

**2013 -2014 TITLE VIII RESEARCH SCHOLAR PROGRAM  
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**Mapping the Educational Market in Tajikistan**

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Dushanbe, Tajikistan

**Research Abstract:**

In the years since the collapse of the Soviet Union there has been tremendous growth in the variety of education institutions available to families in Tajikistan. The primary goal of this research was to map out the types of institutions, the costs associated with various institutions, and the characteristics associated with various institutions that families seek. The specific venue of the study was Dushanbe, where the greatest educational choice exists in Tajikistan.

In order to gain a better understanding of the educational market, I interviewed over 20 parents of school children, as well as over 30 university students. The interviews with parents addressed the various schools that their children studied and reasons why they chose those schools. I also asked parents about the costs associated with their children’s schools. Interviews with university students asked which universities were the “best” and reasons why.

Interviews with parents revealed that there were basically 4 levels of schools. The schools divide out initially based on costs and the manner in which fees are collected –formal or informal. The various costs levels are also associated with characteristics related to school quality. Private schools, both elite and low cost, form the most expensive two levels of schools. Private schools have a legal basis for collecting fees and have good school facilities, teachers for all subjects, and offer specialized curriculum that supplements the prescribed state curriculum. Public schools can be divided into high quality public schools and low quality public schools, forming the least expensive two levels. Some high quality public schools charge fees through the legal mechanism of extracurricular courses, while others have not formalized the fees they collect monthly. In high quality public schools there are typically enough teachers to cover all subjects, they have adequate facilities, and offer some supplemental classes to the state curriculum. Low quality public schools almost exclusively collect fees through informal means, although the fees are modest. It is not always the case that the low cost public schools have enough teachers for all subjects, desks and chairs for all students and the facilities may be of poor quality.

Concerning characteristics on which parents choose schools, I find that parents consider a complex matrix of factors to make their decisions, including school location, costs, and school quality. Location is important to parents because there is no transportation to schools provided. Cost was not a factor which parents immediately mention as a factor for choosing the current

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school that their children attend; instead, they mention it as a limiting factor for choosing a more expensive school. When parents consider school quality they look at both teachers and the curriculum offerings of the school.

Interviews and focus groups with university students found that they favor universities with strong professors and a good reputation. As expected, what constitutes a good reputation and good professors differs by student subgroups. Concerning reputation, many students commented on the value of the diploma. For some young people, universities ranked high for having a prestigious diploma within Tajikistan, such as Tajikistan National University. Others valued more highly recognition of the diploma in Russia, or other foreign countries. Concerning professors, some students cited the qualification of their faculty and the awards that they have won; while others put higher emphasis on having international faculty, such as in the branch campus of Moscow State University and the Russian Tajik Slavonic University.

**Research goals:**

My primary research goal was to discover information about the cost of schools and characteristics of importance within the newly established educational market in Tajikistan. This is a new field of research for Central Asia as no previous research has recognized that a market exists or attempted to map out the costs and benefits of the various institutions.

As my research project evolved, I found that I was collecting information on essentially 4 subtopics related to the educational market. First, I was gathering information from parents about the types of primary and secondary educational institutions that exist. Second, I was gathering information about the characteristics that parents weigh when making educational decisions. Third, I collected information about formal and informal costs of secondary schooling. Fourth, I collected information from university students about the types of institutions they chose and the characteristics which they favor.

**Research Activities:**

During the research grant I conducted over 20 interviews with parents and interviews or focus groups with over 30 university students.

Because of the sensitive nature of the topic, which included information about informal payments, I utilized a convenience sampling technique built on snowball sampling. The core sample was made up of long-term contacts, some of which I interviewed during my dissertation fieldwork in 2006. I have kept in contact with several families since my early research through various research trips from 2009-2012. My long term contacts are diverse and include families who send their children to neighborhood public schools, high quality public schools offering extracurricular courses, gymnasiums and lyceums. I also have contacts who are students in a variety of universities studying differing majors. Utilizing long-term contacts as an initial

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sampling pool was very helpful as some of my most candid information came from their interviews.

I then built the sample by using my long-term contacts to refer other contacts who matched my goals to increase the diversity of my sample. In one case, close to 10 references for parent interviews came from a single contact. Although this might point to too many responses from a single type of family, these contacts were my most diverse set of contacts including the poorest and wealthiest family that I interviewed. I was also able to interview some members of the Uzbek minority community through references from this parent contact. The same situation occurred in my interviews with university students as over 8 contacts came from a single contact, but again the diversity of contacts was a benefit of this approach.

