

# **Justifications and Impacts of Low-Fee Private Schools in Kenya and Uganda: Understanding Policy Evolutionary Mechanisms through Public Discourse of Bridge International Academies**

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*Low-fee private schools (LFPS) have grown considerably in the developing world as public free primary education has been unable to cater to the poorest children. Bridge International Academies (BIA), one of the largest chains of LFPS, has positioned itself as a solution to issues of access and quality of primary education. Using newspaper articles from Kenya and Uganda, this paper examines public discourse of BIA through the lens of cultural political economy, or how public discourse can influence variation, selection and retention regarding LFPS. After exploring scholarship to understand the justifications and impacts of LFPS, this paper finds that justifications are present in public discourse while impacts are not. Therefore, public discourse has given voice and promoted the need for improvements, with LFPS as an option, but that discourse (and scholarship) has yet to emphasize LFPS as a real solution, due to inconclusive evidence and ongoing battles with governments.*

The privatization of education has become a growing global phenomenon, with a sharp increase in private actors entering education markets over the past two decades. The education sector is gaining large investments from private organizations, providing opportunities for immense profits on a global scale (Komljenovic & Robertson, 2017; Verger, Lubienski & Steiner-Khamsi, 2016). While the global education industry is headquartered in the global north, the untapped and growing education markets of the developing world have led to greater investments in education in the global south (Robertson, Mundy, Verger & Menashy, 2012). The World Bank's policy advocacy for education privatization since the early 2000s has created an environment in which governments, aid agencies and the private sector see education privatization in the developing world as sound economic and education policy and a good investment. The World Bank's philosophical lead has led to an unprecedented growth in education privatization in sub-Saharan Africa and South Asia, leading to more, and larger, investments from a range of actors (Mundy & Menashy, 2014).

One area of education privatization which has received greater attention recently are low-fee private schools (LFPS). The purpose of this paper is to examine how one of the largest and most controversial chains of LFPS in East Africa is represented in public discourse and how their representations in media may help or hinder policy evolutionary mechanisms concerning education privatization. This paper differs from research exploring legal, educational achievement and human rights issues concerning LFPS and is instead grounded in the public discourse of these schools, or how these schools are represented and perceived in an important communication medium.

LFPS are understood as schools owned by individuals, groups or companies which offer their services to children for a small fee, either paid directly by parents or by a third party, for the purpose of making a profit (Srivastava, 2013; Phillipson, 2008). The fee differs depending on the country and the provider but is vaguely calculated as the price-point deemed affordable for those living in poverty (Riep & Machachek, 2016; Verger, 2012). The realization that the quality of public primary education was subpar and that not all children had access to public schools, even following the push for universal primary education, has led to a rapid increase in private school enrolment (Alcott & Rose, 2016; Rose, 2009; Tooley & Dixon, 2005). This paper specifically examines one chain of LFPS in Kenya and Uganda, two countries where private education has increased drastically since the emergence of free primary education (FPE) policies. The amount of LFPS has risen dramatically in Kenya since the introduction FPE in 2003 and account for a majority of the private education institutions in the country (Nishimura & Yamano, 2013). A similar trend has happened in Uganda, where enrolment in private schools increased following FPE in 1997 (Kisira, 2008; Saphina, 2017). The two neighbouring East African countries are therefore relevant case studies concerning the growth, justification and impact of the LFPS movement. Although there are more LFPS in Kenya, from the available evidence, debates surrounding their legality and morality have taken centre-stage in both countries. While a comparative study of the two countries would be useful for further research, I choose not to focus on comparison but rather on public discourse in the region as LFPS are still a recent phenomenon and because of their precarious legal statuses in both countries.

This paper will use recent academic literature to understand the justifications for LFPS and the impact of these schools on the education system. Following the literature review, I will examine public discourse of Bridge International Academies (BIA), the largest chain of LFPS in the world, and in East Africa, using one prominent newspaper from each country. I conceptualize public discourse as accessible and broad mediums of information and culture which help people understand the world around them. I will analyze public discourse concerning BIA through the lens of cultural political economy (CPE) by examining BIA in discourse through the evolutionary mechanisms of variation, selection and retention. CPE is a useful theory for analyzing how the mobilization of ideas and new strategies, and actors' perceptions of these ideas and strategies, leads to political positions and consensus, and eventually new policies. (Jessop, 2010; Verger, 2016). Using this framework, I explore BIA's justifications and impacts, to understand how private education actors enter, grow and stabilize in low-income countries. I look at mechanisms of variation, selection and retention of BIA through public discourse to understand whether other actors, namely parents, teachers and citizens, are linked to policymakers' vision of the role of private actors. In the CPE context, variation refers to the development of new practices when dominant ones must be revisited due to challenges or dissatisfaction. Selection concerns identification of policy solutions deemed most suitable after examining existing problems. Lastly, retention represents the final step in which policymakers enact reforms after understanding the problems and exploring solutions. These three stages provide a more critical analysis of policy adoption and the roles of strategic actors, and public information, in pushing for reforms linked with privatization (Verger, 2016; Verger, Fontdevila & Zancajo, 2017).

