

REALITY CHECK:

THE VIEW FROM THE SCHOOL

AND THE COMMUNITY



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This study presents the findings of a survey of the views of parents and children in five selected countries: Moldova, Albania, Azerbaijan, Tajikistan and Turkey. This survey is based on the authors' fieldwork and analysis of a wide range of studies and statistics. The survey was undertaken in more than 20 focus groups and workshops with parents and school-age children (grades 7 to 11) in these countries during the summer of 2006. Findings from these focus groups were also discussed and elaborated in interviews conducted with key informants in each country – education experts from Ministries of Education, teachers, school principals, staff from local and international NGOs who work in the area of education, and UNICEF staff and education officers in each country. In total, more than 30 interviews were conducted in the targeted countries.

A particular interest in these focus groups and interviews was to determine whether the disappointing enrolment and attendance rates observed in some countries (see chapter 3) reflect supply constraints (availability of student places) or demand constraints (based on the assessment of the costs and benefits of schooling made by family decision makers).

A word of caution about the methodology used in this chapter: The focus-group participants used for this chapter were selected entirely from the poorest and most disadvantaged populations in each country. This was done with the intention of highlighting the issues relevant to the most disadvantaged sections of the society. This may have resulted in an excessively bleak picture, even though the positive developments and improvements in the systems are also highlighted as much as possible. It would be a mistake, therefore, to generalize the views and problems presented here to all segments of the society, but they probably give an accurate picture of how things look from the bottom rungs of the social ladder.

THE HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

All of the countries in the region except Turkey have undergone a major transformation since the early 1990s. The education systems have been swept up in these changes. All the people we spoke to are well aware of the effects of this transformation. They associate the changes in education mainly with the changes in the economy, arguing that the economic pressures and poverty have shifted the focus from education towards survival. Simply put, families no longer view education as a priority.

Major changes have occurred in rural areas. With the dissolution of large cooperative farms, families are now farming individually on smaller plots of land. Farm machinery is no longer shared and is instead controlled by a few rich farmers. This forces many to work as farm labourers on other people's lands. Many families do not even bother to cultivate their own land because it is not feasible. But when questioned whether farming is a viable economic option for the future, they agree

that, given certain conditions, their villages could survive by farming alone. This transformation of the economic system and breakdown in family life due to migration and child labour has resulted in a shift in thinking. The result is that society has started to become more tolerant of the failures in the educational system, especially to school attendance and dropping out.

BOX 1. A COMPARISON WITH SOVIET TIMES

A mother in Azerbaijan summarized the current situation:

“If we compare Soviet period with today, everything then was affordable. At least parents could work at factories, plants and support their families. And we didn’t need to think about anything else except education. We were sure to find something to eat after returning from school. We had only one commitment, which was to study. Today’s children work as conductors in public buses. Can these children have a good education? Are they interested in learning? No, they can never think of studying, attending school.”

Despite these worries, almost all parents and teachers agree that, overall, education is now better than it was during Soviet times. Improvements in the curriculum and less ideological and more flexible educational systems are the underlying causes for this view. However, two major drawbacks are also highlighted. One of these is the failure of the system to fully support successful and gifted children from poor families. The second concern is with the dramatic escalation of the private tutoring system that is seen throughout the region. Low teacher salaries and, in some cases, corruption, is forcing teachers to give private lessons to wealthy students and provide more attention to them in class.

Finally, when looking at the changes that have taken place since 1990, it is important to understand the negative impact that civil unrest and civil war have had on education in many of the countries. For example, a female school director in Tajikistan clearly stated that the education system in that country has been negatively affected by the civil war; as a result, children are less motivated to learn and parents are less interested in school education.

Parents and teachers do appreciate the value and importance of the new education systems that have been introduced during the transition, particularly the innovations and increased flexibility. However, unless major economic roadblocks are removed, it will not be possible for the families to restore education to its previous high status.

EDUCATION REFORM

Education reform throughout the region has generated many positive changes, particularly in curriculum, new textbooks and teacher training. There are significant differences among countries on where they stand in their reform efforts. While some countries such as Turkey seem to have completed many steps towards their goal, others such as Tajikistan seem to be just starting the process.

An impressive level of commitment and energy is evident among many government representatives and local experts as they explain their plans for reform (see chapter 2). We want to explore how far the reforms have penetrated into the classroom, and how they are associated with demand. In other words, what do parents, children and teachers understand about 'reform' and how do they view the changes that are happening?

Typically, reform efforts in each country seem to follow a similar pattern. They mainly include three major components: 1) reforming the quality of education; 2) establishing new financial structures; and 3) implementing changes in management and monitoring. To improve quality, governments develop new education standards, write new curricula for all grades, create new textbooks and train teachers in child-centred and interactive teaching methodologies. For financial reforms, governments re-evaluate school-financing options, initiate school grants and try to establish a more rational financing system. Finally, under management and monitoring, governments try to establish national databases in order to collect reliable data, initiate national assessment systems to evaluate student and teacher performance and engage in capacity-building activities.

Despite this very rich and comprehensive framework, the understanding and conception of the reforms by teachers seemed to be very narrow and simplistic. For example, when questioned about what they understand about education reform, a group of teachers in Tirana, Albania responded as follows:

Q: *What do you think about the new reform?*

A: *Instead of 34 teaching weeks a year previously, there are 35 now. More outside school activities are organized and pupils are informed about their rights.*

Similarly, for teachers in Tajikistan, reform meant having computers, better food, better teacher salaries and more activities for children. Two other aspects of reform mentioned by the teachers are the increase in foreign language options and more interest and involvement from international organizations. Teachers repeatedly failed to provide a more comprehensive and meaningful picture of the reform efforts in their country, which probably indicates the failure of the system to involve and communicate the real goals and importance of education reform with the teachers.

There are some positive examples of teacher involvement in reform. In Turkey, for instance, a big national debate is going on about education. National NGOs such as the Education Reform Movement have been conducting studies, and panels are being arranged that involve teachers. These efforts are an important vehicle for disseminating information about reform to teachers, families and other organizations in order to initiate valuable discussion and criticism.

In many countries, reform efforts are moving very slowly. Changes in the curricula are usually at the centre of all reform-related discussions. This is a very sensitive issue for most countries, which are going through an ideological transformation, and trying to make sure that the new curricula are free of the Soviet-style ideology, symbolism and emphasis on rote-learning of facts. Countries want to make sure the appropriate cultural and national vision is reflected in the revised curricula and teaching materials. This is usually a slow and painful process that involves another major step:

development of national education standards. In most countries, educational standards must be approved by the respective legislative bodies before any curriculum development based on them can start. This usually slows down the reform process significantly. Once the process extends over years, it is easy for the teachers, parents and even the children to lose their focus. From the perspective of parents and children, education reform is synonymous with changes in the curriculum. Almost all parents said that one of the major impacts of implementing a new educational system is that it is harder for the students.

Most parents said that the current curriculum requires knowledge beyond what they can provide to their children. An important factor is that the parents, due to their own education, are unfamiliar with the topics that are in their child's curriculum and have trouble in assisting them in areas such as math and physical sciences. In addition, most parents simply do not have the time to spend helping their child.

Another possible reason for the parents' failure to assist their children in their schoolwork might be the switch from fact-based teaching to a more research-oriented approach. The lack of school libraries, resource books and other materials, especially in poor areas, prevents children from meeting the demands of this research-oriented approach. In Turkey, several professionals argued that while some new curricula items require children to work with cardboard, glue and coloured markers to complete their home projects, these items are impossible to find in small rural settlements.

