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Research paper

Educational Reform as Incomplete Institutionalization: Institutional Continuity and Implementation Gaps in Post-Socialist Mongolia

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A B S T R A C T

This study examines why repeated education reforms in post-socialist Mongolia have failed to achieve institutional sustainability and quality improvement. Moving beyond narratives of policy failure, the study conceptualizes this stagnation as incomplete institutionalization driven by path dependency and institutional continuity rooted in the socialist era. A qualitative case study design was employed, utilizing thematic analysis on in-depth interviews with three key decision-makers in Mongolian education collected in 2018. Through a neo-institutional lens, the study identifies three structural dynamics shaping education reform: (1) the persistent path dependency of socialist governance; (2) a severe decoupling, or implementation gap, between policy reforms and school-level practices; and (3) the superficial formalization of quality assurance (QA) systems without genuine internalization. Furthermore, teachers' passive responses are reinterpreted as accumulated “institutional helplessness” rather than individual capacity deficits. By establishing these 2018 findings as a historical baseline, this study lays the groundwork for longitudinal comparisons of post-2023 education law reforms. Ultimately, it contributes to comparative education and neo-institutional research by reconceptualizing post-socialist reform as a complex, incomplete process of institutionalization rather than a mere matter of policy design.

Keywords: post-socialist education reform; neo-institutionalism; institutional continuity; implementation gap; quality assurance; Mongolia

Chapter 1. Introduction

1.1. Background of the Study

This study is grounded in a research project conducted in 2018 by the Institute for Peace and Unification Studies at Seoul National University, entitled “*A Foundational Study on Contemporary Social Structures in Mongolia for Korea–Mongolia Exchange and Cooperation in the New Northern Policy Era.*”

As part of this project, the research team sought to examine patterns of institutional transition across Mongolian society. To gain an in-depth understanding of the internal dynamics and

structural constraints of Mongolia's education system, the team conducted in-depth interviews with key decision-makers and experts in Mongolian education, including a former Minister of Education. These interviews constitute a valuable body of qualitative data that vividly captures the structural challenges facing Mongolian education approximately three decades after the post-socialist transition.

Following the transition to democracy and a market economy in the early 1990s, Mongolia has pursued continuous education reforms aimed at moving beyond its socialist educational legacy and aligning its system with global standards. These reforms have included restructuring the school

system, revising curricula, expanding private education, decentralizing educational administration, and introducing quality assurance (QA) and university accreditation systems. Despite these institutional changes, however, the Mongolian education sector continues to confront persistent structural problems, including declining educational quality, misalignment between policy and practice, and limited institutional capacity (Silova & Rappleye, 2020; Tsedendamba & Lowrie, 2022).

1.2. Need for the Study

The in-depth interview data collected in 2018 provide historical evidence that institutional inertia rooted in the socialist period continues to collide with newly introduced systems even three decades after Mongolia's systemic transition. This suggests that the limitations of Mongolian education reform cannot be reduced to short-term policy failure or resource constraints, but rather reflect long-accumulated institutional structures and actor perceptions.

First, in terms of the value of historical data, the 2018 records should not be regarded merely as outdated materials. Instead, they serve as an essential baseline for identifying long-term path dependency and institutional continuity in Mongolian education.

Second, in terms of relevance to recent scholarship, comparative education studies have repeatedly reported that Mongolia's education reforms, despite visible institutional changes, continue to exhibit strong continuity in administrative culture and educational practice (Silova, 2010; Tsedendamba & Lowrie, 2022).

Third, from a theoretical perspective, discussions of "incomplete transfer" by Silova and Rappleye (2020) and studies on "implementation gaps" by Tsedendamba and Lowrie (2022) support the continued analytical relevance of the 2018 data for understanding contemporary Mongolian education.

1.3. Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study is to systematically reanalyze the 2018 in-depth

interview data from a neo-institutional perspective in order to identify the structural mechanisms underlying

- (1) institutional continuity and
- (2) incomplete institutionalization

in the process of education reform in post-socialist Mongolia.

Furthermore, by positioning the 2018 findings as a historical baseline for Mongolian education reform, this study aims to establish an academic foundation for longitudinal comparative analysis of changes following the 2023 Education Law revision and a planned follow-up study in 2026.

