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HISTORICAL DEVELOPMENT OF EDUCATION FOR KAZAKH MINORITY IN MONGOLIA: A CASE STUDY OF BAYAN-ULGII PROVINCE

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Abstract:
Globally, the Kazakh population numbers approximately 19–20 million, with an estimated 120,000–130,000 residing in Mongolia. The historical development of Kazakh education in Mongolia has evolved through distinct institutional phases. The first phase (1921–1940) marked the initial transition from traditional religious schooling to a modern secular educational system, establishing the fundamental right of ethnic minorities to be educated in their native language. The second phase (1940–1990) began with the establishment of Bayan-Olgii province, which provided the historical prerequisites for an independent educational structure, characterized by structured language policies and the systematic training of indigenous professional cadres. The third phase, from 1990 onward, introduced structural transformations within the educational sector driven by the transition to a market economy. This historical trajectory demonstrates that while the education of the Kazakh ethnic group conforms to the unified legal and regulatory frameworks of Mongolia, it simultaneously retains its distinct linguistic and cultural heritage, thereby conceptualizing a unique "mosaic model." By comprehensively analyzing the historical evolution and current state of Kazakh education, this study aims to scientifically identify pressing challenges and propose practical solutions to enhance the future outlook of the regional educational sector.

Keywords: education, historical development, ethnic minority, mosaic model, language policy

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1. Historical Periodization of Educational Development

The historical development of Kazakh education in Mongolia reflects the broader political, social, linguistic, and institutional transformations experienced by the country during the twentieth and early twenty-first centuries. In Bayan-Olgii Province, where Mongolia's Kazakh population is concentrated, education has played a particularly important role not only in expanding literacy and access to formal schooling but also in maintaining linguistic and cultural identity within the national education system. The development of Kazakh education can therefore be understood as an interaction between two parallel processes: integration into Mongolia's unified national education system and preservation of the language and cultural traditions of the Kazakh minority. From a historical perspective, this development can be divided into three major phases:

1) the transition from religious and informal education to modern secular schooling between 1911 and 1940;
2) the institutional consolidation and expansion of Kazakh-language education during the socialist period from 1940 to 1990; and
3) the transformation of minority education within Mongolia's democratic, market-oriented, and increasingly bilingual education system from 1990 to the present.

Each phase represents a distinctive configuration of educational governance, language policy, curriculum development, teacher preparation, and institutional capacity.

1.1 Phase I: From Islamic Religious Education to the First Modern Schools, 1911–1940

Prior to the development of a state-supported school system, opportunities for formal education among the Kazakh and Tuvan populations of western Mongolia were extremely limited. Religious institutions, including mosques and madrasas, served as important centers of spiritual and community life. However, the educational activities associated with these institutions were primarily religious in character and were not equivalent to a modern system of general education. Instruction concentrated largely on religious texts and the memorization of Arabic and Turkic materials, while systematic secular education and widespread literacy in the population remained underdeveloped (Abdikerim, 1989). The political changes associated with the 1921 People's Revolution significantly altered this situation. The emerging socialist state increasingly regarded literacy and mass education as essential instruments for social transformation, state building, and the development of a modern citizenry. For Mongolia's Kazakh population, this process also opened possibilities for developing formal education that could accommodate the linguistic characteristics of the local population.

One of the earliest institutional developments occurred in September 1927, when the first primary school in the region was established at Khokh Mod in Altantsogts soum. The school initially operated as a nomadic educational institution with approximately 25 students. Its mobile character was particularly significant in a pastoral context, where dispersed settlement patterns and seasonal mobility made conventional school

attendance difficult. In the autumn of 1931, the institution was reorganized as the Altaikhan Primary School, expanded to more than 50 students, and relocated to Baga Olgii, the site of the present provincial center. This school subsequently provided an institutional foundation for what later became Secondary School No. 2 (Bayan-Olgii Province Archive Department, Fund 1, Inventory 1, File 353; Abdikerim, 1989).

