Secondary Schools and Inequality: Navigating the Fragmented Landscape of Educational Choices in Bishkek, Kyrgyzstan

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Abstract

This research aims to describe how parents navigate secondary education choices in Bishkek in the context of diverse school choice options. The paper uses a combination of qualitative and quantitative methods, which include interviews and a complementary survey with parents. The paper provides an overview of the state of school options in Bishkek, explores parental motivations in choosing schools, and engages in a wider debate about educational inequality. By examining parental school choices and motivations, the research reveals that inequality in secondary education in Bishkek is multi-layered and depends on how families can utilize their resources: parents with larger resources in the form of financial, social, and cultural capital are most advantaged, while the majority of under-resourced families are left with little choice and schools of poor quality. This state of affairs has strong implications for the growing socio-economic inequality and creates additional cleavages between social groups.

Keywords

secondary education in Kyrgyzstan – private schools – school choice – education inequality

As of 2018, Kyrgyzstan's GDP per capita was $1,281.40.1 Yet the cost of tuition at some private schools in the capital city, Bishkek, tells a very different story:

1 "The World Bank Data," last accessed December 26, 2019, https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/NY.GDP.PCAP.CD?locations=TJ-UZ-KG-TM-KZ.

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annual tuition is $23,800 at the QSI International School,2 $14,155 at the ESCA Bishkek International School, $13,000 at the Oxford International School, and $11,000 at the Cambridge Silk Road International School.3 Parents of students at these schools pay between 3.5 and 7.5 times the average yearly salary on education alone. These numbers are illustrative of growing socioe-conomic inequality in a country that used to be a Soviet republic where citizens had more or less equal status and equal access to high-quality public education.

Over the past two decades, secondary educational opportunities in Bishkek have become more diversified, due both to the growing number and variety of private schools and to the division of public schools into different categories, depending on the quality of education they offer. This paper explores growing inequality in accessing secondary education in Bishkek, Kyrgyzstan, in the context of such diversification of schools. The paper sets out to answer the following specific questions:

1. What are parents' motivations in making school choices and navigating the fragmented landscape of the secondary education system in Bishkek?
2. To what degree do parents' educational choices reflect and reinforce growing socio-economic inequality in a society that is undergoing significant transformations?

To answer these questions, I employed a combination of qualitative and quantitative methods. My main group of informants included parents of schoolchildren aged seven through 17 who attend public and private schools in Bishkek. Religious private schools were not included in the study.

With the help of a Research Assistant, I conducted 22 in-depth interviews with parents: 13 of them sent their children to public schools and nine to private schools. Out of 22, only three were males and 19 were females. Out of 13 public schools, five schools were located in the city, four in micro districts, and four in new urban settlements. Out of parents whose children attended nine private schools, two were from high-fee international private schools and seven were from medium-fee private schools.

Interviews were conducted between the months of June and October 2018 in Russian and Kyrgyz. The guiding questions solicited parents' reflection on their choice of schools, their main motivations behind the choice, and their estimated educational expenses. Additionally, we asked respondents to elaborate on

2 Zamira Kozhobaeva, "Stoit li ucheba v chastnykh shkolakh zaplachennykh deneg?" Azattyk, February 6, 2017, last accessed October 11, 2018, https://rus.azattyk.org/a/28281350.html.

3 "Gid Kaktus. Chastnye shkoly Bishkeka. Usloviia i tseny," Kaktus Media, May 25, 2018, last accessed October 11, 2018, https://kaktus.media/doc/338956_gid_kaktus._chastnye_shkoly_bishkeka._ysloviia_i_ceny.html.

their level of satisfaction with their choices, and in the case of public schools, whether they would consider private schools given such an opportunity.

Initially, respondents were recruited from the author's immediate networks. To diversify our respondents, who were mainly from medium-fee private schools and elite public gymnasiums, we selectively searched for respondents from other types of schools, such as elite international private schools and average neighborhood public schools. Respondents were chosen from schools located in the city center, micro districts, and new urban settlements. Regarding the latter group of participants, we used our networks to find them but also visited the Dordoi bazaar for a random sample of participants who self- identified as living in settlements.

Interviews were audio taped, transcribed, and coded. A preliminary analysis of interviews prompted the design of a supplementary online questionnaire to crosscheck the data and obtain more streamlined information about the general trends. The questionnaire was designed in Google Forms in Russian and Kyrgyz and included 17 questions about parents' motivations in choosing schools, the level of satisfaction with their choices, and alternative/complementary ways of acquiring education. Other questions sought the demographic information of respondents, including self-estimation of their family income status. Parents were also asked about their strategies in school search and planning for university education.

Overall, 115 parents participated in the survey instrument, completing surveys about the education of 175 children (87 boys and 88 girls). Out of 115 parents, 79% had children in public schools, 19% in private schools, and 2% in both. The majority of parents who participated in the survey were women (95%). Most of them had higher education degrees (78%). Twenty-eight percent of informants lived in the city center, 47% in the residential micro districts, and 25% in the urban periphery. Sixty-seven percent of participants indicated that that they had an average income, 25% higher than average, 2% high, 2% lower than average, and only 1% very low.

It is important to note some of the limitations of the research. The survey sample is not representative. As the survey was conducted online, the questionnaire may have attracted those parents who had proper access to a computer and the Internet. This factor may explain the larger percentage of educated parents and the lower percentage of self-identified low-income parents who responded.

While it was not intentional to target mothers in the survey, the results yielded mostly women respondents (mothers). This result is to be expected in the socio-cultural context of Central Asia and speak to traditional gender-sorted contributions to homework help. The survey's questions were not

gender biased, but a more balanced representation of parents' gender may have resulted in different answers.

In addition, we conducted interviews with twelve experts in the field of education, who provided analytical insights into our research questions. The expert pool included practitioners from the Ministry of Education and other government structures, international organizations and NGOs, public activists, and other experts, some of whom have worked in public schools before. Most of these experts specialized in public schools and could not share any insider knowledge or expertise on private schools. This study focuses on parents, not on schools, so I did not plan to interview teachers or school administrators— yet private schools are a new phenomenon and there is a lack of information available. Therefore, it was necessary to interview some principals or top administrators of private schools. The sample included eight high- and medium-fee private schools.

The paper proceeds as follows. First, it provides an overview of the relevant literature and the state of secondary education in Bishkek and classifies existing school choices. Next, it explores parental motivations and strategies in choosing schools before engaging in the wider debate about the link between education choices and inequality. Finally, it draws conclusions.

1 Private Schools and School Choice

The privatization of education is a global trend, and it has a profound effect on school choices, education quality and also educational inequality. Most of the existing literature on the topic comes from the Western world, which has a long tradition of private schools, but there are also experiences of other countries, such as Ghana, Chile, and China, documented in the literature. The case studies from around the world suggest that the impact of private schools de- pends on a specific country's context and historical conditions.4

On the one hand, private schools reinforce and reproduce social inequalities by empowering already advantaged groups.5 For example, in England's 'independent' schools, this phenomenon comes in the form of "cream skimming" during admission, where most 'able' students from privileged families

4 Thomas Koinzer, Rita Nikolai, and Florian Waldow (eds), *Private Schools and School Choice in Compulsory Education: Global Change and National Challenge* (Wiesbaden: Springer VS, 2017).

