



Private vs. Public Education: An Analysis of Quality and Access Differences in the Thai Education System

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Abstract: Thailand's current education system comprises both public and private educational institutions that play crucial roles in the country's human resource development. This article aims to analyze the differences between private and public education in terms of educational quality and access to education. The study employs literature review and secondary data analysis from relevant agencies. The findings reveal that private education excels in efficient management, modern facilities, and skills development that responds to labor market demands. Meanwhile, public education has strengths in broad educational access, lower costs, and accommodating large numbers of students. However, educational inequality issues arising from differences in families' socioeconomic status were identified. This study highlights the necessity of developing balanced education policies between quality and access to ensure all citizens receive equal and quality educational opportunities.

Keywords: Private education, Public education, Educational quality, Educational access, Educational inequality

1. Introduction

Thailand's education system has developed continuously from the past to the present, particularly after the enactment of the National Education Act B.E. 2542 (1999), which opened opportunities for the private sector to play a significant role in education provision alongside the public sector (Ministry of Education, 1999). This change has resulted in diversity in Thailand's education system, comprising both public and private educational institutions with different management styles, teaching methods, and objectives. Private education in Thailand has grown rapidly over the past three decades, especially at the higher education level with continuous expansion of private universities. Meanwhile, the public education system continues to play a primary role in providing education services to the general public, particularly at the basic education level, which the Constitution guarantees as a fundamental right of citizens (Constitution of the Kingdom of Thailand, 2017).

The differences between private and public education are not limited to management aspects alone but also encompass other important issues such as educational quality, access to education, curriculum appropriateness, and relationships with the labor market. These factors influence parents' and students' choices of educational institutions, which affect educational opportunities and individual potential development in society.

Comparative studies between private and public education are therefore important for

developing appropriate education policies to ensure citizens receive quality and equitable educational opportunities, considering the differences in Thailand's social context and needs (OECD, 2016).

2. Overview of Thailand's Education System

Thailand's current education system can be divided into two main parts: public education and private education, both of which play important but different roles in the country's human resource development. Thailand's education system has a structure covering from early childhood to higher education levels, with clearly defined educational standards for all levels. Public education in Thailand operates under the supervision of the Ministry of Education, with various agencies responsible for each education level, such as the Office of the Basic Education Commission, the Office of the Vocational Education Commission, and the Office of the Higher Education Commission. A key characteristic of public education is its focus on providing education services broadly, considering principles of fairness and educational access for all social classes.

Conversely, private education has developed under specific regulatory frameworks with more management autonomy than public educational institutions. Private educational institutions often have flexibility in curriculum design, administration, and budget utilization, enabling them to respond to market demands more quickly. Statistical data shows that the distribution of students between public and private educational institutions differs significantly. At the basic education level, approximately 85% of students study in public educational institutions, while 15% study in private institutions. However, at the higher education level, this ratio changes dramatically, with approximately 60% of students studying in public institutions and 40% in private institutions (World Bank, 2018).

Thailand's economic and social changes have significantly impacted education system development, particularly the transition to the digital economy era and becoming an aging society, which requires more specialized skills and knowledge (Fry, 2018). These factors have resulted in both public and private education needing to adapt to align with society's and the economy's needs.

Table 1: Number of Educational Institutions in Thailand by Type and Education Level

Education Level	Public Educational Institutions	Private Educational Institutions
Basic Education	Approximately 28,000+	Approximately 5,000+
Vocational Education	421	1,237
Higher Education	156	78

3. Differences in Educational Quality

Educational quality is a crucial factor that parents and students use when selecting educational institutions. Educational quality can be measured through various indicators such as students' academic achievement, teacher quality, facilities, and teaching and learning processes (UNESCO, 2017). In Thailand's context, the differences in educational quality between public and private educational institutions have diverse and complex characteristics. Private education in Thailand often has advantages in management flexibility, enabling rapid educational quality improvements. Private educational institutions typically have lower teacher-to-student ratios, which facilitates more individual attention (James, 1993). Additionally, private education invests in modern facilities such as laboratories, libraries, and educational technology, which affects students' learning quality.

