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strange bedfellows at the global education and skills forum: unions, politicians, multilaterals, and corporate philantropy

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Much has been written about the detrimental impact of corporate philanthropy, such as the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation, the Chan Zuckerberg Initiative, and others, on public education in the United States (US). There has also been considerable discussion of the damaging influence of Northern philanthropy on public education in the Global South. In particular, the for-profit, low-fee school chain Bridge International Academies, supported by the Gates Foundation and others, has come under scrutiny for its work in India and Africa.

> Change was the unmistakable theme of this year's Global Education and Skills Forum, as inspirational changemakers from across the globe gathered to share their knowledge and advice with delegates on how to make a positive impact on the world. (9 Ways GESF 2019 is Impacting the World)

Much has been written about the detrimental impact of corporate philanthropy, such as the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation, the Chan Zuckerberg Initiative, and others, on public education in the United States (US) (Reckhow, 2012; Tompkins-Stange, 2016). There has also been considerable discussion of the damaging influence of Northern philanthropy on public education in the Global South. In particular, the for-profit, low-fee school chain Bridge International Academies, supported by the Gates Foundation and others, has come under scrutiny for its work in India and Africa (Ball, Junemann, & Santori, 2017; Riep & Machacek, 2016). In both of these examples, however, the demarcation between the "good guys" and "bad guys" seems very clear. Those who seek to circumvent democratic processes with regards to public education are clearly at odds with Sustainable Development Goal 4 and the free and equal provision of quality education for all. On the other hand, we find actors whose work seems to escape the scrutiny of academia and who are largely cast in the role of the good guys in education, such as United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), the Open Societies Foundation, Education International and many others.

However, in the international education arena, the demarcation between these groups is increasingly far less clear. Interests have become obscured, and we are now finding examples of the so-called good guys acting bad and perhaps even the bad guys acting good, although the latter is beyond the scope of this discussion. One example of this comes from a recent chapter, Susan Kippels and I wrote on UNESCO and the private sector. In this chapter we explored how UNESCO is increasingly becoming a brand for sale (Ridge & Kippels, 2019). We described how, over time, the organization

has increasingly sought to partner with the private sector in spite of the fact that its own mission and values are at odds with several of the organizations that it is partnering with and implicitly endorsing.

It was through this research that we noticed another example where the so-called good guys, those who are supposed to be defending and/or protecting the right to free, quality education for all, also seemed to be acting bad or at least keeping very interesting company. In this case the setting is the Global Education and Skills Forum (GESF), an annual event hosted by the Varkey Foundation in Dubai at the Atlantis Hotel. This much publicized forum is now also famous for awarding the $1 million Global Teacher Prize (also funded by the Varkey Foundation) to the "best teacher in the world".

For those who are unfamiliar with the event, it involves the gathering of a wide array of well-known and highly influential public figures, ministers, celebrities, philanthropic Chief Executive Officers (CEOs), and private sector leaders, along with the Global Teacher Prize shortlisted candidates. The event consists of two days of talks and workshops, ostensibly identifying ways to improve education and support teachers. What makes this event so intriguing is the diverse array of people and organizations in attendance. We find people and organizations from both the right and left of the political spectrum, such as Arne Duncan (Secretary of Education in the USA under Barack Obama) and Michael Gove (Secretary of State for Education in the UK under David Cameron). We also find celebrities, such as Hugh Jackman and Priyanka Chopra; journalists, such as Thomas Friedman; academics from Harvard University and University College London; and student activists from the US. The Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) and UNESCO also regularly send high level representatives, alongside delegates from Bridge International Academies and Teach for All. While, ostensibly the event sounds good and explores topics such as "Who is changing the world?" (in education)–it appears that none of the attendees have questioned where the money comes from for such a lavish event or if perhaps there is another agenda at play.