My final sample included parents who sent their children to neighborhood public schools, high quality public schools (including schools that offers gymnasium track), low cost lyceums or gymnasiums, the Dushanbe Tajik- Turkish lyceum, and the newly opened President's International School. It also included students who studied in 1<sup>st</sup> – 5<sup>th</sup> course at over 5 universities with more than 10 majors ranging from medicals studies to engineering and international relations.

Interviews with parents lasted between 15-60 minutes. Most students were interviewed as a focus group. I personally conducted the interviews in Tajik. Some interviews were in Russian. In one interview with an Uzbek respondent three languages (Tajik, Russian, and Uzbek) were used in throughout the interview.

In the course of the interview with parents I first asked general questions about the number of children in the family. I then asked about each child's educational history and the reasons why particular schools were chosen. I then asked specifically about school costs. Finally, I asked if parents had any other comments or advice about the topic of parental choices that I had not asked about during the interview.

Focus groups were the easiest way to access university students. I designed the focus groups conscious of the need for individualized opinions. I began by asking university students to rate the top 3 universities in Tajikistan. I then asked them to describe the qualities that made it a top university. This was followed by a general discussion of which programs were rated as top programs and the reasons for it. There was also discussion of the costs, formal and informal, of university.

Interviews and focus groups were not audio recorded to offer a further level of confidentiality to my respondents. The only records of the interviews are detailed notes of the discussions, as well as the papers that university students wrote ranking universities and describing the reasons. Coding of the notes began during the interviewing period. I utilized Atlas.ti software to manage the coding and analysis process.

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**Important Research Findings:**

**School Types:**

Interviews with parents revealed 4 basic levels of schools which can be initially differentiated by cost and whether the fees are collected formally or informally. The levels also differ substantially by characteristics related to school quality.

At the least expensive level are neighborhood public schools, which are officially free-of-charge. However, all families in my study who sent their children to their neighborhood public schools were requested to pay informal monthly fees between 5-30 Tajikistani Somoni (approximately \$1-\$6) per child. The costs reportedly go towards maintenance and school staff salary supplements. Despite being the least expensive schools in terms of monthly fees, families often report receiving multiple requests per month for additional monies for school holidays, teacher gifts, classroom supplies, newspapers, etc. Although each request is small, the multiple requests does significantly increase the total costs. Some parents sending their children to slightly more expensive and higher quality schools, thought the costs of the two levels were similar, they just simply paid a larger amount directly in the monthly fees than in the neighborhood public schools. Concerning school quality, families in the study commonly reported that there was a lack of teachers and/or or high teacher turn over at the neighborhood schools. These schools typically offered only the minimal state curriculum (approximately 4-5 hours of study time), often offering multiple shifts per day.

Schools that occupy the next level are high quality public schools. At their foundation, they are neighborhood public schools, but are considered high quality and sought out by parents for either having better teachers, offering a specialized program (i.e Russian language curriculum), or offering a range of extracurricular [dopolnitelnyil ilovagi] courses. As public schools, they are also officially free-of-charge, but charge a monthly fee of approximately 50-200 Tajikistani Somoni (\$10-\$40) per child per month. Many schools at this level, but not all, have formalized their fees through the system of offering extracurricular classes (which they require students to take). This allows the schools to set up an official bank account and have parents pay the bank and receive receipts for tax purposes. Parents report that they do receive requests for additional support for repairs (typically annually) or special events and holidays, but not to the extent that the lowest level public schools receive. This is partly because the higher monthly fees also cover some of the costs that the neighborhood schools request piecemeal.

The high quality public schools typically have teachers for all subjects. Most schools at this level have one or two talented teachers in their field that parents seek out. The schools offer extracurricular classes ranging from an extra course per day to a few hours per day, which is directly related to the range of costs the various schools charge. The more expensive schools in this range offer multiple hours of extracurricular classes in specialty subjects (foreign languages, information technology, etc.) per day. It should be noted that most parents who reported that

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their children attended high quality public school reported higher class sizes than the low quality neighborhood schools.

It should be noted that in both levels of public school schools there was further differentiation by classroom and even individually through informal payments. Parents with sufficient resources could place their children into particular classrooms with talented teachers. This was a common occurrence at the primary level where children study with the same teacher for 4 years. Multiple parents reported paying extra fees or giving gifts to teachers for additional attention, such as calling on their children to answer questions or calling them to the board more often. Again, this seemed to be particularly in the younger grades, I did not receive reports from parents about this occurring in the secondary grades. This is also an example of the multifaceted approaches that parents were taking as they may be willing to send their child to a school that has a lower overall quality if they could assure their education with a particular teacher or through additional payments for more attention.

