



Civil society organisations highlight limitations of new study on Bridge International Academies’ education model, and urge caution in interpreting findings

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In the light of human rights standards on the right to education and the Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 4, the signatory civil society organisations below raise serious concerns about the potential implications of the recently released working paper “[Can Education be Standardized? Evidence from Kenya](#)”. **We urge governments and other actors to recognise the limitations of this study, which some will seek to use to justify the expansion of for-profit private provision of education and scripted teaching methods. There are well established approaches to address the challenges faced by some education systems and we urge all actors to focus on education strategies and policies that have been proven to deliver inclusive, equitable and good quality education, and that contribute to strengthening public education for all.**

The above referenced working paper, published on 5 June 2022 by the University of Chicago’s Development Innovation Lab details a quantitative study conducted from 2016-2018 on Bridge International Academies (BIA). The research, which uses a randomised controlled trial (RCT) method, studied a group of students who applied for one of 10,000 two-year scholarships to attend BIA schools and compared test scores between those who received the two-year scholarship with students who did not.¹ The working paper argues, on the basis of this comparison between scholarship-recipients and others, that primary school students who attended Bridge schools with the scholarship for two years increased their test scores by an amount equal to being in school for an extra 0.89 year for

¹ It is important to note that only one-third of scholarship winners actually took the scholarship and chose to attend Bridge schools. The other two-thirds of winners wound up going to government schools or other private schools.

primary school pupils, and an extra 1.48 years for pre-primary school pupils. It concludes that attending schools delivering highly standardised education has the potential to produce dramatic learning gains at scale, suggesting that policymakers may wish to explore incorporation of standardisation, including scripted lesson plans and scripted teacher feedback and monitoring, in their own systems.

While the authors claim that their study provides evidence that scripted teaching works, a review of the working paper raises a number of policy and human rights concerns, summarised below:

- 1. The learning gains reported in the study are not necessarily a result of Bridge schools' model of scripted teaching or "standardisation" and cannot be separated from an array of other factors**

The study finds learning gains on test scores, and it makes far-reaching assumptions that those gains are the result of scripted teaching. However, the test score gains highlighted by the study are likely attributable to a whole range of different factors, including longer hours of instruction, a longer school week, smaller class sizes and potentially other social and economic conditions in communities, rather than primarily scripted teaching or "standardisation". It is highly possible that these aspects of the learning experience are what led students who got the scholarship to Bridge schools to perform better on the test than the students who did not win scholarships. There are many variables and complex factors at play in the equation of learning which should warrant far more cautious conclusions.

- 2. Scripted lessons and standardised education models do not represent good quality education; a large body of academic literature argues they are less effective and drive inequalities in education and between learners**

Though the study puts forward that it is specifically the standardisation model that has improved student academic achievement, there is a large body of academic work² that argues otherwise and is critical both of standardisation and of scripted curriculum in particular. Scripted curriculum controls both teacher and student movements from moment to moment in a predetermined, pre-paced, and pre structured way. There is little room for creativity or originality for either teachers or students.³ These structures for learning incorporate little of what we know about how children learn and grow.⁴ Many literacy educators who have studied scripted curriculum have written strong critiques.⁵ These criticisms include that scripted teaching can be less effective than non-scripted teaching, as well as unethical and inequitable. In terms of human rights law, an education of good quality

² See e.g. Fitz, J. A., & Nikolaidis, A. C. (2020). A democratic critique of scripted curriculum. *Journal of Curriculum Studies*, 52(2), 195-213.; MacGillivray*, L., Ardell, A. L., Curwen, M. S., & Palma, J. (2004). Colonized teachers: Examining the implementation of a scripted reading program. *Teaching Education*, 15(2), 131-144.; F.I. Ceron, "Beyond school effects: the impact of privatization and standardization of school systems on achievement inequality in Latin America", 2016, available at: https://www.a-id.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/11/education_21.pdf;

³ Mahiri, J. (2005). From 3 R's to 3 C's: Corporate Curriculum And Culture in Public Schools. *Social Justice*, 32(3 (101)), 72-88. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/29768322>

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ See. Allington, R. 2006. Reading lessons and federal policy making: An overview and introduction to a special issue. *Elementary School Journal*, 107(1): 3-15.

Schweinhart, L. J. and Weikart, D. P. 1997. The High/Scope curriculum comparison study through age 23. *Early Childhood Research Quarterly*, 12(2): 117-143.

Teale, W. H., Paciga, K. A. and Hoffman, J. L. 2007. The beginning reading instruction in urban schools: The curriculum gap ensures a continuing achievement gap. *Reading Teacher*, 61: 344-348.

must be acceptable and adaptable.⁶ Among other things, this requires curricula and teaching methods to respond to the aim of education and be culturally appropriate, and requires education to be flexible so it can adapt to the needs of changing societies and communities and respond to the needs of students within their diverse social and cultural settings⁷, which contrasts with the scripted teaching methods used by Bridge.