The organizer and host of the GESF is the Varkey Foundation. The Varkey Foundation is a philanthropic entity, registered in the United Kingdom (UK) which was established in 2010 by Mr. Sunny Varkey, the founder of Global Education Management Systems (GEMS) Education and former CEO of the Varkey Group. GEMS Education is the organization from which the Varkey Group, and subsequently the Varkey Foundation, derive the majority of their income.[1] GEMS Education has the claim to fame of being the largest for-profit education company in the world (Forbes, 2019). In Dubai alone, more than 55,000 children attend a GEMS-operated school (Shabandri, 2013), and the company also owns and operates schools across the Middle East, Africa, India, the US, the UK, Singapore, and Malaysia (CVC Capital Partners, 2019). The company has been valued at 4 billion USD (David, Nair, & Martin, 2017), and minority shareholders include the sovereign wealth fund of Bahrain, as well as multinational equity firms like Fajr Capital and the Blackstone Group (The Blackstone Group, 2014).

In the United Arab Emirates (UAE), where the chain started, GEMS Education dominates the local education market with 49 schools, and it is the UAE's largest education provider by far (Moody's Investors Service, 2019). The UAE's education sector is unique as the majority of people living in the country are not citizens and thus are not eligible to attend public schools (Ridge, Shami, & Kippels, 2016). In addition, labor laws in the country allow for pay to be based on nationality and there is no minimum wage. As a result, it is common practice for private school teachers to be paid widely different amounts based on their country of origin (Ridge, Kippels, & Shami, 2016), and

teachers working for GEMS Education are no exception. Interviews with a local newspaper revealed that while teachers in Indian curriculum schools can expect to receive around 6,600 United Arab Emirates dirham (AED) (1,797 USD) per month, Western expatriate teachers from countries like the UK or Australia are paid at least 12,000 AED (3,260 USD) and up to 22,000 AED (6,000 USD) per month (Clarke, 2016; Nazzal, 2014). In other schools, where teachers from different backgrounds co-mingle, the disparity between teacher salaries becomes even more apparent as teachers working in the same positions can be paid salaries up to half or double each other (Ridge, Kippels, & Shami, 2016). The continued struggles of teachers working at GEMS schools in the UAE can also be easily observed by reading the local newspapers in the UAE. Recently, teachers at a GEMS Indian-curriculum school in Fujairah were threatened with not receiving their July salary [in order for the school to have the funds to settle a dispute between GEMS management and the landlord of the school] despite the fact that this had nothing to do with the teachers themselves (Gokulan, 2019).

This approach to education should come as no surprise to those who have heard Mr. Varkey's philosophy of education, one which is based on the premise that those who can pay more should get a better quality of education than those who cannot. In an interview with Rai (2014), he compared his different tiers of schools to flying first, business, and economy classes on an airline, claiming that everyone arrives at the same destination but in a different style. While this may be true in aviation, it is patently not true in education. A child attending Eton and a child attending the local comprehensive school in Birmingham are very unlikely to both end up at Oxford or Cambridge. However, this is the philosophy that underpins the way in which GEMS Education operates its schools and the exploitation of teachers from the Global South that, at least in part, enables GEMS Education to continue making large profits for the Varkey Group and ultimately the Varkey Foundation and GESF.

Which brings us full circle to the inherent contradictions that we find at the GESF between who or what organizations say they stand for and who they associate themselves with and take money from in reality. For example, Education International (EI): In the past it has funded research criticizing the role of philanthropic organizations with respect to teachers in countries like Liberia and Kenya (Education International, 2017; Education International & Kenya National Union of Teachers, 2016); however, each year EI co-presents the Global Teacher Prize at the GESF. Julia Gillard, the former Prime Minister of Australia and the Chair of the Global Partnership for Education (GPE) whose mandate is to "strengthen education systems in developing countries in order to dramatically increase the number of children who are in school and learning" (Global Partnership for Education, n.d., Line 1), is another regular attendee. Her presence provides a public endorsement by the GPE for the GESF, and implicitly for the Varkey Foundation and GEMS Education.

