



CHALLENGES OF CHILD PROTECTION POLICY IMPLEMENTATION IN KINDERGARTENS WITHIN MARGINALIZED AREAS OF ULAANBAATAR CITY, MONGOLIA

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Abstract:

This qualitative study explores the challenges faced by public kindergartens in implementing child protection policies in public kindergartens located in Ulaanbaatar's marginalized ger districts. Using broken windows theory as a conceptual framework, the study highlights how neglecting minor systemic issues may escalate into serious risks for children in vulnerable contexts. Data were collected through document analysis of institutional child protection policies and semi-structured interviews with 24 kindergarten principals, 24 teachers, and 24 parents, selected through snowball sampling. Thematic analysis revealed five core challenges affecting policy implementation: teachers' personal financial constraints, weak inter-organizational coordination, limited parental involvement, excessive workloads, and shortages of human resources. These challenges contributed to a pattern of passive engagement among educators, undermining the effectiveness of child protection efforts. The findings suggest that failure to address these institutional gaps may perpetuate hidden forms of violence and neglect, reinforcing the need for proactive, well-supported implementation strategies.

Keywords: child protection, kindergartens, broken windows

1. Introduction

In the 2023–2024 academic year, 274,236 children across 9,034 groups were enrolled in 1,410 preschool education institutions throughout Mongolia. Of these, 260,271 children

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attended formal preschool programs, while 13,965 participated in alternative services (Preschool Education Report, 2023–2024). The national preschool education system is supported by 33,999 educators and staff members, including 9,733 (28.6%) primary teachers. Currently, the network comprises 1,010 state-owned and 400 private kindergartens. According to national statistics, the average child-to-teacher ratio in preschool education is 28.2; however, this ratio varies significantly between urban districts. For instance, Bayanzurkh District—the most densely populated area of Ulaanbaatar—has the highest average ratio at 31.3 children per teacher, while Baganuur District reports the lowest at 20.8 (National Statistics Office, 2022).

Bayanzurkh District, home to approximately 160,996 children under the age of 18 (National Census of Population and Housing, 2020), includes a large proportion of residents living in ger districts—peri-urban settlements characterized by limited infrastructure, poor sanitation, overcrowding, and heightened economic insecurity (World Bank, 2019; UN-Habitat, 2021). These marginalized areas often lack access to basic public services, exacerbating the vulnerability of children and families. Studies across similar global contexts suggest that social disorganization, poverty, and institutional fragmentation in such communities can create serious challenges for implementing effective child protection strategies (Mathews et al., 2015; Jack & Gill, 2013).

In this environment, the implementation of child protection policies in kindergartens becomes both urgent and highly complex. Early childhood education settings are increasingly recognized as crucial sites for identifying and responding to signs of child maltreatment (Browne, 2016; Gilbert et al., 2012). Effective child protection in these settings requires not only legal frameworks, but also proactive teacher engagement, inter-agency coordination, robust reporting systems, and meaningful parental involvement (UNICEF, 2021; Wulczyn et al., 2010). However, despite the presence of such frameworks in Mongolia—including the *Child Protection Law* (2016)—teachers in urban ger districts face persistent structural barriers, including large class sizes, lack of institutional support, poor coordination with social services, and low parental cooperation. These issues mirror those found in international studies of under-resourced urban schools, where frontline workers are often overburdened and unsupported (Lonne et al., 2016; Parton, 2014).

To analyze these dynamics, this study adopts the *broken windows theory* (Wilson & Kelling, 1982) as a conceptual framework. Originally rooted in criminology, the theory posits that unattended minor infractions and signs of disorder can foster environments where more serious harm and neglect flourish. Applied to early childhood settings, this framework helps explain how neglecting “small” administrative failures or frontline disengagement—such as absentee follow-ups, overlooked family risk factors, or unaddressed emotional concerns—can normalize child vulnerability and contribute to systemic failures in protection (Cossar et al., 2013; Devaney, 2020).

While quantitative data provide valuable system-wide indicators, they often obscure the lived experiences of educators working within these environments. Qualitative research is essential to uncovering the complex, everyday realities of policy

implementation (Denzin & Lincoln, 2018). This study, therefore, draws on in-depth interviews with teachers, principals, and parents to explore how child protection policies are experienced and enacted in the ger districts of Ulaanbaatar. By capturing the perspectives of those closest to the children, this research aims to contribute evidence for improving policy design, resource allocation, and frontline support in Mongolia's early childhood protection system.

2. Research Methodology

This study employed a qualitative research design to explore the challenges faced by public kindergartens in implementing child protection policies in marginalized urban areas, specifically in the ger districts of Ulaanbaatar. The research was guided by the *broken windows theory* (Wilson & Kelling, 1982), which provided a conceptual lens for understanding how perceived neglect and institutional inaction may contribute to escalating vulnerabilities for children in at-risk environments.

