Who Is Education For? Boys in the Shadow of Cultural Narratives

Nomin-Erdene Altangerel,

Undergraduate Student, Department of Sociology and Social Work

Tenuunjargal Avirmed

Lecturer, Department of Sociology and Social Work

National University of Mongolia

Abstract

This study aims to explore how cultural narratives and gender role expectations related to "what boys should be like" in society influence boys' attitudes toward education in Mongolia, and whether these lead to an educational dilemma. The research involved 18 students aged 12–18 who participated in an emotional mapping activity. The study employed qualitative methods, including emotional mapping, future planning tasks, and individual and group interviews, to deeply examine boys' attitudes toward education. It hypothesizes that cultural narratives prevalent in various social spheres—such as family, peers, school environment, and media (e.g., "boys are lazy," "men must be strong")—negatively impact boys' attitudes toward education, emotional expression, and self-perception, thereby creating an educational dilemma. The study confirms that the family is the most influential transmitter of these narratives. When families convey positive cultural messages, it helps boys form supportive peer relationships, critically assess media narratives, use social networks positively, and foster positive emotions in school settings, including in their relationships with teachers. Findings show that gendered cultural narratives and expectations must be considered when analyzing boys' educational attitudes. To create a more equitable educational environment, the study highlights the critical role of families in fostering positive gendered experiences and relationships.

Keywords: Boys' educational attitudes, educational dilemma, cultural narratives, emotional mapping

INTRODUCTION

According to the PISA 2022 survey, 15-year-old girls in Mongolia outperformed boys in all tested areas. Girls scored 25 points higher in reading, 6 points higher in mathematics, and 15 points higher in science than boys. These gaps are equivalent to nearly one year of schooling (PISA 2022 National Report: Mongolia, p. 44). Furthermore, as of 2022, the percentage of women with higher education exceeded that of men by 7.8%, suggesting that girls tend to place greater value on education (PISA 2022 National Report: Mongolia, p. 70).

A 2016 study on gender in education examined issues such as textbook content, teacher training programs, school environments, gender policies, and the importance of gender sensitivity among teachers. It also highlighted the influence of parents and teachers in perpetuating gender stereotypes that affect students' gender perceptions and attitudes toward teachers (Ts. Odgerel et al., 2016). The study found that parents were three times more likely to prefer their daughters to pursue higher education than their sons. A 2019 study expanded the focus to include school enrollment, learning environments, academic achievement, teaching methods, time use, and attitudes toward higher education. It emphasized that boys and girls have different learning styles, with girls more inclined toward writing and boys more interested in science and physical education. The 2024 study "Boys Drifting from Education" stood out for analyzing the issue at micro, meso, and macro levels, including the influence of peer groups. Qualitative findings suggested that boys participate in sports more than girls and that increased time spent on sports correlates with academic disengagement. Peer group norms and rigid masculine ideals shaped by gender stereotypes influence boys' psychology, behavior, decision-making, and actions, potentially leading to educational disengagement (Emuujin, 2024). While previous studies have addressed macro-level policy issues, they have not thoroughly explored how boys themselves perceive education and develop attitudes toward it.

Our worldview and the shared beliefs that exist among social groups are shaped through cultural narratives (Peace, 2022). These narratives are transmitted through oral tradition, literature, art, and media, forming societal norms and expectations. So, how do cultural narratives influence boys' attitudes toward education? In schools, teachers often see girls as diligent and obedient and boys as mischievous and disruptive. This can result in teachers focusing more on girls and leaving boys

behind, reinforcing the notion that education is not important for boys. From a theoretical standpoint, Connell (2005) explains that hegemonic masculinity sets norms for men to be strong and independent, marginalizing alternative masculinity and reinforcing gender inequality. Men who do not conform to traditional masculine ideals often experience social rejection and cultural exclusion. Similarly, boys may internalize these traditional ideals through cultural narratives, which in turn shape their attitudes toward education. This raises an important question: Are boys being pushed into an educational dilemma by conflicting cultural messages about masculinity? This study will explore how boys perceive education and how their attitudes are shaped by both traditional and modern cultural narratives.