Three key questions therefore seem to emerge: First is whether these individuals know where the funding for the event comes from or if they choose not to know because they are being handsomely rewarded for their attendance. While it is not clear if they are paid cash amounts for their attendance, we do know that many of the high-profile attendees regularly receive speaker fees in the range of anywhere from 35,000 USD (Crook, 2013) to 100, 000 USD (All American Entertainment Speakers, n.d.). All of this excludes additional costs for hotel accommodation and business- or first-class flights (Van Niekerk, 2015). With regards to the academics who attend the conference, other links are emerging, notably with the Harvard Graduate School of Education, which, according to the 2018 Varkey Foundation annual report, received a grant of 10 million USD to "to fund the creation of a world class conference centre" (Varkey Foundation, 2018, p. 48).

The second question relates to what the Varkey Foundation stands to gain from all of this benevolent giving, regardless of its origins. The most logical answer would be that it hopes to expand the market share of GEMS Education and its other business interests through ensuring favorable support from governments and their ministers around the world. Many former education ministers from countries in the Global South are also members of the Atlantis Group, a private network also funded by the Varkey Foundation, which is another offshoot of the GESF[2] (Varkey Foundation, 2018). In addition, the linkages to prestigious organizations, such as Harvard and the University College London (UCL) Institute of Education, convey a sense of legitimacy for the founder and the company itself. In short, the GESF may be an expensive but effective way to brand and market GEMS Education, whose initial public offering (IPO) was predicted to be valued at upwards of 4 billion USD (Afanasieva & Carvalho, 2018). For Mr. Varkey, there are also personal benefits such as being appointed a UNESCO Goodwill Ambassador in 2012 and serving on Harvard University's Global Advisory Council in 2016.

Finally, what is the cost of the event and to whom? While all parties present at the forum may benefit each other in one way or another, it is clear that there are also those who lose, many of whom are located not too far away from the glitz of the Atlantis ballrooms. These include the teachers who work for GEMS in the UAE and are paid according to their nationality rather than their position. It includes the students and their families in Dubai who have to accept rising fees and/or additional expenses to keep their child in school because of a shortage of spaces in low-fee schools in the UAE (Maceda, 2019). In terms of the larger consequences and losers, there might also be costs for citizens of other countries where GEMS or the Varkey Foundation is now able to operate through connections forged at the GESF. In a recent example from Argentina, Matovich and Cardini (in press) describe how the Varkey Foundation managed to secure a lucrative teacher training contract with the Ministry of Education but retained all of the intellectual property, leading to questions of sustainability and use of government funds. The Varkey Foundation has also set up offices in Ghana and Uganda (Varkey Foundation, n.d.-b) and has also been running projects there funded by the UK's Department for International Development (DFID) and Dubai Cares, among others. As of yet there has been very little independent research conducted in these countries as to the efficacy of these programs and whether or not they are being used as a way to open the country to GEMS schools.

Lastly, the GESF and the Global Teacher Prize present critics of the global education industry with a challenge. The gathering of so-called good and bad guys in the same room at the same event complicates how many have sought to characterize these actors. It requires those of us who critique the sector to move beyond our own default positions. Academics need to be asking more questions such as: "What is the impact of these implicit endorsements and monies received on academic or organizational integrity and independence?" We should be concerned when Education International shares the stage with a man who has built an empire from the profits resulting from paying teachers according to their nationality, as just one example. Similarly, we should be worried when well-respected academics, former ministers of education and prime ministers, including the current Chairwoman of the GPE, gather around the same table as for-profit education providers. Ultimately, we should be most concerned about ensuring that all children have access to high-quality public education and protecting the mechanisms and people that support this. When money and education do not combine to serve the common good, but rather the good of the few and privileged, we need to ask more questions.

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1. A look at the Varkey Foundation financials for the past four years reveals that the majority of the funding comes from the Varkey Group Ltd. This group is listed as a holding company by Bloomberg, registered in Dubai. GEMS Education is a subsidiary of the Varkey Group.
2. Meeting annually at the GESF, the group describes itself as an "exclusive international advisory group" (Line 1) and is comprised of 29 previous ministers and secretaries of education, including from the US, the UK, Brazil, South Korea, and the European Commission (Varkey Foundation, n.d.-a).