10 lessons learned from three recent media articles on Bridge International Academies
GI-ESCR brief – February 2018

The Global Initiative for Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (GI-ESCR) works to improve and promote transparency and accountability in the delivery of education in the context of the fast growth of private actors’ involvement. As part of this work, GI-ESCR researches, monitors, and publicly shares information about the development and impact of commercial private schools, including Bridge International Academies (BIA or Bridge), as one of the largest and most debated chain of commercial pre-primary and primary schools.

Several civil society reports have raised major concerns about BIA, including the quality of schools, the fees, discriminatory impacts, the labour conditions, all of which were denied by Bridge. Following these publications, three extensive media reports conducted by journalists were published in the last eight months:


These three news articles stand out for the investigative rigour of publications they appear in, the depth and detail of their analysis, and the fact that they are based on original research, rather than providing a summary of different positions. They therefore allow for civil society claims to be verified against independent journalist investigations. Strikingly, not only do these articles fully corroborate previous civil society findings, but they also unearth new evidence and challenges.

This brief summarises 10 key findings from these articles. Each finding is indicated by a generic heading, followed by a one summary and contextualisation sentence, and key related quotes taken from one of the three articles, with the author indicated in parenthesis.

1. Respect for national standards

Both the Kenyan and Ugandan governments have taken action against BIA for failing to comply with the minimum requirements to operate schools, including using an unapproved curriculum, unqualified teachers and inappropriate learning facilities. The respective authorities are taking steps to ensure compliance of Bridge schools with national regulations, or closure.

- “A leaked letter from the Ministry of Education reveals that a Kenyan inspection had deemed Bridge’s teaching material “largely irrelevant to Kenyan teaching objectives” and that the teaching methods don’t allow teachers enough room to tend to pupils with special needs.” (Maria Hengeveld)
- “In August 2016, the Ministry of Education sent the company an ultimatum. Bridge was given 90 days to adapt the curriculum to Kenyan guidelines and ensure that at least half of the teachers had a diploma. If they didn’t meet those requirements, Bridge was at risk of having to close down all of its schools.” (Maria Hengeveld)
- “Meanwhile, for more than two years, Bridge has been mired in a legal battle about certification of some of its schools. In February 2017, a Kenyan high court in Busia County upheld a decision to close 10 of 12 schools in the
region for failing to employ enough trained and registered teachers and managers and inappropriate facilities. In Uganda, a High Court of Kampala also ruled that Bridge schools should be closed, citing concerns about unlicensed schools, unqualified teachers and an unapproved curriculum, as well as inadequate latrines.” (Jenny Anderson)

- “[UK Parliament’s International Development] Committee members questioned May on...why Bridge has “strained” relations with so many of the countries in which it operates...” (Jenny Anderson)

2. Enrolment and sustainability

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<th>BIA enrolment is decreasing, and is very far sought from the company’s and investors' targets. This questions the narrative that Bridge is sought after by parents, responds to a demand from communities, or is needed and cannot be closed.</th>
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<td>- “In Kenya, enrollment was growing more slowly than the founders anticipated” (Peg Tyre)</td>
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<td>- “By 2016, they planned to enroll more than 750,000 students, at which point they would be breaking even. By 2022, they estimated that they would educate 4.1 million students and generate $470 million in revenue.” (Peg Tyre)</td>
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<td>- “Bridge currently has 80,000 students enrolled, down 100,000 from last year.” (Peg Tyre)</td>
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<td>- “It is difficult to keep up enrollment and make the schools break even,” Conway said, “because the churn is so high.” He explained that in 2017, thousands of enrolled children were not paid up.” (Peg Tyre)</td>
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<td>- At Bridge Diamond, “Some classrooms were empty. One had 15 students sitting at desks but no teacher.” (Peg Tyre)</td>
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<td>- “Bridge will need to keep expanding if it wants to become a sustainable business; it is currently losing about $12 million a year.” (Jenny Anderson)</td>
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<td>- “As a result of the uncertainty surrounding Bridge, Kenyan enrollment has fallen, from 100,000 in 2015 to 80,000 in 2017.” (Jenny Anderson)</td>
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<td>- “The [Bridge] program needs to get considerably cheaper, and a cheaper version of the program hasn’t been tested,” Sandefur said. “It’s worth piloting and testing a version of the program under real-world budget constraints.” (Jenny Anderson)</td>
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<td>- “If Bridge wants to operate at scale, and pursue more public-private partnerships, it seems incumbent upon it to show not only independent evidence that it can produce learning gains, but also that it can do that at a reasonable cost.” (Jenny Anderson)</td>
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3. Fees and poverty impact

