

FACTORS AFFECTING THE EDUCATIONAL PATHWAYS OF THAI STUDENTS: A CASE STUDY OF THE GENERAL EDUCATION DEVELOPMENT (GED) TEST

Nuengruethai THITIKUL¹

¹ Program in Cultural Studies, Research Institute for Languages and Cultures of Asia, Mahidol University, Thailand; nuenging@outlook.com

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ABSTRACT

This article explores how Bourdieu's concept of capital affects Thai students' success in the General Educational Development (GED) program. It examines the influence of economic, cultural, social, and symbolic capital on educational opportunities and social mobility. The test was originally developed in the United States to expand educational access for marginalized groups. However, in Thailand, the GED test is often seen as a quicker alternative to conventional schooling, with students using various forms of capital to navigate pathways toward higher education. Interviews with 14 participants, including students, tutors, and parents, reveal how these forms of capital shape academic choices and outcomes. Cultural capital enhances self-directed learning and English proficiency, while economic capital enables access to preparation materials and private tutoring. Social capital provides motivation and guidance through support networks, and symbolic capital legitimizes the GED as a credible educational pathway. However, disparities in access to these resources deepen educational inequalities, leaving advantaged students better positioned for success. The study calls for equitable policies to address resource gaps and expand GED access for disadvantaged students. Further research is needed to evaluate the GED's long-term impact on students' educational and career trajectories, especially regarding social mobility and equity.

Keywords: General Education Development (GED), Framework of Capital, Alternative Education, Qualitative Design, Conventional Education

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INTRODUCTION

Education is vital for personal growth and societal development, yet Thailand's educational system faces challenges due to policy and implementation issues. According to the 2021 educational statistics report for schools in Bangkok's service area, 258,124 students were enrolled in the second semester. However, a significant shift occurred the following semester (semester 1/2022), with 2,582 students discontinuing their education. This number represented a 5.8-time increase in students who did not continue their studies compared to the previous semester (Wansirikul, 2022). This alarming trend suggests a potential rise in dropout rates among children, especially post-COVID-19. The pandemic reshaped education, prompting some students to opt for homeschooling or alternative qualifications like the GED (General Educational Development). Over 1,600 Bangkok families have embraced homeschooling, with many students choosing the GED as a pathway to higher education (Thai PBS, 2023).

The GED, or General Educational Development Program, was designed in the United States to increase educational access for students who had dropped out or been marginalized ("What is a GED?", n.d.). The GED has become increasingly popular in Thailand, especially during the pandemic, when many students faced challenges with interrupted learning. This certification enables students to bypass conventional schooling, focus on their interests, and lessen the financial burden on their parents. However, critics argue that it prioritizes exam performance over developing essential skills.

This study explores the factors that drive Thai students to choose the GED over conventional educational pathways, mainly focusing on how various forms of capital influence their decisions. Understanding these dynamics is essential, as the choices made by students in the contemporary educational landscape are not merely individual preferences but deeply intertwined with the resources and social structures available to them. Economic capital, for instance, shapes the financial feasibility of pursuing alternative educational routes such as the GED, while cultural capital influences students' perceptions of educational value and legitimacy. Social capital, consisting of familial support and peer networks, further impacts students' decision-making processes by providing access to information and encouragement. With shifting educational priorities post-COVID-19, understanding these dynamics is crucial to exploring how resources and relationships shape students' educational choices in Thai society.

LITERATURE REVIEWS

The significance of university education

As everyone knows, education has many advantages for individuals. The more highly educated people are, the better chances they have, leading to more opportunities for better employment. This notion is related to the Thai traditional belief that attending university is the most outstanding achievement in life. Most parents meticulously plan their children's education from childhood until they enter university because they believe studying at university is the foundation for developing a career path (MGRonline, 2017).