Another level of schooling available to parents is low cost private schools, typically \$300-\$750 per year. Usually these private schools are either a gymnasium or lyceum. They offer a full day of classes with courses—often science and mathematics—above and beyond the state curriculum and boast high quality teachers for all subjects. They typically have good facilities as well. Some of these schools also provide transport for their students. Parents are not asked to contribute additional funds to the schools for repairs or supplies.

Finally, there is the elite level of private schools that cost thousands of dollars per year. All of the schools in Dushanbe at this level are schools founded by international organizations, with the exception of the President's International School. The most inexpensive are the Tajik-Turkish lyceums (approximately \$1,500 per year). The other international schools are more expensive, costing between \$3,500 and \$20,000 per year. All have foreign teachers and offer schooling to some degree in English. The Turkish Lyceums also offer instruction in some subjects in Turkish. The school facilities are excellent. The international schools offer a full day curriculum that might differ substantially from the state curriculum, but are approved by the Ministry of Education. Parents are not asked to contribute any additional monies for repairs, maintenance, holidays, or supplies.

School characteristics of value to parents:

A variety of factors form the dominant part of parents' decision matrix, including cost, location, teachers and curriculum. School cost was a latent factor in parents' decisions. Meaning that parents did not readily offer that school cost was one of the characteristics in which they consider when choosing schools. However, costs clearly limited parents' choices as they mentioned it later in the interviews. The poorest families in my sample sent their children to neighborhood schools and mentioned that lack of resources/ conditions [sharoit] prevented them from sending their children to any other schools. Across multiple wealth levels, many families did say they

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would like to send their children to a higher quality school, but mentioned that they lacked the resources/ conditions [shaorit] to do so.

Location was mentioned in all interviews as a primary factor that parents consider. A majority of those interviewed chose schools that were close to their homes. The primacy of location is not surprising as there is no public school transportation and parents are responsible for picking up and dropping off children. Safety is also a consideration favoring a close location, especially for young children and girls. Parents who chose among the private schools were aware of which ones provided transport and often chose those schools if they were located far from home or work.

Teachers are the most important characteristic for parents that is directly related to school quality. Parents differed on which teacher characteristics they preferred. Some parents' explanations mentioned the general teaching cadre at a school. For example, some parents chose their schools because it had teachers for all subjects of the curriculum. Shortages of science, mathematics, Russian language and English language teachers in many schools in the years since independence sensitized parents to choosing schools with enough teachers for all subjects. Other parents mentioned that the schools they chose had strong teachers in general. Still other parents chose schools because the teachers and staff at the school kept strict discipline.

Parents also consider the curriculum and/or extracurricular courses that are offered. There is a great variety of subject offerings available in Dushanbe. Some schools offer a mathematics and science curriculum. Other schools offer a more balanced mix of humanities, mathematics, and sciences, such as the Tajik Turkish Lyceums. There are schools which offer an economic oriented curriculum. One or two schools also offer a humanities heavy curriculum. Within Dushanbe there are also a few Islamic gymnasiums with supplementary classes in Arabic and a variety of religious topics. The elite schools offer classes in English and curriculum that are accredited abroad. High quality public schools also offer extracurricular classes, typically a mixture of mathematics, sciences, and humanities, but a few of them offer more of one or the other. There are also public schools which specifically offer Uzbek language track, Russian language track, and the Russian State curriculum. Many parents whom I spoke to preferred programs specializing, or offering extracurricular courses, in science and mathematics. Schools offering a Russian language track or the Russian State curriculum also rose to the fore. Parents felt that Russian was a language that open many opportunities for their children and also provide another language to access learning resources.

University characteristics valued by students:

In interviews and focus groups, young people ranked their top three universities and include reasons why they ranked the universities in such a way. The universities that ranked high on the list differed, but the factors that support their ranking share many similarities. Students mentioned the quality of the professors, the value of the degree, the range of majors/specialties, study abroad opportunities, and corruption as a basis for ranking universities.

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Students' basis for judging university professors were diverse. Some mentioned that professors were high qualified because of their awards at various olympiads.<sup>1</sup> Others mentioned that the professors were foreign. When pressed to explain further about the value of foreign faculty, students explained that the foreign professors participated in a selection process to work overseas so the process must mean that the university has good professors. Others specifically mentioned that foreign professors have different teaching methods which provide more interesting classes and further develop learning. Still others mentioned that foreign professors, especially those associated with the branch of Moscow State University, which reportedly brings in highly qualified professors for intense short courses, were of very high quality.

