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# Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan

## Early Grade Reading Review

**Final Draft**

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# **Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan**

## **Early Grade Reading Review**

Prepared by:

Duishon Shamatov

University of Central Asia  
Aguirre Division of JBS International, Inc.

The author's views expressed in this publication do not necessarily reflect the views of the United States Agency for International Development or the United States Government.

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## ACRONYMS

ADB	Asian Development Bank
AKF	Aga Khan Foundation
CEATM	Center for Educational Assessment and Teaching Methods
EFA	Education for All
EGRA	Early Grade Reading Assessment
FTI	Fast Track Initiative
GBAO	<i>Gorno Badakhshan</i> Autonomous Oblast
IPD	Institute for Professional Development (ITTI in Khorog)
KAE	Kyrgyz Academy of Education
MOES	Ministry of Education and Science (Kyrgyzstan)
NSBA	National Student Assessment
OECD	Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development
OSI	Open Society Institute
PISA	Programme for International Student Assessment
QLP	Quality Learning Program, USAID
UNICEF	United Nations Children’s Fund
USAID/CAR	United States Agency for International Development/Central Asian Republics



## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This qualitative research study precedes the Early Grade Reading Assessment (EGRA) in Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan, which will take place in October - December 2011. The study is a preliminary review of current pedagogy and materials for early grade reading in the two countries, as well as the factors affecting early grade reading. Qualitative data has been collected and analyzed according to the Terms of Reference provided by the Aguirre Division of JBS International, Inc. and the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID). The purpose of this study is to:

1. Review current pedagogy and materials related to early grade reading in Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan
2. Identify positive and negative factors affecting early grade reading in the two countries

In both countries, a purposive sample of key stakeholders and experts was selected in order to gather a wide range of opinions related to current pedagogy and resources available to teach reading in grades one to four. Fifty interviews, 25 each in Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan, were conducted over a span of three weeks in August 2011. The sample included education officials (Ministry of Education), pre-service teacher training institution staff, Academy of Education members, authors of children's literature, representatives from international organizations, primary teachers, and parents. In-depth interview guides were prepared and used in a semi-structured format with these stakeholder groups. The interview guides were translated into Russian, Kyrgyz, and Tajik and respondents were interviewed in the language they preferred.

In addition to in-depth interviews with key stakeholders, relevant literature and materials were also reviewed to assess the state of instructional and educational resources available in these grades. A desk review of relevant documents was carried out prior to and during data collection.

### Findings and Discussions

As a result of the interviews, information was obtained on how reading is taught in the early grades (grades one to four), what standards are used to evaluate students' abilities in reading, and what materials are available for policy makers, teachers, and students. The key factors that positively and negatively affect the successful development of reading skills and comprehension inside and outside of the classroom were also identified. This section presents these study findings.

#### *How is reading taught in the early grades?*

- The education systems in Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan mainly use traditional methods of teaching reading; active reading pedagogy is rarely promoted. Respondent interviews indicated that despite theoretical discussions of "active learning" over the past 20 years (supported by international development agencies), little systemic change has taken place.
- According to a Kyrgyz Academy of Education (KAE) expert, by grade four students should master the following four interrelated components of reading: 1) fluency (or tempo reading), 2) clarity in reading, 3) conscious reading, and 4) correct reading. A child in fourth grade should be able to read no fewer than 100 words per minute and all four components need to be emphasized.
- A very common practice in both countries is reading for the sake of speed and memorization. Many respondents noted that primary teachers overemphasize speed over reading comprehension and, thus, send the wrong message to students about the purpose of reading instruction. As one teacher explained, "We have speed-reading. We have had this method for many years... there are children

who can read 100 words per minute without understanding anything. The speed is necessary, but I would like that children also understand what they read.”

- Reading the same text repeatedly (drilling) happens often, and children are not helped to gradually read more difficult and unknown texts.
- Teachers tend to focus on a few very capable students in the classroom (the top 10 to 20 percent of the class) while the majority of the average or weaker students are ignored. No remedial programs exist for students who have difficulties with learning to read. Teachers often see their students as passive recipients and do not actively engage them in learning.
- Per respondent interviews, many teachers plan and conduct their lessons with the assumption that all students have the same reading ability. They are not able to respond to students at different reading levels. “Teachers have a difficult time when they have a student who can already read and a student who cannot read [in the same class],” noted a respondent. Some respondents suggested that children who come to school knowing how to read should be separated from those who cannot read; according to these respondents, the situation is not fair for a reading child to sit in a class while a teacher attempts to teach those who cannot read. While others opposed this opinion, respondents offered very little insight as to how to solve this challenge.
- Interviews with experts noted differences between Russian and Kyrgyz schools. Russian schools, on average, are resource-rich and provide an array of available literature for children. Kyrgyz schools, in contrast, do not have many Kyrgyz books, and libraries are usually small and outdated.
- Many international development agencies assist local education authorities to provide effective in-service teacher education that introduces elements of student-centered and interactive teaching methods. However, pre-service teacher education has been neglected as assistance to this sector is not seen as a good investment.
- Teacher professional preparation and classroom expertise are major constraints to quality education provision in both Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan. Pre-service teacher training institutions fall far behind reforms and student teachers appear to be poorly equipped with modern reading theories and pedagogy. Teachers have poor knowledge of reading pedagogy and are not trained how to teach reading effectively.
- International donor agencies have funded some interesting initiatives promoting active early reading pedagogies; however, most of these efforts have been limited in scope and number, or have not been sustainable. Programs such as Step by Step and Critical Thinking Through Reading and Writing, both funded by the Open Society Institute (formerly Soros Foundation), were considered to be successful. Many respondents spoke fondly of these programs, but concluded that they had very limited success due to lack of sustainability.

### ***What standards are used to evaluate students’ abilities?***

- Assessment of students’ reading ability focuses on tempo and speed. Students are mostly assessed on their abilities to read text quickly and aloud with clarity. Based on interviews with educators and ministry staff, a student in grade four should be able to read 90-100 words per minute.<sup>1</sup> Teachers assess students’ quick reading and do not encourage students to self-correct or improve. Further,

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<sup>1</sup> It should be noted, however, that respondents provided several different answers to how many words should be read per minute in each grade, and in each language. This indicates confusion as to the standards of reading set at each grade level.

assessment is mostly measured normatively, i.e. grades are based on a classroom scale rather than on individual performance.

- Assessment of reading in primary grades is given low priority. As one educator indicated, “If we want to train teachers in new pedagogy to teach reading, then we should also teach them how to assess reading.” For example, if teachers are to use interactive teaching methods, then assessment should also be stressed accordingly.
- Students are given a grade of one to five in each of their subjects (including reading), with five being the highest and best mark. In some schools, if students are doing poorly in a certain subject, their parents may be asked to come to a public meeting in the school where they are censured for their student’s performance.
- The baseline study of USAID’s Quality Learning Program (QLP) in Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan was conducted in 2010 and took into consideration the education standards of both countries, but also attempted to benchmark the Kyrgyz and Tajik schools to international standards. The test results of students in grades four and seven indicated that these students have poor knowledge, especially in reading. In Kyrgyzstan, 1,023 fourth-grade students took part in the reading tests in their mother tongue. The results indicated that 58.7 percent of the Kyrgyz students scored below basic level, 25.1 percent scored at basic level, and 16.3 percent of students scored above the basic level of reading. In Tajikistan, 1,009 fourth-grade students participated in student reading tests in their mother tongue; 66.2 percent of the students scored below basic level, 29.0 percent scored at the basic level, and 4.9 percent of the students scored above the basic level of reading.
- Kyrgyzstan participated in the 2006 and 2009 rounds of the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA). It ranked last of all participating countries.<sup>2</sup> The 2009 PISA showed that more than 80 percent of participating 15-year-olds had reading skills below Level 2, considered “a baseline level of proficiency at which students begin to demonstrate the reading literacy competencies that will enable them to participate effectively and productively in life.” A specialist from the Center for Education Assessment and Teaching Methods (CEATM) commented, “Our children cannot apply their knowledge in real life situations. For example, a question in the PISA asked students where to place a torch in order to get maximum lighting in a room, which requires knowledge of physics. Most students from Kyrgyzstan could not answer the question correctly.” Tajikistan did not participate in the PISA tests.
- On a National Assessment of Students’ Learning Achievements in 2007 and 2009 in Kyrgyzstan, more than 60 percent of grade four students demonstrated below basic achievement in reading.<sup>3</sup>

### ***What materials are available to policy makers, teachers, and students?***

- Both Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan have developed new education strategies with specific benchmarks for achievement by the year 2020. These strategies highlight the current state of the education system and propose steps that should be taken to achieve the desired goals in improving education access and quality.

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<sup>2</sup> Some 58 countries/economies participated in the 2006 round of PISA, and 65 countries participated in the 2009 round. The 2009 test focused on an assessment of reading skills. On a positive note, Kyrgyzstan saw an average score improvement of 26 points between the two tests making it one of the top improvers in 2009. For more information, see [www.oecd.org/edu/pisa/2009](http://www.oecd.org/edu/pisa/2009).

<sup>3</sup> Reported in UNICEF (2008) *Country Profile: Education in Kyrgyzstan*.

- In Kyrgyzstan, a new national curriculum framework has been developed in coordination with the Open Society Institute as part of the new education strategy. At the same time, the Asian Development Bank's Second Education Project has developed curricula for individual subjects, such as reading. Subject-based curricula for grade one were to be put into effect on September 1, 2011. According to a representative from the Kyrgyz Ministry of Education and Science (MOES), all schools received new first grade textbooks by August 25, 2011. Textbooks for grades two to four are ready, but will be published and distributed later in conjunction with release of the new curricula. Many respondents noted that the planning for the introduction of the new curriculum was done poorly and in haste. As of the end of August, when data collection for this report took place, schools were still waiting for textbooks and teacher guides. In many schools, primary teachers had not been trained in the use of the new subject curricula.
- In both Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan, textbooks are developed according to the standards set for each subject, with a list of topics and hours to be allocated to teaching them. As a rule, previous subject curricula (i.e. curricula that are now outdated or no longer in use) are not accessible to teachers and students. Thus, often teachers and students have only "current" textbooks (if they have them at all) which are to be used in a very restricted way. Teachers often do not have multiple references with which to build their lesson plans.
- The shortage of quality teaching materials and textbooks is a serious issue in both countries. According to the National Statistics Committee (2008), 17 percent of Kyrgyz schools are supplied with about 50 percent of the necessary textbooks and 18 percent with more than 80 percent of the necessary textbooks. Over 30 percent of Russian schools are supplied with less than 50 percent of the needed textbooks and 24 percent are supplied with more than 80 percent of the necessary textbooks.
- According to various respondents, the poor quality of textbooks is attributed to the development and publication processes. In Kyrgyzstan, for example, the KAE is responsible for the development and approval of textbooks. The KAE hires textbook authors who are usually removed from everyday school life; according to respondents, the textbooks developed are overly theoretical and difficult for teachers and students to use. As a result of the monopolization by the KAE of the "business" of textbook development and the lack of open market competition, textbooks are of low quality.
- Inadequate teaching and learning resources impact education quality as well. The 2006 PISA test found that, compared to other OECD countries, schools in Kyrgyzstan have a very low supply of school resources (OECD, 2007). A significant relationship appears to exist between the level of material resources available and overall student performance. Over 90 percent of school directors surveyed for the PISA in 2006 referred to a lack of, or low quality of, physical and material resources used in teaching and learning. Based on the interviews conducted in this study, the supply of resources and materials remains problematic.