Two primary data sources that the study utilized are document analysis and semi-structured interviews. Relevant national laws, regulations, and policy documents pertaining to early childhood education and child protection were reviewed. In addition, the child protection work plans and annual performance reports of 24 public kindergartens located in ger districts were analyzed. This enabled a contextual understanding of the formal policy environment and institutional approaches to child protection. To gain insight into the lived experiences of policy implementation, semi-structured interviews were conducted with 24 kindergarten principals, 24 teachers, and 24 parents. Participants were selected using snowball sampling, a technique effective for reaching individuals embedded in specific professional or social networks (Noy, 2008). This approach was particularly useful for accessing key informants with firsthand experience in child protection practices in marginalized urban areas.

All interviews were conducted in Mongolian, recorded with participant consent, and subsequently transcribed using Chimege, a Mongolian speech-to-text software. Transcripts were anonymized and analyzed using thematic analysis, which facilitated the systematic organization and coding of textual data. Thematic analysis was employed to identify recurring patterns, concepts, and challenges expressed by participants. Data coding followed an inductive approach, allowing categories to emerge from the data rather than being imposed a priori (Braun & Clarke, 2006). This method enabled the researchers to uncover key themes such as resource constraints, teacher workload, inter-agency coordination issues, and parental engagement, all of which influence policy implementation.

Ethical approval was obtained in accordance with institutional guidelines, and informed consent was secured from all participants. The triangulation of document analysis with interviews strengthened the validity of the findings by ensuring that both policy-level and practice-level perspectives were represented.

3. Research Results

This study conducted semi-structured interviews with 24 kindergarten teachers and 24 parents in state kindergartens located in Ulaanbaatar's ger districts, alongside a document review of 24 public preschool institutions' child protection work plans and official policies. Participants were coded as T_P1 to T_P24 (teachers) and P_P1 to P_P24 (parents). Thematic analysis was employed to identify key patterns, and the results are presented below through five major themes, interpreted through the lens of the *broken windows theory* (Wilson & Kelling, 1982), which emphasizes the cumulative impact of unattended minor infractions and systemic neglect in institutional environments. Based on research results, five themes emerged from data, such as 1). Socioeconomic Vulnerability and Risk Profiles of Families; 2). Seasonal and Cultural Factors Influencing Attendance; 3). Institutional Constraints: Funding, Workload, and Human Resources; 4). Gaps in Inter-Sectoral Collaboration and Role Clarity; 5). Home as a Primary Site of Risk.

3.1. Socioeconomic Vulnerability and Risk Profiles of Families

Many kindergartens in suburban ger districts are situated near economically unstable zones—such as auto and lumber markets—where enrolled children come from households without fixed employment, consistent income, or stable housing. Teachers reported that children from these families were frequently absent or withdrawn from kindergarten for extended periods. Some parents, especially those suffering from alcohol addiction, refused to engage with school personnel or share information about their children.

"We try to reach the parents, but they often won't respond. The child misses days, and when we finally meet them, they say it's not our business." (T_P4)

In such households, incidents of child neglect, emotional abuse, and even physical harm were observed. Teachers expressed deep concern about these children's safety outside of kindergarten.

"One mother slapped her child in the face, leaving five bruises. When I investigated, I learned about the family's ongoing domestic stress and alcohol abuse. We tried to help by warning her and documenting the case." (T_P3)

3.2. Seasonal and Cultural Factors Influencing Attendance

Even among registered children, attendance is inconsistent. Permanent residents often prefer to keep their children at home during the cold winter months, especially when grandparents or mothers can care for them. Children with disabilities are particularly affected, as parents may lack the time or support needed to accompany them to school regularly.

“Children with severe disabilities are often kept at home during winter, even if registered. Some parents prioritize kindergartens near their workplace, not in their home district.” (T_P7)

This pattern of seasonal absenteeism creates gaps in educational continuity and weakens the protective role of kindergartens.

3.3. Institutional Constraints: Funding, Workload, and Human Resources

Despite their critical role, teachers lack sufficient resources, training, and institutional support to carry out child protection responsibilities. Although laws such as the *Child Protection Law* (2016) and ministerial regulations (e.g., Ministry of Education, 2019; Joint Order No. A/380, 2017) outline clear responsibilities and funding structures, teachers reported that in practice, they must often finance child protection activities themselves.

“We don’t have a budget or transportation. If there’s an emergency, we use our own car and pay for fuel. We even buy supplies from our salaries.” (T_P5)

This mismatch between legal frameworks and operational realities reflects a systemic breakdown that discourages policy engagement—an effect described by the *broken windows theory* as the gradual normalization of neglect.