Many people pursue higher education for diverse reasons, such as personal growth and the aspiration for improved job opportunities. Some individuals are motivated by the desire to return the favours of their parents, feeling obligated to be their family's remarkable face and wanting to make them proud. Furthermore, a significant number of companies in the workforce require a degree. The university not only acts as a driving force for individual and societal progress but also contributes to developing a better mind and fosters relationships that expand our social horizons (Kennett et al., 2011). This statement aligns with findings by Namoonree (2018), who noted that Thai students often choose universities based on reputation and image, as attending a prestigious university can improve job prospects. Additionally, this motivation often arises from family expectations, which generally act as the primary source of guidance

and directly influence educational choices. Parents believe graduating from a reputable university will support future success and societal acceptance.

The issues in the Thai education system

Due to Gen Z's fast-paced lifestyle, it is challenging for this generation to engage with or appreciate aspects of society that evolve slowly. Therefore, the current state of Thai education fails to meet their needs (Birchmore & Kestle, 2011). A key concern lies in teachers' low and stagnant salaries, which diminish their motivation and ability to perform effectively. Additionally, educators are burdened with administrative tasks and paperwork, diverting their attention from child development and instructional improvement. This often results in an inability to complete the curriculum within the allocated time, leaving students with an incomplete understanding of subjects. To compensate, teachers frequently assign excessive homework, which can contribute to increased stress among students (Jaroensettasin, 2016). Outdated teaching methods and frequent changes in university entrance examinations further exacerbate students' challenges, requiring constant adaptation in their preparation strategies. This persistent need to adjust often leads to frustration and mistrust toward the education system (Chetpayak, 2018). Moreover, standardized tests, such as the O-Net, fail to comprehensively assess students' knowledge, as curricula vary significantly among schools, undermining the fairness and accuracy of evaluations (Phonphothanammat, 2015).

What is GED

The General Educational Development (GED) program was introduced in 1942 as an alternative to a high school diploma. Initially, it aimed to help World War II veterans' transition to civilian life (Tyler, 2013). The GED assesses knowledge and critical thinking skills across four subjects: mathematics, reasoning through language arts, social studies, and science. It is a flexible option for individuals who did not complete high school due to early school leaving, work commitments, or family responsibilities. Unlike conventional education, the GED allows students as young as 16 to earn certification without being bound by strict schooling timelines. The test is available year-round, and results are provided immediately after completion. Research by Ou (2008) highlights the societal benefits of the GED, which include reduced criminal activity, lower rates of depression, and fewer instances of substance misuse, all of which contribute to decreased societal costs. While some consider the GED a lesser alternative to conventional education, it provides pathways to higher education and better employment opportunities, particularly for individuals from low-income backgrounds (Tyler et al., 2000). Furthermore, as noted by Rutschow and Crary-Ross (2014), the GED program often includes support services related to finances, legal issues, and health, helping participants to build fulfilling careers and improve their socioeconomic prospects.

The popularity of the GED test among Thai students

Dr. Suttada Ruenagsuttapha, co-founder of Phuket PALS, notes that many students in Phuket face challenges, such as rising tuition fees and the need for more flexible education options. The GED has emerged as a crucial alternative, offering affordability, flexibility, and global recognition (Keag, n.d.). Many students feel that conventional schools do not nurture their interests, with rigid curricula limiting creativity. Some students believe private tutoring or extracurriculars are more effective than formal schooling, leading them to drop out to prepare for university entrance exams (The Visual by Thai PBS, n.d.). Other students, including athletes or musicians, face challenges like repeating grades or managing health issues. For them, the GED offers a more practical option than conventional schooling. The GED preparation involves independent study and optional tutoring, with some students preparing for two to three months. At 16, students can take the GED and bypass three years of high school, gaining direct access to university. It costs about the same as high school tuition but offers a less draining alternative. Students see it as a way to reclaim time, pursue their passions, and choose their educational paths (Mungngam, 2023).

