

A STUDY OF IDENTITIES AND ACADEMIC SPACE IN THAI SOCIETY: CASE STUDIES OF THAI STUDENTS IN GED PREPARATION PROGRAM IN THAILAND

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Abstract: The objective of this research is to study the identities and academic space of Thai students in a GED preparation program in Thailand. The research comprises the observation, the in-depth interviews of 39 Thai students in the GED preparation program in 1 Tutoring School in Bangkok. The purpose of this research is to study the overview and the reason of becoming GED students. The Snowball Sampling method was used to categorize 9 case studies which all of them are different in terms of educational background. In-Depth Interviews were used to sort out each one of them and the people surrounding them in order to present the identities and academic space of GED students in Thai society.

According to this research, first, it is found that the identities of GED students are incorporating both inconsistency and flexibility as a result of the power of discourse and social space. These identities will be manifested through making negotiations and creating their own identities by means of proposing both the distinctive and collective identities at the same time. According to certain studies, GED students will give more importance to social values and internationalization. They prefer both expensive goods and services.

In addition, they also have the different goals from those of the students from formal schools in terms of time, classes, and academic goals through the collective identities of being “international,” “rich,” “quick,” but “happy-go-lucky” students. Second, there is a strong correlation between the academic space of GED students and their identities. The academic space of GED students comprises both the physical space and the technology-based space. The academic space will have a direct impact on the learning behavior, the meaning of education, and the identities of GED students. GED students are not willing to share the same public space with the conventional students from formal schools, but they are willing to share this space with international students and high society consumers.

Keywords: Identities, Academic Space, GED Preparation Program, GED Student, and Thai Society

Introduction

The current educational system in Thailand has been influenced by the ideology of internationalization, globalization as well as capitalism that elicit Thai people's need for educational services, as they believe that education, especially westernized education, serves as a tool for raising their socioeconomic status (Thanapornphan, 2001). Another effect of globalization on Thai educational system is to open the vision of a new approach to educational management: selective or compulsory adoption of different forms of education from superpower countries, including international programs, online programs or distance learning. These are intended to satisfy altering lifestyles, social values in Thai society, as it is moving toward globalization.

Educational management in Thailand comprises 3 types: formal education, informal education, and non-formal education. Interestingly, the informal and non-formal education originally designed for people deprived of educational opportunity, international programs, especially IGCSE from UK and GED from US has played a part in Thai society. These programs present flexible forms of education suitable for the ways of life and individual demand of Thai people, particularly internationalized Thai adolescents in the society.

GED, General Educational Development, is a distance academic program equivalent to a high school course of study, designed to measure, assess and certify high school level academic skills. It aims to enable people who are deprived of education or left school without high school graduation to continue their education and to receive high school certification according to the American educational system, regardless of their background knowledge, race, or religion. Test-takers can take the test if they are minimally 17 years of age. The tests of GED are designed to measure the skills and knowledge equivalent to a high school course of study. The five subjects which comprise the GED test battery are Mathematics; Language Arts, Reading; Language Arts, Writing (including essay); Science; and Social Studies (American Council of Education, 2007: online).

The GED program is designed for students to study by themselves, to practice by themselves, and to consult their instructors on the topics appearing on the test at their convenience. To take the test, students can register for GED test online (Prometric, 2007: online). The GED program places importance on measuring skills and knowledge for adults that correspond to their work, including English communicative skills,

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knowledge concerning economy, society, culture, American and world history, mathematics, and science. GED graduates include people deprived of formal education from different fields, ranging mainly from artists to professional sportsmen (American Council of Education, 2007). As for learning styles, the US GED program is designed principally for self-study at one's convenience. According to a study, unlike US, in Thailand GED instruction is conducted by institutes that design GED preparation programs to equip students with necessary skills for the test, in the form of classroom-based teaching with obvious costs. This contributes to a phenomenon called 'paradigm shift' in the educational management; that is, the transition of ideology of educational management from the form of alternative education for adults and self-study in US to the form of classroom-based instruction in Thailand.