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<th>As previously documented, fees and other costs charged at Bridge, combined with a strict enforcement system whereby children are expelled for missing payments, means that either children miss schools or families miss on other essential services such as healthcare. This may also largely explain the low and declining enrolment.</th>
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<td>- “The poorest families simply couldn’t afford the tuition and additional payments that Bridge required.” “Bridge’s strict payment system quickly became onerous. Bridge’s business in Kenya depends on most parents making routine electronic payments by mobile phone. But slum-dwelling parents in Kenya are mostly occasional workers who rarely have a predictable income. In informal settlements around Nairobi, I visited 10 or so parents in their homes who explained the fragile finances of their lives. A sick child, an uptick in the price of corn meal or even a prolonged rainstorm can throw a family on the margins into an economic crisis. In most informal and public schools, payment terms are flexible, and the subject of protracted negotiation. Bridge says that it works with families to meet their needs. But many people told me that the school sends children home if fees are not paid. ‘They tell you, ‘Sit at home with your child until you get the money,’ says one parent, a vegetable seller married to an unemployed welder who has two children enrolled at a Bridge school in Nairobi’s Mathare slum. Another mother with a 9-year-old child says she found it difficult to make Bridge payments: ‘At times I’ve gone without eating so I can pay school fees.’” (Peg Tyre)</td>
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<td>- “Michael Conway, Bridge’s East Africa director of operations, told me when I met him in Nairobi last September, ‘but we know families make choices about who gets paid first. We don’t want to be the last vendor paid.’” (Peg Tyre)</td>
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<td>- “You hear such sad stories,” said Juul. “Some parents took out loans to pay the tuition fees and were evicted from their homes because they were unable to make payments on time.” (Maria Hengeveld)</td>
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<td>- “One school administrator, an academy manager, described how the pressure to ensure that parents made their payments on time was disheartening. ‘I didn’t realize how hard it would be to talk to parents,’ he said. ‘They’re ill, they’re out of work, they had a fire. No one is in the house who’s making any money. How can they pay when they have no money for food?’” (Peg Tyre)</td>
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| - “Anton was fired after working for a year in the post when a quality assurance manager and a regional manager made an unannounced visit to his school and discovered three pupils attending in contravention of school fees policy. The children were registered with Bridge, but were no longer allowed to attend classes because their parents had fallen behind with the payment of tuition fees. Anton knew that he was supposed to turn pupils away if their
parents had not paid. He had already had his salary docked once and was at risk of losing his job if he continued to allow those pupils to attend” (Maria Hengeveld)

- “When asked, the company does not deny that, in practice, tuition fees are higher than the promised fees of US$4-6” (Maria Hengeveld)

4. Teaching methodology

Independent observations confirm that the use of scripted curriculum tends to be extremely rigid and limits interactive learning, while the fact that is written abroad can be a source of cultural misunderstandings.

- “But scripts can be confining, some teachers told me. And in some of the 20 or so Bridge classrooms I observed, pupils occasionally asked questions, but Bridge instructors ignored them. Teachers say that they are required to read the day’s script as written or risk a reprimand or eventual termination, and they do not have time to entertain questions.” (Peg Tyre)

- “Bridge has writers in Nairobi who create the lessons that are in Kiswahili, but many lessons, to be delivered in English, are written in America. And it is challenging to develop lesson plans for teachers and children from a different culture. Misunderstandings can occur.” (Peg Tyre)

- “The teacher reads from tablets, including Kindle Nooks and other varieties, verbatim, offering instructions about when kids should open their books, close them, stand up, cheer, or work.” (Jenny Anderson)

- “Bridge teachers’ fidelity to the scripts mean they have little agency... it makes for a classroom that can be oddly lacking in human connection. When O’Malley and I leave the grade two classroom where he was taking notes, he mentions we have been watching is one of the best in the school. I am surprised. The teacher read the script well, and smiled often. But does that make a good teacher?” (Jenny Anderson)

- “If it is too detailed and demands too much in fidelity to the script, it can’t lead to creativity on the part of the teacher,” Crouch said. He offered reading comprehension as an example. To develop and check for comprehension, “you need teachers who can converse with students in an open-ended way. By definition you cannot do that with scripting. It is mathematically impossible.” (Jenny Anderson)

- But Longe worries that kids also need critical thinking skills that won’t come from scripted classes. “I don’t think someone who is reading from scripted text can teach critical thinking,” he says. “You can’t teach what you don’t have.” (Jenny Anderson)

- “If we truly want to leap forward in education, we need to move beyond traditional scripted lessons.” (Jenny Anderson)

- “But Quartz’s visits to schools in Nigeria, Nairobi and Liberia found teachers sticking to scripts, which are tailored to each country’s national curriculum, with few students raising their hands to request more information or clarification. It does not seem that teachers are encouraged to veer off-script: their evaluations—a short one at least once a day, and a longer one each week—address how closely they follow the guide.” (Jenny Anderson)

- Research shows that motivation is a crucial factor in successful learning; kids who see education as its own reward have a big advantage over time. Horn flags the issue in the same blog post. “There is one big problem that I saw that I am not sure if Bridge worries about because parents don’t: children did not seem to be enjoying school,” he writes.