Another important initiative emerged in the autumn of 1928, when a classroom (*tankhim*) was established in Khatuu, in the area of present-day Bugat soum, between two Kazakh administrative banners. Approximately 25 students attended the school. Of particular historical importance was the initiative of young Kazakhs who sought opportunities to learn the Mongolian language and script. The school therefore represented more than a literacy initiative: it reflected the increasing need for the local population to participate in Mongolia's emerging administrative, political, and social institutions. In 1930, the Khatuu classroom was relocated to the center of present-day Ulaankhus soum and reorganized as the primary school of the Sherushi banner. Unlike earlier, relatively informal educational initiatives, the school received state financial support, teaching personnel, and material resources. It consequently became an important model for the development of formal schooling among Mongolia's Kazakh population. Its establishment also illustrates how educational modernization in this period was closely linked to broader political transformations, including efforts by the socialist state to reduce the influence of traditional political and social elites and expand state institutions in rural and minority-populated regions (Abdikerim, 1989). The 1930s consequently marked a gradual transition from isolated literacy initiatives to an increasingly organized network of primary schools. Schools were established in Ulaankhus in 1930, Deluun in 1938, Khujirt and Tsagaangol in 1939, and Altantsogts, Bayannuur, Tsagaannuur, Tsengel, and Tolbo by 1940. Although educational coverage remained limited, these institutions created the human and organizational foundations upon which the subsequent provincial education system was built. The first phase can therefore be interpreted as a period of educational transition and institutional formation. Education gradually moved from predominantly religious and informal forms of learning toward publicly financed secular schooling. At the same time, the establishment of schools created new opportunities for literacy, state-language acquisition, and the preparation of local personnel capable of participating in Mongolia's changing political and administrative system.

1.2 Phase II: Establishment of Bayan-Olgii Province and the Consolidation of Socialist Education, 1940–1990

The establishment of Bayan-Olgii Province in 1940 represented a major turning point in the history of Kazakh education in Mongolia. The creation of a distinct administrative province in an area with a predominantly Kazakh population provided an institutional basis for systematically expanding schooling, developing educational administration, preparing teachers, and producing educational materials appropriate to the linguistic needs of local learners. On 22 August 1940, Order No. 2 of the Governor of Bayan-Olgii

Province established the Department of Public Education with an initial staff of two. Although modest in size, the creation of a specialized educational administration was significant because it shifted education from scattered local initiatives toward a coordinated provincial system. During the 1940–1941 academic year, the province operated 11 primary schools and one teacher-training institution, enrolling more than 1,000 students and employing 31 teachers (Abdikerim, 1989). These figures illustrate the speed with which educational provision expanded following the creation of the province. The development of schooling was accompanied by efforts to recruit and prepare qualified teachers, improve school infrastructure, and develop curricula and learning materials. Specialists from Soviet Kazakhstan also contributed professional and linguistic expertise during parts of this period, strengthening the capacity to provide education in Kazakh.

Over the following decades, the provincial education system became increasingly integrated into Mongolia's national socialist education system while retaining a significant Kazakh-language dimension. This dual orientation is important for understanding the distinctive historical trajectory of education in Bayan-Olgii. Students participated in a nationally regulated education system, but linguistic adaptations and Kazakh-language educational resources enabled schooling to perform an additional cultural and linguistic function. A particularly important institutional development occurred in 1972, when Resolution No. 216 of the Council of Ministers of the Mongolian People's Republic established a Kazakh Education Sector within the Educational Research Institute. This represented an important step in the institutionalization of research and methodological support for minority education at the national level.

The sector was responsible for curriculum-related work, textbook development, translation, and methodological support. Historical records indicate that it participated in publishing approximately 25 types of textbooks and instructional materials totaling more than 380 press sheets in Alma-Ata, Ulaanbaatar, and Olgii. It also translated 18 types of textbooks, amounting to approximately 220 press sheets, from Mongolian into Kazakh. These activities demonstrate that Kazakh-language education was supported not simply through local school practice but through a specialized institutional mechanism linking educational research, curriculum, textbook production, and implementation. This period may therefore be characterized as the institutional consolidation of Kazakh education. Compared with the first phase, educational development was no longer centered primarily on opening individual schools or eliminating illiteracy. Instead, the system increasingly included professional teacher preparation, educational administration, curriculum development, textbook production, methodological support, and research.