In Thailand GED preparation programs are an alternative for Thai students who wish to complete high school education of international programs. It targets Thai students from international schools or Thai students who used to study abroad and wish to obtain high school certification. (Utartham, interviewed 22 Jan. 2008). Today there are an increasing number of students showing interest in enrolling in this program, as can be seen from the number of students who have graduated from this program and have requested the certification of high school equivalence at the Ministry of Education over the past two years. From September 2007 to August 2008, among 1352 students requesting the certification of high school equivalence, there were 184 GED graduates, accounting for 13.5%, whereas from September 2008 to August 2009, among 1194 students requesting the certification of high school equivalence, 160 students were GED graduates, accounting for 13.4%. Given the number of GED graduates requesting the high school certification, GED certificate constitutes an international high school certification that gains major popularity, in comparison with other certificates certified by the Ministry of Education (An officer at the Ministry of Education interviewed 6 May 2010).

There are evident differences in concepts and forms of GED preparation program management between Thailand and US. In the US, it is an alternative form of education designed for people deprived of education not only to continue their education without interfering their work, but also to raise their career potential at their workplaces, thereby, targeting mainly employees. The cost of the program is reasonable; that is, for Americans, the test fee and self-study materials total to 13,200 Baht. In stark contrast, in Thailand the cost including tuition fee, materials and test fee totals to 73,200-313,200 Baht.

Thus, the GED program in Thailand tends to serve the target group of high income-earners who possess a good command of English.

The research question focuses on the transition from students who left formal education to be GED students, in which they are financially ready and possess good communicative skills enough to study in the educational system, so they opted to enroll in the GED preparation program to take the high school equivalence test. Moreover, the concept of identities is a point worth studying, inspired by the study of identities by Schaefer (1995) who claims that identities are used to explain and define a thing in order to form a picture and elicit the clearest understanding by linking one thing to another in the aspect of both similarity and difference. Similarly, the meaning of 'Who am I?' is always formed by similarities and differences between 'I' and 'others' or 'other things'.

This research, therefore, concentrates on studying the ways of life, attitude, and behavior of this group of students in order to investigate whether there are similarities or differences in self-awareness, meaning of education, collective identities between GED students and other groups of students or not, what are the GED students' strong points, problems and obstacles, how GED students are accepted as a result of collective identities and meaning of education in the academic space.

In another implication according to the concept of power by Foucault (1980), management of GED preparation programs in Thailand is comparable to a new social movement to demonstrate the identities that will move, balance, give limit to Thailand's educational management system by using the social space and the academic space as a movement and communication base in the society. Therefore, it is interesting to observe how GED students give meaning and expression on academic issues and the academic space, what the importance of education means to them, how they live their lives and what they expect from society and education, as well as how they are accepted by the society.

One concern is whether maintaining the identities, meaning and academic space correspond to their ways of life or not, whether the identities and meaning of education in the academic space of GED students affects the ways of life in the society or not, whether the form of educational management mutually understood to be a socialization process that transfers social, cultural beliefs, learning of social roles, skills in living and assuaging needs with an aim to self-improvement and a good member in the society is still necessary for this group of students or not, if necessary what academic space and form of education will be suited to this group of students.

The ideology of developmental education is centered on using education as a tool for developing persons that leads to the development of the country. Thus, every person needs to receive an education with different learning styles, with continuity through their lifetime. Education serves as a process to have individuals know what the world is, how to live in the world, how to create things, and how to handle social and cultural changes increasingly influenced by western culture in Thai society. Therefore, education based on this concept must invent or search for approaches to developing academic space in Thai society that correspond to globalization and current lifestyles of people, thereby, creating space, especially a new form of academic space, on the basis of mutual understanding among GED students.

Objectives:

To study the identities and academic space of Thai student in GED preparation programs in Thailand.

Conceptual Frameworks

1. The Concept of Identity

The concept of identity is the study of the identity analysis of Thai students in GED programs in Thailand pertaining to the concept of Type of Identity (Woodward, 1997) which divides this identity into 2 categories as follows.

1.1 Individual Identities: This type of identity is dealing with the expression of individual identities and the social interaction in terms of individual figures, clothing, social status, educational background, and social interaction.