3.4. Gaps in Inter-Sectoral Collaboration and Role Clarity

Although teachers are expected to coordinate with health, social protection, and law enforcement agencies, they reported minimal cooperation or feedback from these institutions. Many responsibilities outlined in job descriptions are left unfulfilled due to a lack of communication and cross-sectoral accountability.

“Even when we file reports and document cases, we rarely receive follow-up or support from child protection authorities.” (T_P10)

Moreover, teachers who were not part of the designated child protection team in the kindergarten displayed limited understanding of policy procedures, suggesting inconsistent professional development and communication within institutions.

3.5. Home as a Primary Site of Risk

While kindergartens strive to create safe learning environments, teachers emphasized that children face higher risks of neglect and abuse at home. In interviews, multiple examples emerged of children arriving in poor hygienic condition, emotionally distressed, or inadequately dressed—signs of underlying family dysfunction.

“One child kept crying in the morning. When I followed up, I found the mother drunk, the child abandoned at the door in just a thin jacket. We tried to invite the parent to our meetings, but she never came.” (T_P15)

Such cases underscore the necessity for child protection policies to extend beyond school walls, with mechanisms for home visitations, early intervention, and inter-agency response.

4. Applying the Broken Windows Theory in Child Protection

The *broken windows theory* posits that failure to address minor forms of disorder—such as absenteeism, lack of hygiene, or non-compliance with reporting—can lead to deeper forms of institutional breakdown and social harm (Wilson & Kelling, 1982). Teachers noted that seemingly small oversights, such as dismissing poor attendance or ignoring family circumstances, contribute to the erosion of protective environments.

Figure 1: Findings according to the *broken windows theory*

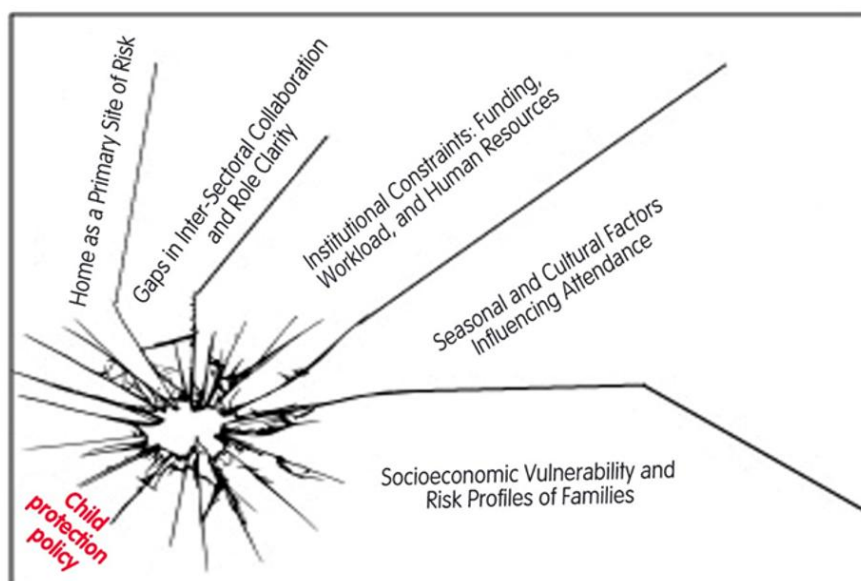


Figure 1 illustrates how cumulative micro-level challenges—workload, lack of transportation, insufficient funding, weak cross-agency links—lead to reduced teacher engagement, undermining both the perception and reality of child protection enforcement.

Teachers working in Ulaanbaatar’s ger districts navigate a web of complex and interrelated challenges that stem from entrenched social inequalities, patterns of seasonal migration, and the fragile infrastructure of educational institutions. Their roles often extend far beyond classroom instruction, as they are tasked with child protection responsibilities that frequently exceed both their material resources and emotional capacities. Despite the presence of national policies intended to safeguard children’s

welfare, a critical disconnect persists between legal frameworks and their practical implementation. This gap is particularly evident in areas such as budgeting and inter-agency cooperation, where a lack of coordination and support hampers the effectiveness of protective measures. The broken windows theory offers a compelling lens through which to interpret these dynamics. It suggests that neglect or inaction at the micro level—such as unaddressed safety concerns or deteriorating social conditions—can contribute to the escalation of child vulnerability. In under-resourced settings like the ger districts, this theoretical perspective underscores the urgent need for proactive, community-based interventions that bridge the gap between policy intent and lived reality.