1.4. Research Questions

This study addresses the following two research questions:

1. How have governance legacies from the socialist period persisted as institutional continuity within Mongolia's education system after the post-socialist transition, and how have they shaped implementation gaps in education reform?
2. Why has Mongolia's quality assurance (QA) system failed to become internalized within school-level practices and professional structures, remaining at a stage of incomplete institutionalization?

1.5. Significance of the Study

This study has the following academic and policy-related significance.

First, in terms of theoretical contribution, the study empirically demonstrates—through a neo-institutional lens—the mechanisms by which institutional inertia from prior regimes obstructs the internalization of international standards and newly introduced systems in transitional contexts, thereby refining debates on institutional continuity and incomplete institutionalization.

Second, in terms of policy implications, the study reframes the limitations of Mongolian education reform not as problems of resource scarcity or policy design alone, but as issues rooted in institutional structures and actor perceptions. In doing so, it offers insights for future policy design that prioritizes teacher professional development and governance reform.

1.6. Delimitations

This study confines its analysis to in-depth interview data collected as part of a specific research project conducted in 2018. Accordingly, the findings are based on the perceptions of key decision-makers in Mongolian education at that time and do not fully capture immediate on-the-ground changes following the 2023 Education Law revision.

1.7. Assumptions

This study is based on the following assumptions.

First, it assumes that the key decision-makers who participated in the interviews provided professional and reliable information regarding the institutionalization of Mongolia's education system.

Second, it assumes that the institutional continuity and structural inertia identified in 2018 will remain analytically relevant for explaining Mongolia's education context in the follow-up study planned for 2026.

Chapter 2. Literature Review and Theoretical Framework

2.1. Trends in Transitional and Post-Socialist Education Research

Research on transitional education constitutes a core area of comparative education, examining how education systems change and persist during the shift from socialist regimes to market economies and democratic governance. Early studies tended to conceptualize systemic transition as a form of institutional rupture, often assuming rapid convergence toward Western educational models. From this perspective, the success of education reform was primarily assessed by the speed and scope of institutional adoption.

Since the 2000s, however, scholars have increasingly focused on the persistence of institutions and practices formed during the socialist period, even long after formal transition. In particular, Iveta Silova (2010, 2020) argues that post-socialist education research must move

beyond a simple “transition narrative” and instead analyze how socialist legacies are reconstructed and recontextualized. This perspective emphasizes that education reform in post-socialist states does not follow a linear trajectory of progress, but rather unfolds through ongoing tension and coexistence between inherited institutions and newly introduced systems (Silova, 2010; Silova & Rappleye, 2020).

This body of scholarship provides the theoretical foundation for the present study, which analyzes Mongolian education not in terms of short-term reform outcomes, but as a long-term process of institutional change using in-depth interview data collected in 2018.

2.2. Neo-Institutional Theory: Path Dependency and Institutional Inertia

This study adopts neo-institutionalism as its primary theoretical framework for explaining the structural dynamics of education reform in Mongolia. Neo-institutional theory conceptualizes institutions not merely as formal rules or organizational structures, but as complex systems encompassing actors' perceptions, norms, and habitual practices.

According to Douglass North's (1990) concept of path dependency, past institutional choices continue to exert a strong constraining influence on the direction and pace of change even after new institutions are introduced. Institutional change, therefore, is cumulative and cannot be fully detached from existing institutional arrangements.

Neo-institutionalism also draws attention to the misalignment between formal institutions and informal practices. While laws and policies may change, actors' cognitive frameworks and organizational cultures—shaped by earlier institutional arrangements—often persist and resist reform. In this regard, Khakhina and Piattoeva (2021) empirically demonstrate that socialist governance legacies continue to function as powerful mechanisms of control within contemporary education reforms.

These discussions constitute the core theoretical basis for explaining institutional continuity in Mongolian education and for identifying its structural origins.

2.3. Stages of Institutionalization and Decoupling

Drawing on W. Richard Scott's (2014) institutional theory, this study analyzes the level of institutionalization of education reform in Mongolia in a multi-layered manner. According to Scott, institutionalization is not a single event but a gradual process occurring across different dimensions.

First, regulatory institutionalization refers to the formal introduction of new laws, policies, and organizational structures. Mongolia can be regarded as having reached this stage through education law reforms, the establishment of quality assurance (QA) agencies, and the introduction of accreditation systems.