## **Factors Affecting Early Grade Reading**

### ***Positive Factors***

- The ministries of education in Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan have requested the aid QLP, a USAID initiative, in preparing the syllabi for grades one to five, including learning outcomes for language and reading.

- The Fast Track Initiative in Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan is working closely with the respective ministries of education to publish early grade reading textbooks and literature. In Tajikistan, the Aga Khan Foundation supports the Methodology Centre in Khorog to prepare early grade reading materials as well.
- In Kyrgyzstan, only 11 percent of preschool children attend kindergarten (Ministry of Education and Science, 2011). As a result of the low levels of school readiness, in the summer of 2011 the MOES prepared 100-hour and 240-hour preparatory classes for young children to prepare for grade one.
- The MOES in Kyrgyzstan attempted to develop a literacy program called the “Reading Child,” albeit without much success due to a lack of funding. However, such efforts demonstrate that the government is aware of the issues of low literacy and is willing to address them.
- In Kyrgyzstan, UNICEF, the Open Society Institute, and the Aga Khan Foundation prepared the TV cartoon project *Keremet Koch*, the first and only program in Central Asia that promotes education. In 2011, these partners developed a new cycle called “Letters” in which the 36 letters of the Kyrgyz alphabet were presented in game form to encourage children to learn. As one of the partners shared, “We thought it would be difficult, but we learned that all children learned the 36 letter parts of the cartoons with repeated showings. Children anxiously waited for the new series and watched it. Even younger age children watched. Maybe they did not understand letters yet, but they watched the actions of the cartoons with new characters.” Currently a new cartoon is being broadcasted called *Adventure to the World of Books*, developed by the Aga Khan Foundation.

### **Negative Factors**

- A culture of literacy, i.e. an emphasis on reading in everyday life, is missing in both Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan. Reading often ends with the school day. Many parents do not read books to their children at home nor do they read with their children. To complicate matters further, many parents have migrated to Russia for work and are absent from the home. Ideally, parents should read to their children and create positive learning conditions at home. As one parent noted, it is important to “establish a tradition at home – to allocate reading time for all members of the family, adults and kids. Everyone reads a book.”
- A consensus in the interviews was that appropriate books and textbooks in local languages, particularly in Kyrgyz and Tajik, are lacking. While Russian language books can be imported from Russia or other neighboring countries, local language texts are not available to supply students with appropriate texts.
- Little emphasis is placed on reading comprehension or reading for pleasure given the focus on student assessments in speed and clarity. As a result, reading is seen as a chore and obligation and most students do not read in their free time.
- Parents also need to be educated on the importance of buying books and supporting reading for pleasure in the home. Many parents would rather spend their money on material things rather than on books, which reinforces to the children the low importance of reading.
- A general misconception in both countries is that the teacher is the only person who can (or should) educate a child. Many parents have the mindset that the teacher’s responsibility is to teach and motivate their child, not theirs. As one primary teacher noted, “In some parents’ meetings at school, I have heard parents say, ‘Well, I gave my child to you (i.e. the school) and now you must teach him.’”

## Recommendations

- USAID should capitalize on the successful work already accomplished by QLP, especially in the areas of primary education. QLP has worked with both pre-service and in-service teacher training institutions, including the Academies of Education in each country. Both teacher preparation and professional development related to early reading pedagogy are a very important area to pursue.
- In-service teacher training cannot support all primary teachers in a short time; therefore alternative and more effective approaches need to be sought so that a majority of primary teachers can be trained in modern early reading pedagogy as quickly as possible.
- International organizations such as UNICEF, the Open Society Institute, and the Aga Khan Foundation have done significant work in the area of early childhood development and early reading. These donor agencies have published popular books, established programs such as alternative and innovative kindergartens, and have done projects in Kyrgyzstan on family reading. Their work, however, has been limited to certain districts or territories. USAID should investigate opportunities to work closely with these organizations, sharing experiences and expertise and exploring ways to increase the impact of successful programs.
- A shortage of children’s literature in Kyrgyz and Tajik indicates an area that could be supported further. However, publishing more books should not become an end in itself; due to a lack of a culture of literacy, children may not necessarily begin to read independently. Therefore, new programs should also involve and attract communities and parents to raise their interest in reading together.
- As noted in the QLP baseline survey, “both countries should put an emphasis on the importance of skills related to reading, understanding, and working with different types of texts. Reading is a basic tool in learning and lack of reading skills inevitably leads to negative consequences in learning all other school disciplines. Due to the fact that in Kyrgyzstan and to a greater extent in Tajikistan... serious problems [exist] with the development of reading skills among students, ... the absolute recommendation is made to the program to [put] a special emphasis on training instructors in text processing methodology and techniques for developing students’ reading skills starting at the very basic level” (USAID, 2010).

# I. INTRODUCTION AND BACKGROUND

## Contextual Background

During the time of the former Soviet Union, Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan achieved significant progress in providing access to education and promoting education excellence. Adult literacy was nearly universal, primary and secondary graduation rates were high, and both countries reported strong student achievement scores in mathematics and science. The Soviet education system, significantly financed and supported by central government structures, complemented the planned economies that dominated the region.

After the dissolution of the Soviet Union in 1991, Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan began experiencing serious problems in all public spheres, including education. The systems suffered two major systemic shocks: 1) a dramatic loss of available financial resources and 2) an inexorable transition from planned economies to market-based systems. Market economies require abilities to apply knowledge flexibly, to cope with the cognitive requirements of unfamiliar tasks, to recognize and solve problems, and to self-manage new learning. Unfortunately, the content and structures of prevailing teaching practices, assessment methodologies, curricula, and education finance systems in Central Asia were not consistent with the acquisition of these skills. Consequently, both nations experienced difficulty in sustaining the level of education achieved during the USSR. The times changed but the systems had not. Despite reported adult literacy rates of 99 percent in both countries, declining education achievements of school-age populations became the reality.<sup>4</sup>

The focus of this study is on early grade reading and the acquisition of literacy skills in grades one to four (in this report referred to as the “early grades”). The U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID) emphasizes the importance of early grade reading in goal one of its education strategy (2011). Skills related to reading are among the foundational skills for all school-based learning. As noted in international literature, poor reading skills lead to poor learning in all other subjects. If children learn to read at an early age and at a sufficient rate (with comprehension), they have a greater chance of succeeding in school. Many students who do not learn to read early are likely to repeat grades or drop out; moreover, children who do not learn to read well are deprived of many future opportunities for continued education and successful employment (RTI, 2009).

## Research Methodology

This qualitative research study precedes the Early Grade Reading Assessment (EGRA) in Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan, which will take place in October - December 2011. With USAID’s support, the EGRA will assess the foundational literacy skills of children in grades two to four. The EGRA can provide a more accurate indicator of children’s current reading abilities, leading to an identification of potential areas for improvements in early education provision (RTI, 2009).

The purpose of this study is to:

1. Review current pedagogy and materials related to early grade reading in Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan
2. Identify positive and negative factors affecting early grade reading in the two countries

Qualitative data was collected and analyzed according to the Terms of Reference provided by the Aguirre Division of JBS International, Inc. and USAID.

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<sup>4</sup> UNICEF (2010) Country Statistics, and ADB (2010) Basic Statistics.

### ***Sampling***

The research team chose a purposive sample of respondents in order to accurately portray the status of early grade reading instruction, methods, and resources in Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan. Research has shown that purposeful sampling can produce powerful insights through the in-depth analysis of a relatively small number of case studies (McMillan and Schumacher, 1997). A total of 50 interviews were conducted, 25 each in Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan, over a three-week timeframe in August 2011. The sample included education officials (Ministry of Education), pre-service teacher training institution staffs, Academy of Education members, authors of children's literature, representatives of international organizations, primary school teachers, and parents. The respondents were identified and selected with the assistance of mission staff from USAID Central Asian Republics (USAID/CAR) and the Quality Learning Program (QLP), a USAID-funded program that supports primary education. Appendices A and B include the lists of individuals interviewed in Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan respectively.

### ***Data Collection Instruments***

Interview guides were prepared and used in a semi-structured format with stakeholder groups. The focus of the interviews was on current pedagogy and materials used in early grade reading instruction, as well as factors that affect early grade reading acquisition. Specific questions related to each stakeholder group are included in Appendix C.

General questions asked of all groups included:

- How do you define reading? How do students in grades one to four learn to read? What are the standards/documents available to them?
- (In Kyrgyzstan) What can you say about the new curriculum for grades one to four? What has changed from the previous curriculum? How is it different?
- What exactly does a student need to master at the end of primary education in terms of reading?
- How do you evaluate the quality of reading instruction in schools?
- How do teachers teach reading? Where have they learned methods of reading instruction? How effective are their methods?
- How do teachers assess students' reading? What methods do they use to assess reading? How effective are their assessments of reading?
- What materials on reading are available for policymakers, teachers, students, and parents? How do you rate the quality of the materials? Are the materials easily accessible to all students? What proportion of students is able to access the materials?
- Do teachers and students have recommended textbooks for reading? How useful are those textbooks?
- Does each school have a functioning library? How many book titles are in the library for early grades? Are they sufficient? Do teachers and students use the library?
- What factors positively or negatively affect the successful development of reading skills? What is your recommendation (if any) for improvements in reading instruction? Do students read independently and learn to read outside school? If yes, where?
- Do parents help their children to read? If yes, how? If no, why not?

The interview guides were translated into Russian, Kyrgyz, and Tajik, and respondents were interviewed in the language of their preference. In addition to in-depth interviews with key stakeholders, relevant literature and materials were also reviewed to assess the state of instructional and educational

resources available in these grades. A desk review of relevant documents was carried out prior to and during data collection. The list of the documents reviewed can be found in Appendix D.

### **Study Limitations**

The research study took place in August 2011 when school was not in session and many potential respondents were on vacation. Some interview candidates had to be replaced due to scheduling conflicts and this necessarily prolonged the data collection process. Due to the brevity of the research study, the author was not able to conduct a more systematic investigation of reading instructional methods in Kyrgyz and Tajik schools (e.g. through observation), which would have enriched the study findings. The limited time to review the documents and the interview data was a serious constraint to thoroughly addressing the tasks outlined in the Terms of Reference. Finally, it should be noted that the data from the interviews were self-reported, which may pose limitations due to personal and social desirability biases among respondents.

## **II. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSIONS**

As a result of the interviews and desktop review, information was obtained on how reading is taught in the early grades, what standards are used to evaluate students' abilities in reading, and what materials are available for policy makers, teachers, and students. The key factors that positively and negatively affect the successful development of reading skills and comprehension inside and outside of the classroom were also identified. This section presents these study findings.

### **Kyrgyzstan: Current Pedagogy and Materials for Early Grade Reading**

#### ***The Education System***

Similar to other former Soviet countries, the education system in Kyrgyzstan deteriorated after the breakup of the USSR in 1991. A considerable decline in student achievement and enrollment took place. Some families withdrew their children from school so that they could help with household activities. Today, Kyrgyzstan has significant resource constraints, a factor which greatly affects the pool of qualified and motivated teachers available. This has resulted in a deteriorated school infrastructure and disordered curricula.