The dissolution of the Kazakh Education Sector in 1992, shortly after Mongolia's democratic transition, marked the end of this institutional arrangement. Although minority-language education continued, the disappearance of a specialized national research and methodological unit created a gap in the institutional infrastructure supporting systematic research, data collection, curriculum analysis, textbook

development, and policy advice concerning Kazakh and minority education. From this perspective, the institutional changes of the early 1990s had implications extending beyond administrative restructuring: they altered the relationship between national educational research institutions and local educational development in Bayan-Olgii.

1.3 Phase III: Democratic Transition, Bilingual Education, and Contemporary Development, 1990–Present

Mongolia's transition from a centrally planned socialist system to democratic governance and a market economy after 1990 transformed virtually all sectors of society, including education. Decentralization, economic restructuring, privatization, demographic mobility, and changing relationships between central and local government created both opportunities and challenges for educational provision. For minority education, the 1992 Constitution of Mongolia established an important legal foundation. Article 8.2 provides that the right of national minorities to use their native languages in education and communication and to pursue cultural, artistic, and scientific activities shall not be affected by the constitutional status of Mongolian as the official language of the state. This provision establishes an important principle for understanding contemporary Kazakh education: the constitutional recognition of minority linguistic rights operates alongside the role of Mongolian as the official state language.

The resulting educational model in Bayan-Olgii has increasingly developed around the relationship between mother-tongue education and proficiency in Mongolian. Kazakh continues to serve as an important language of teaching and learning, particularly during the earlier stages of schooling, while Mongolian language competence becomes increasingly important as students progress through the education system. Consequently, bilingual education has implications extending beyond language instruction itself. It influences curriculum design, textbook availability, teacher competencies, assessment, transitions between levels of education, and students' opportunities for higher education and employment.

Textbook development has also undergone substantial transformation since the democratic transition. Materials produced under the socialist system were gradually replaced as Mongolia introduced new national curriculum standards and revised educational content. For schools serving Kazakh learners, this process created the continuing challenge of ensuring that translated and locally adapted materials are not only linguistically accurate but also pedagogically appropriate and consistent with national learning outcomes. The contemporary education system in Bayan-Olgii also includes institutions for higher education, teacher preparation, technical education, and vocational training. These institutions contribute to the development of local professional cadres and reduce, to some extent, dependence on specialists trained outside the province. Nevertheless, ensuring sufficient numbers of qualified bilingual teachers and specialists remains strategically important for sustaining high-quality education in a minority-language environment.

The scale of contemporary educational provision illustrates the considerable institutional development achieved since the first schools of the 1920s and 1930s. In the 2024–2025 academic year, Bayan-Olgii Province had 45 general education schools, including 40 public and five private institutions. These comprised one school complex, 27 twelve-year schools, one nine-year school, and 16 primary schools. Sixteen schools were located in the provincial center, 16 in soum centers, and 13 in rural bags or other settlements. The school network operated across 62 buildings, of which 52 met standard specifications, and 10 were categorized as non-standard facilities; 61 buildings were state-owned and one operated in rented premises. These figures demonstrate a striking transformation from the small nomadic schools and literacy classrooms established nearly a century earlier. However, quantitative expansion alone does not resolve the contemporary challenges of minority education. The central policy question has increasingly shifted from whether Kazakh children have access to schooling to how the education system can simultaneously ensure high-quality learning, strong competence in the state language, effective mother-tongue education, equitable opportunities, and preservation of cultural and linguistic identity.

2. Discussion: Kazakh Education as a "Mosaic Model"

The historical experience of Bayan-Olgii suggests that Kazakh education in Mongolia cannot be adequately characterized either as an entirely separate minority education system or as a completely assimilated component of mainstream schooling. Rather, it has developed through continuous interaction between national integration and cultural-linguistic distinctiveness.