Second, internalized (cognitive) institutionalization occurs when institutions become embedded in actors' values and everyday practices. This study assumes that Mongolian education reform has encountered structural constraints at this stage.

The gap between these two stages generates decoupling or an implementation gap, whereby institutions formally exist but do not translate into substantive changes in educational practice or professional systems. This phenomenon

constitutes a fundamental reason why Mongolian education reform has remained largely superficial despite extensive institutional restructuring.

2.4. Educational Quality Assurance (QA) and Governance Capacity

Mongolia has introduced education quality assurance (QA) and university accreditation systems aligned with international standards. However, the adoption of these systems has not automatically led to improvements in educational quality. Previous studies emphasize that effective QA systems require not only institutional design but also administrative capacity, professional expertise, and the acceptance and participation of institutional members.

The 2018 interview data analyzed in this study indicate that Mongolia's QA system has been established at a regulatory level but has failed to become fully internalized within school-level practices and professional structures. As a result, QA functions more as a formal administrative requirement than as a genuine instrument for educational improvement, representing a salient example of incomplete institutionalization in Mongolian education reform (Tsedendamba & Lowrie, 2022).

Conceptual Framework of Incomplete Institutionalization

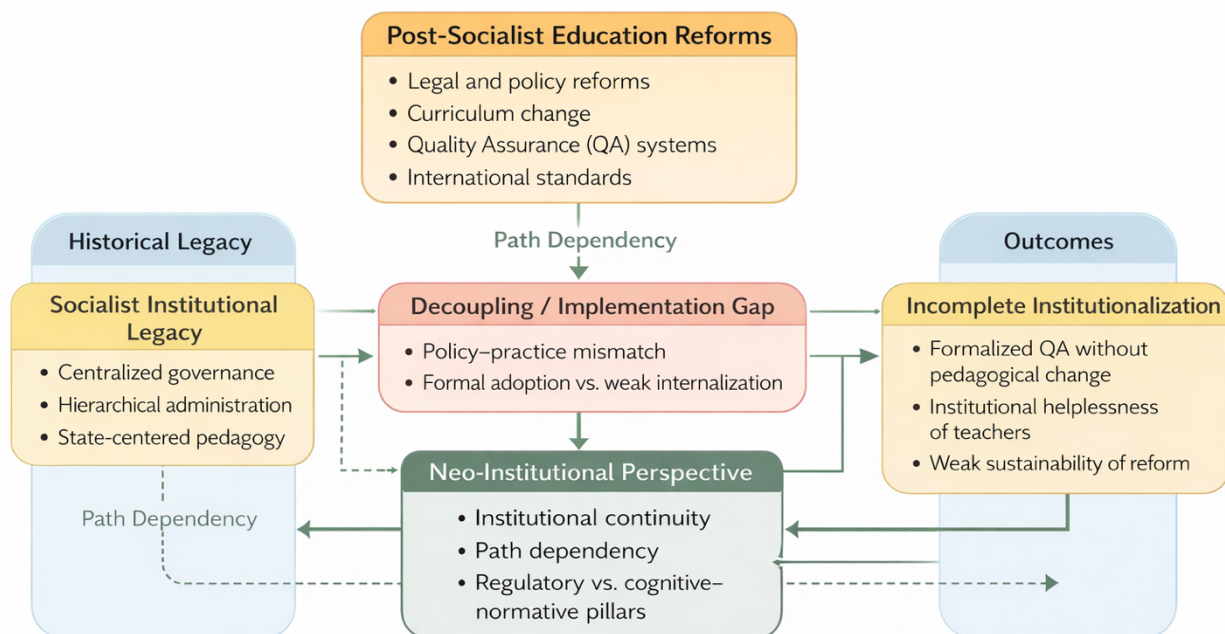


Figure 1. Conceptual framework illustrating how socialist institutional legacies shape post-socialist education reforms through path dependency and decoupling, resulting in incomplete institutionalization. Translational graph.

2.5. International Educational Cooperation and Institutional Alignment

International educational cooperation has served as an important external stimulus for the modernization of Mongolian education. Recent studies, however, suggest that the effectiveness of international cooperation depends less on the scale of support or the number of projects than on the degree of institutional alignment between external models and the recipient country's institutional structures, administrative capacity, and cultural context.