The instruction of early grade reading has suffered in lockstep with an overall decline of education quality in Kyrgyzstan. Students who participated in the 2006 and 2009 Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) ranked last of all participating countries.<sup>5</sup> The 2009 PISA included a specific focus on reading and literacy skills. The findings showed that more than 80 percent of Kyrgyz 15-year-old students had reading skills below Level 2, considered a “baseline level of proficiency, at which students begin to demonstrate the reading literacy competencies that will enable them to participate effectively and productively in life” (PISA, 2009). The PISA test also revealed large gaps between urban and rural schools and between private and government-run schools.

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<sup>5</sup> Some 58 countries/economies participated in the 2006 round of PISA, and 65 countries participated in the 2009 round. The 2009 test focused on assessment of reading skills. On a positive note, Kyrgyzstan saw an average score improvement of 26 points between the two tests making it one of the top improvers in 2009. For more information, see [http://www.testing.kg/files/pdf/2010/PISA2009\\_KGZ\\_Report.pdf](http://www.testing.kg/files/pdf/2010/PISA2009_KGZ_Report.pdf).

A report published by the Center for Educational Assessment and Teaching Methods (CEATM) on the 2009 PISA outlined the close connection between higher levels of education and improved life opportunities (2009):

With higher levels of education, an individual obtains an increased chance to earn more. Moreover, people with a higher education tend to have better living conditions, improved health, and more active cultural and political participation in society. These positive factors are in addition to the already known economic and employment benefits. Research in Canada on the basis of the PISA 2000 results found that after demographic, socio-economic, and cultural factors, literacy greatly increased the chance of young people to get further education, instead of directly getting a job or becoming unemployed.<sup>6</sup>

In 2011, the Kyrgyz Ministry of Education and Science (MOES) developed the 2012-2020 education development strategy with the goal of aligning the education system with international standards. This new strategy describes the current state of education and outlines a strategy for achieving a set of defined goals in the form of state educational standards, a legacy of the former Soviet Union. These standards are developed by the Kyrgyz Academy of Education (KAE) and are approved by the MOES. The standards apply to all levels of education and define the subject curricula, academic workload, required educational levels for graduation, and certificates of learning for certain subjects. All education institutions must comply with the state standards.

In line with the new education strategy, the existing standards are currently being reviewed; efforts to modernize the standards and subjects taught are in process, with the objective of making them more relevant and effective in meeting the demands of the globalized world. New standards are being developed under the auspices of a new curriculum framework<sup>7</sup> and new subject curricula.<sup>8</sup> The goal of preparing these curricula is to minimize the reiterative knowledge style of the past and to produce applied subjects so that students can not only acquire knowledge but also learn to apply the skills in real-life situations.

In recent years, the diversity of school systems in Kyrgyzstan has highlighted the social differences in the country. While the majority of parents are struggling with everyday constraints, a minority can afford to pay for quality education for their children. These “new type” schools provide extra academic services to pupils by offering advanced coursework in addition to the national curriculum. These schools normally select pupils with good academic qualifications through interviews and tests, and shape their own curriculum, generally providing a better and more comprehensive education than state-funded schools. They also receive more national funding for teacher salaries and charge parents for extra services such as tutoring. The pupils in these schools have a better chance to enter prestigious higher education institutions upon completion. Teachers prefer to work in these schools because they receive higher salaries and the pupils are selected. As a rule, these “new type” schools are located in urban areas where wealthier families can afford to pay for their children’s schooling (OSI, 2002).

### ***Pedagogy and Resources for Reading at Pre-primary Levels***

Findings from in-depth interviews and relevant education documents indicate that many of the problematic issues affecting early grade reading start much earlier, often at pre-primary levels. A report by the Aga Khan Foundation (AKF) found that with 465 preschools in the country, only 11 percent of

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<sup>6</sup> Translated from the original version in Kyrgyz.

<sup>7</sup> Development of a new national curriculum framework was spear-headed by the Open Society Institute (OSI, formerly Soros Foundation) in Kyrgyzstan.

<sup>8</sup> Subject development is supported by the Asian Development Bank’s education program.

children of the appropriate age attended preschool and that participation in preschool programs was six times higher in urban areas (24%) than in rural areas (4%) (AKF, 2009). Alan DeYoung indicates that preschool enrolment in Kyrgyzstan declined catastrophically in the 1990s due to the falling number of institutions: from 1,604 in 1991 to 416 in 2000 (2004). This reduction was closely related to several factors: increased costs of education, reduced state subsidies for transport and food, and lower family incomes (OSI, 2002). As a result, most parents could not pay for their children to attend school prior to first grade.<sup>9</sup>

According to the education strategy, 80 percent of first grade students do not have the necessary learning preparations to start school (MOES, 2011). Preschools have a shortage of teachers and books, especially in the Kyrgyz language. Further, many preschool staff do not have necessary qualifications and do not attend regular professional development trainings. Similarly, they are often not trained in early childhood development. Preparatory “early learning” courses financed by the MOES and UNICEF have been crucial to prepare children for first grade. Currently, the courses are 100 hours and 240 hours in length. However, whether these initiatives will become systemic or funding will be available to continue these courses in the future is unknown. The MOES has recognized the importance of preschool preparation and has set a target of 20 percent enrolment for preschool-age children (three to six years old) by the year 2020.

#### Resources

Many international organizations have done significant work in the area of early childhood development. The AKF, for example, promotes active learning in kindergartens, fostering learning for young children in an enjoyable and structured environment and thereby preparing them intellectually and socially for primary school. An education specialist from the AKF shared why her organization has focused on preschool education in Kyrgyzstan:

Many preschool institutions were closed in 1991-1992, and only 416 kindergartens remained by 2000. We analyzed this situation. We also used research evidence that demonstrates that preschool education is crucial for child development. For example, health experts say that the most active period of brain development is from two to six years old. Unfortunately, often the mentality is such that people do not worry when their children are at preschool age and they hope that when the children go to school, teachers will do everything.

In 2005, AKF established new preschool models in Kyrgyzstan to increase access to quality education and offer parents and the government affordable preschool options. One kindergarten model brings students in for four-hour shifts, a method which has doubled the number of students receiving preschool education and has proven to be cost-effective.<sup>10</sup> Another model advocated by AKF is the establishment of community-based kindergartens. As of April 2009, AKF assisted in the renovation of 21 central kindergartens and established 46 satellite kindergartens in homes and underutilized schoolrooms, serving a total of more than 4,000 children.

The MOES is attempting to replicate AKF's half-day kindergarten model. Recent developments reflect the increased attention to and awareness of the necessity of exploring alternative models of preschool education coverage. The 2009 law on preschool education (the first of its kind in Central Asia), fully endorsed the alternative models, and raised the status of preschool teachers to that of primary school

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<sup>9</sup> Low enrollment is not a reflection of demand. According to UNICEF representatives, 70 percent of parents want their children to attend preschool.

<sup>10</sup> Under the Soviet system, timetables suggested that kindergarten students should attend school for approximately 10 hours a day.

teachers in terms of salary. Preschool enrolment remains very low but is increasing as a result of these legislative changes.

AKF launched a highly-regarded initiative called *Reading for Children* in 2007. The goal of this program is to provide opportunities for parents and other family members to introduce young children to illustrated books in order to develop their language and literacy skills. This program published books by Kyrgyz authors suitable for preschool and primary-age children and established community mini-libraries in preschools, primary schools, and other community spaces. An AKF respondent noted the challenge of finding potential authors of children's books and the difficulty of working with them in the editing process. She said, "As AKF pays for these books, we have a right to review the manuscripts and give feedback to the authors. We analyze the content and also how the text may influence the children."

The books develop readiness for reading and school among preschool age children and also reinforce literacy skills and enthusiasm for reading. In addition, informational sessions were conducted for parents to see demonstrations of good storytelling and reading techniques and to encourage caregivers to tell stories and read with their children. *Reading for Children* organizes an annual book festival in which children and parents are awarded prizes for reading-related contests as well (e.g. the best reader of the year, active parents, a reading family, the best facilitator of the year, etc.). As of 2010, 66 mini-libraries were established by AKF, with more than 18,000 readers and 10,000 parents trained to accompany their children's efforts in reading. To date, AKF has published 35 book titles.

In 2009, AKF conducted learning achievement tests for grade one students to assess the impact of *Reading for Children*. Test results showed that children who had attended the AKF-established kindergartens outperformed non-attendant children by an average of 10-13 percent. Based on reading scores, the determination was made that access to the mini-libraries was a highly significant predictor of success: students in schools with mini-libraries scored significantly better than students from schools with no library.

The Open Society Institute (OSI) has also implemented some innovative and interesting programs in Kyrgyzstan such as *Step-by-Step* and *Critical Thinking Laboratories*.<sup>11</sup> The *Step-by-Step* program aimed to introduce child-oriented teaching methods in preschools and primary schools, and worked with a limited number of schools by charging them fees for the services provided. These included training teachers in innovative teaching methods and publishing colorful and interesting books for children. A representative from OSI stated:

I think it would be a big mistake to target and work with the primary school level exclusively. If you really want to make change and impact reading overall, it should start much earlier, i.e. at the preschool level. It is necessary to work with parents and necessary to work on the provision of books at home. Parents should value reading and encourage their children to read books.

UNICEF in Kyrgyzstan also works in the field of early child development, establishing community-based preschools and developing and promoting legislation to strengthen the role of early childhood education. UNICEF also developed and published a large number of storybooks for children which are of good quality and in great demand among children. Unfortunately, these books are in short supply and are only distributed to UNICEF-targeted preschools.

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<sup>11</sup> The Open Society Institute (formerly the Soros Foundation) is a network of foundations and institutions to foster the development of open societies around the world, particularly in the countries of Central and Eastern Europe and the former USSR. OSI has a broad array of programs; in Kyrgyzstan support is given to innovative primary education, higher education, English language training, advising centres and scholarships, educational reform, debate, and critical thinking.

Together with OSI and AKF, UNICEF prepared a TV cartoon project called *Keremet Koch* (Magic Journey), “the first and only program in Central Asia which promotes early education,” according to a respondent from National TV. This cartoon, with the main characters *Aktan* and *Akylai*, is very popular among preschool and primary school-aged children, especially in rural areas where a great shortage of children’s literature exists. The cartoon focuses on child development and various aspects of social life and health. In 2011, a new cycle of the cartoon called *Letters* was developed in which all 36 letters of the Kyrgyz alphabet are presented in game form. As the same respondent noted, “We thought it would be difficult, but we learned that all children learned the 36 letter parts of the cartoons with repeated showings. Children anxiously waited for the new series and watched it. Even younger age children watched. Maybe they did not understand letters yet, but they watched the actions of the cartoons with new characters.”

In addition to *Keremet Koch*, AKF has also prepared a new cartoon called *Adventure to the World of Books*. A respondent from AKF commented:

We are now trying to promote reading through TV, because not everyone has access to books but almost everyone watches TV. We started a new program in the form of a cartoon called *Adventure to the World of Books*. The four cartoon characters are *Chypalak*, *Suluuke*, *Bomposh*, and *Chilisten*. According to the cartoon scripts, they call children to read books and seek answers to the problems from books.

To assist the government with pre-primary and primary education, the Fast Track Initiative (FTI) has focused their efforts in these areas as well. A respondent from FTI commented:

FTI supports achievement of Education for All goals. The first year of funding was allocated to primary education and the second year to preschool preparation of children. New storybooks that contain additional materials for teachers and are linked to program materials for primary education have been developed. We are now going to organize a tender for preschool level books.

