonstrated limited interest in traditional knowledge, suggesting that preservation challenges extended beyond curriculum design to encompass fundamental shifts in cultural values and identity among younger generations.

The table below summarizes key challenges identified across research sites, their manifestation patterns, and strategies schools employed to address them where successful approaches existed.

Table 1. Challenges in Oral Tradition Curriculum Integration: Manifestations and Institutional Responses

Challenge Category	Specific Manifestations	Frequency Among Schools	Successful Mitigation Strategies	Schools Successfully Addressing
Time Constraints	Insufficient curriculum time for cultural content due to academic subject demands	12/12 (100%)	Integrated approach embedding cultural content within academic subjects; designated cultural education days; extended school year for cultural programming	4/12 (33%)
Teacher	Teachers lacking	11/12	Elder co-teaching	5/12 (42%)

Challenge Category	Specific Manifestations	Frequency Among Schools	Successful Mitigation Strategies	Schools Successfully Addressing
Preparation	cultural knowledge, pedagogical skills for oral tradition instruction, community engagement competencies	(92%)	partnerships; peer mentoring among culturally knowledgeable teachers; community-based professional development	
Community Engagement	Difficulty coordinating elder involvement; limited compensation for knowledge holders; logistical barriers	10/12 (83%)	Formal community educator positions; flexible scheduling accommodating elder availability; institutional relationship-building	6/12 (50%)
Assessment Difficulties	Oral traditions resist conventional testing; challenge documenting performative knowledge; evaluation criteria unclear	9/12 (75%)	Alternative assessment methods (performance, demonstration, elder evaluation); portfolio approaches; recognition of gradual competency development	3/12 (25%)
Student Motivation	Students view traditional knowledge as irrelevant; preference for modern knowledge and skills; cultural disconnection	8/12 (67%)	Connecting traditional knowledge to contemporary contexts; experiential learning increasing engagement; involving students in authentic cultural practices	4/12 (33%)
Resource Limitations	Insufficient materials, equipment for cultural education; limited funding for cultural programming;	10/12 (83%)	Community resource contributions; creative use of available materials; grant applications for cultural programming	5/12 (42%)

Challenge Category	Specific Manifestations	Frequency Among Schools	Successful Mitigation Strategies	Schools Successfully Addressing
	facility constraints		support	
Standardization Pressures	National curriculum requirements limiting local adaptation; testing emphasis devaluing cultural content; accountability systems	12/12 (100%)	Advocacy for curriculum flexibility; demonstrating academic benefits of cultural education; policy engagement at provincial level	2/12 (17%)
Intergenerational Transmission Decline	Reduced cultural transmission within families; elder knowledge holder population aging; fewer traditional practitioners	11/12 (92%)	Schools functioning as cultural hubs; documentation projects preserving elder knowledge; creating youth-elder connection opportunities	7/12 (58%)

This table illustrates that while all schools faced multiple challenges, successful mitigation strategies existed for most obstacles, though implementation rates varied considerably. Structural challenges including time constraints and standardization pressures proved most difficult to address at individual school levels, requiring provincial or national policy interventions beyond school control. Conversely, community engagement and intergenerational transmission challenges, though widespread, showed higher rates of successful local solutions through creative institutional innovations and relationship-building efforts. The variation in successful strategy implementation suggests that while effective approaches exist, their adoption depends on school-specific factors including leadership commitment, community relationships, available resources, and institutional capacity for pedagogical innovation.

CONCLUSION

This investigation reveals that Northern Mongolian schools can serve as vital spaces for oral tradition preservation when curriculum integration authentically honors Indigenous epistemologies, involves community knowledge holders as equal partners, employs pedagogical approaches aligned with traditional transmission methods, and receives institutional support through appropriate time allocation, teacher preparation, and flexible assessment frameworks. Successful

implementations demonstrate that oral tradition education benefits students academically while contributing to cultural preservation, challenging false dichotomies positioning cultural education as competing with academic achievement rather than complementing it. However, systemic constraints including standardized curriculum pressures, assessment challenges, teacher preparation gaps, and generational cultural disconnection significantly impede widespread effective implementation, suggesting that school-based preservation efforts require broader educational system reforms addressing these structural obstacles. The research indicates that oral tradition integration cannot succeed through superficial curriculum additions or tokenistic cultural performances but demands fundamental reconsideration of epistemological assumptions underlying formal education, creating spaces where Indigenous knowledge systems receive recognition equivalent to Western academic knowledge.

For Northern Mongolia and Indigenous communities globally facing similar cultural preservation challenges, findings suggest that educational institutions possess significant preservation potential when communities control cultural content, traditional transmission methods guide pedagogical approaches, and schools function as intergenerational meeting spaces rather than solely academic institutions. Future research should examine longitudinal outcomes of oral tradition education on both student cultural competency and community transmission patterns, investigate student perspectives more extensively, and explore scalability of successful localized approaches to provincial or national levels while maintaining the community embeddedness that effective implementation requires.

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