Although international educational cooperation is not the primary object of analysis in this study, this literature provides an important theoretical backdrop for understanding the structural context in which international standards and external institutions are introduced into Mongolia's education system. It helps explain why Mongolia has succeeded in adopting external models at a formal level, yet has struggled to internalize them in practice.

2.6. Limitations of Previous Studies and the Historical Positioning of the Present Study

Existing studies on Mongolian education reform have often overemphasized systemic transition as a form of institutional rupture or have reduced reform failure to the capacity deficits of individual teachers or administrators. Such approaches fail to adequately account for institutional continuity and structural inertia.

By reanalyzing in-depth interviews with key decision-makers collected through a 2018 research project conducted by the Institute for Peace and Unification Studies at Seoul National University from a neo-institutional perspective, this study seeks to elucidate the long-term institutional dynamics of Mongolian education reform. By positioning the 2018 findings as a historical baseline, the study establishes an academic foundation for longitudinal comparison of changes following the 2023 Education Law revision and a planned follow-up study in 2026, thereby distinguishing itself from prior research.

2.7. Conceptual Framework of the Study

Based on the preceding literature review, this study develops a conceptual framework to explain how post-socialist education reforms are shaped by institutional continuity and implementation gaps (Figure 1). Drawing on neo-institutional theory, the framework illustrates the mechanisms through which socialist institutional legacies interact with reform initiatives, resulting in incomplete institutionalization. This framework guides the analytical focus and thematic coding of the study.

Chapter 3. Methodology

3.1. Research Design

This study adopts a qualitative case study design to conduct an in-depth analysis of institutional continuity and the process of institutionalization in Mongolia's education system during the post-socialist transition. The purpose of this study is not to test the causal effects of specific policy interventions, but to develop an interpretive understanding of how educational institutions are maintained, transformed, and reconfigured within the complex historical and institutional context of the transition from a socialist system to a market economy.

To achieve this aim, the study employs thematic analysis as its primary analytical method. Thematic analysis is particularly well suited for examining structural phenomena such as decoupling between policy documents, institutional designs, and actual educational practices. Guided by a neo-institutional theoretical framework, the analysis seeks to capture how institutional change remains confined to the regulatory level and fails to become internalized in actors' perceptions and everyday practices.

3.2. Participants and Sampling

The study participants consist of three key informants who directly led or significantly influenced the design and implementation of education policy in Mongolia. A purposive sampling strategy was employed to select individuals capable of providing in-depth insights into the institutional dynamics under investigation.

The Key Informants are as follows:

1) N. Jadamba: Former Minister of Education of Mongolia and a principal policymaker who led national education reform initiatives.

2) S. Bathuyag: Former Director of Primary and Secondary Education at the Ministry of Education, with extensive expertise in administrative governance and system operations.

3) M. Degerjav: Professor of Educational Psychology at the National University of Mongolia, who has offered a critical academic perspective on education reform.

As leading experts deeply involved in the institutionalization process of Mongolia's education system, these participants play a crucial role in ensuring the credibility and analytical depth of the study.

3.3. Data Collection

The data analyzed in this study are based on in-depth interview materials collected in 2018 as part of a research project conducted by the Institute for Peace and Unification Studies at Seoul National University, entitled *"A Foundational Study on Contemporary Social Structures in Mongolia for Korea–Mongolia Exchange and Cooperation in the New Northern Policy Era."*

Semi-structured interviews were conducted one to two times per participant, with each interview lasting approximately two to three hours. The interview questions focused on participants' experiences of historical transitions in Mongolian education, the persistence of socialist governance structures, the actual functioning of education reforms, and perceptions of the quality assurance (QA) system. This approach yielded rich narrative data revealing institutional inertia and implementation gaps in Mongolia's education reform process.

3.4. Data Analysis Procedure

Data analysis strictly followed the six-phase procedure of thematic analysis proposed by Braun and Clarke (2006). The study aimed to reinterpret the original data collected in 2018 through a neo-institutional lens, following a step-by-step analytical process.