### ***Pedagogy and Resources for Reading at Primary Level***

Children enter grade one with various levels of readiness, depending on preschool attendance, the quality of preschool education, and the quality of parental assistance at home, as well as socio-economic and geographic factors. Some children can already read letters and even words, while others cannot.

#### *Pedagogy*

Irrespective of the children’s level of preparedness, all primary schools start with the letters of the alphabet (the ABCs or *Alippe* in Kyrgyz). Each letter is presented with colorful picture illustrations and primary teachers make sure that each child masters all of the alphabet letters. After four or five months, the children celebrate the “*Alippe Mairamy*” (Holiday of ABCs) to say good-bye to the letter book. Students then study subjects including reading, language, math, and others. A representative from the KAE stated that by grade four, students should master the following four interrelated components: 1) fluency (or tempo reading), 2) clarity in reading, 3) conscious reading, and 4) correct reading. According to the existing education curriculum, by grade four a child should be able to read at least 100 words per minute.<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> In the proposed curricula for grade one to four under the new education strategy, the speed of reading should be 45-55 words per minute, but with an emphasis on reading with understanding.

Based on interviews conducted and documents reviewed, the education system in Kyrgyzstan does not promote an active reading pedagogy and traditional methods are predominantly used. Interviews revealed that despite theoretical discussions of “active learning” over the past 20 years (supported by international development agencies), little systemic change has taken place. Several respondents stated that primary teachers use traditional teaching methods instead of interactive methods. A respondent from AKF commented,

Our international experts studied many schools in Kyrgyzstan and they told us that the teachers do not promote active reading. Students still play a passive role. It is really puzzling that so many international projects have been working for the last 20 years, and so many trainings were conducted, but the situation is still the same (if not worse). Sure, the teachers attended many trainings, but perhaps they got the wrong message and they are overly active by using different cards, pictures, and showing their ability to organize group work and so on. They demonstrate their own strength but this does not translate into their students’ active participation.

A primary teacher noted that, “Many teachers simply force their students to memorize and retell everything. They limit themselves to speed-reading. Children cannot go out of the text boundaries.” A specialist from the KAE noted:

The teacher pays attention to fluent reading in class, a legacy from before. A teacher chooses a text, reads it, and then asks students to read by watching the speed of reading. The meaning or content of text is not paid much attention. Children do not understand what they read.

An author of children’s books commented, “If children can read, then a teacher first reads the text, and students listen. Here, the teacher plays an active role and students passive. Then, with the help of some questions, the teacher consolidates the theme and then gives homework.” A respondent from QLP stated, “It is usual for a teacher to read a text and students follow her by putting their fingers on the text and following the teacher’s reading. Or sometimes a student with good reading skills reads and the rest listen and watch. The main part of reading is retelling.” Another respondent from the KAE added:

In traditional reading classes, students sit passively. There are five or six “excellent” students and the teacher mostly spends time with them so other students cannot develop. If the situation is like this in primary grades, how can they learn in secondary classes? We should have learner-centered classrooms. Teachers should play the role of facilitator, students should become leaders and the teacher should take a passive role. Students should initiate their learning, defend their views, and be able to work in groups, in pairs, and so on. But nowadays we cannot move away from traditional methods, because only a few primary teachers can attend professional development courses.

Similarly, primary teachers often overemphasize (and misunderstand) the requirement that a child should be able to read 100 words per minute by grade four. A primary teacher from Bishkek, for example, stated that children in grade four should be able to read 120-150 words per minute. Other respondents gave different numbers, ranging from 85 to 120 words per minute, indicating a variation in standards or poor knowledge of required standards. A respondent from the KAE commented:

We have requirements on reading technique that a certain number of words have to be read per minute. Then, when reading tempo is assessed, a child cannot catch up with the demands. He [or she] says, “I know I cannot read well, so give me a two (failing mark). I cannot read that number of words per minute.” What is the result? A child reads a text according to the requirement, but when we ask questions about what is

read, they cannot answer. We drill them to read as robots.

Another respondent added, “Teachers often practice speed-reading in their classes. We used to have this method for many years. Some children can read 100 words per minute, but without understanding anything.”

As mentioned previously, some students have advanced reading ability when they enter grade one; consequently many primary teachers will direct their attention to these students. Students who cannot read or have problems learning to read are inevitably left out of the learning process. Currently, no remedial programs exist for students who have difficulties with reading. Some educators suggested that those children who come to school knowing how to read should be separated from those who cannot read. According to these educators, the situation is not fair for a child who already knows how to read to sit in a class while a teacher attempts to teach those who cannot read. While there were opponents to this school of thought, respondents offered very little insight as to *how* to solve this challenge. Many teachers plan and conduct their lessons with the assumption that all students have the same reading ability. They are not able to respond to students at different reading levels.

Teachers also promote rote memorization, the retelling of texts, and drilling while reading the same text repeatedly. A respondent from QLP noted that no emphasis is placed on development of higher order thinking from Bloom’s taxonomy, for example, and teachers do not help students to analyze texts or ask difficult questions. In relation to the PISA, this respondent noted, “Why did our students get last place? Because they could not respond to questions from real life. The PISA asks questions like, ‘Why? How do you use this formula? How does this formula work in real life?’ The students were not able to understand the meaning of the texts and their application or relation to real life.”

Recent changes as a result of the new education strategy have affected reading acquisition in the early grades. Subject-based curricula for primary grades one to four have already been developed. Thus, from September 2011 onward, all first-grade students will study the new subject curriculum developed by the Asian Development Bank’s (ADB) Second Education Project. Grades two to four will study the previous curriculum, but gradually the new subject curricula will be introduced in these grades as well. As part of the initiative, 16,000 teachers and educators in Kyrgyzstan are to be trained in new standards and subject curricula. Some respondents (especially the primary teachers interviewed) reported that the preparation for introducing the new curriculum has been done poorly and in haste; schools are still waiting for textbooks and teachers are awaiting the curricula guides.

The new second language subject curriculum for grade one to four, developed in 2010, was reviewed as part of this study. This curriculum document defines the language competencies for reading as follows:

Students will learn to:

- Read small-size texts adapted to the age of primary school children;
- Read by maintaining rules of stress in words and sentences;
- Read with correct intonation;
- Read silently and with understanding of texts;
- Extract necessary information from texts;
- Read with clarity.

Subject curricula for grades one and two do not include an individual topic of reading; instead reading is taught as part of language competencies by introducing specially adapted texts. A reading course is introduced in grades three and four, when students are familiarized with children’s literature and tasked with comparing and contrasting pieces of literature. Conscious, fluent, and correct reading of small but unconnected texts should be achieved and the attained speed of reading should be 45-55 words per

minute, accompanied by understanding. Students should be able to read texts silently after a teacher explains new words, then develop an understanding of the material and divide the text into logical parts, all the while identifying the words with logical stress.

### *Reading Assessment*

In Kyrgyzstan, national and international tests have demonstrated that students do not perform well in reading assessments. The El-Pikir Research Center conducted research for UNICEF in 2001 and 2005 to test grade four and grade eight students in mathematics, literacy, and life skills knowledge. These were the first attempts to measure student performance at a national level after the dissolution of the Soviet Union, and the results were quite alarming. In 2005, only 58.8 percent of grade four students passed a standard mathematics test, compared to 81.4 percent at the time of the first study in 2001. Only 44.2 percent of the students passed the 2005 literacy test, down from 59.1 percent in 2001 (UNICEF, 2005).

In 2007 and 2009, CEATM carried out the National Sample-Based Assessment (NSBA). These tests measured the competencies and skills of grade four students, such as the application of concepts in different contexts and logical reasoning. Sixty-four percent of fourth-graders scored at below the “basic” level of reading comprehension, 24 percent reached the basic level, and approximately 11 percent attained scores above the basic and high levels.<sup>13</sup> The results of NSBA in 2009 declined; 68.6 percent of fourth-graders scored below basic level, while 24 percent scored at the basic level and 7.3 percent scored above basic and high levels. The results of students from rural areas were far below those from urban areas.

A baseline study of the QLP program in 2010 also showed the poor quality of students’ learning. The test results of students in grades four and seven indicated that these students have poor knowledge, particularly in reading (see Appendix E for the standards of students’ competencies used for developing these tests). In total, 1,023 fourth-grade students took the reading tests in their mother tongue; 58.7 percent of the students scored below the basic level, while 25.1 percent scored at basic level and 16.3 percent scored above the basic level.

Primary teachers struggle with appropriate assessment methodologies when evaluating students’ reading skills. Assessment places heavy emphasis on tempo: the ability to read text quickly and aloud with clarity, with a defined target of 90-100 words per minute by the fourth grade. Teachers target quick reading and do not encourage students to self-correct and improve. Further, teachers compare the students to their peers rather than individually against pre-determined criteria for learning.<sup>14</sup> Assessment criteria are based on teachers’ judgment of what learning should be and are not communicated openly to the students. While some teachers demonstrate innovative teaching techniques, they do not introduce new accompanying methods of assessment. A QLP respondent considered this is a very serious issue:

Unfortunately, students mostly learn what they are told will be assessed. If we want to train teachers in new ways of reading pedagogy, then we should also teach them how to assess reading. For example, if teachers are to use interactive teaching methods, then assessment should also be trained accordingly.

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<sup>13</sup> According to the definition given by CEATM, below “basic” means that “students do not demonstrate sufficient knowledge and skills for successful further learning.” Basic level means possessing the ability to demonstrate understanding of a text as a whole.

<sup>14</sup> As another Soviet legacy, students are given a mark of one to five (five being the highest or best mark). In some schools, if students are doing poorly in a certain subject, their parents may be asked to come to a public meeting in the school where they are censured for their student’s performance. A “one” or “two” is given rarely, especially in the final exams of the school year.

Positive signs of appropriate reading pedagogy are emerging from some urban schools (particularly gymnasia and lyceums) where teachers use interactive teaching methods. As one teacher from Bishkek observed:

We use textbooks by Poliakova, *Zhivoe Slovo*, and others by Buneevykh. These textbooks include various techniques of reading, such as Venn's diagram, technology of Zaitsev, and others. Teachers use interactive teaching to develop students' communicative skills. They also use critical thinking and Bloom's taxonomy of thinking (which assists teachers to visualize knowledge levels, enabling them to help their students analyze, synthesize, and evaluate).

### Textbooks

Many respondents noted the availability and quality of primary level textbooks as a concern. As a rule, older versions of education curricula are not accessible to teachers or students. Older versions of textbooks are often of poor quality and do not promote active learning pedagogies. Insufficient quantities of textbooks and teaching materials, especially in Kyrgyz language, and the poor quality of available textbooks and teaching materials are a common problem. According to the National Statistics Committee (2008), 17 percent of Kyrgyz schools are supplied with 50 percent of their textbook needs, and 18 percent with more than 80 percent of their textbook needs. Over 30 percent of Russian schools have fewer than 50 percent of their textbooks, and 24 percent of Russian schools are supplied with more than 80 percent of their textbooks. On a national level, only 40 percent of schools have their textbook needs met according to the Deputy Minister of Education.<sup>15</sup>

The poor quality of textbooks is also attributed to the textbook development and publication process, fraught with accusations of monopolization and conflict of interest. The KAE, responsible for the official production and approval process of textbooks, has hired textbook writers disconnected from the realities of school life. Because an open-market competition was not used to solicit interested authors, writers were not under pressure to produce good quality books; according to respondents, the textbooks were of poor quality, overly theoretical, and difficult for students and teachers to use.