5 Pauline Musset, "School Choice and Equity: Current Policies in OECD Countries and a Literature Review," OECD Education Working Papers, no. 66 (OECD Publishing, 2012).

get accepted, which itself leads to a more intensive concentration of less disadvantaged social groups in poorer quality schools.6 Social segregation has long been a part of the Australian secondary education experience, where more than 30% of pupils attend private schools and the gap between private and public schools has been deepening in the last decades.7 Similar problems are registered in many Latin American countries.8

On the other hand, it not everywhere that private schools signify segregation or competition for high academic outcomes. When private schools are affordable, they can provide alternative school choices. In Germany, the Basic law prohibits private schools from charging high fees, and schools can be attended by the representatives of different social groups. In one study, driving motivations for parents to send their children to private schools in Germany were such factors as the search for alternative pedagogical philosophies and a student-friendly school 'climate' or teaching styles.9 In China, with the exception of elite international private schools, private schools are not the best choice. Low-fee private schools are actually reserved for the marginalized groups and migrants, who have no city residency registrations to attend public schools, which are considered the best. Chinese private schools are actually disadvantaged compared to public schools.10 In Ghana, private education helped the country to raise the quality of education and achieve the UN

6 Sonia Exley, "A Country on Its Way to Full Privatisation? Private Schools and School Choice in England," in Koinzer, Nikolai, and Waldow, *Private Schools and School Choice in Compulsory Education*.

7 Martin Forsey, Helen Proctor, and Meghan Stacey, "A Most Poisonous Debate: Legitimizing Support for Australian Private Schools," in Koinzer, Nikolai, and Waldow, *Private Schools and School Choice in Compulsory Education*.

8 Cristina Alarcón, "Class Isolation: Examining Private Schools in Chile," in Koinzer, Nikolai, and Waldow, *Private Schools and School Choice in Compulsory Education*; OECD, "Equity and Quality in Education: Supporting Disadvantaged Students and Schools," (Paris: OECD Publishing, 2012); Stromquist, Nelly, "Inequality as a Way of Life: Education and Social Class in Latin America" *Pedagogy, Culture and Society*, 12, no. 1 (2004): 95–119; Claudia Rangel and Christy Lleras, "Educational inequality in Colombia: family background, school quality and student achievement in Cartagena," *International Studies in Sociology of Education*, 20, no. 4 (2010): 291–317.

9 Koinzer, Nikolai, and Waldow, *Private Schools and School Choice in Compulsory Education*.

10 Barbara Schulte, "Private Schools in the People's Republic of China: Development, Modalities and Contradictions," in Koinzer, Nikolai, and Waldow, *Private Schools and School Choice in Compulsory Education*; Jin Wang, and Wonho Jang, "Educational inequality among Chinese urban schools: The business ethics of private schools," *Asia Pacific Business Review*, 22, no. 3 (2016): 502–515.

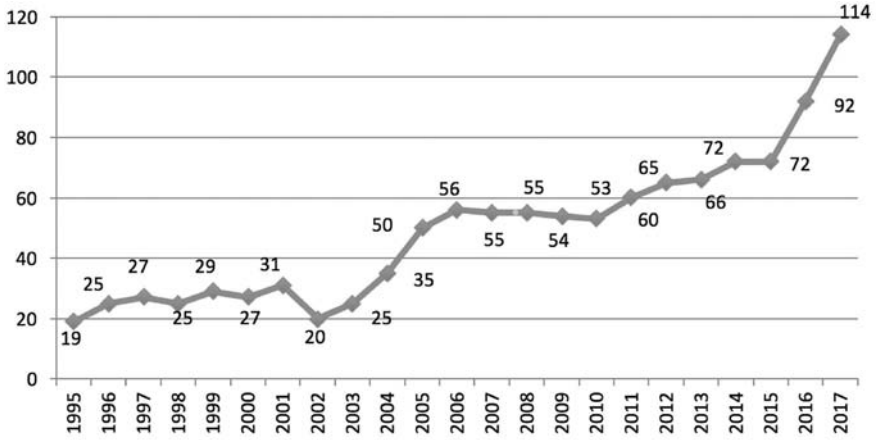

Figure 1 Number of private schools in Kyrgyzstan
Source: National Statistical Committee

Millennium Development Goal (MDG) of universal primary education, albeit creating concerns about deepening inequalities.11

In Kyrgyzstan, private schools emerged in the mid-1990s as a result of neo-liberal policy reforms. Since 1995, the number of private schools has grown from 19 (1% of all schools) to 114 (5%) in 2017 (See Figure 1). The number of students who attend these schools has risen from 0.3% to 2.5% of all students.

Private schools in Bishkek are very heterogeneous, with a diverse mix of prices and services. Many of them have excellent or decent infrastructure and facilities, small class sizes,12 and better-paid teachers. The boom in private schools is occurring in the context of declining quality in public education, acute shortages of schools and qualified teachers, and poor maintenance of buildings.13 Due to urban population growth caused by high internal migration, public schools in Bishkek have become extremely overcrowded.14 Bishkek's 97 schools currently have a 76,500-student capacity, but the actual

11 Maxwell A. Aziabah, "Privatisation of Compulsory Education in Ghana: Examining the Developments so Far," in Koinzer, Nikolai, and Waldow, *Private Schools and School Choice in Compulsory Education*.

12 Kaktus Media, "Gid Kaktus."

13 Sanzhar Eraliev, "Skol'noe obrazovanie. Problemy dostigli krainei tochki," Azatyk, September 6, 2018, last accessed November 21, 2018, https://rus.azattyk.org/a/kyrgyz_education_school-problems/29474742.html.

14 Eric Eversmann, "Dropping Out: School Attendance in the Kyrgyz Republic," *praxis: The Fletcher Journal of Development Studies*, xvi (2000).

number of students is twice as high. Class sizes exceed standards, sometimes reaching 50 students per class per teacher in popular schools.15 This situation is compounded by low teaching salaries and poor school infrastructure.16 Having mostly been built in the Soviet period, public schools are now in need of serious renovation: yet the annual budget they receive from the Ministry of Education and Science for such purposes is extremely low at only 20,000 soms ($285).17 Many schools are thus forced to collect money from parents or continue functioning in poor physical conditions.18

Yet the outlook for public schools is not altogether bleak. There are a few high-performing "elite" public schools (gymnasiums and lyceums) that are seen as prestigious, and even families that can afford to send their children to private schools may prefer these schools because of their academic outcomes. While looking at private schools and their implications for parents' choices and education inequality, it is first necessary to take a closer look at how public schools have become differentiated in terms of outcome and performance.

In Kyrgyzstan, as well as in other post-Soviet states, in the early 1990s we saw the birth of new types of schools—gymnasiums and lyceums—as a way of providing more specialized education for gifted children. In Russia from 1990– 94, the number of such schools grew almost threefold.19 Kazakhstan, Tajiki- stan, and Kyrgyzstan faced similar diversifications of schools.20 This happened due to policy reforms as part of democratization and marketization processes

15 "Po piatero za partoi. Skol'ko detei uchatsia v pervom klasse v prestizhnykh shkolakh Bishkeka," Kaktus Media, September 10, 2018, last accessed November 21, 2018, https://kaktus.media/doc/379418_po_piatero_za_partoy._skolko_detey_ychitsia_v_pervom_klasse_v_prestijnyh_shkolah_bishkeka.html.

16 Kathryn Anderson and Stephen Heyneman, "Education and Social Policy in Central Asia: The Next Stage of the Transition," *Social Policy and Administration*, 39, no. 4 (2005): 361–80.