METHODOLOGY

Participants

In order to identify boys' attitudes toward education, emotional mapping was conducted with a total of 18 students—9 boys and 9 girls—from grades 6 to 12 in general education schools. The research was based on the following core structure: emotional mapping, future self-map in ten years, and both individual and group discussions. Participants were selected through random sampling among students studying in public general education schools in Ulaanbaatar. To ensure diversity, students from different grade levels (6–12) and both genders were included. Private school students were not included in the study. Prior to the study, informed consent was obtained from all participants, and participation was entirely voluntary.

Research Instruments

For qualitative data collection, the emotional mapping method was employed as the primary research instrument. Participants were asked to express their emotions related to themes such as family, friends, school environment, teachers, and self-expression using drawings, colors, key words, and annotations. In addition, they created mind maps reflecting their future plans. This participatory visual approach provided deeper insight into participants' inner emotional worlds and their perceived positions within the educational environment. A discussion guide for both group and individual interviews was also developed to explore their emotional responses to school, family expectations, peer influence, and perceptions of the future in greater depth. These

discussions allowed for a richer interpretation of the visual outputs and helped contextualize participants' emotional narratives. All qualitative data were systematically coded and organized using Microsoft Excel. The data were subsequently categorized and thematically annotated prior to in-depth qualitative analysis, ensuring methodological rigor and transparency throughout the analytical process.

The study's methodological foundation lies in the interpretivist paradigm, utilizing a qualitative, visual, participatory, and arts-based research design. Emotional mapping, as applied in this study, offers a means to explore individuals' emotions, experiences, attitudes, and perceptions in relation to their environments (Participatory methods, 2025). In contemporary understanding, human emotions are seen not merely as internal psychological states but as phenomena that are socially connected, bodily experienced, and shaped by cultural norms and values (Bertrando, 2008; Fredman, 2004). Emotional mapping can therefore be used to uncover the complex relationships between emotions and spatial environments, as well as to understand how individuals perceive and experience particular places (Giesek, 2013; Kara, 2015). For this reason, it has been widely applied in urban planning and psychology. Overall, this method allows individuals or groups to express their emotional experiences and reflections related to a given location or time period. It can be used to represent daily activities, interpersonal or social network dynamics, or even emotional visions of the future (Participatory methods, 2025). Usually, participants create a map either using a provided template or drawing one themselves to visualize their emotions and experiences. These maps are then discussed and interpreted together, forming the main way the data is collected.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Cultural narratives are collective stories enriched by heritage, history, migration, and kinship, which shape group identity and transmit values across generations (Carabelli, 2022; Spira & Wall, 2009). These narratives, shared through oral traditions, literature, art, and media, influence not only what is taught but also how learning is practiced (Peace, 2022). In education, they function as socializing agents, guiding students' attitudes toward knowledge, peers, and authority.

According to previous research, Mongolia's patriarchal social structure manifests in the gendered expectations surrounding children's education. Although parents value education, daughters are

often prioritized, being seen as needing independence for future marital and economic security. By contrast, sons are perceived as capable of managing "without schooling," with some parents excusing boys from homework or classes for herding and household labor, while investing more in daughters' education (Ts. Odgerel et al., 2016; Gender Analysis in Education Sector of Mongolia, 2019). This reflects the persistence of patriarchal narratives that simultaneously empower daughters through education and undermine boys' educational commitment.

Such gendered perceptions are deeply rooted in underlying social attitudes and belief systems, which can be better understood through the framework of attitude theory. Attitudes are generally understood as comprising three components: cognitive (beliefs and thoughts), affective (emotions and feelings), and behavioral (actions and responses) (Spielberger, 2004; Wood, 2000). Within this framework, cultural context plays a critical role, with social norms programming children's orientations toward schooling (Abun, 2023; Hofstede in Brown, 1995).

For Mongolian boys, sport and physical activity are often linked to masculinity, making schoolwork appear less valuable. PISA (OECD, MOEAS, 2022) reported that boys associate sport with being "real men," prioritizing it over academic performance. Yet paradoxically, boys also articulate ambitious future goals—such as becoming engineers or leaders—while rejecting subjects like literature and writing, which are key to those aspirations (Ts. Odgerel et al., 2016).