With the support of the ADB, more than 1,400,000 copies of textbooks and teaching guides (*komlekts*) were sent to schools in September 2011 to accompany the new subject curricula.<sup>16</sup> According to a representative from the MOES, all schools were to receive grade one textbooks by August 25; textbooks for grades two to four will be published and distributed at a later date. Some respondents noted that the new textbook development process was complex and confusing. The Second Education Project of the ADB (under the auspices of the MOES) developed the subject curricula and the textbooks were produced by a private publishing house. The relationship between the ADB and the KAE was strained, as the latter has been responsible for the development of these two components previously.

A respondent from the KAE noted:

Previously, a book was written and was called a draft issue of 400-1,000 copies only. It was tested at a school and then they waited for the results of the test. Only after corrections and additions was the book sent to the MOES. Now, the textbook was published on the basis of four expert views only. The MOES only controlled from the

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<sup>15</sup> The Deputy Minister shared that the shortage of textbooks could be addressed if books were rented for a fee or freely sold in shops, noting the common public practice of illegal textbook sales for much higher prices.

<sup>16</sup> As data collection was completed in August 2011, the research team was not able to confirm whether all necessary textbooks were delivered by the start of the school year in September.

sidelines, as the private publishing house won the tender and the company's expert did the reviews.

In response to this, a representative from the MOES commented:

In 2006, new regulations were adopted on the evaluation of textbooks for the new round and all the criteria and indicators were included for assessing and publishing these textbooks. New textbooks that had been written and approved were entered in an international competition, with several publishing houses competing. They had their own experts, twice as many books were reviewed, and then [the winning texts] were published. These textbooks were received warmly by the teachers.

Nevertheless, a QLP reading expert voiced his skepticism about the quality of the new textbooks. According to his view, the textbooks lack clear elaboration of the reading goals. He noted, "The ADB project has produced textbooks without reference to a clear set of learning outcomes. As far as I can see, the same type of thing has occurred in Tajikistan. First, there should be a curriculum and then the textbooks based on the curriculum." Further, the respondent indicated that the approval process must follow an open and clearly-defined process and that criteria should be available to the writers prior to the launch of the tender process. Textbook authors should not be part of the approval process for the publication and the approval council should be broader and more diverse in its composition (and include practicing teachers). Also, the approval process should include a school piloting component, a public report on the council's decision, and an audit by a separate unbiased body consisting of mixed stakeholders.

## **Factors Affecting Early Grade Reading in Kyrgyzstan**

Many factors were identified that positively or negatively affect early grade reading. Below, these factors are presented based on the findings of this study.

### **Positive Factors**

The positive factors affecting early grade reading in Kyrgyzstan continue to be a relatively high national literacy rate and the value placed on education of children by stakeholders at various levels. The Government of Kyrgyzstan, with the support of international donor agencies, has made considerable efforts to evaluate and measure progress of improving early literacy and access to pre-primary schooling. The MOES recently attempted to launch the *Reading Child* program. Although this program did not commence for lack of financial support, the effort is emblematic of the awareness of early reading problems and the need to address them.

On August 18, 2011, the Education Committee of the Kyrgyz Parliament convened a roundtable discussion that brought together key stakeholders to review issues related to children's literature in schools. In addition to members of Parliament, representatives from the MOES, the central library, international donor agencies, authors of Kyrgyz literature books, and other foreign officials were present. As a result of the roundtable, a proposal was made that the Government should develop a national program for the development and support of children's literature, including the establishment of a public publishing company. Other illustrative activities of the program were suggested to include the organization of a Festival of Children's Books, enrichment of school libraries with more children's literature, request of funds from the Ministry of Finance to further support the development of children's literature, and replication of best practices of international organizations in the field of early childhood development (early reading in particular).

One respondent, a well-known author of children's books, noted:

During the former USSR, the publishing house *Mektep* published about 70 book titles per year: new books, translations, story books, fairy tales, poems, and so on. In all of the 20 years of independence since, 70 book titles have not been published. The government does not finance this. Private publishing houses are not interested in publishing children's books because there is no market. Authors of children's books publish books with their own funds and, of course, it is not sufficient for all. There are more than 2,000 schools in Kyrgyzstan.

The Fast Track Initiative (FTI) has been actively supporting the Government in publishing and supplying schools with early grade reading textbooks and literature (grade-level readers). QLP has been asked to assist the Ministry of Education with the preparation of syllabi for grades one to five, with stated learning outcomes for language and reading.

On August 29, 2011, a new interactive *Alippe TV* (ABC TV) was established in Kyrgyzstan, focused exclusively on education. This new TV program will feature lessons in different school subjects presented by experienced teachers.

### **Negative Factors**

Most respondents noted that the lack of resources in schools, such as textbooks and grade-level readers, was the main negative factor affecting the quality of early grade reading. Indeed, the 2006 PISA survey examined the level of school resources and found that, compared to other OECD countries, schools in Kyrgyzstan have a very limited amount of resources (OECD, 2007). Over 90 percent of school directors surveyed cited a lack or low quality of infrastructure and material resources, such as laboratories, textbooks, computers, Internet access, libraries, and audio-visual supplements, as a determinant of poor education quality. The supply of these resources and materials remains problematic today.

Another contributing negative factor mentioned was the poor quality of primary school teachers. Some teachers, a very small minority, demonstrate a high level of instructional skills. Their classes are characterized by student activity and involvement, rhythm and intensity of work, lively and cheerful surroundings, and frequent interaction between teachers and students. Unfortunately, most primary teachers do not embody these characteristics and employ the "traditional" teacher-centered pedagogy. Some teachers are updating their teaching skills by attending in-service teacher training by QLP, for example. Unfortunately, these trainings are insufficient: they do not cover all primary school teachers and often do not include post-training follow-up activities.

Many international development agencies are assisting local education authorities' in-service teacher training efforts by introducing elements of interactive teaching methods. For example, QLP has been helping the KAE and regional teacher training institutes to modify and improve their training modules. Primary school teachers receive in-service training every five years. In-service teacher training is no longer compulsory and program objectives are changing to be in line with the new education goals of the country, shifting in emphasis from subject content to student development so that teachers have more training in active learning strategies and child development.

Another considerable issue concerns the preparation of new primary school teachers who often enter the workforce unprepared to teach. This situation arises as a result of the lack of previous investment in pre-service professional development. As fewer than half of teacher training graduates enter the teaching profession, donors have been hesitant to invest in this segment of teacher preparation. Little teacher professional preparation and classroom experience are major barriers to quality education

provision in Kyrgyzstan. Pre-service teacher training institutions lag far behind policy reform and student teachers exit without knowing modern instructional theories and pedagogies.

Interview data indicated that cultural characteristics of the family and the society have a negative impact on early learning attitudes as well. Parents do not promote the importance of reading and writing in their home and in everyday life, often called a “culture of literacy.” Some respondents, noting the non-supportive home conditions, suggested that parents should read books together with their children, and seek to create a home learning environment. A parent stated, “We established a tradition at home: after dinner we allocate reading time for the whole family and everyone reads a book. No one watches TV. We then discuss what we have read. Reading should be for pleasure, not punishment.” According to this parent, these activities reduce the child’s perception that reading is painful and obligatory.

In reality, most Kyrgyz parents do not read to their children. Many parents work abroad in Russia and merely send money home to buy clothes and to send their children to school. A primary school teacher added, “It would be ideal if parents would read to their children or at least create good learning conditions at home. But they work hard, come home tired, hardly feed their children, and fall asleep.” Some respondents, such as an education specialist at the AKF, and an instructor at the KAE, suggested that parents should be trained in how to help their children with reading, identifying a need to work closely with parents to aid improved reading ability of their children: “Parents have the misconception that it is the teacher alone who should educate a child. On the contrary, they should work with their children at home.”

Several respondents cited the lack of general reading materials in Kyrgyz as a factor limiting early reading development. A respondent from the MOES noted, “There was a household survey of poverty among children, revealing that almost one third of families in rural areas do not have a single book at home, and this is a very serious problem. In urban areas, children still read a little, at least online, but in the villages it is a serious issue.” A representative from UNICEF added, “There are books from Kyrgyz language authors such as Abdi Kydyrov and Sulaiman Ryspaev, and only a few others, but there is not sufficient literature suitable for young children.” A respondent from the KAE added, “Children from disadvantaged families turn out to be more dependent on school resources. Children’s literature is very expensive and books of high quality are not affordable for many families.” Some respondents did not agree with this, and rather placed the responsibility on the lack of prioritization in families. One parent said, “For example, parents can go to a wedding and spend 2000 soms (US\$ 44.60), so how can they not afford to purchase a book for 300 som (US\$6.69)? They think it is not worth it. A child studies at school and that is it, according to them. It is the remnants of the Soviet mindset.”

Other factors related to broader societal influence were also mentioned. One parent noted, “Computer games are a negative factor, a child would rather play a computer game than read a book.” A children’s author agreed with this, considering TV, video, technology, and music as negative factors that detract children from reading. He stated:

Nowadays many people are paying attention to material wealth, but not spiritual wealth (books). More time is spent on solving social issues, politics. Little time is left for children. Children should read and comprehend and also be able to use their knowledge in real life. If a child sees only negative things around him, then this affects him too. A teacher, then, can do nothing. Look at what is happening now, look at what a child sees now: chaos, garbage in the streets, pushing crowds in public transport, fights, all before the child even gets to school. Only then a teacher can do something. What they could do is they could [learn positive examples] from books.

## Tajikistan: Current Pedagogy and Materials for Early Grade Reading

### *The Education System*

Under the auspices of the Soviet Union, the former Government of Tajikistan created a modern education system that had not existed before, providing universal education access and relatively high education quality. The adult literacy rate reached 99 percent in 1990, and according to the new national education development strategy (2012 – 2020), still stands at 99.6 percent. However, similar to other former USSR countries, the system deteriorated after the break-up of the Soviet Union. The country saw a considerable decline in student achievement and enrollment. Moreover, the civil war in the 1990s further worsened the situation. Today, Tajikistan faces significant resource constraints: low numbers of qualified and motivated teachers, crumbling infrastructure, and changing, outdated curricula. A general perception exists that the quality of education is in decline. However, since Tajik students do not participate in international tests, comparisons of Tajik students' performance to other countries are not possible.

The Tajik Ministry of Education, with the support of international and local experts, is now developing a national education development strategy that will run through the year 2020. The strategy describes the current state of education in the country and outlines the directions and principles for the development of the education system, including identification of strategies leading to determined goals. The new education strategy emphasizes improvement of the quality and access to education at various levels; similarly to Kyrgyzstan, the strategy represents a movement away from knowledge acquisition towards knowledge application, critical thinking, and analysis. The strategy also proposes that Tajikistan shift to a 12-year school structure by 2017, clarifying that, "the purpose of this transition is to incorporate Tajikistan into the world educational system and train specialists in accordance with international standards."<sup>17</sup> Proposed changes in the system structure are primarily at three levels: primary school would include grades one to five, general education school would be re-defined as grades six to ten, and secondary school would be expanded to grade twelve; the proposed changes would have direct implications on all education programs (including new textbook and curricula development).

