

Inequality in Access to Early Childhood Education in Mongolia

Urjinsuren J.¹, Dolgorsuren D.², Togtokhbayer R.³, Batkhishig Munkhzaya.⁴

¹Ph.D, Associate Professor, Department of Education, National University of Mongolia (NUM).

²Ph.D, National University of Mongolia (NUM)

³Master's Student, Lecturer, Department of Education, National University of Mongolia (NUM)

⁴Lecturer, Department of Business and Law, Western Regional School, Mongolian University of Science and Technology

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ABSTRACT

Early childhood education (ECE) establishes the foundational basis for human development and must be equitably accessible to all children; it therefore remains one of Mongolia's central sustainable development priorities. Despite notable progress in recent years — most prominently reflected in the increase of the gross enrollment rate among children aged 2–5 to 90.6% — persistent disparities in access continue to be shaped by socio-economic conditions and geographical location. The Government of Mongolia's strategic policy directions for the education sector emphasize the goal of enhancing the "quality and accessibility of education," underscoring the need for robust, evidence-based research to inform policy solutions. A more nuanced examination of the participation of children residing in remote administrative centers, children from herder households, and children with disabilities, together with an assessment of the effectiveness of alternative education modalities serving these groups, is essential for aligning ECE services with actual needs. Drawing on statistical data and policy documentation for the 2024–2025 academic year, this study provides a comprehensive analysis of the current state of inequality in access to early childhood education in Mongolia and offers evidence-based recommendations for policy and practice.

Keywords: early childhood education; child development; equity; access; Mongolia

INTRODUCTION

Early childhood education lays the psychological, cognitive, and social groundwork upon which subsequent learning and human development are built (Urjinsuren et al., 2025). International evidence consistently shows that the quality of the early learning environment and the strength of children's early social relationships significantly shape their long-term developmental trajectories, including their readiness for formal schooling and their capacity for lifelong learning (Urjinsuren et al., 2025; Hong et al., 2026). For this reason, ensuring equitable access to ECE is not only a matter of educational policy but a determinant of a nation's long-term human capital development.

In Mongolia, the early childhood education sector has expanded considerably over the past decade, supported by government investment and international cooperation (World Bank, 2017a). Nevertheless, disparities in access continue to be shaped by geographic remoteness, household socio-economic status, and disability status, with children from herder households and remote administrative centers remaining disproportionately underserved (UNICEF Mongolia, n.d.; World Bank, 2017b). The Government of Mongolia's education-sector strategy explicitly prioritizes the enhancement of both the quality and the accessibility of education, which underscores the need for rigorous, evidence-based research capable of informing targeted policy solutions.

This study addresses that need by providing a systematic, indicator-based analysis of inequality in access to ECE in Mongolia during the 2024–2025 academic year. Specifically, it examines (1) overall and age-specific

enrollment coverage, (2) geographical and socio-economic equity in service delivery, (3) the enrollment of socially vulnerable groups, and (4) indicators of service quality, including staffing, teacher qualifications, and infrastructure capacity. By integrating these dimensions, the study aims to generate a comprehensive evidence base to guide policies aimed at aligning ECE services with the actual needs of Mongolia's most underserved children.

THEORETICAL AND CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

The analysis is grounded in the understanding that early childhood is a sensitive period during which children's cognitive, social, and emotional capacities develop through interaction with their immediate environment and caregivers. Developmental and educational psychology emphasize that access to a stimulating and supportive early learning environment is a central condition for healthy development and later school readiness (Urjinsuren et al., 2025). Consistent with this perspective, disparities in access to formal or alternative ECE services are treated in this study not merely as gaps in enrollment statistics, but as differences in children's opportunities to develop the cognitive, social, and emotional foundations required for lifelong learning (Urjinsuren et al., 2025; Hong et al., 2026).