17 Interview with an expert, Bishkek, 2018.

18 Ruben Ruiz Ramas, "Parental Informal Payments in Kyrgyzstani Schools: Analyzing the Strongest and the Weakest Link," *Journal of Eurasian Studies*, 7, no. 2 (2016): 205–219; Anderson and Heyneman, "Education and Social Policy in Central Asia; World Bank", "Education and Poverty in the Kyrgyz Republic," Washington, DC: World Bank (2003), http://documents.worldbank.org/curated/en/945481468089099352/Education-and-poverty-in-the-Kyrgyz-Republic.

19 Vladimir Sobkin, "Education and the Problem of Social Inequality in Russia," *International Journal of Inclusive Education*, 5, no. 2–3 (2001): 293–303.

20 Christopher Whitsel, "Parental Choices in the Primary and Secondary School Market in Dushanbe, Tajikistan," European Education 46, no. 2 (2016): 53–73; Christopher Whitsel, "Parents' Perspectives on the Educational Market in Central Asia," (unpublished paper, shared by the author) (2018); Duishon Shamatov, "The Impact of Standardized Testing on University Entrance Issues in Kyrgyzstan," *European Education*, 44, no. 1 (2012): 71–92.

but also due to the economic hardships of the transition years, which allowed public schools to collect informal fees from parents. Those public schools which could raise more funding from parents had more resources, and they could attract more qualified teachers and provide better infrastructure, which in the end also attracted wealthier students.21 Gymnasiums and lyceums offered advanced and specialized curriculum, providing better-quality education, and students from such schools had higher chances of entering prestigious universities than students from average schools.22

Such new types of schools, coupled with newly emerging private schools, have diversified school choices for parents. Such diversification was mostly an urban phenomenon, and it exacerbated already existing gap between urban and rural schools in Kyrgyzstan. For instance, students from urban Russian medium-sized gymnasiums and selected private schools perform significantly higher in the National Standardized Tests (NST) and secure admission to prestigious local universities. They also win the large share of Golden Certificates.

Such educational inequity is caused by three factors: geography (urban versus rural schools), language (Russian versus Kyrgyz language schools), and types of schools (resourced and poorly resourced schools).23 A World Bank report states that more prosperous communities tend to have access to a better quality of education and confirms that there is a huge gap between schools located in Batken and Bishkek.24 However, there is not enough literature that explains Kyrgyzstan's unequal access to resourced schools in the urban context, where students are not bound by geographic or even linguistic limitations.

To understand how this happens, I rely on Pierre Bourdieu's social capital theory,25 according to which capital is seen as the sum of various visible and invisible resources that individuals accumulate. This concept can be applied to study the influence of different resources that parents utilize in educating

21 Whitsel, "Parents' Perspectives on the Educational Market in Central Asia"; Ruiz Ramas; Shamatov, "The Impact of Standardized Testing on University Entrance Issues in Kyrgyzstan."

22 Shamatov, "The Impact of Standardized Testing on University Entrance Issues in Kyrgyzstan."

23 Alan Deyoung, "Problems and Trends in Education in Central Asia Since 1990: the Case of General Secondary Education in Kyrgyzstan," *Central Asian Survey* 25, no. 4 (2006): 499–514; Shamatov.

24 World Bank, "Education and Poverty in the Kyrgyz Republic."

25 Pierre Bourdieu, "The Forms of Capital," in *Handbook of Theory and Research for the Sociology of Education*, J. Richardson, ed., (New York, Greenwood, 1986): 241–258.

their children. I also use Anette Lareau's argument that there are some fundamental differences in how middle-class and working-class parents approach children's education. Middle-class families, through concerted preparation of their children and actively utilizing their own education and social capital, can much better prepare their children for higher education and a future career than the poor and working-class families.26 In this work, I analyze the situation of school choice in Bishkek in light of these two concepts.

2 Landscape of Secondary Educational Opportunities in Bishkek

Secondary school opportunities can be classified into five main categories: three types of private schools (based on tuition costs) and two types of public schools (based on their performance).27

The first category of private schools includes elite international schools with tuition fees above $10,000 per year: QSI International, Cambridge Silk Road International, ESCA Bishkek International, and Oxford International. These schools have international curricula and accreditation. Classes are taught in English, primarily by international faculty but also by local faculty with solid English language skills. These schools have excellent infrastructure and facilities, as well as small class sizes. They are licensed by the Ministry of Education and Science, and by taking some additional courses, students can also gain a local high school certificate. However, the primary goal of these schools is to prepare students to apply to colleges abroad, and these schools can be described as preparing students "for export." Local students study in these schools alongside the children of expats: the share of local students at international schools ranges from 10% to 80%.28

The second category of private schools is those with annual tuition costs between $3,000 and $7,000. Schools in this category include Turkish private schools such as the Silk Road International School and Turkish private lyceums that belong to the Sapat International Education Institution. Sapat private lyceums have established a reputation as high-quality schools.29 They are known for achieving very high results on the NST and in various knowledge-based competitions (Olympiads). The Silk Road International School, for its part, is

26 Annette Lareau, *Unequal Childhoods: Class, Race and Family Life, with an Update a Decade Later* (Oakland, CA: University of California Press, 2011).

27 Based on author's analysis of publicly available information and interview results.

28 "Admissions—Other International Schools," Bishkek International School, last accessed November 21, 2018, http://www.esca.kg/admissions/other-international-schools/.

29 Interviews with experts, Bishkek, 2018.

known for being one of the oldest English-language private schools in the country and for charging much less than other international schools. Other schools in this price range, such as Bilimkana-AUCA High School, Bilimkana-European School, and Erudit, being relatively new, have yet to earn reputations that would justify their tuition costs. With the exception of the Silk Road International School, which teaches in English, the language of instruction of the schools in this category is Russian. However, they generally place a strong emphasis on English. While some of them successfully prepare students to study abroad, they do not have international accreditation. These schools are generally successful in preparing their graduates for prestigious local universities. Local students constitute the vast majority of these schools' student bodies.

The third category contains a longer list of various schools where the cost of education is below $3,000 per year. These schools are not necessarily known for excellent outcomes. Only occasionally do their names appear among the Gold Certificate winners on NST. Yet they still attract students, as they offer much better facilities, better security, and smaller class sizes than state schools, as well as a student-friendly environment. Unlike in the first two categories, where some of the co-owners or top management are foreign citizens, the owners of these private schools are mostly locals. Some schools—such as Ilim, Kelechek, Zvezdochka, and Evrika—are better known than others; they have been in the education market longer and have an established clientele. I also include here some lesser-known or smaller private schools with relatively inexpensive tuition fees ranging from $500 to $800 per year. The price goes down for those schools where the school day is only half a day and where tuition excludes food expenses.

The fourth category is public schools, mostly gymnasiums and lyceums, whose students achieve a high level of academic performance. They can be described as the "top 10," "top 5," or "top 3," depending on who ranks them. These are schools whose students get high NST scores and win various kinds of knowledge-based competitions. However, there is a hierarchy even within this category: three Bishkek schools continuously top the national school rankings for academic performance. On a scale from 0 to 100, the score of School #61 is 91, School #70 scores 88, and School #69 scores 76, while the average score for the rest of the schools in the top 20 is only 40.30 Such schools maintain their reputations by attracting the most qualified teachers and imposing harsh study discipline, heavy study loads, and competitive selection. If students do not

30 "Reiting"; "Nazvany 20 luchshikh shkol Bishkeka za 2018 god," Kaktus Media, August 24, 2018, last accessed September 2, 2018, https://kaktus.media/doc/378847_nazvany_20_lychshih_shkol_bishkeka_za_2018_god.html.

perform to the expected standard, they are either expelled or leave voluntarily, unable to cope with the heavy workload.31

Among the top three, School #61 stands out: since the launch of the NST in 2003, 215 students from this school have received Gold Certificates, meaning that one-third of all Gold Certificate winners nationally have attended this school.32 These schools are in high demand by parents despite the fact that their classes are overcrowded and children study in two shifts. Their students have high chances of entering local universities, universities in Russia, and even some foreign universities on the basis of merit.33

The majority of schools fall into the fifth category: public schools with average or poor performance. These schools generally lack qualified teachers, produce poor NST results, and have poorly maintained facilities. It is surprising that the achievement gap between the two types of public schools is so wide, considering that all schools, including local private schools, follow the same curriculum. The following table summarizes the main characteristics of all six educational categories, also listing their average costs.