For this paper, I ask the following research questions: a) how is BIA portrayed in the Kenyan and Ugandan news media? b) how does public discourse about BIA represent justifications and impacts of the LFPS movement? c) how does public discourse concerning BIA explain variation, selection and retention ideas? In answering these questions, this paper attempts to demonstrate the role of public discourse in creating an environment for private education actors to capitalize on problems related to access and quality in education and to insert themselves as viable and long-term policy solutions.

### **Bridge International Academies**

BIA was founded by Jay Kimmelman, his wife Shannon May and Phil Frei in 2007. Together, they created a business plan for mass schooling in developing countries based on the "Academy-in-a-Box" model. This model is based on standardized methods, curricula and teaching methods which can be scaled and copied across various contexts while keeping costs low. The entire BIA supply-chain, from finding places to construct schools to lessons plans, is controlled and streamlined primarily by BIA employees in the United States. Teachers and Academy Managers, the sole on-the-ground administrative employees, use computers and/or smartphones to access lessons and scripts prepared by central academic teams (Riep & Machacek, 2016). Using and tapping into market-making devices such as marketing campaigns and standardization, BIA has attempted to create new education markets where their schools can flourish (Riep, 2017; Srivastava, 2016).

The first BIA opened in 2009 in a slum in Nairobi. By 2016, BIA owned and operated over 520 schools throughout Kenya (420), Uganda (63), Liberia (50), Nigeria (4) and India (3) (Riep & Machacek, 2016). Since the company's inception, they have received large amounts of philanthropic funding from prominent global players, including the Clinton Global Initiative, Bill Gates and Mark Zuckerberg and national governments through their aid agencies, including USAID and DFID (Riep, 2017).

### **LFPS in Kenya and Uganda: Justifications and Impacts**

Scholarship concerning the rise of LFPS in East Africa over the past decade has focused primarily on its relation to FPE and the increase in demand for public primary schools. In recent years, academia has focused on urban slums, because the largest growth in LFPS have occurred in these areas (Tooley, Dixon & Stanfield, 2008). This section examines the rise of LFPS by examining recent literature on the justifications for their existence and their impacts on student achievement and school quality. Articles selected for the literature review focused primarily on measuring the successes and failures of LFPS in the region using varied methodologies and criteria for impacts on education outcomes. This attempt to provide a verdict on whether LFPS are helping or hindering education is closely related to how BIA is portrayed and whether the chain's entrance and impact in East Africa demonstrates its influence on policy.

### **Justifications**

#### ***The Need for Schools in Urban Slums***

A primary justification for the growth of LFPS in both Kenya and Uganda is the lack of public schools to accommodate all children, especially in urban slums. In both countries,

the impact of FPE policies had immediate consequences for access to education in urban areas. Although the elimination of school fees led to rapid national increases in enrolment (Lewin, 2009), it also put great pressure on the public system to expand at an impossible rate. (Nishimura & Ogawa, 2015; Saphina, 2017). The immediate impact of FPE on access to education was not as present in urban slums, where building schools and hiring administrators and teachers became a difficult task for governments.

In Kenya, Tooley, Dixon and Stanfield (2008) explored the rise of LFPS in the Kibera slum of Nairobi by interviewing school owners and managers. First, they claim, after finding nearly 80 LFPS in Nairobi and compiling self-reported data on each school, that the positive impact of FPE in slums was overstated, and that students enrolled in private schools pre-2003 simply transferred to public schools, meaning that there was little to no net gain in enrolment. Second, based on these findings, they argue that new LFPS have grown significantly in slums to meet the needs of the poorest who were left behind. They conclude that there are serious inadequacies concerning school access through state-run education for Kenya's poorest and that LFPS are trying to fill this gap.

Oketch, Mutisya, Ngware, Ezeh and Epari (2010) explored how students transferred and chose schools in urban Kenya and the competitiveness of entering public schools vs private schools. Examining data from the 2007 Education Research Program, they find that more children in urban slums were involuntarily excluded from entering public schools than initially expected. Oketch, Mutisya, Ngware and Ezeh (2010) focused on understanding discrepancies between supply and demand of public schools. Using an excess demand framework, they find that the announcement of FPE created an increased interest in education, especially amongst the poorest Kenyans. However, limited education funding and poor planning has led to an excess demand for education.

In Uganda, there is less research on LFPS and the reasons for their existence and growth. According to Kisira (2008), the private sector has aided in providing increased access to primary education in areas where the Ugandan government has not succeeded. In short, the private sector has had the potential to meet the continuous education access gap. Harma's (2017) analysis demonstrates how the Ugandan government has had very little success in providing appropriate schooling, creating an environment for private schools to flourish and to take more than 80 percent of the market. Overall, the case in Uganda is similar to that of Kenya: the demand for education, especially in urban slums, has been much higher than the public supply, creating an opportunity for LFPS to run schools for the excess demand.