The Impact of Socioeconomic Disparities on Education Equity in Thailand

Socioeconomic status plays a pivotal role in shaping education equity in Thailand, where disparities in wealth and opportunity significantly impact access to quality education. Wealth disparity exacerbates this issue, with the wealthiest 10% owning over 77% of the country's wealth (KKP Research, 2021). This stark divide leaves many families unable to afford quality education, perpetuating cycles of poverty and inequality. With abundant resources, this group benefits from quality education and career opportunities, securing high-paying jobs and reinforcing their economic status. While financially stable, this group faces limited upward mobility, attaining basic education and skills, but needs help to ascend to the top tiers of wealth or opportunity. Lacking financial means, this group endures minimal access to education and skill development, perpetuating a cycle of low-paying jobs and poverty. In the case of Equity among these tiers, the strugglers face the most significant obstacles, as limited resources hinder their ability to access tools for upward mobility (Kingkawkantong, 2024).

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This study uses a qualitative methodology to examine how cultural, economic, social, and symbolic capital impact Thai students' decisions to pursue General Education Development (GED) and their academic success. The research is structured into five stages, as follows:

Identification of the Research Problem and Review of Related Literature

This study investigates why the GED is increasingly viewed as a pathway to higher education, reflecting the growing preference for alternative education. The researcher formulated research questions, identified keywords, and reviewed academic sources to uncover key concepts and theories relevant to this trend.

Determining Groups of Key Informants in the Research

Purposive sampling was used to select participants, including four students preparing for the GED (born between 1995 and 2009), four GED graduates pursuing higher education, four GED tutors with at least one year of experience, and two parents—one with a child preparing for the GED and one with a GED graduate.

Select and Create a Research Instrument

The study utilized in-depth interviews, with instruments tailored to each group of participants. Interviews were divided into two parts: general information gathering and semi-structured questions addressing specific aspects of the GED process.

Data Collection

Data collection began after Ethics Committee approval. Participants included students (aged 15-17), GED tutors (aged 18-28), and parents, contacted via email or phone. Interviews, conducted in Thai at locations of participants' choice or via Zoom, were recorded with consent.

Data Analysis, Interpretation, and Presentation

Audio recordings were transcribed, verified by participants, and translated into English. Qualitative methods were used to code data, identifying themes related to gender, age, education, and socioeconomic status. Content analysis examined the influence of cultural, economic, social, and symbolic capital, as well as family resources, on GED-related decisions and post-GED educational opportunities.

RESEARCH RESULTS

The concept of capital, originally developed by Karl Marx and later expanded by Pierre Bourdieu, includes economic, social, and cultural dimensions that influence social class and power dynamics. Bourdieu argues that social class is not solely determined by economic wealth but also by cultural and social capital, which influence access to resources and opportunities. Individuals from backgrounds rich in cultural capital are likelier to excel in education and gain access to prestigious institutions. This group, in turn, opens pathways to high-paying and

influential careers. Conversely, disadvantaged people often need more access to cultural resources and educational opportunities, limiting their cultural capital. As a result, they face challenges in attaining positions of power and status in fields like politics or business, perpetuating a cycle of inequality. Success in education is thus not solely a matter of individual effort but is significantly shaped by the availability and distribution of cultural, economic, and social capital. Education functions as a form of cultural capital by certifying high school-level knowledge and providing credentials needed for higher education. However, disparities arise because affluent students benefit from superior preparation resources, such as private tutoring and advanced English proficiency, while underprivileged students face obstacles like limited resources and language barriers. Social capital also plays a critical role in GED preparation, as support from family, peers, and online platforms can provide practical guidance, encouragement, and access to essential resources like study materials and test strategies. In contrast, individuals with weak social networks often need more awareness and tools, reducing their chances of success.

The GED carries societal prestige, portraying its achievers as goal-oriented individuals. This contrasts with non-conventional education students, who are often burdened by stereotypes. Society frequently associates university education with better employment opportunities, emphasizing its symbolic value. Families with more economic resources can invest heavily in GED preparation, enhancing their symbolic capital and social status. This dynamic reinforces existing inequalities.

Wealth provides a significant advantage in GED success. Students from affluent families can afford preparation classes, test fees, and supplementary resources, giving them a clear edge in educational and career opportunities. On the other hand, financial constraints severely limit less affluent students' ability to prepare effectively, perpetuating socioeconomic barriers. This dynamic underscores how economic capital fundamentally shapes access to opportunities (Huang, 2019). In this research, the researcher applied capital theory to demonstrate how capital influences a student's decision to take the GED test, consequently leading to existing inequalities.