HOW FAMILIES SEE EDUCATION NOW

Education is generally accepted as a basic need and a requirement for becoming a member of society. This belief seems to be weakening in three of the countries covered – Azerbaijan, Tajikistan and certain communities in Turkey. Lack of jobs and low expectations for finding a job were key reasons behind these attitudes.

In all the workshops, there was little evidence of parents and children looking at education as a financial investment. The first answers to the question, “What is the value of education?” or “Why do you go to school?” rarely include, “to get a good job in the future.” Upon consistent probes, people eventually establish that link. There might be a number of reasons for this. One is that education is valued by itself, as a requirement for being a ‘citizen’. The other is that in the countries visited, finding jobs, even with a university degree, is quite hard. People believe that finding a job depends on who you know. Therefore, the link between education and jobs may not be quite evident to them. This is in conflict with the statistics reviewed in chapter 4 that indicate that people with better education consistently get higher salaries and spend considerably less time unemployed.

The state ideology, long established during the Soviet times, seems to have engraved the value and importance of education in the minds of most parents. Unless faced by very serious economic barriers, they are determined to provide the best possible education to their children. A major factor behind this is the high level of education of many of these parents themselves. Still, for the

poorest sections of society, this is not always possible. The biggest barriers seem to be a) cost of education, including the economic value of working children for the survival of the family, and b) the envisaged benefits of education, given families' worries about the quality of teachers and of education in general.

It is disconcerting that in Tajikistan and Turkey, some families seem to strongly believe that basic education is not necessary for girls, that it is enough for them to learn how to read and write. This is mainly based on the traditional roles assigned to women in these societies. It is assumed that the girls are going to get married and spend the rest of their lives in the home, doing housework and raising children. Unfortunately, it is not very easy to overcome this argument, since it is true for many of the traditional societies in these countries. It is fortunate that this attitude is not widespread, and there is good evidence that school-age girls themselves are resisting in their own way.

Many children believe that it is not a good idea to cut education short and start work early. They see good education as a prerequisite for individual success. It was children who highlighted the importance of education for having higher status and value in social life. Only in Azerbaijan did children raise the importance of education from the point of view of society as a whole, emphasising how well-educated individuals strengthen society.

The way in which parents see education is closely related to how they see the future of their children and the society in general. In the five countries visited, we witnessed varying degrees of optimism and pessimism. Surprisingly, the country in which parents seem least optimistic was Moldova: despite being closer than the others to being a member of the EU, parents, especially in rural areas, did not seem to expect positive changes in the near future. This is mainly associated with years of emigration for work (see chapter 4), which damages the integrity of many families and generates the strong belief that the only possible work opportunity for youth is to go abroad.

Poverty and hopelessness also were evident among parents. In Albania, for instance, a parent was asked, "How do you feel about the future of your child's education?" The answer: "Let them finish eighth grade and then stay home."

The region as a whole has a long way to go before seeing education as a human right. Even people at higher levels of government almost never mention rights while discussing education reform or the future of education in their country. Resistance by government officials to a rights-based concept of education was evident during interviews with them. Almost none of the officials mentioned the Convention on the Rights of the Child or indicated that they see education as a 'right'. This can be partly associated with the inevitable tension between rights and 'responsibilities of the state' (See chapter 2) On the other hand, it seems extremely difficult to attain certain Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) or to implement education reforms unless the argument for education rests on it being a right.

During the focus groups with parents, the concept of child rights was raised frequently, but families were not familiar with it. However, the situation was different with children. In Albania, Moldova and Turkey, where curriculum change has been implemented, children were aware of child rights. This was mainly because rights are an integral part of the basic education curriculum and are being taught at schools. Some children had also heard about rights through the work of various NGOs,

but their numbers were few.

Some of the discussion with children about child rights raises questions on how well they have internalized this concept, but awareness of child rights through regular curriculum is undoubtedly an important first step. Schools should engage children in a meaningful debate about rights by letting them make connections between their rights and their everyday lives. This very important component of rights education seems to be missing.

In all of the countries, parents stated that the responsibility for educating the child primarily lies with the family. They also added that the state needs to support the parents in this. There may have been an ideological shift since the Soviet times, where the state was seen as having major responsibility for educating children. However, it is clear that this belief also makes families feel ashamed and guilty when they think that they have failed to educate their children properly.

A family's attitude toward education varied by the level of education that was under consideration.

Preschools were a very important component of education in Soviet times. Since both parents worked full-time, young children were under the care of state-run kindergartens. It is still possible to see these large two-story buildings in many cities and villages. After the break-up of the Soviet Union, emerging republics had trouble in continuing to finance these very costly kindergartens (see chapter 5). As a result, starting from the early 1990s, their numbers diminished dramatically (see chapter 3). Many countries are struggling to increase the number of children who receive preschool services and are looking at alternative models, such as community-based centres and concentrated school-preparation courses provided in elementary school classrooms.

Today, all parents consider preschool education to be very important for the development and success of their children in school. Traditionally, kindergartens provided children not only with education and school preparation but also with additional services, such as health, psychological support as well as nutritious food. For some families, this is still the case. But the quality of state-run kindergartens is deteriorating rapidly. Even though they are almost free and only charge a small fee for food, many parents complained that they are physically inadequate, are not heated and served very poor quality food.

In general, demand for basic education is very high within the region. There are some exceptions to this and some populations are excluded (see below). However, for most families, sending their children to the primary school is a given. Despite all the financial pressures, families are doing their best to register their children for first grade – and succeeding, except in the extreme cases of poverty where the survival of the family is in question. The issue of access to basic education gets more complicated in later years (see chapter 3), which is when we see a pattern of drop-outs, mainly at grades 4 and 5. In countries where basic (and compulsory) education is 11 years, a significant number of children are leaving school at eighth or ninth grade. For example, in one school in Azerbaijan, teachers estimated that 20 per cent of the children were leaving the school after ninth grade.

For many poor parents in the region, investing in secondary education is seen as a 'waste' if parents estimate that the child has no possibility to continue in higher education. This is mostly because the only objective of secondary education is seen as preparing students for higher education.

For parents and children, completing secondary education is not seen as providing them with an advantage in the job market. In other words, they are thinking that, for finding jobs, the chances of a person who has completed grade 9 is almost equal to another who has graduated from grade 11. Parents and children feel that secondary education is not providing any specialized skills to students.

For large numbers of poor families, for whom providing university education to their children is an impossible dream, investing in another three or four years of education is becoming meaningless. Despite this, families who can afford to send their children to secondary education do so even if they have minimal hope for a university education, but many poor families decide to pull their children out and have them work in any kind of job they can find.

Accessibility is also a major issue for secondary education. Many poor neighbourhoods and small rural villages do not have secondary schools. This requires families to send their children to a new location, provide them with shelter, and finance their expenses. In traditional families, this is not an option for the girls. For example, parents in Albania told us that many girls are being excluded from secondary education because of the need to travel to school. Sending children to the city centre or to a larger town also raises security concerns for parents. Many parents are not willing risk having their children live away from parental supervision. Children who have relatives in these locations sometimes fare better and move into the relatives' homes during their high school years.

In Tajikistan, based on location, teachers estimated that 30 to 50 per cent of the children are not continuing after grade 9. In rural areas, children start doing farm work after quitting school. In countries such as Tajikistan and Turkey, gender is also a determinant. In Tajikistan for example, some families simply pull girls out of the school after grade 9 even if they have the means to pay for further education.

Almost everyone agrees that the vocational education system in the region is not working. For example, the Ministry of Education in Azerbaijan accepts that the vocational schools in that country are left over from the old system; nothing has been done about them under the education reform, and officials state that the schools do not correspond to the needs of the labour market. The situation is probably not very different in many other countries of the region (see chapter 4). Even in Turkey, where education reform is in its advanced stages, reform of vocational schools is on the agenda, but no decisions have been made so far.