### *Perception of Education Quality*

In addition to filling the quantity gap left by the inadequacies of public schools, the other main justification for LFPS growth is that they will provide a better quality of education (Riep, 2017). Most often, education quality is measured through academic achievement, yet there are other quality indicators that researchers and parents use to examine education quality. Integral to the growth of LFPS in Kenya and Uganda, and throughout the developing world, are parents' perception that public education is of a low quality.

Recent literature on the connection between education quality and growth of LFPS in Kenya has explored parents' dissatisfaction with the quality of public schools. Heyneman and Stern (2014) examined LFPS to understand what has driven their increased demand. Their study included interviews with parents to understand their thoughts on formal schooling. Parents believed there were shortcomings in public schools and wanted other affordable options. To corroborate their opinion, parents cited poor national assessment results, overcrowding in classrooms, teacher absenteeism and unengaged teachers. Other studies have found very similar results concerning parents' perception of public education quality. Nishimura and Yakamano (2013) use a survey of 718 households in rural Kenya to understand what influences parents to send their children to private schools (school choice) and why they change from public to private schools (school transfer). It is important to note that this study does not look exclusively at LFPS. The authors find that pupil-teacher ratio and class size in public schools are two of the strongest determinants of why parents choose private schools. Tooley, Dixon and Stanfield (2008) present their findings on parents in slums' perception of quality differences between private and public schools following focus group discussions with parents from four LFPS in Nairobi. Their findings demonstrate unanimous beliefs that LFPS provide greater quality education than public schools. Similar to the findings of Nishimura and Yakamano (2013), smaller class sizes and lower pupil-teacher ratios, quality indicators which are easy to observe, were a main reason for parents to perceive education quality to be better in private schools.

In Uganda, a similar phenomenon has occurred. According to Kisira (2008), interviews with parents from across the country highlighted the negative perceptions of public schooling after the massive increase of students post-1997. In addition, the decreasing perception of quality, understood as overcrowding and inadequate resources for students, created the higher demand from parents for better quality schools outside of the public sector. Harma (2017) also echoed the perception that LFPS are better than public schools. An interview with a representative from Kampala's private school association found that although public schools may have more qualified teachers, parents have become more result-oriented, and LFPS prioritize improving student achievement. Although the studies mentioned above do not all look exclusively at LFPS, this section has demonstrated that, from available data, parents do believe that public education is sub-par.

## **Impacts**

### ***Increasing Access, but not for the Poorest***

Calculating the number of private schools accurately, and finding what percentage constitutes LFPS, is difficult in Kenya due to registration issues. Most LFPS are not registered with the government because only schools that own their land can register with the government (Heyneman & Stern, 2014). Therefore, most scholars who attempt to examine whether LFPS are closing the access gap acknowledge that there are limitations. Using data from 2002, Tooley et al. (2008) identified 76 private primary schools for the poor just in Kibera. Nishimura and Yakamano (2013) use 2008 data from the Central Bureau of Statistics to demonstrate the rising number of private schools, which increased from 1,441 to 5,857 between 2002 and 2005.

Oketch, Mutisya, Ngware and Ezeh's (2010) study explored the growth of LFPS in relation to where poor students chose to attend. Their research finds that more than 40 percent of the poorest students in urban slums, who had trouble accessing public schools, attended a LFPS. In addition, they find that a higher proportion of children living in slums are attending private schools, not public schools. Stern and Heyneman (2013) find in their case study of 23 mostly unregistered LFPS that they target poor students. Additionally, LFPS often provide some sort of subsidy or scholarship (61% of students in their sample received aide) which allows them to attend the school. Stern and Heyneman (2013) conclude that LFPS are meeting a demand for schools, but their ability to attract the poorest students is inconclusive. While it is difficult to measure the impact of LFPS, recent scholarship has proven that LFPS are filling a gap. However, their ability to aide the poorest of the poor through low-cost schooling has largely been inconclusive (see Day Ashley et al., 2014).

In Uganda, LFPS ability to increase access for the poorest children has been more difficult to observe, mainly because of the large market share they control in urban areas. Harma's (2017) findings show that there are approximately 2,282 private schools of all levels in and around Kampala serving upwards of half a million students, which accounts for 84 percent of all school enrolments. While most children attend a private school, the private sectors' ability to provide education to the poorest of the poor is not as well documented. For instance, proprietors of LFPS were asked which two main socioeconomic groups attend their school. While the majority reported they serve the poor, less than 20 percent stated they serve the poorest. (Harma, 2017). This is consistent with most scholarship, which shows that their impact on aiding the poorest of the poor is relatively weak (Day Ashley, 2014).

### *Offering a Higher "Quality" of Education*

A main selling point for LFPS is that they provide a better quality of education, primarily in terms of academic achievement. For research purposes, Kenya and Uganda are good case studies because there is data on academic achievement from national assessments (KCPE in Kenya and PLE in Uganda), the Southern and Eastern Africa Consortium for Monitoring Education Quality (SACMEQ) and Uwezo's citizen-led assessment.