Cultural Capital: Analyze the role of cultural knowledge and language proficiency in shaping students' educational experiences and outcomes

This study identifies two forms of cultural capital. **Embodied cultural capital** includes personal traits like personality, knowledge, and language skills, which can be used for academic success. For GED test-takers, proficiency in English is crucial as the test is conducted in English. Many students enhance this skill through immersion programs that improve grammar, vocabulary, and communication. Early acquisition of English gives students an advantage, boosting their confidence. Student 4 emphasized that a strong foundation in language builds confidence for the GED, while Student 6 noted that understanding English enables anyone to approach the test, regardless of its difficulty. Additionally, embodied cultural capital includes self-directed learning and time management, as GED candidates often create study schedules to achieve their goals.

Institutionalized cultural capital refers to recognizing and valuing specific educational credentials and systems. While some GED candidates come from English-language programs, others are from high-quality public schools that rival private institutions in academic rigor. These public schools, often recognized for their strong reputations, provide comprehensive education and serve as institutionalized capital.

However, disparities in educational quality among schools remain significant. Only a few schools offer excellent resources and employ highly knowledgeable teachers. These well-resourced institutions are typically private and urban, with high tuition fees. Student 2 expressed frustration with studying irrelevant subjects in her Art-Japanese program, unlike friends enrolled in specialized curriculums tailored to their interests. Students 5 and 8 also

noted unequal teaching quality and limited knowledge access. Programs catering to specific interests are often exclusive to urban, high-cost schools.

These disparities highlight the role of institutionalized cultural capital in shaping educational outcomes. Access to well-resourced institutions profoundly influences students' academic trajectories and abilities, underscoring the unequal distribution of educational opportunities.

Economic Capital: Examine how financial resources influence access to tutoring, study materials, and learning opportunities

Economic capital is crucial for accessing educational opportunities like GED preparation. Students with greater financial means often progress faster as they can afford private tutoring, study materials, and exam fees. While the GED is less expensive than conventional schooling, it still requires financial investment. Affluent students, particularly those from international schools, benefit from prior exposure to English and a higher quality of education, giving them an advantage. In contrast, students from less privileged backgrounds often struggle with language proficiency and require additional instruction, increasing their financial burden. While the GED is considered a cost-effective and time-efficient option, the reliance on economic resources highlights disparities. Student 3 shared that preparation centers helped them address language barriers and knowledge gaps, while Student 6 noted that affordable online practice tests closely mirrored the actual exam. However, wealthier families can more easily afford additional classes or materials, enabling their students to overcome challenges like American history, a complex subject for Thai students. This financial advantage allows for personalized guidance, quicker retakes, and better preparation, as seen in Student 8's friend, who used the GED to secure admission to a prestigious program. Meanwhile, students without such resources face significant obstacles. Limited access to tutoring or quality materials forces them to rely on self-study, hindering progress and widening the gap between those without financial support. Economic capital thus plays a pivotal role in determining students' success with the GED.

Social Capital: Discuss the importance of relationships and networks in providing support during GED preparation, including family involvement and peer connections

Social capital refers to the value gained from networks, relationships, and connections that provide access to resources and opportunities. Interviews reveal that students rely on educators, peers, and online platforms for test preparation, materials, and strategies. Stronger social connections offer enhanced academic support, boosting success. Many GED students share their experiences online, raising awareness and inspiring others. Students 3, 5, 7, and 8 discovered the GED through TikTok, Facebook, and Line Square groups, where peers shared resources and advice. These communities fostered confidence, motivation, and a sense of belonging. **Tutoring schools** also play a vital role, offering expert guidance and connecting students to resources. Study groups, peer insights, and encouragement further enhance preparation. Students 1 and 4 noted that tutors simplified the process by focusing on relevant material and addressing questions. Parental involvement adds to social capital, with parents seeking information, connecting children to resources, and becoming advocates after seeing benefits for others. **However, disparities** in social capital highlight inequalities in GED access. Affluent students benefit from better networks, tutors, and materials, while less privileged students often rely on self-study. Public school students face challenges such as large class sizes, outdated curricula, and limited exposure to alternative paths like the GED. The emphasis on standardized testing and prestigious institutions restricts opportunities for personal growth and alternative career options, leaving many students unaware of educational options that could help bridge their aspirations.