5. Discussion

This study explored the challenges faced by kindergartens in implementing child protection policies within the socioeconomically marginalized ger districts of Ulaanbaatar, Mongolia. Through qualitative interviews and document analysis, the findings reveal that resource limitations, weak institutional coordination, high workloads, and limited parental involvement significantly hinder policy implementation. These findings resonate with global studies on child protection systems, which emphasize that effective safeguarding of children requires not only clear legal frameworks but also sufficient institutional capacity, multi-sectoral collaboration, and community engagement (Gilbert et al., 2011; UNICEF, 2021).

The application of the *broken windows theory* provided a valuable framework for understanding the cascading effects of neglecting minor but persistent systemic issues. Originally used in criminology to explain how visible signs of disorder foster an environment conducive to crime (Wilson & Kelling, 1982), the theory's relevance to educational and child protection settings lies in its emphasis on institutional responsiveness. In this context, teachers' passive attitudes toward policy implementation—rooted in chronic under-resourcing—mirror the conditions described in the theory: small oversights (e.g., ignoring absenteeism or failing to follow up with at-risk families) may lead to larger failures in protecting children from harm.

These results also align with studies emphasizing the emotional labor of teachers in high-poverty areas. Teachers in ger districts are not only educators but de facto social workers, often absorbing the costs of providing food, clothing, and emotional support to neglected children (Day et al., 2007). The data indicate that this unpaid and unsupported care work contributes to burnout and disengagement—issues that child protection frameworks have historically overlooked.

Furthermore, the findings highlight a disconnect between formal policy stipulations and on-the-ground realities. Although Mongolia's *Child Protection Law* (2016) and joint ministerial orders outline specific procedures and funding sources for child protection teams, these mechanisms appear to be inadequately communicated, implemented, or resourced at the kindergarten level. This reflects a broader issue of

“policy-practice gaps” identified in child protection research worldwide (Parton, 2014; Lonne et al., 2016).

Another key insight is the differentiated understanding and engagement among staff. Teachers assigned to child protection teams were more informed and active, while those not on such teams often lacked essential training or awareness. This suggests that a whole-institution approach—where all staff are regularly trained and supported—is necessary for sustainable and effective child safeguarding in early education.

In line with Bronfenbrenner’s ecological systems theory (1979), the findings affirm that child protection is a multi-layered responsibility involving not just teachers, but families, communities, and institutional systems. Without adequate support at each of these levels, protective mechanisms remain fragile. Importantly, teachers observed that many risks originate from home environments rather than the kindergarten itself, emphasizing the need for outreach strategies and community-based prevention initiatives.

6. Implications

The study contributes to the literature on child protection in urban, low-resource contexts and offers empirical support for expanding the use of *broken windows theory* beyond law enforcement, into education and social policy. The findings suggest that supporting teacher well-being is critical for effective child protection. Minor lapses in daily protection practices can compound into institutional failures. Child protection policies must include targeted financial and emotional support for teachers, particularly in vulnerable urban areas.

7. Limitations and Future Research

This study was limited to public kindergartens in one district of Ulaanbaatar, and thus the findings may not be generalizable to all Mongolian early childhood institutions or rural areas. Additionally, while interviews with teachers and parents provided rich qualitative data, future research could include perspectives from social workers, district-level policymakers, and children themselves. Further studies could explore the effectiveness of specific training models for kindergarten staff, comparative analyses of urban and rural child protection systems and longitudinal studies to assess how systemic improvements affect child outcomes over time.

8. Conclusion

This study has illuminated the complex interplay between systemic resource constraints and the implementation of child protection policies in public kindergartens situated in Ulaanbaatar’s suburban ger districts. By applying the broken windows theory (Wilson & Kelling, 1982) as an analytical lens, the research underscores how the neglect of seemingly

“minor” challenges—such as lack of funding, inadequate inter-organizational coordination, and teacher overload—can accumulate to undermine child protection efforts and expose vulnerable children to increased risk.

Key challenges identified include personal financial burdens on teachers, limited parental involvement, poor cross-sectoral cooperation, and acute shortages of time and human resources. These constraints lead to behavioral disengagement, where teachers—despite being at the frontline of policy execution—become passive actors in child protection processes. As the broken windows theory suggests, this passivity may foster an institutional culture of inaction, in which neglect of small problems escalates into systemic failures and hidden forms of child abuse go unaddressed.

A particularly critical insight of this study is the identification of teachers’ personal financial insecurity and emotional exhaustion as a structural factor influencing their ability to implement child protection measures. Given that teachers serve as the foundational agents of early childhood care and protection, the failure to support their well-being represents a significant gap in current policy frameworks.

The findings call for a re-examination of child protection policies to prioritize not only technical training and legal compliance but also the material and psychosocial support of educators. Future research should investigate how targeted interventions—such as improved budgeting mechanisms, teacher incentives, and inter-agency support systems—can enhance the active participation of teachers in safeguarding children in high-risk environments.

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Conflict of Interest Statement

The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

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