This article proposes the concept of a "mosaic model" of minority education to describe this relationship. Like individual elements within a mosaic, Kazakh-language schools and educational practices retain recognizable linguistic and cultural characteristics while functioning within the broader institutional structure of Mongolia's national education system. The curriculum, educational legislation, qualification framework, administration, and overall educational objectives remain national in scope, whereas language of instruction, textbook adaptation, cultural content, and local educational practices provide space for minority identity. The historical evidence indicates that the relative balance between these dimensions has changed over time. During the first phase, the principal challenge was establishing access to secular education and literacy. During the socialist period, the priority shifted toward institutional expansion and the development of Kazakh-language curricula, textbooks, teachers, and methodological structures. In the democratic period, the central issue has increasingly become how to maintain minority-language education while ensuring that learners develop the Mongolian-language competencies and broader skills necessary for participation in national higher education, employment, and civic life.

The "mosaic model" should therefore be understood not as a fixed institutional arrangement but as a dynamic relationship between integration and diversity. Its

sustainability depends on the capacity of the education system to prevent two potential imbalances: linguistic and cultural assimilation on the one hand, and educational or linguistic isolation on the other. High-quality bilingual education provides a potential mechanism for maintaining this balance. The historical experience also highlights the importance of institutional research capacity. The Kazakh Education Sector established within the Educational Research Institute in 1972 provided a mechanism through which curriculum, textbooks, translation, research, and methodological support could be coordinated. Its dissolution in 1992 did not eliminate Kazakh-language education, but it weakened the specialized institutional structure connecting national educational research with minority education. Reconsidering such research and methodological capacity does not necessarily require recreating the former socialist institutional model. Rather, contemporary arrangements could support systematic research on bilingual learning outcomes, curriculum implementation, textbook quality, teacher competencies, language transition, and educational equity among minority learners.

3. Conclusion

The historical development of Kazakh education in Mongolia represents a transformation from limited religious and informal learning opportunities to a comprehensive system of formal education operating within Mongolia's national educational framework. This development can be understood through three interconnected historical phases. The first phase (1911–1940) established the foundations of secular education through literacy initiatives, nomadic schools, and the first state-supported primary institutions. The second phase (1940–1990) brought institutional consolidation following the establishment of Bayan-Olgii Province, including rapid school expansion, teacher preparation, Kazakh-language textbook development, curriculum support, and eventually the establishment of a specialized Kazakh Education Sector within the national Educational Research Institute. The third phase (1990–present) has been characterized by democratic governance, educational reform, constitutional recognition of minority language rights, and the continuing development of bilingual education within a unified national education system. Across these phases, the function of education has progressively changed. The earliest priority was literacy and access; the socialist period emphasized institution building and universalization; and the contemporary period increasingly requires attention to quality, bilingual competence, equity, cultural sustainability, and educational outcomes.

The historical trajectory of Bayan-Olgii therefore offers a valuable case for understanding minority education in multilingual societies. The proposed mosaic model captures a defining characteristic of this experience: Kazakh education has maintained distinctive linguistic and cultural elements while remaining institutionally embedded within Mongolia's national education system. Its future effectiveness will depend on achieving an appropriate balance between these two dimensions. Several priorities emerge from this historical analysis. First, bilingual curriculum development should be

strengthened on the basis of evidence about how children acquire academic competencies across Kazakh and Mongolian. Second, textbook development and translation require systematic quality assurance to ensure conceptual, linguistic, and pedagogical equivalence. Third, teacher preparation should develop professional competencies specifically required for bilingual and multilingual classrooms. Finally, Mongolia would benefit from strengthening national research and methodological capacity for minority education, including systematic data collection and longitudinal research on language, learning outcomes, curriculum implementation, and educational transitions. The historical experience of Bayan-Olgii demonstrates that protecting minority language and culture and strengthening participation in a national education system need not be contradictory objectives. When supported by appropriate policy, research, curriculum, teacher development, and institutional arrangements, they can become mutually reinforcing components of an inclusive education system.

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Conflict of Interest Statement
The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

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