1.2 Collective Identities: This type of identity is dealing with the collective identities of subjects in GED programs via both concrete and abstract symbols to show that all the subjects belong to the same group.

2. The Concept of Social Space

The concept of social space is the study of the space, places, and media that influence the learning and the creation of the identities of GED students under the concept of Lefebvre that comprises the 3 theories as follows:

2.1 Perceived Space: This type of space is the physical spaces that GED students encounter in their daily lives such as schools, home, family, and public spaces.

2.2 Representation of Space: This type of space is dealing with the creation of new meanings such as Siam Square is equated with teenagers.

2.3 Representation Space: This type of space is the study of the creation and expression of space used by GED students in Thailand. For example, if GED students are equated to international students,

they will not tolerate using any materials except those only written in English.

Research Methodology

The study of identities and academic space in Thai society is a qualitative research of the identities of GED students in public spaces that shows social activities, learning behaviors, ways of life of the GED students and their various backgrounds utilizing the life history of GED students, through ethnography research comprising of observation and in-depth interviews. This type of research is preferred according to Spreadley who suggests three important factors in selecting the area of research: place, actor, and social activities. Therefore, this research aims at an institution at Siam Square where the GED Preparation Program is provided. The time scheme was from May 1, 2008 to April 1, 2010.

Stage 1: The study of the overview identity and the academic space of GED students in Thai society

Two methods of observations (participation observation and non-participation observation) were used together with a group interview. Initially, the research began with the researcher being part of the academic staff. The researcher began to observe the behaviors and the attitudes of GED students and their related group of people, such as their teachers, parents and friends. In addition, 39 students from case studies were interviewed to give information about their educational background, family background, learning behaviors, reasons of becoming GED students, social space, and other activities in other spaces. Then, the researcher summarized the synopsis of the students' identities and their academic space. The time scheme was from May 1, 2008 to April 30, 2009.

Stage 2: The study of the process of building identity and the study of factors influencing GED students' identity and their learning behavior

After the study of the overview identity, the researcher selected case studies of 39 samplings in order to research the process of identity and the students' life in different spaces. As a result of this, the 39 samplings were grouped into 4 categories:

1. The students who are now under the Thai educational system;
2. The students who were in the Thai educational system;
3. The students who are now international students;
4. The students who are or were overseas students.

Then the researcher selected 9 case studies to do observation and in-depth interviews in the area of life history in different dimensions such as their

identities, families, economic, social status, educational background, and media practices. All case studies were selected from the outstanding students who are representative from the snowball-sampling group.

The researcher then summarized the information into analytic induction for identities and academic space of the GED students in Thai society. Furthermore, all information was checked for accuracy and looked for any suggestions from teachers, GED students themselves and their parents. The time scheme was from May 1, 2009 to March 1, 2010.

Results

1. *The Problem of GED students in Thailand*

GED Preparation Program in Thailand was established in 2001 and is aimed to serve international students who were not able to finish high school. Therefore, this program provides an alternative opportunity for them to earn a high school level education and pursue their education in a university. From the research, it is found that there are two groups of GED students:

1. The students who are or were under the Thai educational system.
2. The students who are or were international students and/or overseas students.

Each one of them has his/her own purpose of taking the GED preparation program. The first group takes the GED because they have a negative feeling towards the Thai educational system. They believe that the system is only aimed for students to memorize only content and a university entrance examination are questionable. Besides, some of them had studied overseas, so they compare the Thai educational system with others, and feel that the other systems are more qualified than the Thai system.

The latter looks at the GED program as a cheaper program. They believe that they pay less in this system compared with their actual expenses in the school system. Moreover, this group of students enjoys social activities, such as nightlife and part-time work, so the GED preparation program is more suitable to their lives.

However, the problem exists in the GED preparation program when the students, especially Thai students, feel that they cannot afford the tuition fee for the program and they have problems with their English efficiency. The latter problem seems to be the main problem for Thai students since all courses in GED are in English. All GED subjects reflect the American lifestyle and culture, so those who lack discipline both in their studies and in examinations

might not be able to pass the exam easily within the timeline.