Equity in ECE is accordingly conceptualized along three interrelated dimensions: (1) geographical equity — the extent to which service provision is distributed across administrative levels (capital/aimag, soum, and bag centers); (2) social equity — the extent to which socially vulnerable groups, including children with disabilities, orphans, and children receiving social welfare support, are represented among enrolled children; and (3) quality equity — the extent to which the availability of qualified teaching staff and adequate infrastructure is comparable across regions and institutions. These three dimensions structure the presentation of findings in Section 4.

METHODOLOGY

This study employs a quantitative, descriptive research design based on secondary data analysis. The analysis draws on preliminary administrative statistics for the 2024–2025 academic year, the 2025 A-ESD-1 sectoral report, and the National Development Year-End Report, supplemented by 2023–2024 data on the geographical distribution of kindergartens, teacher qualifications, and the enrollment of socially vulnerable children (Ministry of Education and Science of Mongolia, 2025; National Development Agency of Mongolia, 2025). Core indicators — including overall and net enrollment rates, the geographical distribution of institutions, the student–teacher ratio (STR), and the educational attainment of teaching staff — were calculated and compared against national targets and international benchmarks. Where the two primary administrative data sources reported divergent totals for the same indicator, this discrepancy is noted explicitly, and the more comprehensive source is applied consistently throughout the analysis (see note under Table 1).

RESULTS

Accessibility of Early Childhood Care and Education (Coverage Analysis)

To assess the level of accessibility of early childhood care and education (ECCE), two principal indicators were used: the overall enrollment rate for children aged 2–5, and the net enrollment rate of five-year-old children, who constitute the school-entry cohort.

General enrollment (ages 2–5). According to preliminary statistics for the 2024–2025 academic year, the overall enrollment rate among children aged 2–5 reached 90.6%, corresponding to 96.3% of the annual target of 94% (Ministry of Education and Science of Mongolia, 2025). A total of 264,818 children were enrolled in ECE, of whom 253,158 (95.6%) participated in mainstream programs and 11,660 (4.4%) in alternative programs. While the general enrollment rate remains high, the shortfall relative to the 94% target indicates persistent challenges in expanding access, particularly among children aged 2–3 and those residing in remote areas.

Net enrollment of five-year-old children. Enrollment among children of school-entry age (five years old) remains the highest within the ECE system, reaching a net enrollment rate of 94.1%, or 97.0% of the target rate of 97%. A total of 74,027 five-year-olds were enrolled in ECE. This result reflects strong progress toward ensuring school readiness; nonetheless, the remaining 5.9% — approximately 4,300 children — represents a residual group that has yet to be reached and requires targeted intervention.

Age-Group Enrollment Patterns (2025)

Table 1. Enrollment by Age Group, 2025

Age Group	Participants (Total)	Participants (Female)	Share of Total
Age 2	55,671	27,105	21.5%
Age 3	60,912	29,792	23.5%
Age 4	68,196	33,388	26.3%
Age 5	73,344	35,812	28.3%
Total (Ages 2–5)	258,849	126,397	100%

Note. The total reported in the 2025 A-ESD-1 report (258,849) shows a slight discrepancy relative to the figure presented in the National Development Year-End Report (264,818). The latter, more comprehensive figure (264,818) is applied consistently in Section 4.1.

Enrollment among two-year-olds (55,671 children), while numerically substantial, is likely to represent the lowest enrollment rate relative to the total population of that age cohort — a pattern plausibly associated with kindergarten capacity constraints and lower parental demand for very early enrollment. Enrollment increases progressively across ages 3 to 5, with five-year-olds representing the largest share (28.3%), a trend consistent with the effectiveness of Mongolia's policy emphasis on school readiness in the year preceding primary entry.

Equity Analysis in Early Childhood Education

The equity analysis evaluates the extent to which ECE services reached children from socially vulnerable and geographically marginalized groups, drawing on detailed 2023–2024 data.

Geographical equity. An examination of the geographical distribution of kindergartens in 2023–2024 (N = 1,410) shows a pronounced concentration in urban centers: 984 kindergartens (69.8%) were located in aimag or capital centers, 394 (28%) in soum centers, and only 32 (2.3%) in bag centers. This distribution indicates significant geographical inequity in service accessibility for children in remote and herder communities — a pattern that broadly mirrors findings from earlier national assessments of Mongolia's ECE sector (World Bank, 2017a, 2017b). This disparity is currently addressed, in part, through alternative education modalities.