3. Education models that disregard teachers' rights are unethical, erode the teaching profession, and are in violation of human rights

The study cites that teachers in Bridge schools were "paid around KES 10,100 per month" while public primary school teachers were "paid between KES 30,000 and 50,000". The amount paid to Bridge teachers is far below the current minimum wage in Kenya⁸ and they have much longer working hours. The Bridge model promotes exploitation, low pay and long hours for teachers using the justification that their teachers are less educated and less qualified than public school teachers. The authors of the study seem to view this as positive, comparing it to the standardisation of production tasks of firms such as Walmart or McDonald's. According to international human rights law, the material condition of teaching staff should be continuously improved.⁹ Moreover, the United Nations treaty monitoring bodies have repeatedly stressed that schools should ensure a sufficient number of trained teachers, receiving good quality pre-service and in-service training with built-in components on gender sensitivity, non-discrimination, and human rights, and that all teachers should be paid domestically competitive salaries.¹⁰ However, the practice of Bridge schools cited by the study runs against these human rights as well as labour standards¹¹ and must be addressed by States immediately, also as part of their commitments to meet SDG 4¹².

4. Financial support received for the study raises considerable concerns about funding bias

The study received funding from several organisations who, at the time of the study, were investors or were directly affiliated with investors in Bridge International Academies. This includes in particular the World Bank, which provided funding for the study via four different programs, contributed research capacity and invested \$13.5 million in Bridge through its private sector arm, the International Finance Corporation (IFC), as well as the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation, and the Omidyar Network.¹³ Several of the funders named in the study have been proponents of a greater role for the commercial private sector in education

⁶ [Committee on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights, General Comment No. 13, at para 6.](#)

⁷ [Committee on the Rights of the Child, General Comment No. 1.](#)

⁸ <https://teachersupdates.co.ke/events/uhuru-increases-minimum-wage-by-12/>

⁹ See the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights, art. 13.2.e.

¹⁰ See Committee on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights, General Comment No. 13 and Committee on the Rights of the Child, General Comment No. 1. Kenya is a State Party to both international treaties (ICESCR and UNCRC) which impose legally binding obligations on the State.

¹¹ ILO/UNESCO Recommendation concerning the Status of Teachers (1966)

¹² One of the main targets for ensuring inclusive and equitable quality education and promoting lifelong learning opportunities for all (SDG 4) is to substantially increase the supply of qualified teachers - with the minimum required qualifications - by 2030.

¹³ The working paper notes that the World Bank International Finance Corporation (IFC), Bill Gates, and the Omidyar Network have invested in Bridge. It lists the funders of the study to be: the World Bank Strategic Impact Evaluation Fund (SIEF), the World Bank Knowledge for Change Program (KCP), the World Bank Research Support Budget (RSB), the World Bank Education Global Practice (GEDDR), JPAL Post-Primary Education Initiative, the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation; and the Omidyar Network's education initiative, which spun out to become Imaginable Futures in 2020. The scholarship program was funded by UnitedWeReach.

systems in the Global South, where scripted teaching and standardised education models have been introduced/provided by for-profit education actors. This potential funding bias raises questions about the validity and integrity of the study's conclusions which might impact future decisions on investing in the scripted teaching model followed by Bridge.

5. The study ignores the broader context of Bridge's problematic behaviour as a company

Beyond the specific findings, the study's conclusions ignore the broader context of Bridge's deeply concerning behaviour as a company, including [labour rights violations](#), harassment and intimidation of communities and critics¹⁴, [failure to follow the Kenyan curriculum](#) and [credible allegations of child sex abuse](#), as documented in a number of complaints to the IFC's accountability body. It also glosses over the major concerns about this model of low-fee private education, which causes segregation and stratification in the education system and disproportionately excludes girls, children with disabilities and the poorest – and undermines public education.¹⁵

6. The study overlooks a major policy shift within many international organisations, which are moving away from for-profit private education and affirming public education

Since the study was conducted, various international organisations, including those that previously provided funding to for-profit, private actors, have shifted their policies to reject this approach and affirm public education instead.

A [2018 resolution by the European Parliament](#) declared that the European Union and its Member States must not use development aid money to fund commercial private schools, which was followed by the [Global Partnership for Education's decision in its 2019 Private Sector Strategy](#) to prohibit funding to for-profit provision of core education services. [UNESCO's Global Education Monitoring \(GEM\) Report 2021](#) confirmed that "profit making is inconsistent with the commitment to guarantee free pre-primary, primary and secondary education."

Most recently, in March 2022, the World Bank's IFC [divested from Bridge](#), following a series of formal complaints, after investing a total of \$13.5 million since 2014. The following June 2022, the IFC [indefinitely extended](#) their [2020 landmark commitment](#) to freeze all direct and indirect investments in private, fee-charging kindergarten through grade 12 (K–12) schools, in response to an Independent Evaluation Group [report on IFC's investments](#) in K–12 private schools. [In its response to the evaluation, IFC](#) cited a number of challenges with such investments including weak financial results and the "potential for investments in private K–12 schools to exacerbate inequalities and have unintended, undesirable spillovers into the public sector school system".