This contradiction exemplifies an educational dilemma: the tension between progressive, learner-centered approaches and traditional standardized systems (Wahlquist, 1938). In Mongolia, it manifests as a clash between patriarchal cultural narratives and globalized educational demands, leaving boys caught between independence as a masculine ideal and the necessity of academic success for future achievement.

The Mongolian Education Context

In Mongolia, access to higher education is relatively widespread, and university education is highly valued across society. There are around 65 higher education institutions nationwide, of which 17 are public universities that enroll the majority of students. In addition, about 70 technical and vocational education and training (TVET) institutions operate across the country, 41 of which are

publicly funded, providing alternative pathways for young people seeking employment-oriented qualifications (*Mongolian Statistical Yearbook 2024*, 2025).

In the 2024–2025 academic year, 150,282 students are studying in higher education institutions, while 40,906 students are studying in TVET institutions (*Statistical Information on the Education Sector 2024-2025*, n.d.). Admission to universities is based on national entrance examinations, which are held twice a year and can create disparities between urban and rural students due to unequal access to educational resources.

In the 2023–2024 academic year, 36,620 students graduated from secondary school. Among them, 33,369 students took the national university entrance examination, of whom 29,582 (or 80.7 percent) were current-year graduates. In the following academic year (2024–2025), 23,703 students entered higher education institutions, and 18,298 of them—or approximately 77.2 percent—were graduates from that same academic year (D. Ankhzaya, 2025). These figures indicate that the majority of university entrants in Mongolia are recent secondary school graduates.

Meanwhile, 22,358 students newly enrolled in TVET institutions in 2023–2024, with 2,533 of them—about 11.3 percent—being recent secondary school graduates. While studying abroad remains limited to those with strong academic performance or sufficient financial means, it is becoming increasingly popular, rising from around 1,300 Mongolian students in 2023–2024 to approximately 2,500 in 2024–2025 (Mongolian statistical yearbook, 2024). This trend reflects growing aspirations among young people for diverse educational experiences and global exposure.

In technical and vocational education and training (TVET) institutions, gender differences are evident across fields of study. Male students are predominant in areas such as information and communication technologies, engineering, manufacturing and construction, agriculture, forestry, fisheries, veterinary sciences, and service-related trades. In contrast, female students are significantly overrepresented in disciplines such as arts and humanities, health and social welfare, business, management, and law.

In higher education institutions in the 2024–2025 academic year, male students continue to dominate several major fields of study. Specifically, 72.5 percent of students in information and communication technologies, 70.8 percent in engineering, manufacturing and construction, 55.4

percent in agriculture, forestry, fisheries and veterinary studies, and 64.4 percent in service-related programs are male. In contrast, female students are strongly represented in disciplines such as health and welfare (82.2 percent), education (82 percent), and business, management and law (61.8 percent), and they outnumber male students across almost all other fields of study (*Mongolian Statistical Yearbook 2024*, 2025). This highlights a clear gendered pattern in the choice of academic disciplines within higher education.

FINDINGS

As students progressed through grades, their emotions and feelings began to differ by gender.

Using emotional mapping, students were asked to construct a chronological timeline of their schooling, marking the emotions they experienced in each grade with colors and short explanations. This allowed an understanding of how their psychological states changed over time, and how cultural narratives and the agents transmitting them were reflected in students' feelings.

The findings reveal that in grade one, both boys and girls experienced a wide range of emotions, but boys reported more negative feelings. Boys attributed their negative emotions to factors such as parents picking them up late from school, perceiving the school environment as dirty or harsh, or being bullied. Their positive emotions, by contrast, came from making friends, achieving high grades, and engaging in interesting lessons. These results emphasize the importance of family, peers, teaching methods, and teachers in shaping early experiences.

During grades two to four, boys reported feeling calmer and happier compared to girls, possibly suggesting that they were learning to regulate their emotions and adapt to cultural expectations over time. However, in grade five, boys expressed anxiety, loneliness, sadness, and frustration due to national examinations, peer transitions, bullying, and even the quarantine period. It was also at this stage that many boys began playing video and computer games, which, according to group discussions, further decreased their academic engagement.

Interestingly, the emotional maps showed that during transitions—such as moving from primary to secondary school and from lower to upper secondary school—boys reported the most positive

emotions. This may indicate that boys are most psychologically stable during periods of change. However, once they entered upper secondary school, boys increasingly experienced negative feelings such as frustration and anxiety. This shift may be explained by the fact that they begin to think about their future, plan more concretely, and reflect on themselves more realistically.