Box 2. Azerbaijani parents discuss vocational education

Q: *Are there any mothers here who are thinking of sending their children to the vocational school nearby?*

A: (Parent 1): *No, not to the vocational school*

Q: *Why not?*

A: (Parent 1): *Because children after graduating from the vocational school will not be able to find a job. In comparison, children with university education, there is no doubt that those will be given a job if there is one available.*

A: (Parent 2): *We do not need to give special education for children to become a welder or a car mechanic. They can learn it by doing. We can send our children to work next to a skilled technician and they can work and learn there. For such kind of job there is no need to get a certificate from the vocational school. First of all it is waste of money and time for us.*

Among the parents, interest in vocational education is very low. They argue that children who graduate from these schools are unable to find jobs. Many parents argued that their children refused to go to vocational schools, especially when the compulsory education is 11 years. Some parents are reluctant to send their child to vocational schools because their fees are higher than standard high schools. A mother in Albania complained that the vocational school in their town charges a US\$15 monthly fee.

From the perspective of children, interest in vocational education is also very low. Except in Azerbaijan, where a few children see vocational schools as an option to build the skills they need to start their own private businesses, almost all children stated that they have no interest in vocational schools. This is mainly associated with the low status attributed to these schools.

In the transition countries, people do realize that the quality of higher education has improved, especially with respect to the curriculum. However, they are very open about their concerns regarding lack of access and inequalities in the system. The truth is, higher education is way beyond the reach of the children of almost all families except those in middle- and upper-middle-income groups. Parents are well aware of this fact and are quite frustrated. Children are trying to be more optimistic, but deep inside they also know the reality. During the focus groups, a child who said she wanted to be a doctor was questioned further, and the impossibility of achieving such a goal became increasingly clear. The real barrier is almost always poverty. While there are a small number of scholarships for the top performers, they are not enough (chapter 5). Most poor families simply give up on the idea of sending their child to university very early in the process, and do not even bother to try.

In addition, the low quality of basic education for the poor never allows them to become academically competitive in the race for higher education. The booming business of private tutoring and university preparation courses in many countries of the region is putting higher education beyond the reach of millions of children from low-income families. Parents and children are fully convinced that success in school and access to higher education is fully dependent on one's ability to afford and continue with these private education supplements. Access to higher education is also important. For example, some families refuse to send their girls to a big city to attend university.

Box 3. Children in Sabirabad, Azerbaijan, on the difficulty of getting to university

Q: *Do you think that the school is preparing you well to get in the university?*

A: *No, with only school preparation we can never enter the university. We need to hire a private tutor for the preparation.*

Q: *Who are the tutors? Are they the same teachers in the school?*

A: *Yes, the same teachers. But when we pay them for the private lessons they teach us much better than they do during the class lessons. When we ask some questions during the lessons teachers say to us, “come to my private lesson I will explain it to you.”*

The number of private schools is growing in many countries of the region, although they are still hardly an entity to be seriously considered. In general, private schools are non-existent in basic education, yet many private preschools are showing up in capital cities. These preschools charge high fees and can only be afforded by middle- and upper-middle-income groups. Even though their hourly fees are high, some are operating on a ‘part-time basis’ in order to make themselves more affordable. For example, one private preschool in Yerevan, Armenia operates one-day and two-day per week programmes and targets children 5 and 6 years old for school preparation. As the countries in the region improve economically, the trend of private preschools will grow, yet they will not be accessible to any of the economically disadvantaged families.

While limited in numbers, another trend is the privately-funded specialized high schools. These are sometimes established by not-for-profit groups and are associated with a certain ideology or religious group. The Selale schools in Tajikistan are a good example. They operate from nine institutions and serve about 2,600 students. While this number is very small, the quality of education and resources in these schools are so superior to standard government schools that for many families, they are seen as the best available option. Until recent years, they were only accepting male students; this has changed now, yet the student body still overwhelmingly consists of males.

ENROLMENT, ATTENDANCE AND DROPPING OUT

Across all countries, the ‘official’ enrolment rates are not really useful in determining how much schooling children are getting. Attendance and drop-out rates are much more important indicators, but unfortunately, there is a lack of reliable data. In most of the countries, attendance records are kept by schools. However these records are very unreliable, and when reported to the ministry of education (MOE) or state statistical departments, almost never reflect the reality. Another issue is double registration due to migration. It is very common for children to register in one school, but fail to cancel that registration when the family moves. It is also very hard to track students in this system if they have re-registered in a new school.

In reality, non-attendance takes different forms. The big categories of children who miss out on education can be listed as follows:

- **Children who are never registered to school.** Many of these children are not counted, due to lack of reliable census statistics and the practice of not registering the children (citizenship) in the first place. The practice is very common among Roma populations, and in Tajikistan and Eastern Turkey.

- **Children who are registered but not attending.** This group consists of children who have very spotty attendance in the classroom. The biggest component of this group are working children, including seasonal farm workers who disappear for extended periods. There is also a large group of children who only show up occasionally. In many countries, children are officially allowed to miss about 30 days of school. If there is a ‘valid’ excuse, this number can easily be doubled. For example, if the mother claims that the child is sick, this is considered a valid excuse by the teacher. Since this group is registered, they do not show up as dropouts in the official books. Repeating a class or losing your registration due to non-attendance is extremely rare, and unprecedented in some schools.
- **Children who officially drop out.** This group does not seem to be very big. However when it happens, the main reason for dropping out is child labour. Children officially drop out when their labour is needed for the survival of the family. Child labour is not always about generating income; in many cases, girls’ support in childcare and housework is equally valuable and can be as demanding as paid full-time work.
- **Children who drop out and want to get back but are unable to do so.** This is one of the most complicated issues. Many children may drop out at one time during their lives. After a few years, these children try to get back into the system, and that is when the problem starts. None of the educational systems in the countries visited had the flexibility to integrate these children back into the system. From the child’s perspective, a nine year old objects strongly to the possibility of sitting next to first or second graders because they are ridiculed. The schools and teachers also do not want this group, arguing that they are disruptive and require special attention.
- **Invisible dropouts.** This is the hardest group to identify. They do attend school, however, for various reasons they are not interested in or capable of following the course of education. After a while, teachers give up and start ignoring them. Since there is no failing and no real testing in basic education, they somehow sail through the system without actually learning anything. The teachers are also reluctant to do anything about this problem, since having significant numbers of unsuccessful students reflects badly on them. This issue has been raised in many meetings, and education professionals are also aware of the problem, but no attempts to address this issue have been seen.

Box 4. Teachers’ views on dropping out in Tajikistan

“Dropping-out is the biggest problem. By the time children reach grades 3 and 4, they already start disappearing from a class. They are often orphans or those from poor households. Boys work in a market and make approx 10 Somoni (US\$3.30) a day. Girls stay home to help with household chores. Dropouts are mostly boys. They stop schooling because parents tell them to do so, but sometime children themselves decided not to go to school. Many of those children do not have fathers at home (they are working in Russia). Children are taken care of by mothers, grandparents or siblings. Teachers monitor those children and contact their families when they stop coming to school. It is weak parental control that contributes to child drop-outs.”

FACTORS AFFECTING FAMILIES' DEMAND FOR EDUCATION – A BENEFIT/COST FRAMEWORK

Families' demand for education can be analysed within a benefit/cost framework. The benefits of schooling must exceed the costs, direct and indirect, as seen by family decision makers, to make schooling an apparently worthwhile investment. The perceived benefits of education can be affected by its impact on chances of getting a job and by its quality. The perceived costs include any payments, official or unofficial, that have to be made, as well as the costs to a family of losing an unpaid worker. However, there are also those to whom such a calculation is not relevant, because they are excluded for various reasons (poverty, gender, ethnicity, etc.) from the possibility of further schooling.