Recent literature on achievement in LFPS compared to public schools has been hotly debated. While some scholarship presents findings that LFPS increase achievement for most students, others demonstrate much smaller gains or no difference. Tooley's (2005) study, using a random stratified sample of schools, tested 3,000 students in Kibera in both LFPS and public schools in English, Kiswahili and mathematics, through an assessment developed by the author. After controlling for background variables, Tooley found that students in LFPS did score significantly higher (Tooley, 2005). In a more recent study, Dixon, Tooley and Schagen (2013) once again conducted their own examination of private and public school students in Kibera. Using multi-level modelling, they found that students in LFPS scored higher in mathematics and Kiswahili, but not in English. While much of Tooley's work demonstrates that LFPS have higher achievement, there has been

a lot of criticism from fellow academics pertaining to Tooley's methodology, testing instruments and analysis (see Watkins, 2004; Day Ashley, 2014).

Other studies have explored quality differences in Kenya. Bold, Kimenyi, Mwabu and Sandefur (2013) use KCPE results to examine the differences in scores between private and public schools. They find that between 2000 and 2005, private schools performed on average 20 percent better than public schools in raw score and conclude that there is an exam performance premium of one standard deviation. It must be noted that their analysis did not differentiate LFPS from regular private schools. Bold et al. (2013) have also been criticized, namely for using KCPE scores that are over a decade old and because most students do not reach Standard 8, the year students take the KCPE exam. A study of 12 LFPS in Kibera by Ohba (2013) also explores KCPE results and transition rates to secondary school. Ohba (2013) finds that eight LFPS had lower KCPE scores than the two government schools selected for comparison, and that graduates of public primary schools were more likely to enter secondary schools.

Examining Kenya, Uganda and Tanzania, Alcott and Rose (2016) study whether LFPS increase learning outcomes for children from the most disadvantaged backgrounds.

This is the most recent study examining student achievement in LFPS, which uses household data and assessment results from Uwezo's 2013 assessment to conduct a regression analysis examining the impact of attending private school on whether a child developed literacy and numeracy skills. They find that private schooling is positively related to increased basic learning outcomes in general for all children in Kenya and Uganda, but that private schooling is unlikely to decrease the already large gap in learning outcomes between rich and poor. Therefore, it is difficult to assess if LFPS are providing better quality education to students from similar socioeconomic backgrounds, or if their student population would perform better regardless of the school they attend.

While public perception of education quality is often linked to pupil-teacher ratios, there is much less empirical research on the topic. In their study, Stern and Heyneman (2013) find that in their sample of private schools in urban slums, pupil-teacher ratio was 15:1, compared to 80:1 in the government school. This evidence corroborates Tooley and Dixon's (2005) findings, in which LFPS in Kibera had a ratio of 21:1 while public schools' pupil-teacher ratio reached 60:1. Ohba's (2013) study also finds that ten of the 12 LFPS had lower pupil-teacher ratios than the two public schools. While there is some evidence of lower pupil-teacher ratios in LFPS in urban slums, there is no research on whether the same phenomenon is present outside of slums. In Uganda, there was no mention of pupil-teacher ratios of LFPS in the literature. However, a Ugandan National Planning Authority (2015) report reveals that pupil-teacher ratio in public schools was 54:1 in 2014, while the ratio was 32:1 in private schools. There is no mention of whether this ratio is similar or different for LFPS.

### **Methodology**

To examine how BIA, the largest chain of LFPS in East Africa, is portrayed in the news media, I constructed an original dataset of articles published online between January 2016 and March 2018. The dataset is limited to articles in this date range because the first BIA

opened in Uganda in February 2015 and due to a lack of media coverage prior to January 2016. I searched for articles in the most read English-language newspaper in Kenya, the *Daily Nation*, and Uganda, *New Vision* (Nyabuga & Booker, 2013; BBC, n.d.). While the *Daily Nation* is a privately-owned newspaper, *New Vision* is a government-owned newspaper. To find relevant articles, I used the search option on both newspapers' websites to input following terms: "Bridge International Academy", "Bridge Schools", "Low-Fee Private School" and "Low-Cost Private School." In total, there were 31 articles in the dataset. Nearly three-fifths (58%) of the articles were in the *Daily Nation*, while the remaining two-fifths (42%) were found in *New Vision*.

Following the collection of articles, I developed a detailed codebook, as well as a questionnaire for background variables and speech acts. Speech acts are the voices of specific actors in each article and are therefore given authority and a platform in public discourse. There are conscious choices made relating to who receives the power to speak and present arguments in news media. Speech acts are thus critical for examining who is given agency and whose ideas are put at the forefront of public discourse. The methodology and codebook I employed is a hybrid of media analysis tools used to examine contentious issues in education and growing global education movements. I use Pizmony-Levy's (2016) methodology for examining speech acts of articles pertaining to contentious education issues, as well as Steiner-Khamsi's (2003) typology for political reactions of international large-scale assessments to explore whether the media scandalizes, glorifies, or is indifferent towards BIA. The dataset also included certain background variables, including year and month, location of article in the newspaper, author affiliation and information about BIA.