### *Pedagogy and Resources for Reading at Pre-primary Levels*

The national education development strategy describes the main education issues that need to be addressed. Many of the issues in reading, at their root, relate to the limited access and poor quality of preschool education. Preschool enrolment is approximately 11.6 percent (5.1% for one- to six-year-old children, and 6.5% for three- to six-year-old children); thus, almost 90 percent of Tajik children enter primary school without any preparation. The sector lacks appropriate quality books and materials; teachers are poorly qualified (28.1% of teachers have higher education certificates and 14.8% have completed basic education) and a majority of them are not equipped with the necessary skills to teach. The situation is particularly exacerbated in rural areas. Required fee payments for preschools further limit parents' willingness to send children to preschool.

The Government of Tajikistan recognizes this issue of low preschool access; the national education development strategy has set targets for increased early kindergarten enrollment rates: 30 percent for three- to four-year-olds and 50 percent for five-year-olds by 2020. Achieving this target will require significant increases in the supply of preschool institutions (e.g. private kindergartens or child development centers, new forms of community-based double-shift kindergartens, etc.) as well as fee exemptions for low-income families and training programs for preschool educators and staff.

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<sup>17</sup> Translated from Tajik Ministry of Education website : [http://www.khovar.tj/index.php?option=com\\_content&task=view&id=21285](http://www.khovar.tj/index.php?option=com_content&task=view&id=21285).

## Resources

Many international organizations including UNICEF, OSI, and AKF have long been active in the field of early child development, publishing books and establishing programs of alternative and innovative kindergartens. The Director of Education Programs for OSI in Tajikistan wrote that, “Since 2004, OSI has been targeting those children not covered at the government preschool institutions. The project is called *Getting Ready for School* and has a preparation curriculum for five- to six-year-old children and also a manual for parents (*Parenting with Confidence*).”<sup>18</sup> Similarly, OSI/Tajikistan’s *Step by Step Program* is active in introducing an innovative and interactive curriculum for preschool and primary school age students. In contrast to other Central Asian countries, the Tajik *Step by Step Program* is still receiving funds from OSI’s Early Childhood Project, based in London. UNICEF in Tajikistan also works in the field of early child development, establishing alternative learning centers for four- to six-year-old children.<sup>19</sup>

The AKF in Tajikistan has been working very actively in the field of education for over 20 years and in recent years has been paying increased attention to early childhood development. A strong body of evidence from developed and developing countries alike report the efficacy of early childhood development programs to improve school achievement and provide other social and economic benefits. The AKF chose to work with this level precisely because of the issues with low reading levels in primary school as a result of poor and inadequate preschool education. An education specialist from the AKF in Tajikistan commented, “Children who start school behind tend to stay behind. The gap between the low and high achievers widens over time and becomes difficult to close.”

The AKF established new kindergarten models to increase access to quality education and offer parents affordable options for preschool. A new “half-day shift” kindergarten model is now being proposed by the AKF, which has been included in the new education strategy. The AKF is also establishing community-based kindergartens and early childhood development centers, as well as piloting a parenting program with the aim of increasing access to early childhood opportunities. This cost-effective model makes use of under-utilized classrooms in schools and homes, while families and communities pay the salaries of the teachers. Additionally, the AKF has been establishing children’s corners in public libraries and mini-libraries at village schools so that children have access to appropriate literature.

As stated above, *Reading for Children* was first implemented by the AKF in Kyrgyzstan, where the program proved to be very successful. The children who had access to the program scored significantly higher on reading assessments in their first year of primary school. The AKF in Tajikistan identified *Reading for Children* as a very cost-effective education initiative for replication over the coming years. The following extract from the AKF proposal for *Reading for Children* was provided by the AKF.

### **The Importance of Reading**

Reading is fundamental to a student’s progress through the formal education process. If children are not reading fluently by the end of the third year of school they probably never will. Yet little attention has been given to ensuring that all children become successful readers, including those who join school from homes with no reading materials and a mother tongue different from the language of instruction in school. The AKF is undertaking work within the formal education systems across a number of countries which specifically addresses the formal teaching of reading. We are also starting to roll-out an initiative which works with families and communities to ensure that children have more access to books and enjoyable reading opportunities.

*From the AKF proposal for Reading for Children.*

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<sup>18</sup> Received via email communication on August 30, 2011.

<sup>19</sup> The UNICEF staff in Tajikistan chose not to contribute to this study, which in their opinion focused on primary reading level only; therefore, further information about UNICEF was not collected.

The AKF in Tajikistan plans to, “establish approximately 41 mini-libraries and train around 60 facilitators, benefiting more than 1,200 parents and children. The mini-libraries will be established within existing early childhood development centers and schools, as well as in five village organizations and at least one Learning Resource Centre, and one public library” (AKF proposal for *Reading for Children*). As further noted by a respondent from the AKF in Tajikistan:

There is a great shortage of supplementary materials for reading. There are textbooks but no supplementary books. Textbooks do not have rich information. Also, there are not many methods for teaching reading. Taking into consideration these issues, the AKF has projects developing supplementary reading materials for children of preschool and primary school ages. There is a team working in Khorog on this. During the last three years, we invited international consultants who worked on this area. We have samples of supplementary readers. They are very colorful and attractive.

Unfortunately, those supplementary materials are currently limited in number and are distributed to the AKF target schools only. Finally, the AKF is also involved in the Zero Grade Program, which prepares children from GBAO (*Gorno Badakhshan Autonomous Oblast*) for grade one of primary school.<sup>20</sup> Most of the people from GBAO do not speak Tajik as their native language. During the former USSR, a preparatory grade was introduced in GBAO so that children would have an easier transition from their native language to the Tajik language in primary school. After the break-up of the USSR, these preparatory courses were closed. The AKF, in partnership with the Institute for Professional Development, has re-initiated the Zero Grade Program by enhancing the capacity of teachers to understand and apply interactive teaching approaches at the pre-primary level. An impact study conducted in 2008 demonstrated that the performance of children who attended the Zero Grade courses outperformed those who did not attend by an average of 16 – 22 points.

### ***Pedagogy and Resources for Reading at Primary Levels***

#### *Pedagogy*

The reading pedagogy in Tajik schools has developed similarly to Kyrgyzstan, with new development approaches yet a distinct legacy of the Soviet system. Jean Bernanrd, an international consultant for the Tajik Ministry of Education and FTI, described the importance of reading materials in the Tajik education system (2011):

It is widely recognized that learners who are able to read independently and fluently by the time they reach the end of their fourth year of formal schooling are better equipped to succeed both in learning and in life. In order to help learners achieve this benchmark, children must have access to a wide variety of high-interest supplementary reading materials that are relevant to their lives and written in their mother tongues at levels aligned with the reading instruction they receive in the classroom. In Tajikistan, because only about 11 percent of preschool age children attend any form of education prior to entering primary school, children come to school with varied levels of reading skills. As a Soviet legacy, all primary school curricula begin with *Alifbo* (ABCs in Tajik), which teaches each letter of the Tajik (or Russian) alphabet and requires all students to master the letters of alphabet before they can begin new subjects.

After *Alifbo*, students study one subject where all aspects of language (reading, writing, and grammar) are taught jointly as one subject from grade one to four. This change was made 16 years ago by the Academy of Pedagogic Science (now the Academy of Education), aiming to modernize language learning.

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<sup>20</sup> Aga Khan Foundation and Institute for Professional Development (2008) *Zero Grade Program: Learning Achievements Impact Study*. GBAO Monitoring and Evaluation Department.

Thus, unlike other countries, students now study language and reading as one subject. An author of primary textbooks observed, “It is a very contentious situation. Before the 1994-1995 academic year, reading was a separate subject in Tajik schools. Starting in 1994, it was integrated as a subject of language. Unfortunately, there was confusion among authors and teachers around this integration and interest in reading has fallen rapidly as a result.” A respondent from the Republic Institute of Professional Development added that the most confusing period was during the initial years of the change, when the textbooks did not make sense because the topics covered and exercises for the text did not correspond. A respondent from QLP in Tajikistan concurred:

Reading is one of the foundational subjects in primary education because children’s thinking develops in this area. Unfortunately, about 16 years ago, the subject of reading was removed from the school subjects list and was integrated with language because of the Academy of Pedagogic Science’s initiative. This was a faulty approach for integration which really diminished the focus on reading. Its main purpose now is grammar, and the development of thinking by reading is no longer emphasized.

According to most respondents, the primary schools in Tajikistan do not promote an active reading approach. According to a respondent from the Academy of Education, Tajik teachers are used to traditional methods and very few teachers are using student-centered methods in their lessons. Only those teachers who attended professional development trainings held by international organizations are familiar with these methods. A respondent commented that in all schools reading is taught in a step-by-step approach: first the alphabet, then words, and then sentences and so forth. A primary school teacher commented,

Reading is as follows. First, after *Alifbo*, reading is introduced. Students first read the text, loudly and then silently, and then texts are read part by part. Then, questions are asked to check the students’ understanding and students are asked to recall the text or make conclusions based on the text.

#### *Reading Assessment*

According to respondents who are primary school teachers, students in grade one are expected to read 25-35 words a minute and in grade four 85-90 words. The teachers often limit the reading activities to reading fluency and understanding the meaning of the texts only. No emphasis is made to encourage students to ask more difficult and higher-order thinking questions according to Bloom’s taxonomy. The QLP specialists mentioned this specifically. “At QLP, we have developed modules of pre-service and in-service training for primary teachers and one component is reading. We try to develop students’ thinking by focusing on Bloom’s taxonomy.”

The Tajik Ministry of Education conducted language and math tests with grade four students in 2008. In mother tongue instruction, 29 percent of the students scored below the passing grade and did not meet the minimum requirements of the education program. On a five-point score scale with five as the highest score, approximately a third of these students scored a two, while 23 percent scored a three, 44 percent scored four, and a mere two percent scored five (excellent).

According to respondents, primary school teachers are not equipped with strategies for teaching students of varied ability levels. As a result, they either cater to those who already know how to read, or they focus too much time and attention on those students who cannot read and ignore those who already can. They also have very ineffective assessment strategies and rarely use assessment tools to improve students’ learning (i.e. many teachers are not familiar with diagnostic or formative assessment). Teachers do not develop clear criteria for learning outcomes and therefore their assessments are often based on subjective judgments. Although some previous international projects sought to introduce

changes in the form of innovative or interactive teaching practices, diagnostic assessment methods were not introduced in tandem. Thus, those teachers who attended these trainings were left confused about how they would assess interactive methods (e.g. group activities, presentations).

### Resources

The respondents also mentioned that materials are not easily available at schools and that primary teachers, if they are fortunate, have access to textbooks only. The Tajik Ministry of Education requested QLP to prepare syllabi for grades one to five with learning outcomes for language as a subject. This is a positive move towards result-oriented or outcome-oriented education, because education programs in Tajikistan have historically left the issue of outcomes very vague, by listing topics and content only.

As one primary school teacher commented, “many textbooks are very abstract and difficult as they contain (Tajik) language that is either too scientific or too ancient; primary school children struggle with it.” An author of children’s textbooks added, “Some textbooks now contain classical texts without adaptation. Even the teachers complain that they do not understand some texts - how can you expect the students to understand them?”