From a developmental psychology viewpoint (Erikson, 1968), the shift to upper secondary school coincides with the stage of identity formation, when adolescents face growing expectations related to future choices, career paths, and social belonging. For Mongolian boys in particular, this stage also intersects with cultural narratives of masculinity that emphasize independence, responsibility, and economic contribution. As a result, as academic demands intensify and social comparisons increase, these expectations may generate internal conflict—between the desire to conform to masculine ideals and the pressure to achieve academically.

On the other hand, in Mongolian culture, girls are often socialized to be patient, compliant, and academically diligent—traits that align closely with school norms and teacher expectations (Gender Analysis in the Education Sector of Mongolia, 2019). Therefore, they may experience negative emotions during every transitional period, as they tend to internalize school-related expectations more deeply than boys.

Another notable finding is that although boys tended to express their emotions in a more general way compared to girls, they actually identified and listed a wider range of emotions. According to Saarni (1999), awareness of experiencing multiple emotions about an event or relationship promotes effective adaptation, suggesting that recognizing a diversity of emotions may indicate higher emotional competence. Moreover, Lutz, cited in Saarni (1999), cultural values play a big role in how children learn to experience and express emotions. Parents and communities guide kids toward ways of feeling and behaving that are valued in their culture. In this light, boys' ability to recognize different emotions even if they talk about them in broad terms might show both their growing emotional awareness and how cultural expectations encourage them to hold back when expressing feelings. This suggests that boys may possess a relatively strong *emotional vocabulary[1]*, even if they describe their overall experiences more briefly. Their tendency to

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[1] Emotional Vocabulary is simply the collection of words we use to express our feelings. But from an academic standpoint, emotional vocabulary moves beyond a simple lexicon of feelings to become a lens

generalize might be influenced by cultural narratives, gendered expectations, self-protective behaviors, and digital media culture—all of which shape their adaptation and emotional expression in educational settings.

In summary, while boys demonstrated an ability to recognize and articulate diverse emotions, they often evaluated each grade more generally than girls. This pattern may reflect cultural narratives that portray boys as introverted, less expressive, and less empathetic. At the same time, it also suggests that boys may be developing stronger skills in regulating their emotions. Rather than innate biological differences, these patterns are likely shaped by cultural narratives, which divide empathy and emotional expression along gendered lines.

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through which we examine human experience, behavior, and societal structures, especially within the context of sustainability (Sustainability Directory, 2025).

Figure 1. Color-coded emotional mapping of female students from 1st to 6th grade.
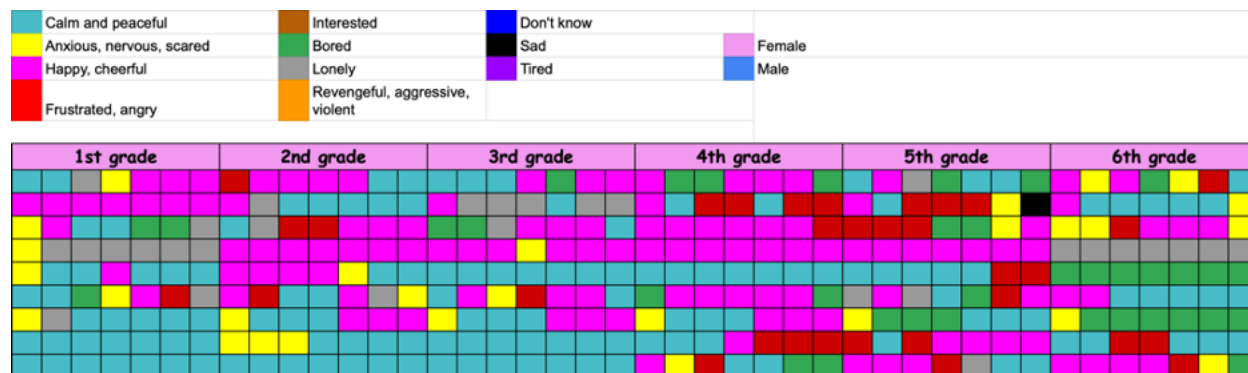

Figure 2. Color-coded emotional mapping of male students from 1st to 6th grade.