Symbolic Capital: Evaluate the significance of recognized qualifications and their impact on students' motivations and aspirations regarding higher education

Symbolic capital reflects the value individuals gain through cultural, social, or academic achievements, shaping their life choices. In Thailand, many students pursuing alternative education paths, like the GED, benefit from financial support, enabling them to bypass conventional schooling. This flexibility allows them to focus on university entrance exams and engage in extracurricular activities aligned with their goals. Thailand's frequently changing university entrance exams frustrate students, prompting many to choose the GED as a quicker alternative. Interviewees noted that conventional schooling often lacks relevance for entrance exams, requiring extra classes to fill knowledge gaps. Students 3, 4, and 8 expressed frustration with irrelevant topics and constant exam changes, while Students 1, 2, and 6 highlighted unequal access to resources. Additionally, strict school rules, such as mandatory short haircuts and piercings restrictions, further disillusioned students. The GED streamlines education, focusing on core subjects—math, science, social studies, and English—while providing flexibility in exam preparation. Students value the opportunity to retake exams and learn from their mistakes, contrasting this with Thailand's rigid one-shot testing system. Compared to options like the IGCSE, the GED requires fewer subjects and is faster to complete. By allowing students to balance their education with personal growth, the GED helps build symbolic capital, improves university prospects, boosts confidence, and aligns with individual goals.

Empowering Families and Social Networks: Enhancing Access to Alternative Education, GED Opportunities, and Academic Success

Parents significantly influence their children's values and attitudes toward education, shaping their academic pathways through emotional and financial support. Financial resources, such as tuition and study materials, are often crucial for success, making parents key stakeholders in educational choices. However, parental attitudes toward the GED vary. Some families resist it, perceiving it as inferior to conventional education, leading students to self-finance their GED to prove its legitimacy. Conversely, supportive parents adapt to the changing educational landscape, recognizing the GED's legitimacy and flexibility. For instance, students who demonstrate commitment to the GED often shift their parents' perspectives, eventually gaining financial and emotional backing. This dynamic underscores the importance of economic and cultural capital in educational decisions.

Social networks also play a pivotal role in shaping students' perspectives and decisions about the GED. Peer networks inspire and motivate students by sharing resources, study tips, and success stories, challenging conventional notions of education. Tutors provide tailored study plans and emotional support, helping students manage the challenges of independent learning. The GED offers Thai students an alternative pathway to higher education, granting them an equivalent high school diploma and the flexibility to focus on relevant subjects. However, it presents challenges, including a narrower curriculum, potential knowledge gaps, and financial burdens due to the need for tutoring. Wealth disparities also create inequities in preparation access. Parental and social support systems are critical in overcoming these obstacles, enabling students to achieve their academic and career goals.

DISCUSSION & CONCLUSION

The Interplay of Cultural and Economic Capital in GED Preparation

The challenges within the Thai education system have increasingly become a significant factor driving students to turn to the GED test as an alternative. The pandemic has exacerbated the challenges of conventional learning, prompting students to seek knowledge independently as they feel that conventional education no longer meets their needs. However, viewing the GED test as a product in a capitalist market suggests that individuals with more financial resources can access and benefit from it more easily. Those from lower economic backgrounds often need more funds to afford education. Even as an alternative to conventional education, the GED still requires financial investment, forcing students to compete for access. This state

means that the GED test is a potential shortcut to success, but it reflects the broader inequities within the Thai education system. The increasing inadequacy of the conventional school system and curriculum highlights the insufficiency of school education alone in helping students and parents achieve their future goals. Many students choose the GED test to buy time and better prepare for university entrance exams, prioritizing test performance over classroom content. Consequently, university admission becomes more important than what is learned in school, leading to a disconnect between academic preparation and long-term success. Moreover, success with the GED is also shaped by cultural capital. Thai students often need strong language proficiency and self-directed learning skills to navigate the English-based test effectively. These skills equip students to understand test materials and complex questions and enhance their overall test readiness. Such advantages empower students to approach the GED, improving their performance outcomes confidently. This interplay between cultural and economic capital underscores the systemic disparities in education while highlighting the advantages accessible to those who possess these forms of capital.