In curriculum development, private education has agility in designing and improving curricula to align with labor market and social demands. Particularly at the higher education level, many private universities have developed curricula emphasizing industrial applications and providing real experience through internships and projects. Meanwhile, public education has strengths in other areas, particularly the stability of the education system and international standard recognition. Public educational institutions often have long histories and social acceptance. Teachers in public educational institutions have job security and continuous development through systematic training systems. Research comparing academic achievement of students in private and public educational institutions found that at the basic education level, students in private institutions had higher academic achievement in some subjects, particularly English and mathematics (Paweenawat & Vechbanyongratana, 2015). However, at the higher education level, this difference becomes more complex, depending on specific fields and universities.

Nevertheless, differences in educational quality do not mean that private education is better than public education in all aspects. Public education has strengths in developing good citizenship, creating social consciousness, and promoting national identity, which are important values no less than academic knowledge (Fry, 2018). Educational quality development currently requires integration between the strengths of both systems. Public education can learn flexibility and innovation from private education, while private education can apply stability and social development concepts from public education.

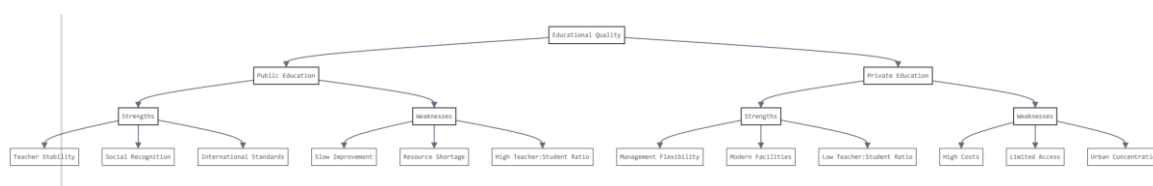


Figure 1: Educational Quality Comparison Mode
Source: Adapted from OECD (2018) and World Bank (2018)

Table 2: Comparison of Educational Quality Indicators

Indicator	Public Education	Private Education
Teacher: Student Ratio	1:25	1:18
Technology Investment	Moderate	High
Curriculum Flexibility	Low	High
Teacher Stability	High	Moderate

4. Differences in Educational Access

Educational access is a fundamental right of citizens guaranteed by Thailand's Constitution. The differences in access between public and private education are complex and impact educational inequality in society (OECD, 2018). Analyzing educational access requires considering multiple factors such as costs, institutional location, admission requirements, and family readiness. Public education has a main strength in broad educational access, particularly free and compulsory basic education. Public educational institutions are distributed throughout the country, enabling children and youth in remote areas to access education. Educational costs in public institutions are much lower than private education, which is a crucial factor for low-income families (Colclough, 1996).

According to data, the average annual costs of education at different levels show clear differences. At the primary level, costs in public institutions are approximately 15,000 baht per year, while private institutions cost approximately 80,000-150,000 baht per year. At the higher

education level, this difference becomes even more pronounced, with public universities costing approximately 30,000-50,000 baht per year, while private universities cost approximately 80,000-300,000 baht per year. Research on factors affecting educational institution selection found that cost is the second most important factor after educational quality. Families with monthly income below 20,000 baht typically choose public education, while families with income above 50,000 baht tend to choose private education more frequently (World Bank, 2010).

Regarding admission requirements, public education often has selection processes emphasizing academic achievement and competitive examinations, which may be barriers for students with potential but poor exam performance. Conversely, private education often has more diverse admission requirements, but the main limitation is the ability to pay costs. Educational access issues also relate to geographical inequality. Most private education is located in major urban areas and economic zones, making it less accessible for children and youth in rural areas even if they can afford the costs. Public education therefore plays an important role in reducing this geographical inequality by having public institutions distributed throughout the country.

Information and communication technology development has opened new opportunities for educational access, particularly online teaching and learning that helps reduce geographical limitations. However, technology readiness and digital skills remain important factors creating differences in educational access (OECD, 2016). Well-off families often have more readiness in this area, enabling them to fully utilize online education.