PERCEIVED BENEFITS

The job market

The job market is a critical influence on demand. One very strong and common thread that emerged from focus groups in all of the countries was that completing basic education and even secondary education is not enough for finding a job – any job – in the current market. All the parents and children we have spoken to very strongly stated this belief. This might seem to be in conflict with estimates of rates of return (see chapter 4), but it is probably realistic for those at the lower end of the distribution of income who cannot reasonably expect to keep their children in school long enough to reap these benefits.

For example, many children in Tajikistan are aware that, even with a high school diploma, they will not be able to find a job in their own country. Since university education is beyond their reach due to economic reasons, they see their only option as going abroad for work, mainly to Russia. Due to the characteristics of the job market in Russia, where they do odd jobs, they argue that a diploma is not necessary for them anyway.

For almost all of the poor and rural populations in the region, higher education for their children is an unachievable dream. Parents as well as children are fully aware of this fact. Even though there are some exceptions where extremely successful children manage to get some scholarships, these cases are extremely rare. This is partly because these children also start the race from behind, due to the inferior quality of schools in most rural areas (see chapter 4). The result is the reluctance of the parents in many cases to invest in basic – and even more so secondary – education.

In some rare cases, people raised the possibility of private entrepreneurship as an option. For example, in Azerbaijan, since regular jobs are very hard to come by, some families are trying to establish their own businesses. But overall, the option of going into private business was almost never mentioned by families, in spite of the fact that in reality members of many families are already involved in some sort of private business such as small trading, selling things on the street, and in other sectors of the service industry (see Box 4 on dropping out in Tajikistan). Interestingly, they never label these activities as actual 'jobs' and see them as real 'options'. None also think about

the possibilities of their children going into their own business in the future. This was also not raised as an option by children themselves. There may be a number of reasons for this. One is the impossibility of raising enough capital for business. The second, and probably more important reason, is the established tradition of being a part of the wage labour force and seeing it as the only option.

From all the discussions with parents and children, it is clear that they are basing their decisions on education on current economic and job-market conditions, not on a long-term vision. This is understandable if a family is currently struggling to survive, with five unemployed children staying at home.

Quality of education

The primary means of increasing families' demand for education, as revealed by our discussions, is to increase its quality. There are many elements that help determine quality.

Teacher quality is one of the biggest concerns for many education experts in the region. Some parents in focus groups also raised the problem of teachers being uninterested and inadequate. With the exception of Turkey, teacher salaries are extremely low in the region. Pedagogical departments of the universities can hardly find candidates to be future teachers. As a result, the least successful of the graduates enter this profession just to get a diploma, but mostly have other ideas in mind for their future. As the older generation of experienced teachers retires, they are being replaced by this younger group. It was interesting to hear that older teachers have embraced the educational reform and new ways of teaching more enthusiastically, while it was the newly graduated young teachers who had shown most resistance.

Box 5. Albanian children's views on teachers

Q: *Do you prefer the older teachers or the younger ones?*

A: (Child 1): *The older ones.*

Q: *Why do you prefer the older ones?*

A: (Child 2): *They explain things better.*

Another issue with respect to the implementation of the reforms is the lack of coordination between the pedagogical institutes and ministry of education. In most countries, universities seem to be unable to implement the necessary reforms needed to educate future teachers on how to embrace child-centred approaches.

One of the biggest problems is the extremely low salaries of teachers throughout the region (see chapter 5). Views on the supply of teachers also vary dramatically. For example, the Azerbaijan Ministry of Education claims that there are too many teachers in the country. They argue that the shortages in the system are due to inefficiencies, and because teachers are not working the required

hours. In contrast, the MOE in Tajikistan says that they have a shortage of 8,500 teachers in the country.

Parents have mixed views about the quality of teachers. While in some locations (e.g., Moldova) parents are happy with the performance of the teachers, in others they are quite critical, stating that teachers are not interested in teaching and not providing the necessary services to their children (e.g., Albania).

As for children, most of them are quite happy with their teachers. The criticisms, when they exist, focus on the issue of private tutoring. In Moldova, we heard children say, “Some teachers only like rich children.” In other cases, children were critical about their teachers’ performances. During the focus groups, none of the children said that they want to be teachers in the future. When questioned, they gave their reasons as low salaries, hard work, and poor conditions in rural areas. Unless these conditions are improved, it is hard to be optimistic about the future of education within the region.

To be fair, due to the very tough conditions and poverty in the region, all the teachers are under extreme pressure. They need to be more than just teachers; they must be almost like social workers. For example, in Tajikistan, when a child fails to appear in class for a number of days, the teachers are required to visit their homes, explore the situation, and make sure that the child starts school again.

Similarly, school principals have unprecedented responsibilities. They are usually required to raise almost all the money needed to run the school except for the salaries of the teachers. To do this, they institute fees, engage in fund-raising and explore other possibilities for soliciting donations. The result is an incredible variation among schools at the same level. It is common to see a very well kept and prosperous looking school next to a poorly run and dilapidated one. People who know about this say the only difference between these schools may be in the skills and commitment of the school principals.

Labour market forces are resulting in large-scale movement of labour within and in between the countries in the region (chapter 4). In some cases, the population shifts are also affecting the quality of education by forcing the most qualified teachers to leave their native countries. Moldova is a good example of this.

The implementation of teacher-training reforms did not seem to penetrate all the way through to the rural schools in many cases. Depending on the country, the result is great variation in how reforms are carried out. In limited cases (especially in Moldova), it is possible to see that a radical change occurred in the way knowledge is transferred, teachers are trained and the curricula are revised. On the other hand, it is common to see schools where teacher training is non-existent, or limited to one day at the beginning of each year.

In the five countries visited, with the exception of Moldova, there was no evidence of ongoing systematic teacher training. For example, of the two schools visited in Albania, no in-service training had taken place in one, and training in the second was limited to one or two days at the beginning of each year. This had started four years ago. Similarly, in Tajikistan, teachers go through in-service training once every five years. In Turkey, all school inspectors have been trained, but they were only able to train a small percentage of the country’s 600,000 teachers.

Elements of interactive education are missing in almost all classrooms. In many places, the teachers are sticking to traditional methods of teaching – e.g., lecturing the class. This fact-based teaching does not allow any room for student involvement, discussion, group work and class outings. When this issue was raised, the MOE in Azerbaijan explained that interactive teaching had started in only five pilot districts in the country, and most of the country had never experienced it. Even the teachers have widely mixed views about this. While some teachers are openly against interactive teaching, others argue that even though it is a good idea, only a small percentage of the teachers are able to implement it. One of the teachers argued that the way that interactive methods are implemented has resulted in exclusion, because teachers tend to focus on the best performers and ignore low-performing students in that system. Other students in Albania also described typical grade 6, 7 or 8 class sessions as follows: teacher walks in, checks homework, tells us what pages to read and leaves. These students have never done group projects, any research, site visits or class discussions.

Box 6. What happens in class?