Effectiveness of alternative education for herder children. Enrollment of herder children is used as a key indicator for assessing progress in reducing geographical inequity. In 2023–2024, a total of 34,888 herder children were enrolled in ECE, of whom 13,965 (5.1% of total enrollment) participated through alternative education modalities. These findings suggest that alternative delivery models — including mobile teachers, mobile schools, and home-based groups — play a critical role in extending educational access to children in remote and nomadic communities, consistent with prior recommendations to prioritize home-based ECE for hard-to-reach populations (World Bank, 2017a).

Enrollment of Socially Vulnerable Children (2023–2024)

Table 2. Enrollment of Socially Vulnerable Groups

Vulnerable Group	Children Enrolled (Total)	% of All ECE Children (N = 274,236)
Children receiving social welfare benefits	3,794	1.38%
Children with disabilities	1,977	0.72%
Double orphans	32	0.01%
Single orphans	1,234	0.45%

Although inclusive policies aimed at supporting children receiving welfare benefits and children with disabilities are being implemented, their enrollment remains low relative to the total ECE population. The enrollment of children with disabilities, in particular — 1,977 children, or less than 1% of total enrollment — indicates the continued need to expand inclusive education services and to strengthen the identification and referral mechanisms that connect vulnerable children to available provision.

Quality Indicators: Teaching Personnel

The quality of ECE provision is directly linked to the number of teaching personnel, their educational attainment, and their professional experience.

Table 3. Number of Teachers and Staff (Preliminary 2025–2026 Data)

Indicator	Total (N)	Female (N)	Share of Female Staff
Total staff	36,464	30,922	84.8%
Directors	1,333	1,307	98.0%
Methodologists	1,121	1,112	99.2%
Core teachers	10,298	9,819	95.3%

According to preliminary estimates for the 2025–2026 academic year, the total ECE workforce of 36,464 employees indicates that the sector maintains an adequate human-resource base overall. However, women constitute 84.8% of all personnel, reflecting a persistent gender imbalance that is characteristic of Mongolia's ECE workforce and consistent with global patterns in the early-years education profession.

Student–teacher ratio (STR). With 264,818 children enrolled in 2024–2025 and 10,298 core teachers employed in 2025–2026, the resulting student–teacher ratio is $264,818 \div 10,298 \approx 25.7:1$. On average, therefore, one core teacher is responsible for 25–26 children, a ratio that exceeds both international recommendations (15–20:1) and national standards, which vary by group size. This finding points to increased

risk to the quality of ECE service delivery and to teachers' capacity to provide individualized attention, particularly to children with additional developmental needs.

Educational Attainment of Teachers (2023–2024)

Table 4. Educational Level of Core Teachers

Educational Level	Core Teachers (N)	% (of 9,733 Teachers)
Master's degree or higher	549	5.6%
Bachelor's degree	6,825	70.1%
Higher (diploma / specialized secondary)	1,629	16.7%
Technical / vocational	485	5.0%
Other (general secondary / primary)	48	0.5%
Total	9,733	100%

A total of 75.8% of core teachers (Master's, 5.6%, plus Bachelor's, 70.1%) hold at least a bachelor's degree, indicating a relatively strong professional profile within the ECE teaching workforce. Nonetheless, 5.5% of teachers hold qualifications below the diploma/bachelor level (technical/vocational and other categories), highlighting a continued need for targeted professional development and upskilling, particularly in institutions serving remote and underserved communities.

Capacity and Infrastructure

The accessibility and quality of ECE services depend directly on the number, location, and capacity of kindergarten facilities. The total number of kindergartens in Mongolia has remained relatively stable, decreasing slightly from 1,410 in 2023–2024 to 1,399 in the preliminary 2025–2026 data.