Government policies to promote educational access have been continuously developed, such as scholarships, student loan funds, and various projects aimed at reducing inequality. However, gaps still need improve

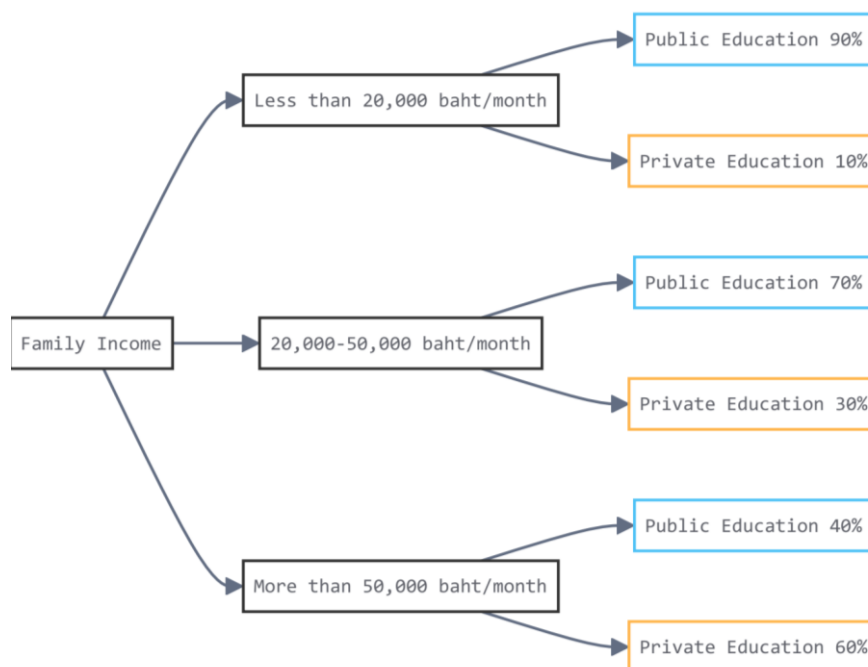


Figure 2: Educational Access by Family Income Chart

Source: World Bank (2018) and OECD (2018)

Table 3: Average Annual Education Costs (Unit: Baht)

Education Level	Public Education	Private Education
Primary Education	15,000	80,000-150,000
Secondary Education	18,000	90,000-180,000

Vocational Education	20,000	60,000-120,000
Higher Education	30,000-50,000	80,000-300,000

5. Factors Affecting Educational Institution Selection

Selecting educational institutions is a complex decision-making process with multiple influential factors. Research on educational institution selection behavior among Thai parents found six main important factors: educational quality, costs, safety, institutional location, reputation and recognition, and curriculum appropriateness (World Bank, 2010). Educational quality remains the top factor in educational institution selection, with parents typically considering students' academic achievement, teacher quality, facilities, and extracurricular activities. Private education often has advantages in this area, particularly regarding teacher-to-student ratios and individual attention.

Cost is the most important factor for low and middle-income families, while high-income families often prioritize quality over cost. Research found that high-income families are willing to pay more for their children to receive quality education, even if it means reducing expenses in other areas (James, 1993). Safety is a factor receiving increased attention currently, particularly in large urban areas with crime and accident problems. Private educational institutions often have stricter security systems, such as access control, security personnel, and CCTV systems. Institutional location significantly affects decision-making, with parents typically considering distance from home, transportation convenience, and community environment. Public education has advantages in nationwide distribution, while private education is often located in urban and developed areas.

Institutional reputation and recognition affect employment and further education opportunities. Many public universities such as Chulalongkorn University and Thammasat University have high reputation and employer recognition, while some private universities also have reputations in specific fields such as management, information technology, and design (Fry, 2018). Curriculum appropriateness is an increasingly important factor, particularly in an era of rapid labor market changes. Parents and students often consider curriculum modernity, emphasis on market-demanded skills, and internship and employment opportunities. Private education often has flexibility in improving curricula to align with market demands more quickly.

Social and technological changes have created new factors in educational institution selection, such as online teaching and learning systems, digital skills development, and future work preparation. These factors increasingly influence parents' decisions, especially after the COVID-19 situation that increased the importance of online learning (UNESCO, 2017).