¹⁴ See [Arrest of Curtis Riep](#) and [legal gag on the Kenyan Teachers Union](#).

¹⁵ See e.g. Report of the Special Rapporteur on the right to education, 2019, (A/HRC/41/37); [CRC Concluding observations on the combined third to fifth periodic reports of Kenya](#), para 57; see also [ACHPR Concluding Observations and Recommendations on the 5th Periodic State Report of the Republic of Uganda](#); and [ACHPR. Concluding Observations & Recommendations on the Combined 8th – 11th Periodic Report of the Republic of Kenya](#).

Despite the evidence reflected in the above bodies' decisions about the limits and harms of the for-profit approach and its negative impacts on poverty, inequality and public education systems, and the concerns raised about Bridge's behaviour as a company, we regret that the working paper has nevertheless served to legitimise the company and its model.

In light of the above, the undersigned organisations recommend that this working paper be read critically and strongly caution against using its findings to promote or fund the model used by Bridge International Academies (rebranded as NewGlobe) or similar approaches. We recommend that, on the basis of the evidence available, governments do not rely on scripted schooling and standardised education models to address the challenges in their education systems. Instead, they should focus their attention on education strategies and approaches that have been proven to deliver inclusive, equitable and quality education as evidenced for instance through a number of [successful examples](#), and contribute to strengthening public education for all, in alignment with international human rights. Such strategies should include:

- Making sustained financial investments into *public* education, primarily through mobilising domestic resources and especially by investing into the training of highly-qualified, professional teachers;
- Upholding standards that require schools to have a healthy and safe learning environment, with adequate water and sanitation facilities and classrooms; to have an adequate student-teacher ratio, as well as textbooks and other school materials; to have qualified teachers who are regularly trained and are employed under good and fair working conditions;
- Ensuring that education is locally relevant and promotes social justice and equity;
- Enhancing accountability for education through the participation of teachers and communities, rather than promoting high-stakes, tests/outcomes-based accountability mechanisms;
- Ensuring that education stakeholders across the spectrum can widely and actively participate in policy decisions on education.

Signatories:

1. Actionaid International
2. Africa Network Campaign on Education for All (ANCEFA)
3. Alliance Globale pour l'Éducation et le Développement (AGEDE), Niger
4. Brazilian Campaign for the Right to Education
5. Campaign for Popular Education (CAMPE), Bangladesh
6. Civil Society Network for Education Reforms (E-Net Philippines)
7. Coalition for Transparency and Accountability in Education (COTAE), Liberia
8. Coalition Nationale Malgache pour l'Education Pour Tous (CONAMEPT), Madagascar
9. Coalition pour l'Education Pour Tous BAFASHEBIGE, Burundi
10. Construisons Ensemble le Monde (ONG CEM), République Démocratique du Congo
11. Coordination Nigérienne pour l'Éducation à la Non-Violence et à la Paix (CNE-NVP)
12. Corporate Accountability and Public Participation for Africa (CAPPA)
13. East African Centre for Human Rights (EACHRights), Kenya

14. Euskal Eskola Publikoaren Aldeko Plataforma (Platform for the Defence of the Basque Public School)
15. Education For All Sierra Leone Coalition (EFA-SL)
16. Education International
17. Equal Education Law Centre
18. Eurodad
19. Fédération Nationale des Enseignants et éducateurs sociaux du Congo/Union Nationale des Travailleurs du Congo (FENECO/UNTC), République Démocratique du Congo
20. Global Campaign for Education (GCE)
21. Global Initiative for Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (GI-ESCR)
22. Global Justice Now (UK)
23. Initiative for Social and Economic Rights (ISER), Uganda
24. Mouvement Ivoirien des Droits Humains (MIDH), Côte d'Ivoire
25. National Campaign for Education Nepal (NCE Nepal)
26. National Education Union (NEU)
27. Oxfam International
28. Réseau Ivoirien pour la Promotion de l'Éducation pour Tous (RIP-EPT), Côte d'Ivoire
29. Réseau Nigérien pour la Défense des Droits de l'Enfant et de la Femme (RENIDEF)
30. Right to Education Initiative (RTE)
31. RTE Forum India
32. Solidarité Laïque
33. Syndicat National Autonome de l'Enseignement Secondaire (SNAES), Cameroun
34. Syndicat National des Agents de la Formation et de l'Éducation du Niger (SYNAFEN)
35. TEACH Côte d'Ivoire (République de Côte d'Ivoire)
36. Union Nationale des Formateurs de l'Enseignement Technique et Professionnel de Côte d'Ivoire (UNAFETPCI SOLIDARITE)
37. World Organization for Early Childhood Education (OMEP)
38. Young Men Action for Education (YMAEONG), DRC