Table 5. Number of ECE Institutions by Ownership

Indicator	2023–2024	2025–2026 (Preliminary)
Total kindergartens	1,410	1,399
State-owned	991	1,019
Local government-owned	19	27
Private	400	353

State-owned kindergartens increased from 991 to 1,019, while private kindergartens decreased from 400 to 353. This shift may reflect policy measures aimed at stabilizing the sector and strengthening government involvement in ECE provision.

Table 6. Location-Based Access Disparities (2023–2024)

Location	Kindergartens (N, %)	Enrolled Children (N, %)
Total	1,410	274,236
Aimag / capital centers	984 (69.8%)	200,176 (73.0%)
Soum centers	394 (27.9%)	70,855 (25.8%)
Bag centers	32 (2.3%)	3,205 (1.2%)

Nearly 70% of all kindergartens are concentrated in aimag or capital centers, serving 73% of all enrolled children, while only 32 kindergartens (2.3%) operate in bag centers, accounting for just 1.2% of total enrolled children. This pattern highlights extremely limited access to ECE services in remote and rural areas and indicates that kindergartens in central locations are likely operating beyond their intended capacity, resulting in significant overcrowding (World Bank, 2017a).

Within Mongolia's national development policy framework, goals have been set to expand access to schools and kindergartens and to reduce the number of general-education schools operating in three shifts to two shifts, further underscoring persistent capacity challenges across the education sector. In response, planned capital investments for 2025 — including the construction of dormitory facilities — demonstrate the government's recognition of the urgent need to address these infrastructure gaps.

DISCUSSION

Taken together, these findings indicate that Mongolia's ECE sector has achieved substantial progress in overall coverage while continuing to face three interrelated structural challenges: geographical concentration of facilities, underrepresentation of socially vulnerable groups, and quality constraints stemming from high student–teacher ratios. The most critical of these is the geographical imbalance in access: with only 2.3% of kindergartens located in bag centers, children from rural and herder households face structurally limited opportunities to access formal ECE, despite the demonstrated effectiveness of alternative delivery modalities in partially closing this gap.

From a developmental perspective, these access gaps are consequential precisely because early childhood is a period during which the foundations of cognitive, social, and emotional development are established through sustained engagement with a stimulating environment and responsive caregivers (Urjinsuren et al., 2025). Limited access to quality ECE in remote and vulnerable populations therefore risks compounding existing socio-economic disparities well before children enter the formal school system, a concern consistent with earlier national assessments showing that socio-economic gaps in child development outcomes persist even among children with substantial exposure to public ECE services (World Bank, 2017b).

The elevated student–teacher ratio (approximately 25.7:1, against an international benchmark of 15–20:1) further suggests that even where access is achieved, the quality of the learning environment may be compromised, with implications for individualized attention to children with disabilities or additional developmental needs. Addressing these combined challenges will require a multi-dimensional strategy that

integrates infrastructure expansion, teacher workforce incentives, strengthened alternative delivery models, and closer coordination with Mongolia's broader national development policies.

CONCLUSION

This study set out to analyze inequality in access to early childhood education in Mongolia during the 2024–2025 academic year across four dimensions: overall coverage, geographical and social equity, and service quality. The analysis shows that although the number of state-owned kindergartens has increased — indicating improved sectoral stability — the overall number of kindergartens has remained relatively constant (1,399–1,410), and geographical inequality remains the leading challenge, with only 2.3% of kindergartens located in bag centers. Mongolia's ECE sector continues to face significant capacity bottlenecks arising from the urban concentration of facilities, insufficient rural infrastructure, and high student–teacher ratios.

Addressing these issues requires a coordinated, multi-dimensional strategy combining infrastructure expansion in remote areas, incentives to attract and retain qualified teachers in underserved regions, strengthened and better-resourced alternative delivery models for herder and nomadic communities, and closer integration of ECE planning with Mongolia's national development policy framework. Future research should build on the theoretical and methodological foundations discussed here (Urjinsuren et al., 2025) to examine the longitudinal developmental outcomes of children served through alternative ECE modalities, in order to determine whether current interventions are sufficient to close persistent equity gaps.

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