The value of the university's degree was also important to young people. Some ranked Tajik National University high mentioning it was the most prestigious degree in the country. In some comments this was directly tied to the ease of finding work afterwards. Others ranked the Russian branch campuses as the highest citing that their degrees are recognized in many countries. Some specifically mentioned the ability to have the degree recognized in Russia in particular as important.

Many students justified ranking some universities higher because they offered a wide variety of majors or specialties. Often the specific phrasing was that "they offered many of the most important degrees necessary for a modern society." Again there were differences in which particular universities ranked highest, but the factor of diverse offerings that were important for society was similar. The finding was surprising given that students have little opportunity to change tracks or take a variety of courses outside their specialty as they study. This is because students declare their specialty when taking entrance exams for the university and continue in that tract until they complete their studies. Perhaps the finding arose because of using a method of questions that leads to learning how universities are ranked, but not specifically how young people chose their particular universities.

A final quality to mention is international connections. Multiple universities in Tajikistan offer a variety of programs and international connections that improved the value of the university in students' eyes. For example, some students ranked higher universities that offered programs in language study and translation offered a year of study abroad to perfect language knowledge. One of the Russian branch universities offers a year of study at the home campus. Other students highly ranked universities that have opportunities to study abroad in European programs.

Concerning corruption, some students mentioned that they ranked certain universities higher because of they had stricter controls on corruption. In focus group discussions some students mentioned that they ranked some universities lower because they knew of corruption at

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<sup>1</sup> Olympiads are academic competitions where talented students are invited to demonstrate their knowledge in a certain field. These are held at city, provincial, national, and international levels.

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the university. There did appear to be gender differences in opinions about corruption. It was mostly girls that ranked universities higher based on lack of corruption. During focus group discussions boys joked about ranking some universities higher because you could pay for exams and study more easily at various universities.

**Policy Implications:**

The study of patterns and process of inequality in society is key for understanding the disenfranchised, a group of people with greater potential to be drawn to extremist views. The market in Tajikistan clearly demonstrates that there are inequalities of educational quality in Tajikistan. The poorest students do not have guaranteed access to schools with teachers to cover the full curriculum. Wealthier parents may choose between a variety of schools with higher levels of quality and supplemental courses.

The variation in quality is important to note because for the past several years there has been a worldwide focus on “Education for All,” meaning that many investments, measurements, and studies simply focused on the number of children enrolled in school. There were not the same investments in the quality of education. Thus, Tajikistan and other developing countries were able to score highly and be marked as improving education by simply increasing the number of children in school. The revelation that there are definable differences in educational quality, particularly between public schools, may encourage greater investment in quality. USAID has begun investing in quality by working with teacher training programs, which is a welcome change and this study supports that work.

This study also found that the differentiation of the educational market in the public schools is based on informal payments. While there have been multiple reports that mentioned informal payments or corruption in education, there was not a study that previously mentioned the range of costs that parents pay. It was found that the neighborhood public schools, often the only option for the most vulnerable populations, have the highest percentage of costs that are collected informally. Although the amounts are modest, it still sets a precedence that state intuitions operate on a basis of informal payments. In addition, multiple middle-class parents reported making informal payments to teachers for special attention for their children in the classroom or for their children to be placed with the most talented teachers at the schools. This multiplies the effects of disenfranchisement of the most vulnerable populations whose only options are the neighborhood public schools. Below is a quotation from a recent study on parents’ informal payments that highlights the dangers of such practices for civil society:

*When present, corruption defeats the very purpose of education: having a universal and open system based on merit, and not money. In a corrupt educational system, students do not acquire the skills and knowledge that will enable them to contribute meaningfully to their country’s economy and society. They will learn from a young age to value corruption, accepting it as a norm for them and society.*

—Transparency International, 2007 (as quoted in Kamizade and Lepisto 2010)

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**Co-Curricular Activity:**

For two weeks the Open Society Institute of Tajikistan offered a seminar on the Sociology of Education for policy, academic, and NGO leaders in the sphere of education in Tajikistan. I participated in the seminar and led a session where I presented my research. The research I presented was about trends in inequality since the fall of the Soviet Union. The presentation provided an important perspective that data from the Ministry of Education cannot track. This is because I used household data that provide information on all children in the household, whether in school or not, and important background information such as gender, wealth, rural/urban, or minority status. The Ministry of Education simply collects data about whether or not children are in school and does not publish data connected with background characteristics outside of gender. The presentation led to excellent discussion of data gathering and analysis.