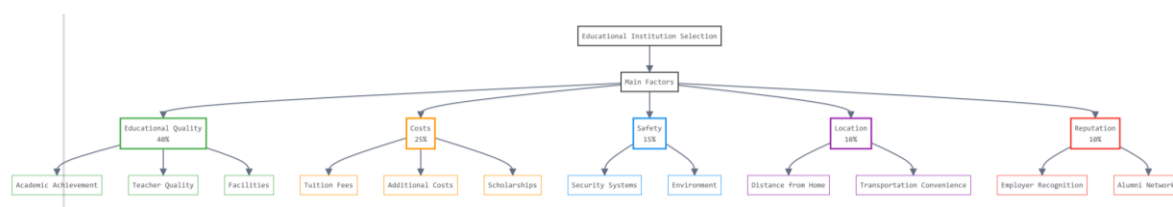


Figure 3: Educational Institution Selection Factors Model

Source: Adapted from World Bank (2010)

6. Impact on Educational Inequality

The differences between private and public education significantly impact educational inequality in Thai society. Educational inequality does not arise solely from differences in educational quality but also includes access to educational opportunities, development of

necessary skills for the labor market, and creation of social networks (OECD, 2018). Research on educational inequality in Thailand found that families with higher socioeconomic status tend to send their children to private educational institutions more than others (Paweenawat & Vechbanyongratana, 2015). This results in these children receiving opportunities to develop more diverse skills and knowledge than children from lower-status families. This advantage accumulation affects opportunities for higher-level education and labor market entry.

The phenomenon called "Matthew Effect" in education, which refers to those with initial advantages receiving increasingly more opportunities and resources, is found in Thailand's education system. Children studying in high-quality private educational institutions often receive diverse skills development, opportunities to participate in special activities, and good guidance, resulting in high opportunities to enter leading universities. Educational inequality also affects social mobility in Thailand. Research found that children from well-off families have fewer opportunities to change social status through education compared to children from low-status families, as they start from already higher positions (World Bank, 2018). Meanwhile, children from low-status families often face problems accessing quality education, making social mobility through education difficult. The impact of educational inequality is not limited to the individual level but also affects the country's economic and social development. Having only certain groups receive quality education causes the country to lose potential for full human resource development (Colclough, 1996).

However, educational inequality does not arise from private education alone but results from existing economic and social inequality. Private education may be a tool that reinforces existing inequality but is also an important option for education development and creating constructive competition in the education system. Reducing educational inequality requires multi-dimensional implementation, including improving public education quality to match private education, creating access opportunities to private education for disadvantaged groups, and developing policies that promote educational fairness (UNESCO, 2017).

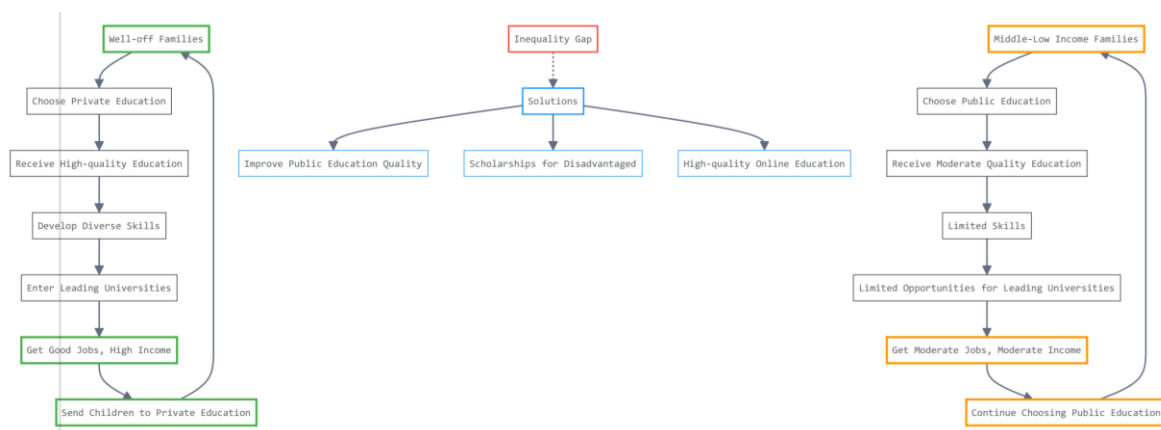


Figure 4: Educational Inequality Cycle
Source: Adapted from OECD (2018)

7. Policies and Development Directions

Developing education policies that balance quality promotion and ensuring equitable educational access is a significant challenge for Thailand. Current education policies have developed toward utilizing strengths of both public and private education through creating cooperation and constructive competition (World Bank, 2010). The 20-Year National Education Strategy (2017-2036) has set development directions emphasizing upgrading public education quality to international standards while promoting private sector participation in

quality education provision with appropriate regulatory mechanisms (OECD, 2016). This policy focuses on creating cooperation between public and private sectors in education development rather than viewing them as competitors.