I analyze the media, and those given voice in the media, to understand the dominant conversations and debates occurring in the public sphere, and thus how ideas concerning BIA are contextualized and how the public makes sense of BIA's actions. According to Luhmann (2000), media does not only represent shared social realities, but it can produce and influence the public's notion of reality. The presentation, speakers and tone of the media may influence how the public interprets its social reality (see Weaver, 2007). Analyzing the media can help in understanding patterns or interpretation among a given population. In addition, discourse is powerful as it privileges certain ideas and can constrain or develop knowledge (Bacchi, 2000). This is also important concerning policy making as it puts to the forefront certain ideas, facts and truths.

The dataset and methodology are limited in two ways. First, the small sample of newspapers means that certain perceptions and voices may be hindered. This is more relevant to Uganda, as *New Vision* is a government-owned newspaper. Second, since my dataset only includes articles found online, is it difficult to tell whether all of these articles were also published in print editions (Ngoge, 2014).

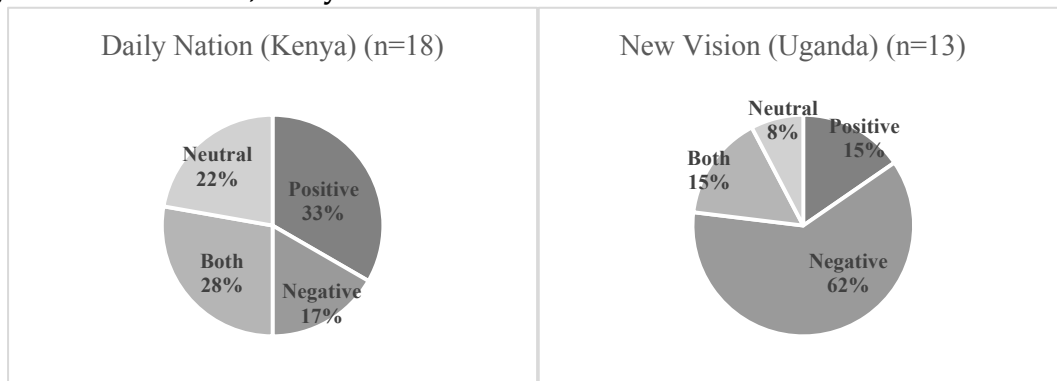
## **Results**

### *Descriptive Patterns*

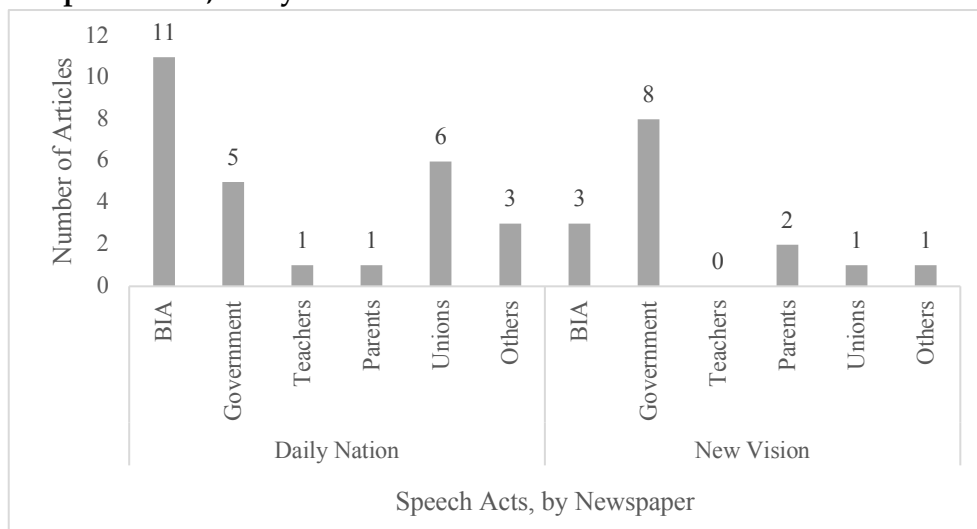


I began by examining the descriptive statistics of the dataset. The number of articles referring to BIA, regardless of newspaper, was highest in 2016, with 16 articles. Interestingly, 13 of the articles in the dataset were published between November 2016 and January 2017, three months in which there were conflicts between BIA and governments. In terms of the perception of the articles, eight included positive impression of BIA, 11 were negative, seven articles attempted to present both sides, and five articles were neutral. The reactions towards BIA by newspaper were drastically different, with *New Vision's* perception much more negative than the *Daily Vision*, as can be observed in Figure 1. Regarding speech acts, BIA and government officials received similar amounts of speech acts, 14 and 13, respectively. Again, speech acts differed significantly between newspapers, with BIA receiving much less speech acts in *New Vision*, which can be seen in Figure 2. Lastly, concerning specific information provided about BIA in the articles, 20 articles included how many BIA schools and/or students were present in the given country, eight articles named BIA funders, seven articles stated that BIA were low-fee and five articles mentioned that BIA was U.S.-based.