3 Parents' Motivations in Making School Choices

Based on the analysis of the motivations of parents who participated in interviews and completed the questionnaire, I have found that parents who send their children to private schools enjoyed a wider range of privileges than those who send their children to public schools.

4 Private Schools

The questionnaire results shown in Figure 2 highlight parents' most commonly mentioned motivations for choosing private schools. Small class sizes (73%) was the leading motivating factor, followed by quality of education and all- day child care, each of which scored 68%. Sixty-six percent of parents were swayed by a perception that private schools had better attitudes toward children. Good infrastructure (55%), highly qualified teachers (41%), English language education (41%), a specialized program (41%), and security (36%) were also important.

31 Based on interviews with parents and experts.

32 "Zolotye tsertifikaty ort," Lyceum #61, last accessed November 21, 2018, https://yk61.ru/index.php/dostizheniya-uchenikov/zolotye-sertifikaty-ort.

33 "Istoriia litseia," Lyceum #61, last accessed December 16, 2018, https://yk61.ru/index.php/news/k2-item.

Table 1 Secondary educational opportunities in Bishkek

1. Top elite international private schools:
   a. Tuition: $10–23,800
   b. Preparing students "for export": international accreditation, all subjects taught in English
   c. International teachers, excellent facilities, security, small class sizes, student-friendly atmosphere
2. Higher-fee private schools:
   a. Tuition: $3–5,000
   b. Excellent prospects of entering top local universities
   c. Qualified and decently paid teachers, good facilities, security, small class sizes, student-friendly atmosphere
3. Medium- and lower-fee private schools:
   a. Tuition: under $3,000
   b. Financial (not always merit-based) opportunities for entering good universities
   c. Select teachers, decent facilities, security, small class sizes, student-friendly atmosphere
4. High-performing public schools:
   a. Free; collection of fees from parents for school needs $100–200 per year (estimated average)
   b. Merit-based opportunities to enter top local universities
   c. Select teachers, average facilities, no security, large class sizes, harsh discipline, selective admission
5. Public schools with average and low academic performance:
   a. Free; collection of fees from parents for school needs $50–80 a year (estimated average)
   b. Limited prospects (both merit-based and financial) of entering good universities
   c. Underpaid teachers with heavy loads, average or poor facilities, no security, large class sizes

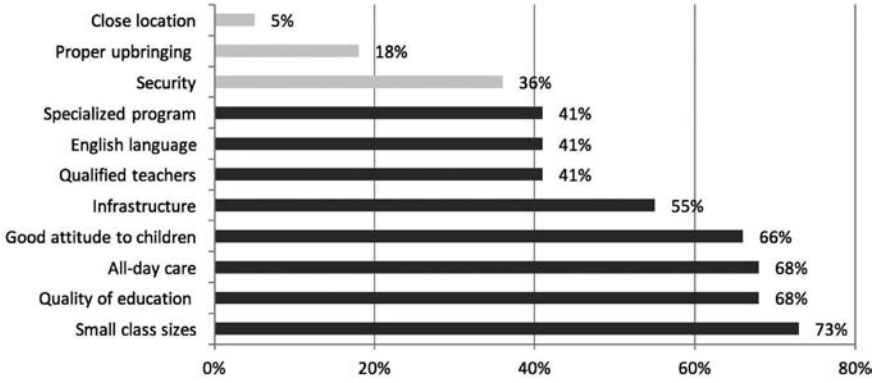

Figure 2 Parents' reasons for choosing a private school

In the following subsections, I unpack these and other motivations by interweaving the survey results with an analysis of our interviews with parents and experts.

5 Small Class Sizes, Better Conditions, and Better Treatment ofChildren

One major factor motivating parents to consider private school for their children is the size of classes. In many public schools, classes are extremely over- crowded: several informants indicated that in a 45-minute lesson, the average child receives less than a minute of attention from the teacher. By contrast, classes in private schools are generally small; student numbers range from 10to 25.34

In choosing private schools, parents expect closer teacher–student interaction and a more individualized approach. Parents interpret small class sizes as an important factor that contributes to the quality of learning.

Some parents were very concerned about their child's health and wellbeing in overcrowded classes. One parent, whose child attends one of the high-performing public schools in Bishkek, expressed a wish to move her daughter to a private school so that she would have better study conditions:

> I am satisfied with the quality of education that our school provides andthe teachers are very qualified. However, if I had more money, I would

34 Kaktus Media, "Gid Kaktus."

> transfer my daughter to private school because of the small class sizes and good conditions. There are 47 children in my daughter's classroom which was designed to fit 25. There is a 40 cm gap between the blackboard and the desk in the first row, so the child who has to sit at that desk is the most miserable, because he/she sits too close to the blackboard. In winter, when the heater is on, there is not enough air in the classroom. It's the same on hot summer days. Because of the high number of children, school happens in two shifts. The school cafeteria stops working at 4 pm and the child who is at school until 7 pm often goes hungry (Parent, public school #26).

A few parents—often those who had lived abroad or had been exposed to Western-style education—were very critical of the teaching methods and communication styles of teachers in public schools. They took a negative view of the top-down and authoritarian style of interacting with students, comparing it to the old Soviet style with its harsh disciplinary methods. For them, private schools offered an escape from the conservative style of teaching found in public schools, promising better treatment of children and a more liberal and relaxed learning atmosphere. As one parent explained:

> If I were to choose between two evils, I would choose private schools because at least they offer some relief, including better teaching and communication methods (Parent, private school).

6 All-Day Child Care Services

Most private schools in Bishkek provide all-day child care services. The school day in a private school lasts from 8 am to 5 or 6 pm. Schools provide breakfast, lunch, snacks, and in some cases an early dinner. They also organize after-school activities on the school premises such as language courses, sports, music, arts, and other interest-based clubs, as well as reserving time for completing homework. Schools organize transportation to and from school, which can save parents time during rush hour. This approach is convenient for families, particularly in households where both parents work. An expert on education articulates this consideration in the following way:

> For some parents, especially of children in elementary school, it is convenient that their child is cared for during the day because they are at work.

> He eats there, rests, does homework. This takes a certain amount of pressure off parents (Expert, Ministry of Education).

As many public schools in Bishkek are underfunded and overcrowded, school staff works in two shifts and does not have the means or facilities to organize after-school activities. This creates a burden on working parents, who traditionally reach out to grandparents or other extended family members for help with childrearing. However, this option is not available to everyone. Many residents of Bishkek come from various parts of the country and leave their elderly parents and extended families behind. Working parents therefore seek alternative help with child rearing: either hiring nannies, relying on local relatives, or choosing private schools.

In Kyrgyzstan, children's safety at school has been a problem for many years. There have been many reported cases of violence among high school children, as well as of school racketeering.[35] Only in very recent years have parents start- ed to collect money to hire security guards or install camera surveillance at public schools.[36] Even then, private schools guarantee children's security far better than public schools, as respondents noted:

> Private schools are more expensive, but you are paying not for education but for security. There are 16 people in the class and you know that no one will hurt your child (Parent, private school).