Figure 3. Color-coded emotional mapping of female students from 7th to 12th grade.
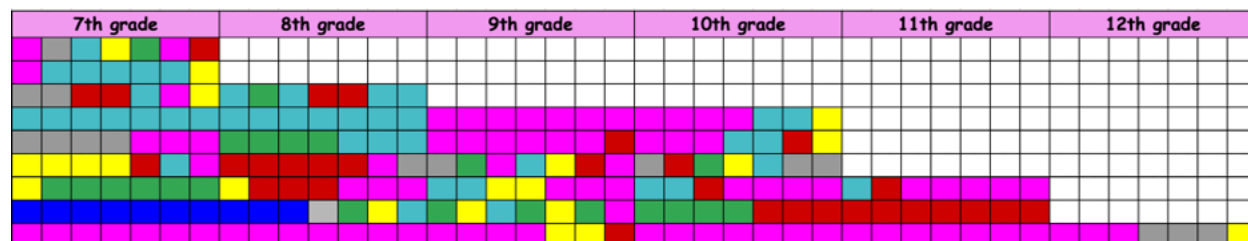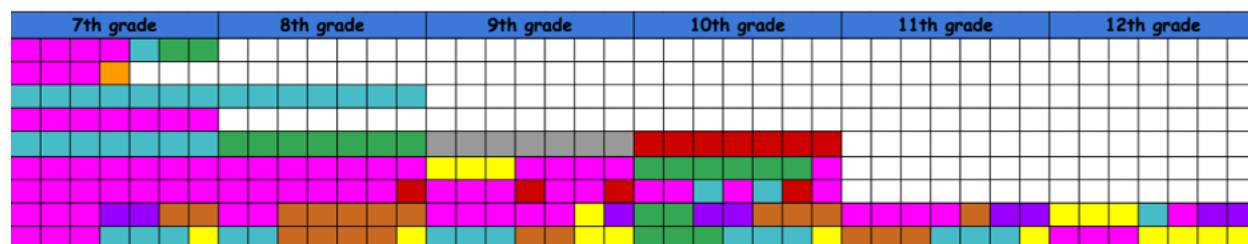

Figure 4. Color-coded emotional mapping of male students from 7th to 12th grade.

Boys evaluate themselves more realistically regarding education.

Boys' cognitive maps revealed ambivalent attitudes toward education. They envisioned their future through multiple trajectories such as "Option A" (pursuing higher education) and "Option B" (direct entry into the labor market, entrepreneurship, or working first before continuing studies). This suggests that education is not perceived as an indispensable pathway but rather as one among several possible routes.

Such ambivalence might reflect Mongolia's dominant cultural narratives of masculinity, which emphasize that "a man must be strong and independent" and "a man must provide for the household." Previous studies indicate that boys are more likely than girls to miss classes for work-related and household reasons—such as working as horse jockeys, helping families during migration, or participating in sports competitions. Parents, particularly in rural areas, tend to prioritize girls' education while excusing boys from schoolwork or daily assignments to assist with herding and other domestic responsibilities (*Gender Analysis in the Education Sector of Mongolia: A Focus on Boys' Education*, 2019).

This gendered pattern is also reflected in national statistics. As of 2024, only 38.6 percent of all university students in Mongolia are male (*National Statistical Office*, 2025), while in 2020, 17.6 percent of males aged 15–19—compared to only 6.7 percent of females—were engaged in employment (Tumendemberel, 2022). These narratives appear to position education not as the primary foundation of success, but rather as a negotiable option within broader masculine expectations.