**Figure 1: Article Tone, Daily Nation and New Vision**



**Figure 2: Speech Acts, Daily Nation and New Vision**



***Public Discourse and Justifications***

The justifications for LFPS, namely that they provide school access to children who otherwise may not have the opportunity and that they are perceived as better schools, are quite present in the discourse. Regarding the CPE framework, dissatisfaction with the status quo allows for new actors and ideas to enter discourse and ultimately battle for policy relevance. These justifications are highlighted primarily from BIA speech acts as well as testimonies from parents. In addition, reporting about the number of BIA schools and students was combined with information on the number of out-of-school children and the negative impacts of closing these schools.

***Access.*** The notion that BIA entered Kenya and Uganda to fill the demand gap for access to primary schools was a main theme. There were 12 articles (Kenya 9; Uganda 3) which mentioned that BIA was justified in their endeavours because of their ability to increase access to schools where there was a lack of public schools. In terms of speech acts, BIA and parents were most often quoted concerning the lack of access in public schools. For instance, Shannon May stated that BIA schools "were helping poor children who could not access education due to congestion in public schools" (ID 5), a short introduction to BIA in an article about technology said that the company "manages over 400 schools in Kenya for low-income areas in slums where access to school is limited" (ID 19), and a forum on education in Nairobi led the reporter to state that "urban informal settlement demand for schooling has outstripped supply for lack of public schools in those areas" (ID 15). The discourse promotes the idea that there are not enough government schools in the region.

Public discourse does acknowledge that there is an undersupply of schools for the poorest in the two countries, and BIA positions itself as an opportunity for students to begin or continue their schooling. There are instances in which attempts to close BIA are linked to students being unable to find other schools to attend. An editorial by an unnamed author stated that closing BIA schools will leave students without any alternatives (ID 11), and a teacher (a former BIA employee) wrote that the consequences of governments shutting down BIA schools will impact poor students, who were only able to attend school due to BIA (ID 22). From these perspectives, the attempt to shut down BIA schools due to compliance and legal problems are not questioned, only how shutdowns will negatively impact students. Overall, public discourse does deal with the inadequacies of the public system, and BIA is presented mainly as a provider of education in area which is in desperate need of education providers.

***Perceptions of Quality.*** The negative perception of public education quality is a main justification for the growth of LFPS. Regarding public discourse, there are some mentions of how BIA's quality of education is perceived to be better while demeaning the quality of public schools. Although there are few of these speech acts, one from a teacher and four from parents, they provide important insights on public perceptions of quality. Additionally, there are five instances in which reporters stated that parents backed BIA due to their good schools. In Uganda, a parent responded to BIA reopening in September 2016 after a forced government shutdown, by stating that Bridge "offers children a good

education" (ID 29). In November 2016, when the Ugandan government did order the closure of all BIA schools, three parents were asked their opinion by *New Vision*. All three parents were in favour of keeping BIA open and stated that BIA was offering quality education, with one parent saying that BIA schools "are far better than some government schools" (ID 32). Four other articles mentioned that parents were protesting, or planning to protest, the attempted closure of BIA in both Kenya and Uganda. However, outside of parents' perception, only one article clearly stated that BIA offers education in areas where "quality is largely compromised" (ID 19). Perceptions of the low of quality of public schools, and BIA's ability to provide better education is highlighted in discourse, especially by users. However, concrete reasons for this better perception, including class size, teacher quality and achievement, are not mentioned.

### ***Public Discourse and Impacts***

In general, discourse through the media seems to emulate the ambiguity of BIA's impact by largely not engaging with it. Therefore, while BIA does highlight the inadequacies of the current education landscape in the two countries, no proof is provided as to why its model should be integrated into policy. In addition, main actors, including BIA, the government, unions and parents, do not make many claims about the impact of the LFPS in Kenya and Uganda.

**Access.** BIA's impact on increasing access to education, especially for the poorest children, is seldom stated in the media. Although articles contend that there are not enough public schools, there are no mentions of BIA reducing the number of marginalized or out-of-school children. BIA speech acts do not include any mentions that the schools have helped in closing the gap between demand and supply through education. However, 20 articles (Kenya 13; Uganda 7) provide information on how many schools BIA operates and/or how many students are enrolled. While this provides an idea of the size and expansion of BIA in recent years, it does not explain whether students are from low socioeconomic status. Therefore, public discourse does seem to follow the literature closely: while LFPS have grown and increased enrolment, there is a lack of evidence as to who attends these schools and whether BIA has significantly curbed the number of out-of-school children.