Abdullo Ashurov and Firuz Umarzoda indicate that Tajikistan has spent significant funds on publishing new textbooks during the last five years (2011). From 2006 to 2011, 10,545,815 copies of textbooks were published for approximately 50 million somoni, according to the authors. These textbook publications were financed by the state, with support from international organizations.<sup>21</sup> The authors analyzed the quality of these textbooks with the help of experts and found that Tajik language and history teachers complained about the complexity of the textbooks. Many of the terms used in the texts were presented with multiple definitions and thus confused students. “A lot of terminologies were introduced from the Russian language during the former USSR, but nowadays they are being replaced by Arabic equivalents,” wrote Ashurov and Umarzoda (2011). Another respondent, who chaired a textbook review committee, confirmed that many textbooks are very difficult to understand. “Nowadays, tender competitions for publishing rights are used to select the printing company. Usually, a company which promises to print for the least amount of money ends up winning the tender, and thus the quality is secondary.”

Children’s literature is in great shortage, especially literature in the Tajik language. As a respondent from the Academy of Education commented, “There used to be good libraries with many books in all schools but after the civil war, a very large part of the libraries and books were burned. We lost many books, especially literary books and children’s literature.” A respondent from the AKF compared textbooks in Afghanistan to those in Tajikistan, and noted that Afghan books had a very clear methodology (i.e. each topic had a clear objective and stated goals of the lesson and learning outcomes). A summary at the end of each lesson assessed if students had reached the lesson objectives, if they had learned words which were described in learning outcomes, and so on. These textbooks included everything and were easier to use. Tajik textbooks, in his opinion, are very complex and are not understood by students or, in some cases, even teachers.

In 2010, the Fast Track Initiative Catalytic Fund Grant (FTI-3) conducted a project to identify supplementary reading materials for grades one to four in support of the Tajik Ministry of Education’s plan to improve the educational services throughout the country and to assist in progress toward the

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<sup>21</sup> Calculations of the cost of textbook publication over the past 5 years from international funding sources: in 2006 World Bank: 2,4 million somoni, in 2007: 6,3 million somoni; and in 2008: 7,3 million somoni; in 2009 World Bank and ADB together spent 3,6 million somoni and in 2010, the FTI spent 2.3 million somoni.

Education for All (EFA) initiative and the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs). The project aimed to find a list of children's books and periodicals in the Tajik language for distribution to approximately 25 percent of the country's schools as part of an early reading package. A total of 65 titles (from a compiled list of 130) were recommended for procurement and distribution, sent together with instructions for teachers, parents, and librarians for their use. The materials are expected to be distributed to schools in each of the 68 districts of Tajikistan under additional funds from the FTI-3 Catalytic Fund and a substantial contribution from UNICEF.<sup>22</sup>

## **Factors Affecting Early Grade Reading**

As a result of this study, many factors were identified that positively and negatively affect early grade reading.

### ***Positive Factors***

A very positive factor in Tajikistan is that the official statistics indicate high education access and literacy, with nearly 100 percent adult literacy (according to Ministry of Education official data). This is a critical foundation as it implies the possibility of home support from family members for early readers. However, it should be noted that since no international testing is done in Tajikistan, this official data from the Government can be triangulated or compared with data from other countries.

Another very strong positive factor noted by respondents is heightened social awareness, particularly amongst government officials, around the importance of early grade reading. In fact, one primary school teacher stated, "Reading is one of the best qualities and it brings so much gain to people. In this regard, I would like to mention the words of our President, who says that people start loving each other by reading, and the more a person likes to read, the more he has a friendly attitude towards others." A respondent from the Tajik State Pedagogic University also made a reference to the President of Tajikistan. "Children learn at school only; at home parents do not provide any support. Therefore, I think that President Emomali Rahmon's law on 'Parents' Responsibility' is very timely and necessary. Now when we assign homework, parents cannot stay away idly."

Similarly, preschool education and primary education have been designated as priority areas in the new education strategy. FTI is also working closely with the Ministry of Education to address the issues of preschool and primary education (e.g., publishing early grade reading textbooks and literary books).

### ***Negative Factors***

Many respondents in Tajikistan mentioned that a contributing negative factor to early reading success is the social background of children, as many parents are out of the country for employment (e.g. in Russia) or busy with work, while children are on their own. This is a situation that is very similar in Kyrgyzstan, and is endemic in the region. According to some respondent, adult illiteracy is an issue in rural areas as well, a negative factor that may make one question the official data presented at the beginning of this section. As a respondent noted:

Many parents in rural areas are not literate and they are not reading books themselves. They cannot read for their children. Also, children's books are not available in the local language. There are books in Russian but most people cannot read them. Plus, the books are expensive and many parents cannot afford to buy them.

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<sup>22</sup> FTI succeeded in providing materials to selected schools. The project consultant proposed that the packages should be delivered to the remaining Tajik schools, as well as new packages to be distributed to the schools with minority languages (Russian, Uzbek and Kyrgyz).

A few respondents also listed television and computers as negative factors. A representative from the Tajik State Pedagogic University stated, “Take the example of TV. If it is used rationally, it can be a very good tool for getting information, but too many unnecessary and low-level content programs are taking up too much of the children’s time. Thus, their effect is very detrimental to reading.” His colleague from the University added:

A few years ago, a Russian scholar named Smirnova conducted an experiment on children’s TV viewing habits. She came to the conclusion that watching TV has a very strong negative effect on children’s thinking as children watch it mechanically without any brain activity. Similarly, while reading texts, children were switched off and they could only visually capture the images of the textbooks without being deeply endorsed in thinking and reading.

Several other respondents from the Tajik State Pedagogic University commented that computers often do more harm than good as well. “There is too much violence and killing in computers, and children learn things beyond their age.”

Finally, as in Kyrgyzstan, many respondents mentioned negative factors having to do with the lack of resources available in the country, whether it is low access and quality of textbooks or the lack of training for preschool and primary teachers. These factors, along with the social environment of the child, all strongly affect the possible improvement, or decline, of early reading instruction and acquisition in Tajikistan.

### **III. RECOMMENDATIONS**

Interviewees provided several recommendations for improving early grade reading in Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan. This section will highlight some possible areas for intervention.

- An increased focus on early childhood development (in addition to early grade reading) is needed, as almost 90 percent of preschool-age children in both countries are not receiving pre-primary education of any kind. Some organizations such as the AKF have already made positive steps in preschool education, doing outstanding work in this field at reasonable cost rates. The AKF has published quality books, established programs such as alternative and innovative kindergartens, and conducted projects in Kyrgyzstan such as *Reading for Children*. However, both the AKF and UNICEF have a rather limited scale and thus cannot serve the whole country. USAID should investigate opportunities to work closely with these organizations, sharing experiences and expertise, and exploring ways to increase the impact of successful programs.
- At the primary school level, USAID should continue to capitalize on the good work of previous education projects, particularly QLP’s work on capacity building of government institutions for long-term sustainable impact. QLP has done impressive work with in-service teacher training institutions. At the same time, in-service teacher trainings on early reading pedagogy may not be sufficient if conducted in regular government training courses, given that a very limited number of primary teachers can attend such trainings. The need exists for continuous and rigorous follow-up activities at the school level; irrespective of training quality at in-service teacher training centers, teachers need a lot of practical guidance and support while they are in their classrooms.
- In-service teacher training cannot support all primary teachers in a short time; therefore alternative and more effective approaches need to be sought so that a majority of primary teachers can be trained in modern early reading pedagogy as quickly as possible. Alternative models for in-service

teacher training should be explored including cascade training, which involves utilization of strong local teachers (i.e. champions) as trainers. This would help to ensure that future innovation attains a much wider breadth of adoption as compared with a more narrowly focused training model.

- An increased focus on pre-service teacher training institutions should also be considered; the curricula of these institutions often do not incorporate many of the innovative and modern pedagogical approaches that are being shared in in-service trainings. These types of trainings are typically only available to teachers via their colleagues or sporadic professional development courses.
- Another recommended area of focus is content, particularly publishing of textbooks and children's literature books in local languages. As this study has shown, a great shortage of children's literature in Kyrgyz and Tajik exists, however this area is also quite politically contentious. For example, discussions in Kyrgyzstan have arisen about the re-establishment of government-owned publishing houses for children's books. While publishing more books is very important, it should not become an end in itself, because there is no guarantee that children will start reading immediately. Thus, new programs are needed that involve and attract communities and parents to support children's reading acquisition and habits to raise their interest.
- Finally, as noted in the QLP baseline survey, "both countries should put an emphasis on the importance of skills related to reading, understanding, and working with different types of texts. Reading is a basic tool in learning and lack of reading skills inevitably leads to negative consequences in learning all other school disciplines. Due to the fact that in Kyrgyzstan and to a greater extent in Tajikistan... serious problems [exist] with the development of reading skills among students, ... the absolute recommendation is made to the program to [put] a special emphasis on training instructors in text processing methodology and techniques for developing students' reading skills starting at the very basic level" (USAID, 2010).

## Appendices

### Appendix A. List of Individuals Interviewed in Kyrgyzstan

Name	Title	Organization
Larisa Marchenko	Head of Strategy Department	Ministry of Education
Chinara Attokurova	Instructor	Kyrgyz Academy of Education
Olga Dudkina	Instructor	Kyrgyz Academy of Education
Venera Musaieva	Instructor	Kyrgyz Academy of Education
Sulaiman Ryspaev	Instructor and author of children's books	Kyrgyz Academy of Education
Batma Abduhamidova	Instructor and author of children's book	Kyrgyz Academy of Education
Tuganbai Konurbaev	Vice-Chancellor	Arabaev State University
Ainura Akunova	Senior Teacher, Kyrgyz Language (Primary)	Arabaev State University
Kulumkan Sadykova	Senior Teacher, Kyrgyz Language and Literature	Arabaev State University
Burulai Aitikulova	Education specialist	Aga Khan Foundation in Kyrgyzstan
Rashid Shakirov	Student Assessment & Curriculum Development Specialist	Creative Associates/QLP
Aikynai Yusupova	Program Specialist, Mentoring	Creative Associates/QLP
Kate Lapham	Senior program manager	OSI / Soros Foundation
Chynara Dzhumagulova	ECD officer	UNICEF
Alvard Pogosian	Education specialist	UNICEF
Farhad Imambakiev	Communication section	UNICEF
Oskana Markova	Coordinator of children's programs	National TV
Aisuluu Sulaimanova	Education sector	World Bank
Gulmira Sultanova	Head	FTI
Keneshbek Sainazarov	Co-chair	Advisory Council to the MOES
Sagyn Mamytova	Primary teacher	v. Tash-Moinok
Jyrgal Ysmanova	Primary teacher	Jal microdistrict
Galina Pavlovna	Primary teacher	School # 5
Asylbek Joodonbekov	Parent	
Saira	Parent	
Gulniza	Parent	

**Appendix B. List of Individuals Interviewed in Tajikistan**

<b>Name</b>	<b>Title</b>	<b>Organization</b>
Shoev Mahmudhon	Specialist of textbook development	MOE
Kotibova Sharifa	Senior research fellow	Academy of Education
Boronov Bozorboi	Senior research fellow and book author	Academy of Education
Makhamov Saifullo	Head of chair and textbook author	Institute for professional development
Mulloev A	Head of methodological center	MOES
Navrozov Khamza	Chief specialist of primary education	Dushanbe
Safarova Zulfia	Chief specialist of pre-primary and primary education	MOE
Abdulazizov V	Director	Republican institute of professional development
Azizova M	Senior specialist and textbook author	Republican methodology centre
Zieev Muhiddin	Author of textbooks	Dushanbe
Olimova F	Head of chair	Pedagogic College
Turaev Ermahmad	Senior instructor	Pedagogic University
Gulomov Abdurahim	Assistant to dean	Pedagogic University
Saidkhodjaeva Tahmina	Instructor	Pedagogic University
Egamberdieva Manzarahon	Primary teacher	Vahdat town school
Mirova Malohat	Primary teacher	Vahdat town school
Abdulloev Ibodullo	Chair of pre-primary and primary education	Institute of Professional Development
Mamadfozilov Zuloby	Education specialist	Aga Khan Foundation
Niyozov F	Specialist	QLP
Choriev A	Specialist	QLP
Nazarova Barfia	Primary teacher	Private gymnasium in Dushanbe
Majidova Bibihafiza	Doctor of pedagogy, professor at primary education department	Tajik State Pedagogic University
Karimov T	Chief specialist of primary education	Institute for Professional Development
Negmatov Negmat	Parent	Dushanbe
Nodirov Bahriddin	Parent	Dushanbe

## Appendix C. In-depth Interview Guide Questions

The following questions were used as guides in in-depth interviews conducted. Interviewers had the option to select among the questions and to add to the questions as necessary. The interviewers were also instructed to let the discussion flow naturally, and to use these questions merely as a guide for a more in-depth discussion around reading in the early grades.