In Azerbaijan, children described a typical class session as follows:

Q: *In a typical class session what happens? Can you describe a regular class?*

A: *Everybody comes in, the teacher explains lessons, students listen and teacher gives homework at the end.*

Q: *Is that true? Is that what happens most of the time?*

A: *Yes, but we can also ask the questions.*

Q: *Do you do any projects by yourself? For example, doing some research, learning about something and then coming back to the class and reporting it?*

A: *No*

Q: *Do you ever do group projects?*

A: *Yes, but not so often.*

Q: *Can you give an example?*

A: *The teacher divided us into two groups once, and asked questions to each group to see which one would win.*

Educational resources are inadequate. Rapidly deteriorating school buildings are already a major issue in many countries and likely to become an even more serious problem in the coming years. The main reason is the inability of the governments to allocate financial resources for the renovation and upkeep of school buildings (chapter 5). In most places, schools need to raise money for physical improvements themselves. Given the high cost of capital improvements, this is a very challenging task. Of the five countries visited during the study, the issue was most serious in Albania, Azerbaijan and Tajikistan. Mothers mostly complained that school buildings are too hot in summer and freezing in winter. In urban areas, crowding is a major issue. Mothers in Albania complained that flu spreads very quickly in winter. Similarly, children complained about lack of heating, broken

doors and windows, lack of sport facilities, and poor condition of school yards. In fact, in exercises conducted in Albania and Tajikistan where children developed and rated the reasons for not liking the school, issues related to deficiencies of the physical structure were consistently rated as number one.

Lack of school desks and chairs is a major issue in Tajikistan. The Deputy Minister of Education raised this as the top challenge facing education today in the country. All the desks and chairs in Tajikistan are imported, and it costs approximately US\$30 for a desk and two chairs. As a result, on any given day, it is possible to see many children standing up with no desk and no place to sit during a typical class session. Despite the many deficiencies in infrastructure, it is clear that in all countries, urban schools are still in much better condition when compared to schools in rural areas. Lack of adequate teaching resources is another issue. Schools do not have educational materials, globes, maps, laboratory equipment, and other teaching aids. This is raised repeatedly by many children.

Computers are considered a very important component of education both by parents and children. One parent stated, “These days you cannot find a job without computer literacy.” Despite all the efforts of the governments and donors, the availability of computers in classrooms is very spotty and problematic. In some countries, schools simply do not have any computers. Of the five countries we have visited, Moldova was an exception: there are a few computers in many schools. Yet the computer-to-child ratios are very low, so children can get only a very limited time in front of a computer. In other countries, computers are either missing or the few available ones are not usable due to technical problems, lack of teacher skills or protective school policies.

There is a big technology gap between genders. All over the region, Internet cafes and electronic game saloons are opening everywhere. In many countries, they are strictly for boys. Girls are not allowed to go to these locations by their families. In any case, these places are completely dominated by the boys and girls are not welcome. Considering that computers in the classroom are still a long way off, and most schools have only a few computers (and no software, know-how or technical support), there is a big disparity between genders in accessing electronic technology. This was strikingly clear during workshops with children. Possible ways of dealing with this include having girl-only sections in some Internet cafes (there are some examples of this in Azerbaijan) and extra hours of access for girls to computer labs in schools.

It seems that the region is a long way from integrating computers as an effective learning tool in classrooms. Beyond the lack of resources to buy and disseminate computers to the classrooms, other major barriers need to be overcome. The biggest is to train teachers to accept computers and to integrate them into the classroom. Technical support and lack of appropriate software are other barriers.

Many countries in the region are struggling to create new textbooks for all grades that conform to their new curricula. This is not an easy task. Language is usually a problem. In the beginning, governments simply translated or modified books that were being used during the Soviet times. These days, in countries such as Azerbaijan, all the books are being written in Azeri, and these will replace older books. The most common approach to creating new textbooks is to give the responsibility to publishers. Once the new curricula are published, publishers are then asked to

submit books that are in accord with these curricula. An expert panel established by the MOE then determines which submissions are acceptable. At the final stage, individual schools are allowed to choose which textbook they want to use among the approved few for each subject and grade. This approach has positive implications, and it is a step forward from the standardized single-book approach of older times. However, the ability and qualifications of publishers (and in some cases, local consultants) to generate totally authentic and new textbooks for each subject area are limited. As a result, a lot of books used in Western Europe and the US are being translated and submitted with minor modifications. A few experts in Albania and Turkey complained about this, but they also agreed that this is still an improvement over the previous versions of textbooks. Long-term implications of this approach in education are yet to be seen.

At this time, measuring student performance and learning is on the agenda of many governments. However, there is no evidence of established systems of monitoring and assessment that seem to work properly. In countries such as Albania and Tajikistan, there are no standardized tests in basic education, and student performance is solely determined by classroom teachers. Azerbaijan and Turkey are in the process of establishing nationwide testing systems, yet the values of these are under question. For example, in Azerbaijan, a new nationwide graduation exam was instituted for all ninth graders starting in 2006. The problem is that these are administered by each school, then the results will be collected nationally. When we have spoken to the students and parents, it was surprising that none were concerned and did not even consider failure as an option. Even the teachers admitted that they are not going to let their students fail in a national exam and drop the overall score of their school against other schools.

In fact, failure in school and repetition of classes is not even an option for most children in the region. Some countries, such as Turkey, already eliminated repeating classes in basic education. Others have created systems such as summer courses and additional exams to ensure that all students continue at the secondary level. In all of the countries visited, students stated that repeating classes due to poor performance is extremely rare. One reason for this is economic: Education costs are so high for poor families that when a child repeats class, the family needs to spend the money for education a second time. This upsets families, and they use pressure and even propose financial compensation to the teachers and the school in order to ensure that their children do not repeat the same grade.

The situation is similar for assessing the performance of teachers. There are inspectors in all countries, however their numbers are small and it is not possible for them to conduct a good assessment of the quality of teachers. This is mainly left to school principals who may or may not be totally objective. Some countries have teacher testing on the books, but this is rarely applied or meaningful. For example in Azerbaijan, even though the teachers were required to be tested on a regular basis, this has never been done since 1994.

In all countries visited except Moldova, class sizes did not tend to be smaller than optimum. This is in contrast to many other countries in the region (chapter 5). Based on reports from teachers and students, we have seen class sizes that range from 30 to 43 in Albania, 21 to 40 in Azerbaijan and 30 to 35 in Tajikistan. In some schools, class sizes easily reach the 60-to-80 range. We have even witnessed one class with 120 students in Turkey. Crowding is mainly an outcome of unexpected and extensive migration within each country. For example, when lots of rural families in Albania moved to the outskirts of the capital of Tirana, this created a major crowding in schools surrounding

the city. Similarly, the most crowded schools in Turkey are the ones in poor neighbourhoods with huge migrant populations surrounding big cities such as Istanbul and Diyarbakir. The main reason why classroom crowding is not a big issue in many locations is because of the two-shift (morning/afternoon) education system. Some countries such as Tajikistan even use three shifts in very crowded areas, which has a major negative impact on the quality of education.

There were many instances of parents quoting anecdotes of violence in the schools. Yet there is little evidence that violence in the schools is keeping children out of school. In Moldova, some parents mentioned violence as a reason for pulling their children out of the school but upon investigation, it was clear that parents were using this as an excuse for their children's non-attendance. Some children complained about corporal punishment used by their teachers. Many teachers also accepted the fact that mild forms of corporal punishment are being used widely by most of the teachers. Parents never raised this issue and they seem to have no objections to this practice. Unlike some western countries, violence in the form of bullying by peers does not seem to be a major problem reported in the schools in this region. In contrast, violence is mainly psychological. There are two very common versions of this. One of them is related to family contributions to the school. This is a major issue for poor families. Young children whose parents have failed to pay the required fees to the school fund are scolded and humiliated by teachers and the principal in front of their peers. This type of punishment has a devastating effect both on children and their parents. During the focus groups in Moldova, some parents cried when this issue was being discussed. The second form of psychological violence is related to the issue of clothing and mostly applies to girls. Girls whose parents are too poor to provide them with new and quality clothing are commonly humiliated by their peers for wearing the same clothes to school day after day. This creates such a pressure that many girls simply stop attending school. Some parents also reported violence against children with minor disabilities. It is not possible to judge if this is common practice but it definitely needs investigating. Finally, in some extreme cases, violence in the community may be blocking the access of children to school. In eastern Turkey, parents stated that they are reluctant to send their girls to school due to the increase of violence in the community, and they feel their girls are not safe while going to school.