**Quality.** In terms of discussing BIA's impact on quality of education, public discourse barely focuses on BIA's ability to provide a better education than the public system. Instead, there is a much larger focus on top performers and scholarship opportunities. In abstract terms, BIA attempts to present itself as superior. For instance, BIA speech acts include loose terms such as "Bridge is delivering learning gains" (ID 21) and that Bridge's education is "world-class" (ID 13). However, BIA distances itself from high quality education at times, stating that "our schools are not the worst in Uganda" (ID 32) and that BIA provides "a decent education" (ID 13). In simple terms, BIA speech acts attempt to prove that BIA provides high quality, or at least good, education, but there is little discussion of the real impact on quality indicators. There was only one article from December 2016 which mentioned higher student achievement of BIA schools compared to public schools. The article highlighted the elevated KCPE results of "six candidates with a pass mark of over 400 marks while another 700 candidates scores above 300 marks to steer the group of schools in an unprecedented performance" (ID 16). BIA's head of

communication stated in the article that "this performance has vindicated Bridge Academies of cheating, poor quality education" (ID 16).

The media in Kenya also highlights BIA's ability to help a small number of top performers by providing scholarships to schools in the United States. Four articles in the *Daily Nation* mention students receiving scholarships from BIA and their partners. These stories examined how BIA helps to provide full scholarships to "prestigious secondary schools" (ID 6). The idea that scholarships will help provide quality education to students is also highlighted by BIA staff, who stated that "Bridge Academies will continue to support Kenyan children in attaining the highest levels of education by seeking scholarship opportunities" (ID 6) and that BIA had "secured Sh80 million to ensure their top graduates join top secondary schools" (ID 13). Although the discourse on scholarships does not demonstrate an ability to increase quality for all students, it does show that BIA produces a handful of top students, and that BIA can provide them with greater education opportunities, often outside of Kenya, than public schools.

### ***Government, Unions and the Legality of BIA***

While out of the scope of justifications and impacts, but important to understanding the evolutionary policy mechanism of retention, is it critical to examine public discourse related to the legality, and perceived legality, of BIA. I find that governments and teacher unions in both Kenya and Uganda attempt to discredit BIA by putting to the forefront of discourse their subpar standards.

In the dataset, a total of 17 articles (Kenya 5; Uganda 12) explored the substandard practices of BIA. Additionally, six articles (Kenya 1; Uganda 5) stated that BIA's practices are not legal. Lastly, 16 articles (Kenya 7; Uganda 9) mentioned that BIA schools were closed due to their inability to conform to government standards. For instance, articles included statements such as "Bridge schools were ordered closed in August this year for failing to teach the approved syllabus and for employing untrained teachers" (ID 1), that they operated in "conditions ... [which are] hazardous and the teachers who are employed in the schools are not qualified" (ID 13) and that their "non-conformity to national curriculum, use of unqualified teachers ... and poor infrastructure were putting the lives of the learners in danger" (ID 20). The focus on standards and their negative impact on students is evident in the discourse and is the main argument of governments and unions. Yet, when exploring how these subpar and non-conforming education standards effect students, there is almost no mention of access or quality.

### **Discussion**

Public discourse concerning justifications for BIA and BIA's impact in the education sector are mixed. My findings demonstrate that the two main justifications for the growth of LFPS, the greater demand for education than the public system can supply and the negative perception of the quality of public schools, are present in the discourse. However, the media's interaction with the impacts of LFPS is similar to the literature: there is no information, in this case study of BIA, on LFPS ability to increase access for the poorest, and greater quality is spoken about primarily in abstract terms. Overall, I find that the media does create space for the public to contemplate the downfalls of the public system

and to promulgate the role of LFPS like BIA, and other private alternatives, as possible solutions. However, I also find that the discourse does not demonstrate that LFPS positive impacts on access and quality are so apparent that it is an obvious solution to current education woes.

By exploring the justifications and impacts of LFPS, and more specifically BIA, I find an interesting and useful study to employ CPE and the evolutionary mechanisms of variation, selection and retention in terms of privatization policies (or in this case actors, trends and policies). Regarding validation, the discourse demonstrates that the romanticism of free primary education supported by the government must be revisited since there have been adverse effects. LFPS like BIA are presented, through their own speech acts, and from parents and diverse advocates for accessible quality education, as a viable solution to the education struggles in Kenya and Uganda. While literature dictates that it is private corporations who advocate for services of LFPS (Srivastava, 2010), discourse demonstrates that other actors have also contributed. Therefore, I find that public discourse, particularly in Kenya but also in Uganda, allows for serious debate concerning variation, and the possible role actors like BIA can play to mitigate, and ultimately fix, lack of access to education.

The selection of the most suitable solutions to access and quality issues in East Africa in public discourse is much more nuanced. As demonstrated, the impacts of LFPS are not highlighted, and most actors, including those from opposite sides of the spectrum, have been careful not to conclude the success or failures of BIA specifically. According to Verger (2016), reform advocates try to frame their solution in scientific and evidence-based ways. In public discourse, there is very little evidence-based information about the successes or failures of BIA, which is different from how LFPS enter education markets (Riep, 2017). It is also important to note that discourse and public opinion are also variables which can mediate selection of particular policies. The more informed the public is about reforms, and their ability to tolerate and support aspects of these policies, the more they can influence selection (Boyd, 2007). Therefore, I find that discourse has not supported the idea that LFPS are the answer to issues surrounding access and quality, but that in more abstract terms LFPS are shown as an alternative which does not hinder progress. I hypothesize that the lack of concrete statements on the impact of BIA stems from the fact that BIA may not be entirely confident in their results, or do not have measurable proof of their self-proclaimed successes, while governments and unions may have believed that BIA would fail and that parents would not enrol their children in schools with easily identifiable infrastructure and curriculum problems.