An education expert echoed this view:

> I think if parents could afford it, many would send their children to private schools just to make sure the child is looked after. This is especially important in the case of the security of teenagers, including information- al security. Parents do not worry and their children are in a secure environment until they pick them up (Expert, Ministry of Education).

Thus, another motivation driving parents to choose private schools is this "all- day childcare" approach, which minimizes parents' daily chores and ensures their children's safety.

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35 "S reketom v shkolakh Kyrgyzstana stalkivaiutsia 51% mal'chikov i 12% devochek—issledovanie nisi," Bilim Akipress, October 9, 2017, last accessed November 21, 2018, http://bilim.akipress.org/ru/news:1409182.

36 Interview with parents.

7 International Private Schools and English as a Means of EnteringUniversities Abroad

The cost of a private school rises sharply if it offers a curriculum taught solely in English and if it has international accreditation. Interviews with school administrators and an analysis of graduates' profiles revealed that these schools are heavily oriented toward preparing children to study abroad. Having assets such as native English speakers as teachers, an international curriculum, and college counselors who prepare applications to foreign universities all mean that these students have more opportunities to access the global education system than their peers at other schools. These schools also organize trips to European and U.S. universities (at parents' expense) to spark students' interestin studying abroad.

However, some parents and experts raised questions about the quality of this education for its high cost. One expert said:

> As far as I know, in most private schools where the cost is very high, the emphasis is on infrastructure, good conditions, and English-speaking teachers. But I have reservations regarding the qualifications of teachers at these schools. Look at the results of republican Olympiads and Gold Certificates. Among them you will not find representatives of these elite schools, except for the Kyrgyz-Turkish Lyceums (Education expert).

Interviews with representatives of some of the elite international schools suggest that their students do not achieve high NST results for three reasons. The first is language limitations: NST and local competition are conducted in Russian or Kyrgyz, while these schools' students study in English. The second is that many local students of international schools do not plan to apply to local universities: by the time the NST comes around, they have often already received admission letters from universities abroad. Third, the children of foreign citizens and expatriates who study in these schools are not interested in taking the NST. Instead, they take international exams such as the SAT, TOEFL, and IELTS, which are required for entrance to universities in the West.

When it comes to private schools with a local curriculum and instruction in Russian, it becomes less clear how successful they are at preparing children for education abroad. Most of them allocate more hours to studying English than public schools and use English as one of their main marketing strategies. Some of them also organize study tours to Europe or the U.S. for an extra fee. An interview with a representative of the Sapat lyceum (Sapat International

Education Institution) administration revealed that the chain has big ambitions to send students to foreign universities in the coming years:

> This year, out of 750, about 350–400 students went abroad. Fifty went on full scholarships to universities that are included in the world's top 100. We achieved this goal in just two years. Our plan for next year is to in- crease this number to 100. They took 25 students to Hong Kong. They have eight universities and five of them are in the top 100. All 25 [students] received scholarships. Tuition costs $25,000–35,000 (Representative of Sapat International Education Institution).

The same representative of the Sapat school chain was critical of the local system of rating schools based on the NST, pointing to a number of flaws in that approach. He suggested that Kyrgyzstan should shift to thinking more globally and rely on international ratings, such as the Program for International Student Assessment (PISA), evaluating schools' performance by the same standards under which foreign universities' students gain admission rather than on the number of Gold Certificates or local Olympiads. The latter, according to him, are local and trivial matters.

8 Turkish Boarding Schools: Quality and Added Value

Many Turkish private schools in Kyrgyzstan belong to the Sapat International Education institution system, which currently has two international schools, 16 lyceums (boarding schools), and four primary schools in the country.37 Both international schools, two of the boarding schools, and three of the primary schools are located in Bishkek. Sapat private schools are known for their quality, proof of which can be seen in the number of international and local competitions their pupils have won and the number of Gold Certificates that students have received over the years. In addition to educational quality, other motivations prompted parents to choose these schools: they instill moral values and encourage an upright lifestyle. Students of the Turkish schools are often described as well-bred, hardworking, honest, and self-disciplined.38 While

37 International Sapat Educational Institution, last accessed November 21, 2018, http://sebat .edu.kg/about.php?lang=ru.

38 Demir, Balci, and Akkok, "The Role of Turkish Schools in the Educational System and So- cial Transformation of Central Asian Countries."

the curriculum does not contain religious education *per se*, they try to school children in Islamic ethics within a universal moral framework; values such as respect for parents and the elderly, tolerance, compassion, altruism, and brotherhood/sisterhood are important components of Sapat education. A representative of a Turkish school administration confirmed:

> Our philosophy is to provide two things: quality education and proper upbringing. These two things cannot be separated from each other (Representative, Turkish private school).

A parent whose child attends one of the Turkish elite private schools commented:

> The reason why I gave my son to the school is English, but the ethics of the school were equally important to me (Parent, private school).

According to this parent, Turkish boarding schools are much more effective at promoting important values than non-boarding Turkish schools because their pupils have less contact with outsiders. Sapat boarding schools are segregated by gender in the upper/middle grades, and high school students usually live at school during the week, going home for weekends. Teachers in boarding schools therefore have more control over the behavior of their students. Often, boys and girls are sent to Turkish boarding schools during their teenage years specifically for these reasons. One respondent said that whereas previously parents sent their children to a "moldo" (an Islamic scholar), they now send them to Turkish schools.

Boarding schools, as an interview respondent shared, especially in the south, have become popular among migrant families who live in Russia. Housing prices are too high in Russia to allow the entire family to live properly, and often migrant parents leave their children behind in Kyrgyzstan with grandparents or other relatives. For those who can afford the tuition, private boarding schools are a good option that provides education, housing, as well as needed care.

9 Private Schools as Social Currency

In choosing schools, parents primarily rely on the opinions of their social networks: friends, relatives, and colleagues. According to the survey, 76% of all parents surveyed rely on the recommendations or reviews of friends, colleagues, and relatives in finding information about schools (see Figure 3).

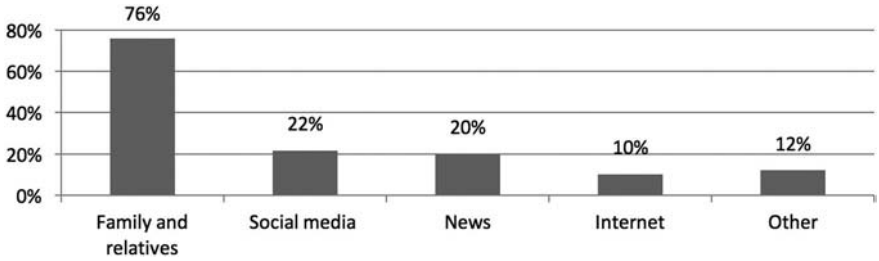

Figure 3 Sources of information used by parents to choose a school

Because private schools are relatively new and it is not easy to obtain public information about their performance and other outcomes, parents normally seek suggestions from people in their social circles. I find that parents are more likely to send their children to a particular private school if other parents in their social circle recommend that school and assess their experience positively.

Interestingly, such sharing of their experiences in obtaining private secondary education can also reinforce status competition among parents: some respondents elaborated that they send their children to a particular school because their friends' children are there. One parent whose child attends the Silk Road International School told the story of how, when a more expensive branch of the same school was opened, wealthier parents moved their children there, even though, according to her, there was no difference between the curricula of these two schools. Parents send their children to more expensive schools out of social pressure of "keeping up with the Joneses." I suggest that by sending children to private schools, parents implicitly seek to showcase their social status or gain social currency.