The educational system in region has gone through major changes in terms of language and is still struggling to adjust to the change from Russian into national languages in schools. Due to complexities in ethnic and national origin it is very common to find schools in one country where instruction is given in different languages. Despite the efforts of the governments to replace Russian with national languages and switch to the Latin alphabet (e.g., Azerbaijan), there are still many problems, mainly in terms of educational materials, books and other resources. For example, a parent in Azerbaijan raised the issue that in that country, most university teaching materials are still in Russian. Since there are only a very limited number of Russian classes in non-Russian schools, the ability of children to speak and write in Russian is dropping rapidly. Many parents acknowledge this and agree that their children can hardly speak Russian any more. This is creating a big language gap among generations.

In most of the countries in the region, parents seem to have little choice in selecting a school for their children. They can choose to send their child to the school closest to their home or to another one which is further away. There are some exceptions to this. For example, in Turkey, parents

are required to send their child based on their home address to a school in their neighbourhood which is determined by the educational district. Unless they are willing to pay and choose a private school, they have no choice in this matter. The flexibility given to parents in choosing a school in other countries is mostly an illusion. This is also used by rich parents to pressure poor ones into contributing to the school fund. If parents cannot pay the required contributions, it is very common for other parents to ask them to take their child to another school. So school choice is not a real choice for many due to economic reasons and transportation costs. Another important factor related to choice is the school's status. Most good schools are very sensitive about their status. They feel it is their right to reject children when they feel that their status might be in jeopardy due to having a high percentage of poorly-performing students. As a result, children who have been away from the school for a few years, or children of migrant families who come from rural areas with poorer-quality education are pressured to go and apply elsewhere. School status is the most critical variable that determines how parents make decisions on which school to send their children.

Perceived cost

Our discussions confirmed that basic education in the region is not free (see chapter 5). On paper, the schools are free and do not officially charge any fees. However there are many hidden costs that present a major barrier, and families need to make significant sacrifices in order to be able to keep their children in school. Families with large numbers of school-age children feel the pressure more than others. Many parents complain about the huge amounts required at the beginning of each school year. Money is needed for new clothes, shoes, bags, school supplies and textbooks. Parents in Albania estimated that about US\$150 to \$200 is needed per child at the beginning of the school year. Overall, the main categories of costs are as follows: 1) clothing and books; 2) contributions to school fund; 3) school supplies; 4) food.

Most governments in the region have very little or no funding for school expenses other than teachers' salaries. In most cases, funds for expenses such as repairs, cleaning, light bulbs, chalk and similar items need to be raised from local sources. Schools have no choice but to ask parents to make contributions to the school fund to cover these costs. While some schools ask for registration fees to be paid directly to the principals, a more common approach is to establish school funds. School funds are managed by parent and teacher committees; however, their election process is not very clear. It is common for richer, more active and influential parents to appear on these committees. Parents from low-income groups in every country we have visited complained over and over how much pressure they were put under when they failed to contribute equally to the school funds. When asked what would happen if they refused to contribute (because the legality of this practice is under question), parents replied that their children are humiliated, sometimes by teachers in front of their peers. This was also validated by stories told by children themselves. Although humiliation of the children was less common in Turkey, parents there also raised this issue.

The biggest problem in the management of these funds is lack of transparency. Parents complained that they do not know how the money is being spent, and they thought that some money might even be going to pay teachers' salaries, even if this was not supposed to happen. We have seen this pattern being repeated in many other parts of the region.

Box 7. Parents' views on school funds in Moldova

Q: *What is the money asked for? Repairs, class funds, teachers' salaries? What is the total cost?*

A: (Parent 1): *Salaries are separate.*

A: (Parent 2): *They don't report to us how they spend the money, no accountability.*

A: (Parent 1): *Other payments are teacher's and director's birthdays, holidays, New Year, Christmas. If you say it's too much, the answer is "go to another school."*

A: (Parent 3): *I am exempt from payment of funds in my lyceum, I pay only for repairs. [There is] no accountability for the money.*

A: (Parent 2): *I don't pay to the school fund.*

A: (Parent 4): *They always find something and ask for money – for example, for food at school.*

A: (Parent 1): *I pay 200 leu for preschool, although one says it's free. I need to pay for detergents, group funds, etc.*

Affording textbooks is still a big problem for parents. Of the countries visited, only in Turkey were all textbooks given out totally free, although the government is not committed to continuing this policy in the long run. In other countries, textbooks are either sold or rented. Even though the schools sell textbooks for reduced prices, it is still a major financial burden on families. Furthermore, sometimes books are very hard to find (e.g., in Tajikistan). The rental system works much better. In Azerbaijan, for example, most books can be rented to children by the schools for a small rental fee. The books are returned at the end of the year and recycled. Rental fees are reduced accordingly for years two and three. The life of books ranges from three to four years. If the books are lost or damaged in the process, the families are asked to compensate. Parents complained that not all the books are available for rental and they still have to go and buy some of the books from stores.

Sometimes school reform may have an adverse effect on the cost of textbooks. For example, in Albania, most textbooks were given out free to the families. Now under the reform process, all textbooks are being rewritten and printed on high-quality paper, and the costs skyrocketed. The government can no longer afford to give out free textbooks, and the plan is to sell them to the families at half price in the coming years.

The cost of clothes that children wear to school is a major item for many families. This issue was repeatedly raised in Albania, Azerbaijan and Tajikistan. At first look, it is not clear how something like clothing can become such a major issue that it prevents some children from attending school. Yet as we talked to parents and children, it became evident that there was great social pressures about clothing that was exerted on children by their peers. This was also repeatedly mentioned by children in Tajikistan. Moldova and Turkey have solved this problem by requiring school children to wear standard uniforms. In countries where there is no uniform requirement, all the parents and children we have spoken to support the idea of uniforms. However, system-wide implementation of standardized uniforms is not very easy and requires a lot of logistical arrangements. For example, in Tajikistan, there is a presidential decree for all school children to wear uniforms. However, the decree is not followed and most schools are not strict on this issue.

The incidence of corruption in the region (which adds to the cost of education) varies from country to country. The most common complaint is about the private tutoring system widely accepted in most countries. In Turkey, the system is more official and organized in the form of private centres called Dersane. The system is so widespread that no one even thinks that a child can get into a good high school or university without attending these institutions. Parents are regularly pressured by the schoolteachers to hire them for private lessons. Parents say that if they do not oblige, teachers do not pay enough attention to their children, give poor grades and sometimes fail them. Only the best students are immune from these pressures.

Box 8. Perceptions of corruption

“The English teacher said, ‘If you want to know better, pay me and I’ll have additional lessons with you’. The teachers don’t like the poor.”

– Parent, Moldova

“Teachers ask for extra fees for some school subjects. Teachers are offering some children private tutoring (10 somoni per month for 3 hours per week. Lessons are given on English, physics, etc.). At the school, teachers pay more attention to those whom they are offering extra classes.”

– Parent, Tajikistan

Q: *Do you think new teachers are well trained?*

A: *They lack teaching methodology. University standards have dropped and there are corrupted lecturers who take bribes in exchange for passing you.*

– Teacher, Albania

This phenomenon is commonly acknowledged by some teachers. The root cause lies in the very low salaries that teachers are getting throughout the region. Some say that teachers have no option but to give private lessons in order to survive. The system is well known by everyone, but the MOE’s are usually reluctant to acknowledge and address it. In some cases, like in the Azerbaijan MOE, they are aware of the situation but claim that it is a part of the education system and in many cases good for students since it helps the poorly performing children catch up with others.