Qualitative findings demonstrated that while girls primarily articulated education-oriented aspirations, boys produced three distinct sets of options. This dual approach simultaneously revealed their pragmatic evaluation of opportunities and a latent skepticism toward the necessity of education. This aligns with Connell's (2005) concept of hegemonic masculinity; whereby dominant ideals of manhood normalize the notion that "a man will succeed regardless of
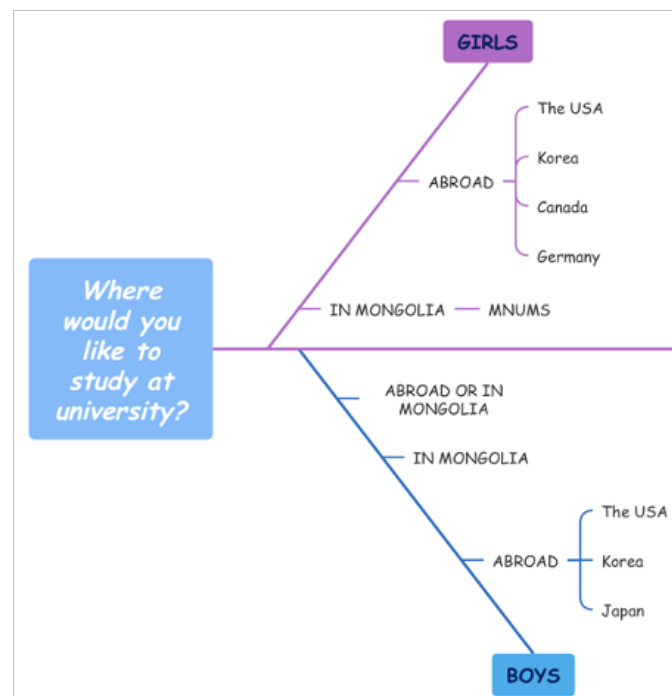
educational participation." Furthermore, boys' projections of their future highlighted a greater tendency to calculate their financial situation with precision, contrasting with the ways in which girls framed their aspirations.

When asked about their educational orientation, all girls except those pursuing medical careers expressed a desire to study abroad, while boys' responses fell into three distinct categories. This suggests that girls align more closely with globalized educational trends, characterized by the growing international mobility of students and the increasing participation of women in higher education worldwide. According to UNESCO and the Migration Data Portal (2022), approximately 6.9 million students were studying outside their home countries, marking a 176 percent increase over the past two decades. Historically, male students slightly outnumbered

females among internationally mobile students, but this gender gap has steadily narrowed: by 2021, about 3 million were female (47 percent) and 3.4 million were male (52 percent) globally.
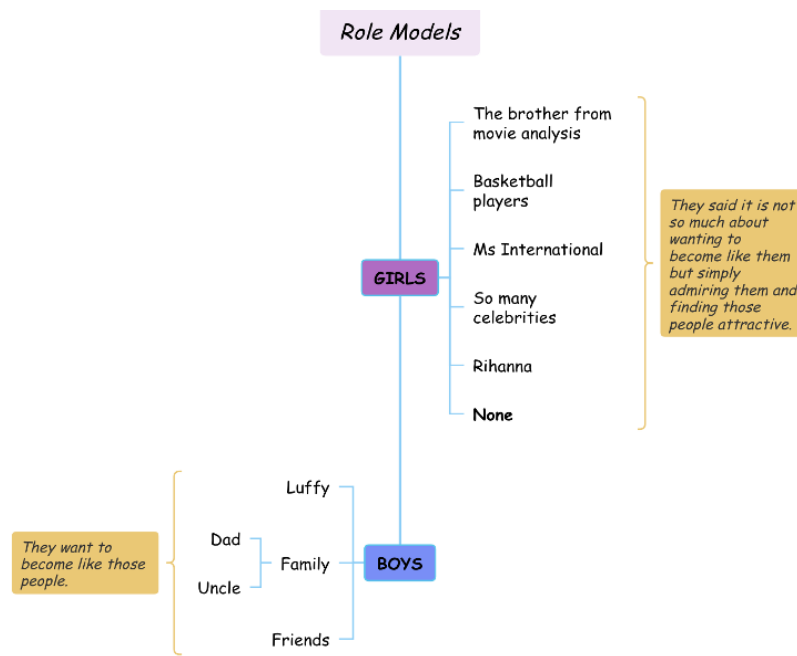
These patterns suggest that girls are more responsive to global educational aspirations, where studying abroad symbolizes empowerment, independence, and access to wider opportunities. In contrast, boys—shaped by patriarchal narratives and paternalistic attitudes, are more likely to devalue formal education. This devaluation not only undermines skill development but also propels boys toward rapid judgments and immediate actions, a process that may lead them into an educational dilemma. For example, when reprimanded by teachers, boys tended to accept the

critique yet decided not to engage in lessons or complete assignments. Girls, on the other hand, though discouraged—continued to persist, reflecting the influence of cultural narratives prescribing female patience and compliance.