- “There’s rigorous evidence on the impact of teachers’ guides in the early years, but there is limited research beyond grade three or four,” said Piper, from RTL. “I can’t think of any rigorous studies in developing countries.”

5. Labour conditions

The articles confirm claims of extremely poor labour conditions, including tight contracts limiting teachers moving to other schools, long working hours, high pressure, for a low salary.

- “Early on, the company found it difficult to retain instructors. The Stanford case study cited high teacher turnover in 2010. Bridge began requiring instructors to sign a two-year contract; if they broke it, they had to pay back the cost of their training. Teacher turnover slowed.” (Peg Tyre)

- “Bridge teachers are discouraged from talking to the press, and their contracts remind them that they may not speak on behalf of Bridge, but some agreed to talk to me provided they were not identified.” (Peg Tyre)

- “working at Bridge, teachers said, can disrupt a career: Instructors are required to sign an employment agreement that includes a noncompete clause that prevents them from working at other nearby schools for a year after they leave.” (Peg Tyre)

- “On reflection, Anton says that he is relieved that he is no longer working for Bridge. He was under too much pressure to attract new pupils and the “rigid payment system” put him in uncomfortable waters with parents. Every month, about half of the parents couldn’t pay their fees on time, and would get upset with Anton when their children were, again, sent home from school. These tensions made it even more difficult to attract new customers and to persuade existing customers to bring in new ones.” (Maria Hengeveld)
6. Learning outcomes

New information shows that Bridge could have sought to misrepresent the effectiveness of its schools by providing additional tuition by foreign teachers to good pupils to pass national exams, while encouraging those with low score to repeat a year. In addition, experts confirm the mixed opinions held by previous critics on the value of Bridge’s self-assessment of its results.

7. Transparency and marketing

The articles demonstrate the lack of transparency and the culture of secrecy at Bridge, which does not hesitate to intimidate or discourage independent inquiry. This made headlines in 2016 when Bridge orchestrated the arrest of an independent PhD student researching its schools. This lack of transparency also appears in Bridge’s marketing approach. Enrolment in BIA appears to be partly or largely driven by a carefully studied marketing approach, with staff potentially misleading parents in order to reach their targets, rather than by a demand of parents, leading to important disappointments, which could also explain the low and declining enrolments. These findings confirm a video of a former BIA staff making similar claims.

- “He worked at Bridge for two and a half years before he handed in his resignation. The low salary and the heavy work load (60 hours a week, according to John) were contributing factors.” (Maria Hengeveld)
- “But it is unclear whether teachers will stay with a system that gives them so little freedom, especially when they have longer days and are paid less than they might earn at a government school” (Jenny Anderson)
Observations confirm health and safety fears in Bridge schools.
“the school building itself was shabby and neglected. In the schoolyard, about 30 feet away from where children enter their classrooms, was a deep trench of fetid garbage and rotted bags of feces.” (Peg Tyre)

10. Relationship with other schools

Bridge is critical of other schools, in particular government schools, in a way that appears to be a partial exaggeration or a misrepresentation of the reality.

“Geordie Brackin, the company’s energetic director of innovation, guided me to a Bridge classroom where students were using flashcards and told me that when he goes to government schools he “doesn’t see flashcards, and our teachers don’t report using flashcards.” Brackin’s observation, though, was greeted with embarrassed smiles at local public and private schools a short walk away. “Of course, people who are trained teachers, we know about flashcards,” said Lilian Odhiambo, who runs a small private school in the Mathare slum.” (Peg Tyre)

“Bridge chose not to use more than 50% of the teachers it was given in Liberia, saying that many were illiterate and couldn’t read the lesson plans. Those teachers reverted to the country’s education ministry, which then decided whether to reassign them to other schools. That complicates the idea of a public-private partnership, in which operators are meant to work within the existing system. “If these are the worst teachers and they are out of your school but in a school nearby, are you bringing up your quality at the cost of the other public schools?” asked Horn from Ark. If so, that is not a fair outcome for students, and does not improve the system.” (Jenny Anderson)