10 Public Schools

When it comes to parents' motivations for choosing public schools, the survey results reveal a completely different picture. The figure below details the most commonly mentioned reasons for choosing a public school. The majority (68%) indicated that the proximity of the school was a major motivation, while 52% said that their choice was determined for them by the district in which they reside. Only 33% indicated that the quality of the education was a motivating factor, and all other factors were significantly less relevant.

Below, I analyze the most significant reasons why parents chose public schools, using both survey and interview results.

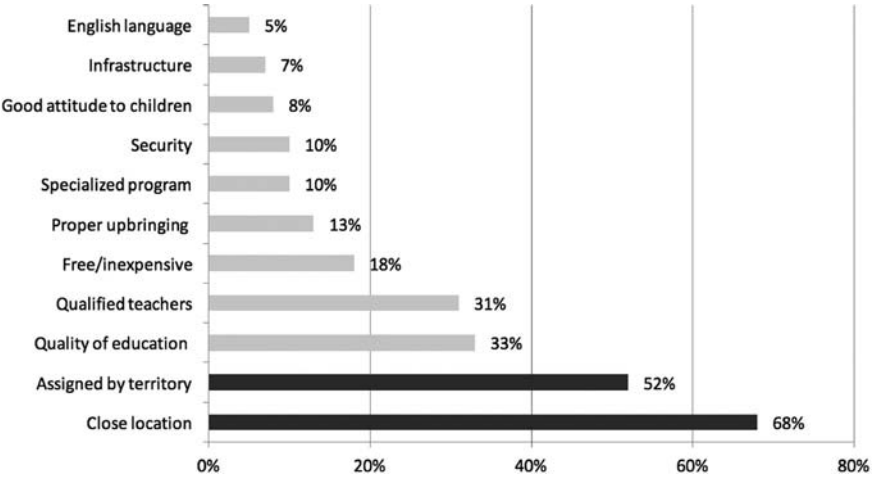

Figure 4 Parents' reasons for choosing a public school

11 School Location

In line with the survey results, interviews confirmed that the most significant factor in choosing public schools is their proximity. Our informants who send their children to public schools were divided between those who used neighborhood schools and those who bypassed this system in search of better- quality schools in other districts. Among those who chose neighborhood schools, proximity was the single most important factor influencing their decision. When asked about their reasons for choosing their school, one parent said this:

> I did not go and check out other schools. This school is located close to us, so I chose it. I don't know how it is different from other schools (Parent, public school #87).

Sticking to a neighborhood school was also influenced by a lack of the resources necessarily associated with attending better ones, which would require extra cost and effort. One parent explained her experience in this way:

> I have five children; four of them go to school. Before, two of them used to go to a gymnasium. After they finished elementary school, I had to transfer them to School #88 near our place of residence. The reason for this is that we would spend money on transportation and it would also require an adult to take them and bring them back. And that school

> would require more money for renovation and we would pay more money. So we have transferred them to the neighborhood school. You pay less for school fees here. It is only one stop away. The children walk to school (Parent, public school #88).

Those who lived in poorer new settlements in Bishkek and those who had no choice but to send their children to low-performing neighborhood schools complained that schools were extremely overcrowded and understaffed, with a very high rate of teacher turnover.

Parents who were able to place their children in high-performing public schools—sometimes outside of their district—mentioned high-quality education, qualified and committed teachers, the school's specialized curriculum, discipline, high NST scores, and the number of competitions won by the students as important factors in their decision. When asked about her motivation, one mother said the following:

> First, this school is very strong and my child will get a good education not only in physics and mathematics, but also in all other subjects. My son is good at mathematics and I want him to develop these skills further (Parent, public school #61).

Because admission to these high-performing schools is competitive, securing a place for a child requires certain skills and commitment from parents, such as early planning, preparation, hiring tutors, and so on. One parent shared her experience of how being strategic and preparing well in advance helped her to prepare her children for the high-performing school #61:

> I would prepare both my kids at home after they came home from kindergarten. They could read at the age of 4. I taught them math. I researched what schools are good, where they are located, what they teach. I planned ahead, thinking about which school to choose. I developed my own rating by asking parents about the schools their kids attend. I asked questions about which schools were the best. And then based on my personal rating, I decided that my kids should go to school #61. And then we start- ed preparing for admission (Parent, public school #61).

In choosing a similar type of school, another parent considered a combination of factors, such as children's abilities and aptitudes as well as the school director's reputation as a person who doesn't take bribes. She hired private tutors to successfully prepare her child for the entrance examination.

One common feature of parents who sent their children to high-performing public schools was that parents were themselves educated and interested in their children's development. They were very resourceful and well-informed about good schools in Bishkek, including their ratings and performance, and they extensively used their social and professional networks to obtain more information about schools. Most importantly, they knew how to get their children into these schools: they actively encouraged and motivated their children to study. Many used the services of private tutors, while others prepared children at home themselves, investing their own time and energy and using their own knowledge and skills.

In an interview, an education expert reminded us that despite the presence of elite international private schools in Bishkek, for many residents, the dream schools remain the "elite" public schools, such as #61, #13, and #6, attendance at which has been seen as a status symbol since Soviet times. He mentioned that until very recently, it was common to have to pay large bribes to be admitted to these public schools. Higher, unofficial parental fees paid to gain admission to these schools help explain why very poor parents cannot send their children there.39

12 Flexible After-School Time

Attending public school generally requires only half a day, in contrast to the full day at many private schools. Children are therefore left with ample after- school time to complete homework, tutoring, and various extra-curricular activities. Some parents indicated that that the advantage of a public school is that their child can attend the Shubin music school, which is popular among many urban families in Bishkek. After-school time can also be used to attend various interest-based clubs, such as dancing, drawing, sports, chess, and so on. Many students use these free hours to fill the gaps in the public education system in certain core subjects by attending private lessons. Private tutoring has become very popular among students of all types of schools, but more so in public schools (36% of students) than in private ones (23%) (see Figure 5). However, more private school students attended educational centers (41%) than did their counterparts in public schools (30%). One way to explain this observation is that students in public schools want extra help with core sub- jects such as math and English, and therefore they seek out private tutors, while private school students tend to be enrolled in extracurricular classes for

39 Interview with an expert.

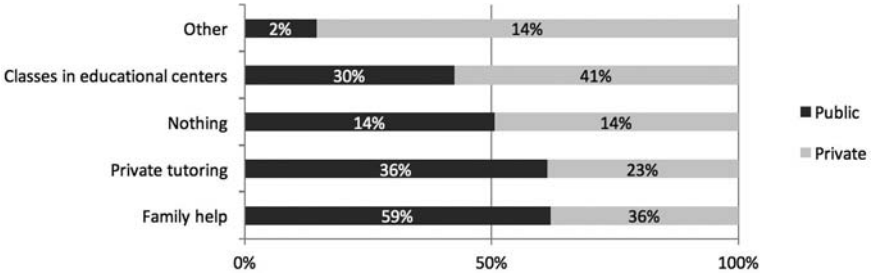

Figure 5 Strategies for obtaining additional knowledge outside the school curriculum, by type of school

sports, music, or arts, which are more often group-based. More students in public schools received family help with homework (59%) than students in private schools (36%), as many private schools provide homework support atschool.

Survey results showed that math and languages, especially English, are the most popular subjects. One expert described the popularity of the private tutoring business in Bishkek this way:

> I know very few schools where kids do not go to private tutors. Even the majority of kids in elite gymnasiums also go to private tutoring. Money flows there (Expert, consultant on education).