Social Capital and Its Role in Navigating Educational Pathways

Social capital extends beyond personal networks to online platforms. Social media sites and YouTube provide a wealth of resources, including tutorials, test strategies, and personal experiences shared by GED graduates. Students with substantial social capital are more likely to leverage these resources, enhancing their preparation and building confidence. For instance, a student participating in an online study group can access shared resources such as practice tests, effective study strategies, and collaboration opportunities with peers pursuing the GED. This collaborative environment fosters a sense of community and helps students navigate the complexities of the GED process more effectively.

Conversely, individuals with limited social networks face significant disadvantages. Access to knowledgeable peers or online communities is necessary for them to be aware of the GED as an alternative pathway and help find effective preparation strategies. Such students are more likely to rely solely on conventional schooling systems, which may not align with their unique needs or aspirations. The absence of social capital can hinder their ability to take full advantage of alternative educational opportunities, perpetuating inequalities in access and outcomes.

Symbolic Capital and Motivation: The Influence of Recognized Qualifications

In Thailand and the United States, the GED test provides an alternative pathway for individuals facing challenges in conventional education, enabling them to earn a high school equivalency diploma outside the conventional system. However, the purpose and perception of the GED differ significantly between the two countries. In the United States, the GED is often regarded as a tool to address societal issues such as criminal activity, depression, and substance misuse. It serves as a second chance for individuals unlikely to return to conventional schooling, encouraging them to value education and offering financial, legal, and health-related support (Rutschow & Crary-Ross, 2014).

In contrast, the GED in Thailand is frequently used in a different context. Rather than serving as a bridge for individuals who have left the conventional education system, it is increasingly viewed as an alternative to the country's rigid and often criticized educational framework. Students from middle- and upper-class families commonly opt for the GED out of frustration with the Thai education system, which they feel fails to meet their learning needs. This choice is driven by the belief that admission to prestigious universities is essential for future success. While it is often said that a university's reputation does not directly determine career outcomes, attending a well-known institution in Thailand provides valuable networks and opportunities. The GED is considered a more efficient path for students to achieve their goals, allowing them to avoid time-consuming and less relevant subjects. These students are not necessarily dropouts; some leave conventional schooling to concentrate on their interests. However, many GED candidates aspire to enroll in international programs since not all Thai universities accept

GED scores for admission. This pursuit has led numerous students to explore creative strategies to enter their desired universities. This situation contrasts sharply with the United States, where the GED is mainly viewed as educational support for marginalized populations.