### Ministry of Education Staff

1. How do you define reading? (or How do you understand 'reading?') How do early grade students learn to read? What standards / documents are available for them?
2. What (skills, competencies, and knowledge) does a student need to master at the end of primary education in terms of reading?<sup>23</sup>
3. How do you evaluate the quality of teaching reading at schools? How do teachers teach reading? Where have they learned methods of teaching reading? How effective are their methods?
4. How does Kyrgyz Academy of Education conduct training for primary teachers? How many hours? What is the focus of those trainings? Do teachers learn to teach reading, and if yes, what exactly?
5. How do teachers assess students' reading? What methods do they use to assess reading? How effective are their assessment of reading?
6. What materials are available on reading for policy makers, teachers, students or their parents? How do you rate the quality of those materials? Are these materials easily accessible to all students? What proportion of students can have access to those materials (and why not all)?
7. What factors positively or negatively affect the successful development of reading skills?
8. Do children learn to read outside schools? Do parents help their children to read books? If yes, to what degree and if not, why not?  
What is your recommendation (if any) for improvement of teaching reading?

### Academy of Education

1. How do you define reading? (or How do you understand 'reading?') How do early grade students learn to read? What standards / documents are available for them?
2. What (skills, competencies, and knowledge) does a student need to master at the end of primary education in terms of reading?
3. Do teachers and students have recommended textbooks for reading? How useful are those textbooks?
4. How do you evaluate the quality of teaching reading at schools? How is reading taught at schools?
5. How do teachers teach reading? Where have they learned methods of teaching reading? How effective are their methods? How does Academy of Education conduct training for primary teachers? how many hours? What is the focus of those trainings? Do teachers learn to teach reading, and if yes, what exactly?
6. How do teachers assess students' reading? What methods do they use to assess reading? How effective are their assessment of reading?

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<sup>23</sup> In Kyrgyzstan, the following questions were also asked: What do you know about the new curriculum for Grades 1 to 4? Are the schools, teachers, and students prepared to use this new curriculum? What is new in these curriculum documents? (Can you share a copy of the new curriculum if you have it?) Do all teachers have this curriculum? Is reading covered in the new curriculum? If yes, how? Are textbooks published according to the new curriculum? Do teachers and students have these recommended textbooks for the primary level? How useful are those textbooks?

7. What materials are available on reading for policy makers, teachers, students or their parents? How do you rate the quality of those materials? Are these materials easily accessible to all students? What proportion of students can have access to those materials (and why not all)?
8. What factors positively or negatively affect the successful development of reading skills?
9. Do children learn to read outside schools? Do parents help their children to read books? if yes, to what degree and if not, why not?
10. What is your recommendation (if any) for improvement of teaching reading?

### **Pre-service Teacher Education**

1. How do you define reading? (or How do you understand 'reading?').
2. What (skills, competencies, and knowledge) does a student need to master at the end of primary education in terms of reading?
3. Does your university have recommended primary textbooks? How useful are those textbooks?
4. What (skills, competencies, and knowledge) does a student need to master at the end of primary education in terms of reading?
5. How do early grade students learn to read? What standards / documents are available for them?
6. How do you evaluate the quality of teaching reading at schools? How is reading taught at schools? How do teachers teach reading?
7. How does your pre-service teacher training institution prepare primary teachers? How does your university help future teachers to teach reading? What methods do they learn in terms of teaching reading and why?
8. How effective are your student teachers' methods of teaching early reading? What is the evidence for it?
9. What factors positively or negatively affect the successful development of early reading skills?
10. Do children learn to read outside schools? Do parents help their children to read books? if yes, to what degree and if not, why not?
11. What is your recommendation (if any) for improvement of teaching reading?

### **International Organizations (World Bank, UNICEF, Soros Foundation, USAID, and Aga Khan Foundation)**

1. How do you define reading? (or How do you understand 'reading?').
2. What (skills, competencies, and knowledge) does a student need to master at the end of primary education in terms of reading?
3. How do early grade students learn to read? What are the standards / documents available for them? Are textbooks available according to these standards?
4. How do you evaluate the quality of teaching reading at schools? How is reading taught at schools? How do teachers teach reading?
5. What does World Bank (UNICEF, OSI/Soros Foundation, USAID or Aga Khan Foundation) do in terms of primary education in Kyrgyzstan (or Tajikistan), and especially on early grade reading? (Can you share any research reports by World Bank on early grade, if at all?)
6. What factors positively or negatively affect the successful development of early reading skills?
7. Do children learn to read outside schools? Do parents help their children to read books? if yes, to what degree and if not, why not?
8. What is your recommendation (if any) for improvement of teaching reading?

### **Primary Teachers**

1. How do you define reading? (or How do you understand 'reading?').

2. What standards are available? Are primary textbooks available according to the standards? Do teachers and students have recommended textbooks for reading? How useful are those textbooks?
3. What (skills, competencies, and knowledge) does a student need to master at the end of primary education in terms of reading?
4. How do you evaluate the quality of teaching reading at schools?
5. How is reading taught at schools? How do teachers teach reading? Where have they learned methods of teaching reading? How effective are their methods?
6. How do teachers assess students' reading? What methods do they use to assess reading? How effective are their assessment of reading?
7. Is there library at your school? If yes, how many book titles are there in the library for early grades? Is it sufficient? Do teachers and students use the library?
8. What materials are available on reading for policy makers, teachers, students or their parents? How do you rate the quality of those materials? Are these materials easily accessible to all students? What proportion of students can have access to those materials (and why not all)?
9. What factors positively or negatively affect the successful development of reading skills?
10. Do children learn to read outside schools? Do parents help their children to read books? If yes, to what degree and if not, why not?
11. What is your recommendation (if any) for improvement of teaching reading?

### **Authors of Children's Literature**

1. How do you define reading? (or How do you understand 'reading?').
2. What standards are available? Are primary textbooks available according to the standards? Do teachers and students have recommended textbooks for reading? How useful are those textbooks?
3. What (skills, competencies, and knowledge) does a student need to master at the end of primary education in terms of reading?
4. How do you evaluate the quality of teaching reading at schools?
5. How is reading taught at schools? How do teachers teach reading? Where have they learned methods of teaching reading? How effective are their methods?
6. How do teachers assess students' reading? What methods do they use to assess reading? How effective are their assessment of reading?
7. Tell us about your books for children? (Are you an author of textbooks or literature books?)
8. How do you write books? What is the basis for writing the books? Do you write books on the basis of standards? Who reviews and approves books that you write? Are they approved for the use in all schools? Are these books sufficient in number for all children? What are the aims of these books? How do they develop children's reading skills? (Is it possible to get a copy of your book or else where can we purchase them?)
9. What do you think is the reason for such a small number of children's books in Kyrgyz (or Tajik)?
10. How do you evaluate the effect of children's TV programs and in particular cartoons for promoting reading skills? Do they develop reading skills, and if yes, how?
11. What factors positively or negatively affect the successful development of reading skills?
12. Do children learn to read outside schools? Do parents help their children to read books? If yes, to what degree and if not, why not?
13. What is your recommendation (if any) for improvement of teaching reading?

### **Interview with Children's TV**

1. How do you define reading? (or How do you understand 'reading?').
2. How do early grade students learn to read?

3. Do you know about new curriculum for Grades 1 to 4? What is new in these curriculum documents?
4. How do you evaluate the quality of teaching reading at schools? How is reading taught at schools?
5. What factors positively or negatively affect the successful development of reading skills?
6. Do children learn to read outside schools? Do parents help their children to read books? If yes, to what degree and if not, why not?
7. Can you tell us about children's TV programs you prepare? What programs do you have? What is the goal of these programs? How do you prepare them? Who helps? Whose idea was it? Do you think these TV programs are having success? What is the evidence for it?
8. What can you say about Aga Khan Foundation's new TV program on reading (in Kyrgyzstan)? Who developed its programs / skits? What is the age group of children the targeted audience?
9. What is your recommendation (if any) for improvement of teaching reading?

### **Parents**

1. What grade does your child study in?
2. How do you define reading? (or How do you understand 'reading?').
3. Do you know about new curriculum for Grades 1 to 4?
4. What (skills, competencies, knowledge) does a student need to master at the end of primary education in terms of reading?
5. How do early grade students learn to read?
6. How do you evaluate the quality of teaching reading at schools? How is reading taught at schools? How do teachers teach reading?
7. What factors positively or negatively affect the development of your child's reading skills?
8. Does your child learn to read outside schools? Do you think your child needs to read out of school / at home? What kind of facilities do you have for that?
9. How many books (apart from textbooks) does your child have at home? In what language?
10. Do you help you child to read books? If yes, how? If not, why not?
11. Where else does your child learn to read?
12. Does your child watch TV programs to learn reading? If yes, what kinds of programs?
13. What is your recommendation (if any) for improvement of teaching reading?

## Appendix D. List of Documents Consulted and Reviewed

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## **Appendix E. Standards in Student Tests by CEATM**

### Grade 4 Students' Standards in Reading

1. Understanding
  - a. Student can interpret information in a text
  - b. Student can make conclusion based on information in a text
  - c. Student can identify/explain the meaning of word or phrase in a context
  - d. Student can explain a particular fact with text information
2. Application
  - a. Student can use the text information in new situation or in real life context
3. Analysis
  - a. Student can identify the main idea of the text
  - b. Student can make connections between the elements of text or facts
  - c. Student can identify causes of a particular event based on text information
  - d. Student can distinguish between significant and insignificant information
  - e. Student can identify which kind of information is missing in a text
  - f. Student can identify the motives of character's behavior
  - g. Student can identify the rationale for forms of the particular text
4. Evaluation
  - a. Student can develop required criteria for evaluation
  - b. Student can evaluate according to the proposed conclusion of the text
  - c. Student can evaluate the advantages of one object, event or action in relation to others