Clear differences also emerged in relation to role models. Boys tended to admire others with the desire to become exactly like them, whereas girls valued their role models for aesthetic or personal appeal without necessarily aspiring to replicate them. This distinction illustrates boys' heightened susceptibility to external evaluations and social pressures, measuring their self-worth against collective standards. Such tendencies may partly account for Mongolia's current gendered educational gap: in 2024, female students comprised 61.4% of university enrollments compared to 38.6% male students (Integrated National Statistical Database, 2025). The dual patterns of socialization experienced by boys, in which they are simultaneously positioned as incapable of succeeding in education and as destined for success regardless of effort, produce contradictory dispositions. These conflicting cultural messages encourage boys to both disregard education and yet maintain a belief in future success. The paradoxical, controversial orientations that emerge from such narratives are clearly reflected in the qualitative findings of this study.

Mind map. Central node: "Students' aspirations for themselves ten years from now."

BOYS:
- Very wealthy. Has an income of 7–10 million (MNT). Capable of supporting a family.
- Has bought their dream car. Owns both an apartment and a car.
- A strong leader who inspires others. Aims to achieve great success in sports.
- Has become a better person — respects others and earns their respect in return.
- A proud son, caring younger or older brother
- Works in a field related to their profession and knowledge; performs their job with ease.
- Taller, stronger, mentally resilient, healthy, and with a transformed mindset.

GIRLS:
- Repay the kindness of my parents. Support my younger siblings' education. Buy a home and a car for my mom and dad.
- Be in a relationship with the kind of boyfriend I truly want. Get married at the age of 26 to 28.
- Live a simple and happy life with the one I love
- Satisfied with what I've chosen
- First, have my own home and car, then get married and start a family
- Graduate high school with a grade of 96 or higher
- Learn a new language. Drink with friends once a week. Expand my social circle. Have 20 million MNT in savings. Live with my friends.

CONCLUSION

This study suggests that boys' attitudes toward education in Mongolia appear to be influenced by cultural narratives and patriarchal gender expectations. From early schooling, boys express more negative emotions than girls, often linked to bullying, delayed parental support, or an unsupportive environment. Although boys can identify a broad range of emotions, they tend to generalize their experiences more briefly, reflecting cultural pressures to suppress emotional expression.

As they progress through school, boys reveal ambivalence toward higher education. Unlike girls, who consistently aspire to pursue university studies, often abroad, boys tend to be more pragmatic and skeptical, developing 'Plan B' alternatives such as immediate employment, entrepreneurship, or delayed study. This realistic self-assessment underscores the contradictory messages they receive: on the one hand, cultural ideals of masculinity suggest that men can succeed without formal education; on the other hand, globalized economic demands require academic credentials for future achievement. This tension exemplifies the educational dilemma.

The role models identified by participants further highlights gendered differences. Girls tend to admire public figures without aspiring to replicate them, whereas boys express a desire to become exactly like their role models, reflecting a stricter adherence to cultural ideals of masculinity. Furthermore, when identifying obstacles, boys primarily highlighted issues related to social trust and peer relationships, whereas girls more frequently cited academic and financial constraints. These findings indicate that boys' educational orientations are influenced not only by institutional and familial structures, but also by peer group dynamics and prevailing cultural narratives.

In sum, boys evaluate themselves more realistically regarding education—a perspective shaped by the interaction of cultural narratives and lived experiences. This realism stems from early exposure to patriarchal expectations that emphasize independence, practical contribution, and economic responsibility over academic achievement. As a result, boys often learn to approach education pragmatically, weighing its value against immediate social and economic realities. While this orientation fosters adaptability and resilience, it simultaneously limits boys' long-term educational commitment and investment in formal learning. Girls' educational paths, by contrast, appear more stable and education-centered. These gender differences reflect the ongoing impact of patriarchal

culture on education goals and emotional expression. To foster greater gender equity in education, efforts could begin within families and communities by addressing stereotypes of masculinity that may undervalue schooling. Gradual shifts in cultural narratives may support increased educational engagement among boys and promote its recognition as a viable future pathway.

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