As the final step towards policy reform, policymakers must choose one solution to institutionalize into the regulatory framework. Retention is therefore controlled by decision-makers. Regarding public discourse, it is evident that the government, as well as teacher unions, do not agree that solutions like BIA are appropriate, namely because they do not conform to legal standards. It is worth mentioning that in public discourse there are very few mentions of LFPS impeding access or creating an environment of lower education quality, which seems to be the two main justifications for their existence. Although Verger (2016) argues that other key stakeholders may position themselves

following the implementation of a policy, since LFPS have entered the market without full consent from governments, their voices have been integral in reaching the retention phase. The contention between BIA and the government and teacher unions, including using the courts and forbidding some independent researchers from examining BIA, has meant that retention seems out of grasp. In Uganda, which has developed a legal environment in which public-private partnerships are common (Srivastava, 2016), BIA's entrance into the market has created a rift between the LFPS chain and the public sector. Therefore, I argue that moving towards retention, in which LFPS like BIA are legally allowed to run schools, will not be possible unless LFPS either follow government standards (which may increase fees and make them unaffordable), or prove that they can effectively improve education and energize the public to fight on their behalf.

In sum, by examining the justifications and impacts of BIA in public discourse through the lens of CPE and the policy process of variation, selection and retention, I find that discourse creates a space for exploring variation and new solutions to the access and quality gaps which have not been filled by the governments in both Kenya and Uganda. However, discourse does not show that LFPS results are influential or unimpressive enough to either describe it as a real solution or to brush it aside. In addition, the Kenyan and Ugandan governments' attempt to invalidate BIA, not through exploring its effects on access and quality, but by making it illegitimate, makes it impossible to consider it as a retainable solution.

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## Appendix

## Newspaper Articles – ID List

ID	Newspaper	Article Title	Month	Year
ID 1	Daily Nation	400 schools likely to be shut over standards	Dec	2016
ID 2	Daily Nation	Bridge International awards scholarships to 5 Mombasa siblings	Jan	2017
ID 3	Daily Nation	British NGOs, unions to stage anti-Bridge Academies demo	May	2017
ID 4	Daily Nation	Changing method to boost learning	Jul	2017
ID 5	Daily Nation	Close Bridge schools, Sossion tells ministry	Jun	2016
ID 6	Daily Nation	Four Bridge pupils win Sh72m scholarship to study in the US	Jan	2017
ID 7	Daily Nation	Governor backs Bridge Academies despite court order	Mar	2017
ID 8	Daily Nation	Kenyan pupils land prestigious US study scholarship	Jan	2016
ID 9	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A
ID 10	Daily Nation	KNUT to oppose ministry's plan to discontinue holiday studies	Mar	2017
ID 11	Daily Nation	Look further at report on private schools	Dec	2016
ID 12	Daily Nation	Low-cost Bridge schools hire 300 TSC-registered teachers	Sep	2016
ID 13	Daily Nation	Ministry rolls out fresh rules to promote quality education	Jan	2016
ID 14	Daily Nation	Sossion stopped from defaming Bridge Academies	Mar	2017
ID 15	Daily Nation	Row erupts between ministry and Bridge schools	Jul	2017
ID 16	Daily Nation	Slum school shines as it tops KCPE results	Dec	2016
ID 17	Daily Nation	Sossion denies defaming international school	Jun	2017
ID 18	Daily Nation	Sossion under fire from parents over remarks	Dec	2016
ID 19	Daily Nation	Technology key in improving education, says MP	Jun	2017
ID 20	New Vision	Bridge Academies asked to reimburse learners' school fees	Nov	2016
ID 21	New Vision	Stop funding Bridge schools: Teachers petition WB	Apr	2017
ID 22	New Vision	Rethink position to close Bridge schools	Dec	2016
ID 23	New Vision	RDCs ordered to close unlicensed schools	Feb	2018
ID 24	New Vision	Promote dialogue, Musingo tells institutions	Nov	2016
ID 25	New Vision	More Bridge International Academy branches closed	Nov	2016
ID 26	New Vision	Government to crackdown on unlicensed schools	Jan	2018
ID 27	New Vision	Government stop expansion of Bridge International schools	May	2016
ID 28	New Vision	Enforcement of the Standard Operating Procedures for private schools and school charges in Uganda	Feb	2018
ID 29	New Vision	Bridge Schools re-open amid uncertainty, controversy	Sep	2016
ID 30	New Vision	Bridge schools' parents, pupils storm Parliament	Nov	2016
ID 31	New Vision	Bridge Schools not authorized to operate, says ministry	Feb	2018
ID 32	New Vision	Bridge schools close, over 1000 pupils affected	Nov	2016