Various projects arising from this policy, such as the School Partnership program that encourages private universities to help develop public schools, teacher and educational personnel exchanges, and resource sharing between public and private educational institutions, show preliminary implementation results demonstrating the possibility of creating beneficial cooperation for both sides. Digital technology development for education is another important direction that can help reduce educational inequality. The Digital Education Platform project promoted by the government hopes to enable all students to access high-quality teaching and learning through online systems regardless of location and economic status. Many private educational institutions have joined this project by sharing content and expertise.

Policy for establishing strict and fair educational standards for both public and private education is necessary. Establishing independent and credible educational quality assessment agencies will help parents and students select educational institutions with information (UNESCO, 2017). This assessment system should cover academic achievement, life skills development, and work readiness. Promoting vocational education is another important direction requiring development. Both public and private education should cooperate in developing vocational education curricula that respond to new industry and economic demands. Creating cooperation with the private sector in organizing internships and employment will help vocational education gain higher value and recognition.

Future development directions should emphasize creating flexible education systems that can adapt to world changes. Lifelong learning should be an important principle that both public and private education must implement to enable citizens to continuously develop new skills and knowledge according to labor market and social demands (Fry, 2018).

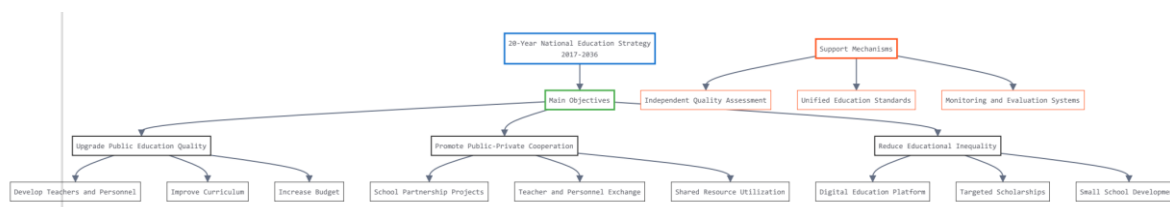


Figure 5: Thai Education Development Policy Framework

Source: World Bank (2010) and OECD (2016)

8. Conclusion

The comparative study between private and public education in Thailand reveals the complexity and diversity of Thailand's current education system. The differences between these two systems are not one-dimensional but encompass multiple important dimensions including educational quality, educational access, and impacts on social inequality. Private education has outstanding strengths in management flexibility, investment in modern facilities, and ability to improve curricula to align with labor market demands. Lower teacher-to-student ratios and individual attention are factors that make private education popular among well-off families. However, the main limitations of private education are high costs and concentration in major urban areas, resulting in limited access.

Conversely, public education plays an important role in guaranteeing citizens' basic education rights and reducing educational inequality. Lower costs and nationwide distribution make public education the main choice for most people. System stability and social recognition are important strengths of public education. However, significant limitations include delays in

system improvement and resource shortages in some areas. The impact on educational inequality is an issue requiring serious attention. Differences in access to quality education affect life opportunities and individual social mobility. Having only certain groups able to access quality private education may create advantage accumulation affecting social fairness.

Future education policy development should focus on creating balance between quality promotion and ensuring equitable access. Utilizing strengths of both systems through creating cooperation and constructive competition will be key to developing Thailand's education system with quality and fairness. Digital technology development for education and creating quality online learning platforms will help reduce geographical and cost limitations, enabling all students to access quality education more. Investment in teacher and educational personnel development in both public and private systems is necessary for overall educational quality improvement.

Ultimately, the success of Thailand's education system does not depend on choosing between public or private education alone but depends on the ability to create a diverse, quality, and fair education system that can appropriately respond to the needs and potential of all Thai

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