Another cost of sending children to school is that they are not available to contribute to the family income either by unpaid work at home or by their earnings. Child labour is the primary means for families to alleviate poverty. Qualitative research conducted in the five countries very strongly suggested that child labour in different forms is a major problem that is related to both quality and consistency of education. In fact, there are strong clues to suggest that this issue might be much bigger than originally anticipated.

Child labour takes different forms in rural areas and cities. Child labour in rural areas in farm work is seasonal and does not seem to have a major impact on the education of the children. It is very common for children to work on family farms to assist them during the harvest. However, the

problem starts when they start working on other people's farms as farm labourers. This is quite common in Moldova where many children are employed in farm work. Interestingly, they are paid the same daily fee as the adults, which makes farming jobs quite attractive for these children and their families.

Box 9. A teacher in Azerbaijan talks about her students who work

Q: *Do most of your students work?*

A: *I can tell you about my students, who are studying at the seventh and eighth grade. Starting from this year they are obliged to work. A child goes to work after school and comes home after 11 p.m.*

Q: *What percentage of children are working?*

A: *Approximately 30–40 per cent. And at the root of all issues are economic problems.*

Q: *Are students who are working [considered] illegal workers, or are there legal jobs for them?*

A: *No, they are illegal workers.*

Q: *What kind of jobs do they do?*

A: *Conductor, carrying heavy loads, working as street vendors selling pens and chewing gum, newspapers, etc.*

In urban areas, children work in various private-sector service-related jobs. They carry materials for construction of buildings, they wash cars, work as waiters in restaurants and girls sometimes work as hairdressers. Children almost always work with the consent of their parents. In Azerbaijan, children earn about US\$1–2 per day, and US\$0.68–2.30 per day in Tajikistan. Money almost always goes entirely to their parents. More boys than girls have such wage-earning jobs, but in some countries, it is not uncommon for the girls to be kept at home in order to assist with housework and taking care of young children. For instance, in Diyarbakir, Turkey, we met children as young as 12 years old who need to stay home in order to assist their mothers with all kinds of household chores, including cleaning, cooking, laundry and childcare for the whole family.

For some groups, the earning power of the children becomes a matter of survival. The Roma are a good example: although children make very little money on the street, if five or six children are working in one family, this adds up to a significant amount of money; in many cases, this is the only income for the family. The parents often sounded very proud because their young children had steady jobs and were successful at them, even though this was preventing them from attending school.

Not all forms of child labour result in dropping out of school. Many children do work during after-school hours or holidays. However, this inevitably resulted in them missing many classes. Even if they do not miss classes, children who work after school stay out working until very late so they do not have enough time to do homework and are usually very tired during the day.

Exclusion

For several categories of children, non-attendance at school is not the result of an implicit comparison of perceived costs and benefits on the part of family decision makers, but reflects their involuntary exclusion from the possibility of further schooling.

Parents overwhelmingly refer to poverty as the main reason for non-attendance and drop-out. While it is true that some families are struggling to survive financially and children are dropping out of school due to economic reasons, sometimes claims of poverty become an easy way for parents to justify not schooling their children on a regular basis. Some parents blame poor nutrition as the reason why their children fail to perform well in school or regularly attend. In Tajikistan, many children who have dropped out of school said that their parents did not have the money to send them. In the focus group in Dushanbe, Tajikistan, out of the 14 children who had attended school, eight did not even complete the first grade. They said that they learned how to read and write from their parents or brothers at home. In some cases, girls and younger children are pulled out of school so that older children can continue with their education. For example, in Tajikistan one girl said that she could not continue in school because her parents sent her three brothers to university.

Box 10. Poor parents and school funds in Moldova

Q: *What happens if you do not pay to the school fund?*

A: (Parent 1): *If we don't pay to the school fund, the parents raise this issue at parents' meeting and say that this lyceum is not for the poor. Citizens are against poor people.*

Q: *How do they know that you didn't pay?*

A: (Parent 1): *There is a parent's Committee which collects the money and they communicate with teachers.*

A: (Parent 2): *It is not clear how the money for the fund for school repairs is used. They ask for money again and again.*

A: (Parent 3): *They tell us: don't complain, if you don't like it, go to another school. Education is free but we need to make a lot of payments.*

A: (Parent 1): *Our children are persecuted by other children. The rich parents influence the teachers, our children are ill treated, nicknamed 'poor souls'. There is a big pressure on us in school and our children need to have a very strong character to survive. Many do not succeed and hate and dislike the school, the students and the teachers.*

Dropping out of school is very common for children from poor and dysfunctional families. There is not a clear time when the drop-out happens. However, during focus groups and interviews, a pattern started to emerge. It seems like fourth and fifth grades act as a breaking point where many children start dropping out. Dropping out during the first three grades is much more uncommon. This is confirmed both by parents in Azerbaijan and teachers in Tajikistan. In contrast, in the school that was visited in Albania, teachers claimed that most drop-outs happen at grades 7 and 8, and about 10 per cent of the children in this school fail to graduate.

Children also raised the issue that, in many cases, families may be spending their money on inessential needs, so they cannot afford to send their child to school. In the typical story of a dropout, everyone – the family, the school and the child – plays a role. Usually children from broken and disinterested families who migrate from rural areas cannot cope with the new school. They become unsuccessful and get humiliated by other children. As a result, they lose interest and drop out to go to work or stay home. Once children drop out for a few years, it is very hard to get them back into the system. The discrepancies between children from poor and richer families become more pronounced when children from socially and economically different groups attend the same school. As a result, we see symptoms of social friction.

None of the educational systems that we have seen had the flexibility to cope with this issue. In Tajikistan, there are some centres that attempt to teach children basic skills after they drop out for a few years. Yet the ability of this option to integrate children back into school is very questionable.

Some of the countries try to compensate by providing aid to poor families so that they can afford to continue sending their children to school. Unfortunately, the amount of this aid is usually so low that it is almost meaningless (e.g., Tajikistan). An exception to this is a relatively new state programme in Turkey, in which the government pays poor families US\$10 per month for boys, and about US\$12 for girls if their families ensure that they attend school on a regular basis. The programme is called conditional cash transfer. The programme is quite controversial, and has strong supporters as well as opponents. Also in Turkey, the government is struggling to design a brand new system in order to integrate children who have dropped out previously back into the schools. The programme, CATCHUP, is currently in the planning stages. However, there are concerns that these efforts can be abused by parents. Some of the parents, thinking that their children can ‘catch up’ later, may choose not to send their children to school in the first place and make them work in the meantime.

The increasing levels of migration that have already been described also have implications for exclusion. Internal migration involves rural families moving to the outskirts of larger cities in order to find better jobs, or as a result of civil unrest in their native areas. This has a direct affect on school attendance and levels of student drop-out. In most countries, the level of education in rural schools is inferior to schools in big cities. Children who come from rural schools usually experience problems in their new schools. Eventually, they fail and lose interest in education. Teachers in Albania confirmed this phenomenon; they estimated the number of students who drop out as a result of migration to be around 2 per cent. International migration often involves one or both parents going out of the country looking for work for extended periods of time. This results in children being cared for by less interested relatives or grandparents. Eventually, some families break up when those who have moved away set up new lives and stop sending money back.

In many parts of the region, there is little evidence of gender disparity against girls in basic education. The percentage of girls who complete basic education is comparable and sometimes higher than boys (see chapter 3). On the other hand, in most of the the region, especially in the Central Asian Republics, there is an increase in traditional values. Many girls are leaving school during or immediately after secondary education, at the age of 14 or 15. As a result, gender gender gaps are increasing as one goes higher up in the education levels.