However, location and distance are important. Parents who lived on the outskirts of Bishkek complained about the lack of access to good tutoring centers in their area. The majority of private educational centers and places to pursue extracurricular activities are located in the city center. This situation also con- tributes to the popularity of such activities among long-term urban residents compared to newcomers, who overwhelmingly live in new settlements.

While private tutoring is not cheap, it can actually offer cost savings to middle-income families. Some such families find it more strategic to send their child to a high-performing public school and compensate for the missing knowledge through private tutoring. For example, learning English privately is much less costly than attending an international private school. One parent, while convinced that high-performing public schools provide quality education, noted the advantage of private schools when it comes to English. For her, hiring a private tutor was the solution:

> I have seen how well children from international schools speak English. As far as I understand, they are no different in terms of other subjects. Of course, it is not bad, but why would you overpay just for English? I need

> to hire a good tutor so that my child can compete with them. These schools also give academic writing skills. This is their big advantage; public school children do not have these skills. So this is a big disadvantage of public schools if you want to send your kid abroad. You have to get additional help in this (Parent, public school #6).

13 Preparing Children for "Real Life"

Some parents find that public schools allow children to grow up in the authentic social environment of Bishkek, better preparing them for real life. Many parents who chose public schools were critical of the conditions in private schools, considering them too protective and nurturing and noting that there, children socialize mainly with others from similar social backgrounds. One ex- pert shared the following opinion:

> Many parents consider that private schools do not provide kids with the opportunity to become closely familiar with life and make them less adaptable (Expert).

Parents consider that public schools allow children to study with other children from diverse backgrounds and learn to socialize and survive. They see "real life," take public transportation to school, become more independent and more disciplined, and thus grow up to be more prepared for the difficult life ahead.

14 Discussion: Portrait of Educational Inequality

In this final section, I set out to account for how these educational choices are shaped by the kinds of resources parents have at their disposal. This task requires taking a hard look at the issue of inequality, which I do first by comparing families' motivations and strategies and then by categorizing families ac- cording to the different forms of capital they employ in providing education for their children.

15 Factors of Inequality

The most obvious factor that reflects inequality between public and private school parents is income. Figure 6 confirms the obvious, showing a direct

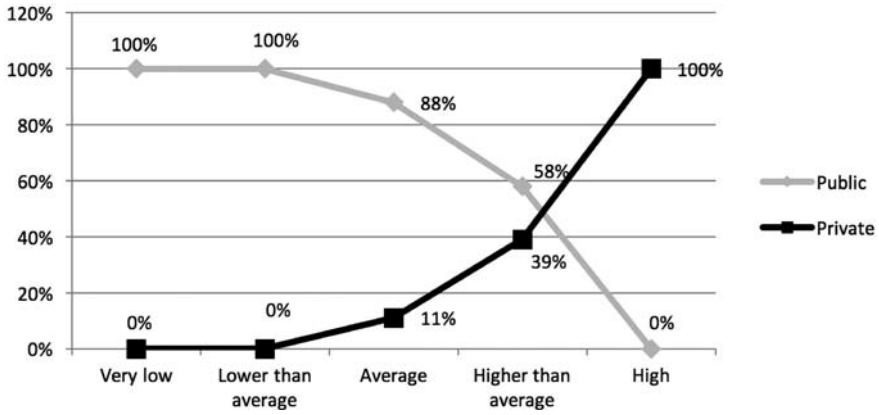

Figure 6 Choice of private vs. public school, by income

correlation between income and choice of school. One can see that parents with higher incomes can afford private schools, while public school users are those who have average incomes or are poor. However, some families with higher-than-average incomes also use public schools.

Inequality can also be identified by comparing parents' motivations and strategies. For example, location was the most important factor for parents of children in public schools—69%, versus only 5% for parents of children in private schools. This suggests that children in private schools are not limited by distance: their parents can take them across the city, usually in their own cars, or they can afford to pay for transportation organized by schools. Mobility is thus connected to income. Money also allows parents of private school children to access certain privileges: small classes with proper conditions, a good diet, and better treatment of children by teachers and staff. For families whose children attend public schools, these were not mentioned as factors in their choice.

The quality of education in private schools (68%) was rated higher in the survey than in public schools (33%). The comparison of parental satisfaction with their choice of schools shows that parents from private schools were more satisfied—4.29 out of 5, compared to 3.74 for parents of children in public schools. The reasons for dissatisfaction were different for public and private schools. The most common complaints about public schools included poorly qualified teachers, overcrowded classes, bad treatment of children, a lack of books, and collection of money from parents for various school needs. Complaints in private schools were more elaborate and were related to the quality of food, the quality of education not being quite up to expectations, and fear of the experimental character of private schools and their innovative curricula.

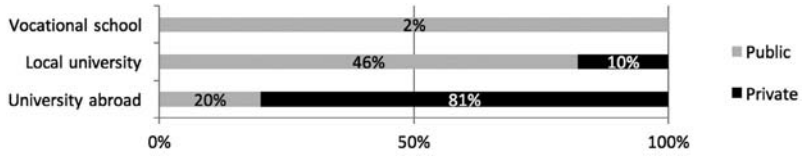

Figure 7 Plans for children's future, by type of school

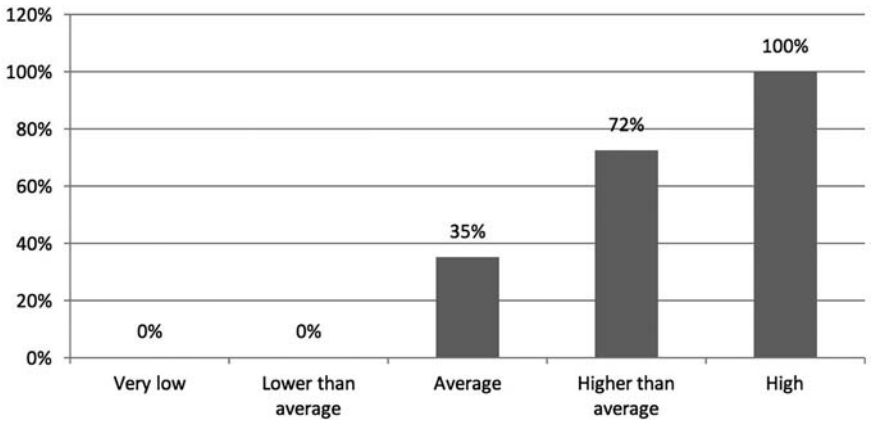

Figure 8 Study abroad plans, by income

One of the most noticeable gaps between the two types of schools is revealed in the future plans that parents envisioned for their children. Figure 7 shows these differences: only 10% of parents of private school attendees were interested in local universities, compared to 46% of the parents of those attending public schools; 81% of parents of private school children indicated that their child would study abroad, compared to 20% of parents of public school children. The top destination for obtaining post-secondary education was Europe, followed by the U.S. and Russia.

Besides a correlation between future plans and type of school, there is also a very strong positive correlation between future plans and income. This is shown in Figure 8.

Looking at all these figures and comparisons, one could suggest a fairly straightforward correlation here: those who have money have more opportunities both for private education and for education abroad, while those who lack money have fewer. Yet the situation is more complex; looking at educational inequality only from the financial angle does not tell the complete story. In the next section, I incorporate other forms of capital into the discussion.