**Conclusions:**

In my previous dissertation research, I learned that there were differences among schools and that some parents were actively placing their children in a variety of schools. The evidence pointed to the existence of an educational market. However, no research has provided any specific information about the types of institutions, the costs of institutions, or school characteristic that families' valued.

This research has found that in Dushanbe, the capital city of Tajikistan, the schools can be divided into four levels based on costs and school quality. The schools costs differ both in amount and whether or not the fees are collected formally or informally. Private schools, both elite and low cost, form the most expensive two levels of schools. Private schools have a legal basis for collecting fees and have good school facilities, teachers for all subjects, and offer courses in addition to the minimum state curriculum.

Forming the lowest two levels, public schools can be divided into high quality public schools and low quality public schools. Despite being public schools which should be free-of-charge, all parents reported paying a monthly fee per child to the schools. Some high quality public schools charge fees through the legal mechanism of offering extracurricular courses, while others have not formalized the fees they collect monthly. In high quality public schools there are typically enough teachers to cover all subjects, they have adequate facilities, and offer some supplemental classes to the state curriculum.

Low quality public schools almost exclusively collect fees through informal means, although the fees are modest. Despite the fact that the specific monthly fee is modest, schools or teachers often make multiple additional small requests for funds for various school supplies or activities. It is not always the case that the low cost public schools have enough teachers for each subject. They may not have enough desks and chairs for all students and the facilities may be of

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poor quality. Low cost public schools often only provide the minimum state curriculum (typically 4-5 hours of study per day) and operate multiple shifts.

Concerning the factors which parents consider when choosing schools, all parents mentioned location as a primary factor in their decision. Most parents worked to send their children to the highest quality schools in the neighborhood, near their workplace, or a private school which provides transport. Cost seemed to play a latent role in decisions. While parents did not mention it as a specific reason why they chose their particular school, they did mention it as a limiting factor to sending their children on to a school at the next general level of cost and quality.

Besides practical factors, parents also considered characteristics related to school quality. Teachers were the most mentioned factor related to school quality by parents. The specific characteristics of teachers differed. Some parents simply took note of having sufficient teachers to cover all courses, especially math sciences or foreign languages. Others valued teachers' strictness. The curriculum and supplementary offerings of a school were also factors that were mentioned by parents. In general mathematics and sciences were most preferred by parents. There were also several parents who preferred Russian language track or schools that offered the Russian state curriculum.

Young people also offered information about the characteristics they use to rate various universities. One of the most important factors was the value of the degree, both in the country and outside the country. They considered the quality of the professors. As with parents ranking of teachers, the specific measures of quality differed. Some ranked universities with foreign faculty higher, while others ranked universities with professors who had won awards at Olympiads as higher. Although they declared majors upon university entrance and were required to continue in those specialties, students ranked universities on the variety of specialties that the university offered. Finally, a subsection of university students also ranked schools based on their international connections.

All of these findings helped shed greater light on the newly established educational market in Tajikistan. There are definitely cost and quality differences among schools, even public schools. Parents are actively managing their children's education by placing them in particular schools or with particular teachers. Unfortunately, the foundation of cost differentiation in public schools is based on informal payments. The systems of informal payments in education means that a significant portion of early childhood experiences of the most vulnerable population include multiple requests for monies in an informal way. These practices further disenfranchise the most vulnerable populations.

**Plans for Future Research/ Publication:**

The future goal is to expand this research to the region. Tajikistan is not unique in the region in its tremendous expansion of the educational market and perhaps the factors that parents consider



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when choosing schools in other former Soviet countries are similar. However, Tajikistan is one of the poorest countries in the region and the economic devastation has meant that public schools rely very much on collecting funds from families. The difference in ability to collect funds is reflected in the quality of the school creating a significant level of variation among public schools that parents must consider. Perhaps in countries with more wealth there are higher quality neighborhood public schools and/or less variation among public schools and so parents are not as concerned with educational choice.

Multiple papers and presentations associated with the research on the educational market are planned for the near future, or have already been submitted. One paper which outlines in greater detail the choices parents are making and characteristics that they consider has been submitted for publication in a special issue focusing on the privatization and the educational market in Eurasia. Another paper with greater detail about the informal market will be presented at a conference on informal systems in Eastern Europe and the former Soviet states. Further projects may develop the findings from focus groups with university students.