First, all interview recordings were transcribed verbatim and repeatedly reviewed to generate initial analytical insights. Second, open coding was conducted to identify primary meaning units such as "replication of the Soviet model" and

"reform on paper." Third, related codes were grouped into broader categories, including "socialist governance structures" and "formal reform versus actual practice." Fourth, relationships among categories were examined to derive core themes such as institutional continuity, implementation gaps, and incomplete institutionalization.

Through this process, the study ultimately identified six analytical themes explaining the institutional characteristics of Mongolia's education reform.

3.5. Themes and Interpretive Framework

The categories and themes derived from the analysis were interpreted based on neo-institutional theory. The major themes include:

1) Institutional continuity: The persistence of socialist institutional arrangements and operational practices after systemic transition.

2) Implementation gaps: Structural discrepancies between policy documents and school-level practices.

3) Incomplete institutionalization: The formal adoption of quality assurance (QA) systems without substantive internalization.

4) External support mechanisms: The role of international educational cooperation as supplementary rather than transformative.

5) Declining educational quality and moral education: The transformation of educational purposes in response to broader social changes.

Each theme was interpreted with reference to participants' interview narratives, and representative quotations are presented in the appendices (Tables A3 and A4) to ensure analytical transparency.

3.6. Trustworthiness

To ensure the rigor of qualitative inquiry, the study employed multiple strategies to enhance trustworthiness.

First, triangulation was conducted by cross-referencing interview data with contemporary Seoul National University research reports and official Mongolian education statistics. Second, member checking was used to confirm whether the researcher's interpretations accurately reflected participants' intended meanings. Third, peer review was undertaken to assess the

validity of the coding process and interpretive conclusions.

3.7. Ethics and Transparency of Data Reuse

This study involves the secondary analysis of data collected in 2018 while the researcher was participating as a research fellow in a project conducted by the Institute for Peace and Unification Studies at Seoul National University. Participants' anonymity was strictly protected, and all procedures adhered to principles of research ethics and data protection.

By applying a new neo-institutional theoretical framework to the existing dataset, the study ensures analytical originality through reinterpretation rather than repetitive use of the same data.

3.8. Limitations and Analytic Generalization

This study is based on the perspectives of three senior education experts at a specific point in time (2018), which limits the potential for statistical generalization. However, the purpose of the study is not to provide a representative evaluation of education reform outcomes in a single country, but to interpret the structural mechanisms underlying institutional continuity and incomplete institutionalization commonly observed in post-socialist contexts.

Accordingly, the study offers analytic generalization by advancing the concepts of institutional inertia and incomplete institutionalization as explanatory tools applicable to other countries with similar historical trajectories.

Chapter 4. Findings and Analysis

4.1. Chapter Overview

This chapter presents the findings derived from an analysis of in-depth interviews conducted with three key experts in Mongolian education as part of a 2018 research project led by the Institute for Peace and Unification Studies at Seoul National University. The analysis was guided by the neo-institutional theoretical framework discussed in Chapter 2 and the thematic analysis procedures

outlined in Chapter 3. In particular, the findings are organized around three core analytical dimensions: institutional continuity, implementation gaps, and incomplete institutionalization.

Through empirical evidence, this chapter seeks to provide a structural explanation for why education reforms in post-socialist Mongolia—despite being repeatedly introduced—have failed to translate into substantive improvements in educational quality and institutional internalization.

4.2. Institutional Continuity and Path Dependency

The analysis reveals that Mongolia's education system continues to exhibit strong persistence of centralized governance structures and operational practices formed during the socialist period, even after systemic transition. This persistence should not be understood merely as administrative inertia, but rather as the outcome of path dependency shaped by the long-term accumulation of Soviet-style educational models.

“The education system has changed, but actual operational practices have not changed significantly.” (Key Informants B, personal communication, August 2018)

This statement illustrates that while legal frameworks and formal institutions have been reformed, decision-making processes and organizational cultures remain largely hierarchical and top-down. In other words, institutional change has occurred at the regulatory level, but deeper institutions encompassing actors' perceptions and practices have not undergone corresponding transformation.

4.3. Implementation Gaps and Decoupling between Policy and Practice

Education reform policies introduced at the national level have failed to generate substantive change at the school level, and a clear implementation gap, or decoupling, between policy design and practice has become evident.