Barriers to Success: The Role of Socioeconomic Disparities

Interviews reveal that most public school students are unfamiliar with the GED test and the schools need more resources and modern teaching methods essential for contemporary education. These schools often have large class sizes and outdated curricula, prioritizing rote learning and standardized testing over fostering critical thinking skills and exploring personal interests. This environment places immense pressure on students to excel academically, often to gain admission to prestigious high schools and, eventually, top universities. However, students with strong social networks are more likely to become aware of the GED and the resources available to prepare for it. These networks, which comprise peers, tutors, and even social media communities, provide essential support by sharing information, study materials, and success stories from others who have successfully navigated the GED pathway. Tutors within these networks might offer tailored guidance and act as connectors facilitating access to critical resources. Social media further expands these opportunities, allowing students to connect, share experiences, and gain insights that open new doors in their educational journey. Many students struggle with rigid school structures that fail to align with their interests, making learning feel monotonous or irrelevant. This dissatisfaction highlights flaws in Thailand's one-size-fits-all education system. Since university is seen as essential for career success, the GED provides a strategic pathway, allowing students to bypass restrictive environments and focus on relevant subjects. Its flexibility also enables students to engage in extracurricular activities, strengthening their university applications and expanding social networks, making it an attractive option for those seeking alternative academic routes. However, for students from less privileged backgrounds, the symbolic value of the GED often comes with significant tradeoffs. Their decision to leave conventional schooling reflects dissatisfaction with the system and the necessity of leveraging limited resources to pursue success. Without sufficient economic or social capital, these students may lack awareness of alternative educational pathways and feel compelled to adhere to the conventional structure of conventional education. For them, choosing the GED is less about opportunity and more about survival within a rigid system. In contrast, students from more privileged backgrounds often inherit cultural assets, such as familiarity with academic discourse, self-directed learning skills, and the confidence to navigate complex educational systems. These advantages enhance their ability to excel and gain recognition. Meanwhile, less privileged students frequently struggle to acquire these essential skills and may grapple with feelings of inadequacy or alienation in competitive educational settings.

The findings indicate a shift in the educational choices of Thai students, with many now choosing the GED test as an alternative to conventional schooling. Participants came from various types of schools, reflecting a range of resources. Half were enrolled in English programs, emphasizing language proficiency's role in expanding opportunities. GED tutors, often university students, play a vital role in supporting learners. The rigid structure of the Thai education system, coupled with the impact of COVID-19, has led many students to prefer the GED due to its flexibility and alignment with personal interests. However, challenges remain, including knowledge gaps, affordability, and issues with social interaction. Wealthier students benefit more from these alternatives, highlighting the need for equitable educational policies.

Implications for Educational Policy and Practice

Due to a misalignment between the Thai education system and student needs, many students seek quicker and more practical pathways to higher education. While the government has tried to reform Thai education, these reforms often fail to address students' priorities, as curriculum designers rarely consult students about their preferences. Consequently, the GED test is a

flexible alternative, offering individualized learning pathways that better accommodate students' diverse needs and facilitate their pursuit of higher education. Thai students increasingly prioritize admission to prestigious universities, believing that attending a top institution enhances their career prospects. This belief drives them to explore any feasible route to achieve their educational goals. However, opting for the GED has drawbacks.

Taking the GED can limit opportunities for peer interaction. Students who leave conventional schooling to focus on GED preparation and tutoring may be isolated, as their peers are often preoccupied with their academic commitments. This isolation can lead to loneliness and disconnection, widening the gap in students' social lives. Unlike conventional schooling, which fosters teamwork, collaboration, and lifelong friendships, the GED pathway often needs more opportunities for building strong social networks. These missed experiences are valuable not only for personal growth but also for developing essential social skills.

Another concern is the potential need for more depth in academic content. The GED focuses on assessing basic high school knowledge but only delves into subjects with the same rigor as conventional schools. As a result, GED students may need help to develop the complex understanding and critical thinking skills needed for success in college. This occurrence can make the transition to higher education more challenging. The GED is sometimes viewed as exploiting educational system gaps rather than fully engaging with the conventional learning process. Using the GED as a shortcut, students may miss the opportunity to gain a comprehensive education that fosters essential skills and knowledge over time. This shortcut could hinder their readiness for college, where deeper content understanding and analytical skills are often crucial.

The increasing popularity of the GED among Thai students highlights gaps in current educational policies, which fail to address the diverse needs and aspirations of today's youth. Although the government has tried to improve the education system, these initiatives are often reactive rather than proactive. Thus, if the government wants to ensure that all students receive a high-quality education, the curriculum should be practical, applicable to real-world contexts, and inclusive of students from all socioeconomic backgrounds. Schools must also provide supportive learning environments that promote academic success and holistic development. Improving access to quality resources and support within conventional schools can help retain students who might otherwise seek alternatives like the GED. Strengthening social and economic support systems in schools could address inequalities, ensuring that all students—regardless of their background—have equitable opportunities for success. Additionally, policymakers should prioritize equitable funding to improve public school resources, fostering a system where all students can thrive.

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