16 Three Forms of Capital and Categorization of Families

In order to see the full picture, I suggest looking at family resources by considering different forms of capital: financial, social, and cultural (human). This approach, pioneered by Bourdieu, has been explored by a number of other scholars. Non-financial forms of capital—social and cultural—are important resources that can contribute to people's wellbeing.40

Social capital usually implies various forms of social relations that people can use to their benefit. In the context of Kyrgyzstan, social relations and net- works have always been extremely important.41 In this research, I found that parents with wider social networks could access more information on educational opportunities. It is through their social networks that they sort out which schools are good and learn where to find qualified teachers and tutors. In some cases, having connections to school directors can even secure a dis- count at a private school or a place for a child in a highly competitive school.

Cultural capital refers to various kinds of knowledge, skills, and information, including familiarity with how institutions work, that result in positive outcomes for upward mobility. It is a question of knowing the "rules of the game."42 Parents, even when they do not have much financial capital to invest in an elite private school, are still able to access high-quality education by sending their children to high-performing public schools. Knowing the rules of the game helps them make strategic decisions, such as preparing children ahead of time for admission to a competitive school or university; taking advantage of various extracurricular activities, such as music schools, drawing, or choreography; seeking out additional learning opportunities through private tutors; and being actively engaged in their children's education, constantly motivating and directing them.

Parents' education also helps. Many parents who grew up during the Soviet era, when literacy was almost universal and schools and universities offered high-quality education, possess a very good knowledge of core school subjects. These parents might not have the money to place their children in private schools nor the social connections to secure them places in prestigious public

40 Lareau, *Unequal Childhoods*.

41 Kathleen Kuehnast and Nora Dudwick, *Better a Hundred Friends Than a Hundred Rubles? Social Networks in Transition—The Kyrgyz Republic* (Washington, DC: World Bank, 2004); Aksana Ismailbekova, *Blood Ties and the Native Son: Poetics of Patronage in Kyrgyzstan* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2017).

42 Annette Lareau, "Cultural Knowledge and Social Inequality," American Sociological Review 80, no. 1 (2015): 1–27, 1.

schools, yet they are quite well-educated themselves and they devote their own time to studying with children.

Thus, having a wide range of social connections and cultural capital can increase parents' access to schools and opportunities for obtaining knowledge.[43] When taking into consideration these additional forms of capital, the portrait of educational inequality becomes more complex and nuanced. Those who do not have financial, social, or human capital are the ones at risk. Accordingly, one can distinguish several main categories of families by reference to the resources they have for placing children in schools. It is important to look at these categories as fairly abstract ones and to bear in mind that many families belong to more than one category. That being said, creating some form of typology helps us visualize the nuances of inequality.

16.1 *The Elite*

This category includes representatives of the upper echelons of Kyrgyz politicians: parliamentary deputies, upper-level ministry bureaucrats, and high- ranking professionals working in international organizations. These are people who have access to a substantial share of at least two (financial and social) or even three (financial, social, and cultural) forms of capital. These families can afford to send their children to international English-language schools or else oblige school principals to accept their children to these schools for a lower fee (or no fee at all). Parents in this category have the widest range of choices for their children. Down the hierarchy of official positions, the range of choices shrinks: lower-ranked officials might still have social and cultural capital but not necessarily financial capital.

16.2 *The "New Kyrgyz"*

This category includes Kyrgyz businessmen who became wealthy by engaging in cross-border trade, the sewing industry, construction, or other businesses. Many of them came to Bishkek from the regions and built their fortunes by working hard over the course of many years. Such "new Kyrgyz" may not have strong urban cultural capital and may have only a modest education and social background. But they do have money, and depending on how successful their businesses are, they can afford different kinds of private schools, from the cheapest to the most expensive. For representatives of this category, sending children to an expensive private school might be a matter of social prestige, while placing them in cheaper private schools is a matter of convenience: kids are well looked-after and parents do not have to do homework with them.

43 Lareau, *Unequal Childhoods*.

16.3 *Urban Middle Class*

This category includes long-term city residents who themselves grew up in Bishkek or consider themselves urbanites. Members of this group have excellent Russian language skills and urban-style manners.44 Many of them work as professionals in various fields, including the more or less well-paid positions in international organizations. Some might have small businesses. Even with higher-than-average salaries, their incomes might not be enough to afford private schools. The top choice for such parents is to place their children in the prestigious high-performing public schools. To do so, they make the best of their social, cultural, and human capital. Being well-educated themselves, parents can benefit from their human capital by helping children prepare to study in such demanding schools. These are the parents who are most likely to be critical of private schools, dismissing them as providing a poor quality of education, while justifying their own choice.

16.4 *Urban Poor*

This is the category of long-term urban residents in the lower socio-economic strata—those without regular or well-paid jobs. These include low-paid teachers, medical staff (nurses), and other low-paid government workers, whose only source of income is their salary. Unlike the urban middle class, they are not able to generate additional income from small and medium businesses. Having a child attend a high-status public school can place a significant burden on such households, as these schools still collect higher parental contributions than average schools. The low status of their jobs means that they have limited social capital or professional connections. The only form of capital these urban poor residents might have, then, is their human capital—that is, their own knowledge of subjects. They are more likely to send children to the regular neighborhood schools and contribute to their children's education byhelping them with their homework.

16.5 *Poor Internal Migrants*

Since Kyrgyzstan's independence, Bishkek has attracted a large number of internal migrants, who have come to the capital in the search of income and survival opportunities. These families might not have any qualifications or social connections that would help them in the professional or business realms. They live in the family dormitories in the city center or in the less prestigious *novostroikas* on the outskirts of the city. The only choice they have is to send

44 Natalya Kosmarskaya, "The Russian Language in Kyrgyzstan: Changing Roles and Inspiing Prospects," *Russian Journal of Communication*, 7, no. 2 (2015): 217–222.

Figure 9 Categorization of families regarding access to schools

children to the neighborhood schools. Unfortunately, because many *novostroikas* lack schools, their children have to travel long distances to attend the nearest school. These children are the most unfortunate because their parents do not have money or connections; being from rural areas, their social capital is built around kinship and relatives who live in the villages they came from. Nor do they have much human capital to help their children with homework or advance their educational opportunities.

These are the five categories of Bishkek residents, which summarize the inequality existing between families in terms of children's access to education by looking at different forms of capital: financial, social, and cultural. What is the relative weight of each category in the overall composition of resource possession? Putting precise numbers on this question is beyond the scope of the present research, but by looking at average salaries and at the numbers of public and private schools in the city, I suggest that the composition is skewed toward the lower end. I propose that educational inequality in Bishkek can be understood as a pyramid (see Figure 9).

17 Conclusion

Parents' secondary education choices in Bishkek reveal that, as in many parts of the world, private schools serve wealthy and upper middle-income families. Despite some debates around the quality of education in private schools, privileged families in Bishkek opt for private education for a variety of reasons. Some see in private education an opportunity to escape the Soviet-style education system, which they perceive as outdated, while others value private

schools for their conveniences. For a select few, private schools provide students an easier path to leaving the country and entering global education, while for others, they provide a mechanism for securing higher status for children (and parents). As most private schools do not have strict and competitive admission policies, the only criterion for accessing such schools is the family's financial status. Thus, private schools sort out student composition according to parents' socio-economic backgrounds, which paves the ways for social segregation and inequality.

However, parents with strong social and cultural capital can place their children in the best public schools, which provide an education no worse than that in some private schools. Inequality in secondary education in Bishkek is thus layered and depends on how families can utilize their resources. It is those families that lack all three forms of capital whose children are at the highest risk and need serious attention from policymakers. It is disturbing to know that these poor families—who make up the majority of the urban population of Bishkek—are disadvantaged in their ability to access not only private schools, but also high-quality public schools.