“Reform plans look perfect on paper, but they operate differently in reality.” (Key Informants C, personal communication, August 2018)

This gap is not primarily attributable to defects in policy design itself, but rather to the formal institutionalization of reforms that have not been

internalized within the everyday practices of teachers and administrators. These findings empirically demonstrate the disconnection between regulatory institutionalization and cognitive–normative institutionalization discussed in Chapter 2.

4.4. Formalization of Quality Assurance and the Decline of Educational Quality

(Incomplete Institutionalization of Quality Assurance)

Although Mongolia has introduced quality assurance (QA) and university accreditation systems aligned with international standards, the interview analysis indicates that these mechanisms function more as administrative compliance procedures than as instruments for improving educational quality.

“Universities have become more concerned with graduating students than with the substance of education.” (Key Informants B, personal communication, August 2018)

This reflects the reality that, alongside the quantitative expansion of higher education, QA systems have devolved into formal managerial tools rather than catalysts for substantive pedagogical improvement. This study interprets this phenomenon as a representative case of incomplete institutionalization, which constitutes a core structural problem in Mongolia’s education reform.

4.5. Structural Constraints and the Limits of Institutional Implementation

Participants consistently identified poor working conditions for teachers, excessive administrative workloads, and inadequate educational infrastructure as structural factors constraining the effectiveness of reform implementation. These conditions function as physical and organizational barriers that prevent institutional changes from yielding meaningful outcomes.

The analysis suggests that low salary levels and unstable working environments undermine teachers’ professional development and willingness to engage with reform initiatives,

thereby creating a vicious cycle that weakens the implementation capacity of education reform.

4.6. Erosion of Educational Culture and Character Education

Following the systemic transition, Mongolian society has experienced rapid social transformations, including the decline of nomadic culture, the spread of nuclear family structures, and the expansion of market-oriented values. In this context, the former state-centered value system has eroded, yet no alternative educational or ethical framework has been firmly established.

As a result, the normative pillar of education has weakened, and confusion regarding the purpose and direction of character education has intensified. This finding suggests that education reform must extend beyond institutional design to encompass consensus on educational values and purposes.

4.7. Supplementary Findings: Educational Cooperation between Korea and Mongolia

Educational cooperation between Korea and Mongolia has generated positive, practice-oriented outcomes in areas such as teacher training, educational infrastructure development, and ICT integration.

“Cooperation with Korea has provided tangible support to educational practice.” (Key Informants A, personal communication, August 2018).

However, such cooperation has not reached a level sufficient to strengthen Mongolia’s internal institutional capacity or to structurally internalize reform processes. Accordingly, this study positions international cooperation as a supplementary external mechanism, suggesting that it is more appropriately examined in depth in a separate study (Paper 2).

4.8. Summary of Findings

The findings of this chapter can be summarized as follows.

First, Mongolian education remains embedded in a structure of institutional continuity characterized by strong persistence of socialist-era institutional inertia.

Second, although education reform policies have been introduced, implementation gaps between policy

design and school-level practice have become structurally entrenched. Third, key institutional mechanisms—including quality assurance (QA)—remain at a formal level, reflecting a state of incomplete institutionalization.

The perceptions of experts in 2018 clearly demonstrate that the challenges facing Mongolian education stem not from simple resource shortages or policy design failures, but from long-accumulated institutional structures and actor perceptions. These findings justify the study's positioning of 2018 as a historical baseline and enable longitudinal comparative analysis with a planned follow-up study in 2026.

Chapter 5. Discussion

5.1. Overview of the Discussion

Building on the findings presented in Chapter 4, this chapter interprets the structural constraints confronting education reform in post-socialist Mongolia through a neo-institutional theoretical lens. In particular, statements made by key decision-makers in Mongolian education in 2018 are reinterpreted not as evidence of temporary policy failure, but as the long-accumulated outcomes of path dependency rooted in socialist legacies and decoupling between policy design and educational practice.

Furthermore, by positioning the 2018 findings as a historical baseline, this chapter provides a theoretical foundation for comparing and assessing the direction and magnitude of institutional change in subsequent follow-up studies after 2026.

5.2. Institutional Continuity and the Entrenchment of Path Dependency

A central finding of this study is that the most significant constraint on education reform in Mongolia lies not in short-term resource shortages or deficiencies in policy design, but in institutional continuity accumulated since the socialist period. The “unchanging operational practices” identified in Chapter 4 illustrate how path dependency persists even after the formal introduction of institutional reforms.