Box 11. Why girls drop out, according to other children

Q: *Do you have any friends or anyone you know that drop out of school before ninth grade?*

A: *Yes, I know.*

Q: *Why?*

A: *Some parents do not allow their daughters to go to school after fourth or fifth grades. They believe that if their girl can write her name it is more than enough.*

A: *There are cases that those girls are in the list of those classes, but they do not attend the school, because parents would not let them do it.*

A: *There are some children from poor families, they drop out from school*

A: *The other reason is when 14–15-year-old girls are getting married. Then they drop out.*

Q: *Is that mostly the parents' decision?*

A: *Yes, there are some cases when parents even force their girls to get married*

– Children, Azerbaijan

“If we need to select only one child for education, we prefer giving education to boys.”

– Parent, Tajikistan

However, in three countries visited – Azerbaijan, Tajikistan and Turkey – the pattern was very different compared to the rest of the region. In Azerbaijan, some girls are pulled out of the school at fourth or fifth grade. Parents of these girls consider that ‘enough education for a girl’. They also argue that the girls are going to get married and stay home, so there is no point in educating them further and preparing them for a career. Similarly in Tajikistan, priorities are clearly given to the education of boys if parents need to choose between a boy and a girl. In Turkey, the gender gap between boys and girls in basic education is already a well-known fact. This is a major issue specifically in the rural areas in eastern Turkey and in immigrant communities surrounding big cities. Despite all the efforts, big barriers stand in the way to closing this gender gap.

While gender disparities might have roots in religion, very few parents openly admit it or use ‘religion’ as the reason for not sending girls to school. Instead they prefer to use the word ‘tradition’. Still, the issue is complex and, besides the reluctance of ‘traditional’ families to send girls to schools to sit next to boys without wearing head scarves, factors such as the value of the girls’ labour in housework may be equally important.

In some isolated cases, people have argued that it is more important to educate girls than boys. Interestingly, employability of girls and economic benefits was at the root of all these arguments. For example, in Moldova, parents said that it is easier for educated girls to find jobs than for educated boys, therefore priority should be given to girls. A different argument raised in Azerbaijan was that girls should be educated instead of boys because that is the only way girls can find a job. The arguments of a school director in Tajikistan were similar. He said that educating girls is more important because boys will go abroad for work anyway.

There was not much evidence of integration of children with special needs anywhere. If such children cannot find their way into institutions (specialized schools), there is a very slim chance that they will attend regular schools. On the other hand, specialized schools left over from the Soviet times are under staffed, and under equipped. For example, a school for blind and visually impaired children visited in Tajikistan had no specialised staff, equipment or supplies to address the needs of these children. Many parents that we have spoken to did not even entertain the notion of sending their children to a regular school. They are already struggling to send children without disabilities to school, and for them, hiding a child with a disability at home (sometimes looked after by siblings), is considered the 'right' approach. This is less likely to be true for middle and upper income families.

Box 12. The views of children and parents on children with disabilities

Q: *Are there any children with disabilities in your school?*

A: *Yes. There are 157 children with mental and physical disabilities in the village; only 2–3 of them go to school. They are ignored and humiliated.*

Q: *What is the solution?*

A: *To send them to special schools. We need to be more tolerant. The mentality is bad – children laugh at them.*

– Child, Moldova

Q: *What about children with physical or mental disabilities, do they go to school?*

A: *They go to special schools.*

Q: *Are there any children with physical disabilities in this school?*

A: *No, there aren't any in this school. Parents of disabled children keep it quiet as they are ashamed.*

– Parent, Albania

Such exclusion is more dramatic in rural areas where no option for institutionalization exists. In a workshop with children at a small village in Moldova, children stated that there were 157 children with mental and physical disabilities in the village. While it was impossible to confirm this, they said that only two or three of them were attending school. Similarly, in a school in Albania, we were not able to find anyone who knew a child with a disability attending that school. The school had more than 2,000 students. Parents claim that this is because parents of children with disabilities are ashamed to admit it. The widely accepted solution of integrating children with special needs into regular schools is not even on the agenda of most governments. For example, in Azerbaijan and Tajikistan, where there was no evidence of children with disabilities in the regular schools. An official in Azerbaijan admitted that the attempts towards inclusive education are at a very preliminary stage and most people are not even aware of the concept. Even Turkey has a long way

to go before starting to achieve integration on a large scale.

From Eastern Europe to the Balkans to Turkey, Roma children are excluded from education in large numbers. This is mainly due to their lifestyle, which is not entirely their own choice but is forced upon them by respective governments. Most Roma families do not have the basic provisions such as shelter and water. Many Roma children cannot even go to school due to problems of hygiene. A lot of people have argued that the Roma want to keep their culture intact so they do not want to be incorporated into the educational system or send their children to regular schools. This is not confirmed by our discussions. Roma want to educate their children. All they argue for is to be included as a participant in the actions being taken to better their lives.

In many places, Roma children beg, sell things and work on the streets starting very early in their lives. Roma families with no other options to survive depend on this income. In Albania, a Roma child can typically make US\$1–3 per day. Many families have more than five or six children working simultaneously for the full day. The money that children make adds up to a major portion of the family budget. In Tirana, Albania, we visited many Roma families who have five or six children at basic-education age. None of them were registered or attending school.

CONCLUSIONS

While the provision of quality education is critical for providing access for all, another critical determinant is the demand for education by parents and children. Maintaining a high level of demand is critical for schooling, especially for the disadvantaged populations who have a large range of economic and social barriers that prevent access to education. What determines demand? Multiple factors need to be considered. Arguably, the most important factor determining demand is the value given to education by the families and children. The key questions are how people view education and why they think it is important. The answers to these questions have ideological as well as practical implications. At the ideological level, education might or might not be seen as a 'human right' and a necessity for becoming a 'person' and a 'valued member' of the society. On the practical side, education may be viewed as an 'investment' for the future that will bring an economic return in the form of stable jobs and higher salaries. The returns on education may eventually be high (chapter 4), but the poor know that their children have little chance of progressing far enough to enjoy them.

The picture gets even more complicated when the pressures against education are considered. From a family's perspective, these pressures are mostly economic or social. For the poorest section of the population, affordability is a major issue, even for basic education. Even though basic education is supposed to be free, the hidden cost of education is a major barrier for schooling in most of the countries. While some families simply cannot afford to educate their children, others are faced with the decision as to whether it is worth investing in education, and for how long. Social pressures that reduce demand are another key factor. A good example is the belief in some communities in Azerbaijan, Tajikistan and Turkey that a few years of schooling is 'enough' for most girls, since they will be married and spend their lives in their homes raising families.

On the supply side, there are a number of key variables that are closely related to demand. One of them is the accessibility of the schools. Except in some extreme cases, students seem to have access to basic education even in the remotest villages. The same is not true in preschool education, where there is unbalanced demand and supply. Preschools that provide many services, such as nutritious food in addition to education, are seen as desirable resources by many parents, but are not available in many communities. Quality is another area of disparity that influences demand. Quality of schools, physical conditions, availability of educational resources and capacity of the teachers vary incredibly, and these are worst in rural and low-income areas. Perception of school quality, both by families and children, is a major factor shaping demand for education.

In summary, it may be possible to argue that overall in the region, weak demand for education by families is the more important reason why some children are excluded from basic education. We have found little evidence that supply constraints are an issue. In all the places visited, there were no cases where a child who wanted to continue with basic education was unable to do so due to the unavailability of schools or spaces in schools. It should be noted that this is true mostly in the case of basic education – usually the first nine grades. The picture is different for secondary education and especially for higher education, where demand is strong, but economic barriers exclude all except the richest in the society.

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