Despite the adoption of Western-inspired systems emphasizing decentralization and autonomy, Mongolian education administrators and teachers continue to operate within an administrative culture accustomed to centralized and standardized decision-making. This indicates that while reforms have been accepted at a regulatory level, they have not been sufficiently transformed at the level of organizational culture and actors' cognitive frameworks (North, 1990; Khakhina & Piattoeva, 2021).

5.3. Decoupling between Regulatory Adoption and Cognitive–Normative Resistance

The implementation gaps observed in Mongolian education reform can be interpreted as a process of decoupling between policy adoption and practice. Although legal and institutional frameworks were rapidly restructured in response to international pressures toward institutional isomorphism, actors in educational settings failed to internalize these reforms as part of their professional values or normative practices.

This phenomenon reflects an imbalance between the regulatory pillar and the cognitive–normative pillars of institutions as conceptualized in neo-institutional theory. Statements such as “policies appear perfect on paper but function differently in practice” exemplify a typical pathway through which institutions that lack internalization devolve into formalism (Scott, 2014; Tsedendamba & Lowrie, 2022).

5.4. Formalization of Quality Assurance and Incomplete Institutionalization

The formalization of quality assurance (QA) systems identified in Chapter 4 constitutes a key empirical example demonstrating that Mongolian education reform remains at a stage of incomplete institutionalization. Although QA mechanisms have been introduced, they function primarily as administrative procedures designed to meet formal requirements rather than as instruments for improving educational quality.

The tendency of universities to prioritize graduation rates and outward performance indicators over the substantive quality of education illustrates the structural consequences that arise when institutions fail to become internalized in actors'

perceptions and practices. This finding suggests that tensions between global standards and local contexts may lead to qualitative decline rather than improvement.

5.5. Teacher Professionalism and the Sustainability of Reform

Teacher professionalism represents a central analytical focus in discussions of the sustainability of education reform in Mongolia. Rather than interpreting teachers' passive responses as individual deficits in capacity or motivation, this study understands them as the outcome of long-accumulated institutional helplessness.

When education reforms advance at the level of laws and policies but fail to integrate with teachers' professional identities, reform initiatives struggle to achieve sustainability. Accordingly, the long-term development of Mongolian education requires a shift toward governance structures that balance autonomy and accountability, enabling teachers to participate as active agents rather than passive recipients of reform.

5.6. Limits of Institutionalization in International Educational Cooperation (Supplementary Discussion)

International educational cooperation, including cooperation between Korea and Mongolia, has generated tangible achievements in the modernization of Mongolian education. However, the analysis indicates that such cooperation has not reached a level sufficient to structurally strengthen Mongolia's internal institutional capacity or to internalize reform processes.

These findings demonstrate that external support is unlikely to result in sustainable institutional change when it lacks alignment with domestic institutional structures. Consequently, international educational cooperation must be redesigned to move beyond material support and toward strengthening administrative capacity and normative institutional pillars.

5.7. The 2018 Data as a Historical Baseline and Longitudinal Implications

The interview data analyzed in this study represent a historical baseline that encapsulates the structural challenges confronting Mongolian education approximately three decades after the systemic transition. Issues identified in 2018—including institutional inertia, implementation gaps, and the crisis of character education—are likely to remain critical evaluative indicators even after the 2023 Education Law revision.

Accordingly, this study provides a key reference point for longitudinal comparative analysis in a planned follow-up study in 2026, enabling systematic assessment of which institutional elements have changed and which continue to persist through path dependency.

5.8. Summary of the Discussion

In summary, the stagnation of education reform in Mongolia can be understood as the outcome of path dependency generated by the collision between newly introduced institutions and centralized inertia inherited from the socialist period. This has been structurally manifested through decoupling between policy and practice. In particular, the formalization of quality assurance systems and the institutional helplessness of teachers constitute core mechanisms of incomplete institutionalization, confining reform to superficial change.

These findings suggest that sustainable development in Mongolian education can be achieved only by moving beyond the external transfer of institutional forms toward deeper transformation in actors' perceptions and governance capacity. Ultimately, this study reconceptualizes education reform in post-socialist contexts not as policy failure, but as a process of incomplete institutionalization shaped by institutional continuity and implementation gaps.

Chapter 6. Conclusion

6.1. Summary of Key Findings

Drawing on in-depth interviews with three key decision-makers in Mongolian education collected in 2018 as part of a research project conducted by the Institute for Peace and Unification Studies at Seoul National University, this study examined the structural constraints confronting education reform in

post-socialist Mongolia from a neo-institutional perspective. Rather than interpreting limited reform outcomes as the result of policy failure or insufficient reform commitment, the study conceptualized them as a problem of incomplete institutionalization, in which institutional continuity and path dependency originating in the socialist period constrain the internalization of reform initiatives (North, 1990; Scott, 2014).

The findings can be summarized as follows. First, Mongolia's education system continues to exhibit strong institutional continuity, characterized by the persistence of centralized governance structures and operational practices formed during the socialist era. This path dependency continues to shape decision-making processes and organizational culture even after the introduction of new education institutions, thereby constraining substantive reform. Second, a structural implementation gap (decoupling) exists between legal and policy reforms and school-level practices. While reforms have been adopted at the regulatory level, they have not been sufficiently internalized in the perceptions and practices of teachers and administrators.

Third, quality assurance (QA) and university accreditation systems have been formally introduced but remain at a stage of incomplete institutionalization, functioning inadequately as instruments for improving educational quality. Finally, teachers' passive responses to reform are interpreted not as individual capacity deficits, but as manifestations of institutional helplessness formed within long-accumulated hierarchical administrative structures.

By foregrounding institutional continuity and decoupling, this study extends neo-institutional theory to transitional education systems and offers an analytic framework applicable to other post-socialist contexts.

6.2. Implications and Contributions

This study offers several academic and policy-related implications.

From an academic perspective, the study advances comparative education and neo-institutional research by analyzing education reform in post-socialist contexts not as a rupture or

episodic failure, but as a process shaped by institutional continuity and incomplete institutionalization. The key theoretical contribution of this study lies in framing Mongolia not as an exceptional or unsuccessful reform case, but as a paradigmatic case of incomplete institutionalization.

In addition, by structurally interpreting the mechanisms of institutional change through in-depth interviews with a small number of key informants, and by presenting the findings in the form of analytic generalization, the study strengthens the theoretical rigor of qualitative case study research.

From a policy perspective, the study locates the limitations of Mongolian education reform not in resource shortages or policy design alone, but in structural factors such as institutional inertia and actors' institutional helplessness. These findings suggest that future education policy in Mongolia must move beyond legal and institutional restructuring toward governance reform that balances autonomy and accountability, strengthens teacher professionalism, and facilitates changes in actors' perceptions.

6.3. Limitations of the Study

This study is based on the perceptions of three senior decision-makers and experts who were deeply involved in the design and implementation of Mongolian education policy at the time of data collection in 2018. As such, it does not fully capture the experiences of teachers and students at the school level. Moreover, because the data were collected in 2018, the study does not directly reflect the immediate effects of the education law revisions introduced after 2023.

However, given that the purpose of this study is not to provide a short-term evaluation of policy outcomes, but to interpret the long-term structure of institutional change, these limitations do not fundamentally undermine the study's interpretive validity.

6.4. Directions for Future Research: From 2018 to 2026

The interview data analyzed in this study serve as a historical baseline, capturing the structural challenges confronting Mongolian education approximately three decades after the post-socialist

transition. Building on this baseline, future research can extend the present study into a longitudinal qualitative analysis by applying the same theoretical framework and analytical procedures in a follow-up study planned for 2026.

Such research would enable systematic comparison of whether institutional continuity, implementation gaps, and institutional helplessness identified in 2018 have been transformed following the 2023 Education Law revision, or whether they continue to persist through path dependency. In doing so, future studies may offer a more refined assessment of the sustainability and developmental trajectory of education reform in Mongolia.

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Appendix A. Interview Key Informants

- Jadamba — personal interview on Mongolian education reform, Ulaanbaatar, August 2018
- Bathuyag — personal interview on administrative continuity in Mongolian schools, Ulaanbaatar, August 2018
- Degerjav — personal interview on pedagogical challenges and character education, Ulaanbaatar, August 2018