2. *The Identities of GED Students in Thai Society*

For this study, it is evident that the identity of GED students comprises the individual and collective identities. They share individual identity through their figures, clothing, and skin colors. Meanwhile, the collective identity is divided into 3 types:

2.1. International: This reflects the identity of one's thoughts and behaviors. The "international" identity occurs when GED students had studied in international schools or studied overseas, and they experienced cultural diversities. This group of students also lives in families that venerate those who speak English fluently and those who graduate from overseas schools. GED students seem to be passionate about international culture and society. This "international" identity also results in the behavior and attitude of GED students who want to continue their higher education in an international program. Apart from this, they seem to consume mostly products manufactured in western countries such as clothes, media, or even websites, which are popular among westerners.

2.2. Rich: This "rich" identity represents the identity of social and economic status. The students with this identity share the same behavior and attitude on certain product consumption such as education, travel, entertainment, clothing, life style, and socialization. This identity reflects in a group of people with high income. The major influence for this rich identity is a wealthy family who emphasizes using expensive goods to represent their social status.

2.3. Quick/Happy-go-Lucky: This identity results from the flexibility of the program. GED has no limitation on the timeline and allows all test takers to schedule their own examination dates. Therefore, GED students seem to be easy at studying with no stress. In addition, many GED students do not tend to take university entrance examinations, so the students can design their own learning habits. However, this can lead to a lack of responsibility.

The most outstanding advantage of the GED preparation program is its flexibility. GED allows the students to schedule their study and plan their examination dates by themselves. Many of them finish the program in a short period because GED does not give specific time for students. The only requirement is that all students have to pass 5 subjects from the program. According to this, many students use GED as their shortcut to go to the university within a short period.

3. Academic Space for GED students in Thai society

There are two academic spaces for GED students in Thai society.

3.1. *Physical Space*: This space refers to a space where boundary is set concretely. There are three spaces under this academic space.

3.1.1 *Home and Family*: This space is very vital for GED students as most of them spend more time with their family than with their studies. This is in contrast to Thai students. Therefore, this home and family space provides them with the knowledge in many dimensions especially the attitude, value, and objective of their life. From this research, it is evident that GED students spend their time in home and family space than in other areas in a week.

3.1.2 *Tutoring school*: Tutoring school aims to provide preparation for GED students in order to allow GED students to present their GED identity freely without an interfering power to intrude their identity. This is a place where GED students will learn all needed knowledge for the GED program and all necessary elements in socializing with other GED students.

3.1.3 *Public space*: Public space in this research consists of Siam Square, the main department stores such as Siam Paragon, Siam Center, Siam Discovery, Central World, and Central Chidlom, and the nightclubs around Thong Lor and Sukhumvit Road where most visitors are from a high-income bracket. GED students in this space will learn to share the same attitude and life style.

3.2. *Technology-based Space*: This space refers to a space in websites, and other media such as television, radio programs, magazines and other printed media, which can be categorized into two groups:

3.2.1 *Online Social Network*: Most GED students create their own personal space online via face book and twitter. Another method is an instant message program (A.K.A Chat Program) that allows the users to instantly send and receive messages online.

3.2.2 *Media*: GED students tend to consume much on these media and it seems that they prefer international ones. They believe that watching international media, which English is the primary language, makes them look “international”.

4. The Occurrence of Identity of GED students in Academic Space

The identity of GED students in academic space tends to be inconsistent and flexible. It is also dynamic. In other words, this identity is a process of becoming which depends on discourse and the power of discourse.

4.1. The identity in home and family space:

GED students live in a home with their family and will act differently from living in other spaces. This bond strongly with the “actor” factor. For example, GED students will present their individual identity when living with their family. They will be no more GED students. In fact, they will switch to a collective identity that is more recognizable in their family.

4.2. The identity in tutoring school:

A tutoring school is a place where GED students show collective identity to present their “GED look”. However, each student seems to present his/her own outstanding individual identity in this space.

4.3. The identity in technology-based space:

This identity is very flexible either in physical space such as Siam Square and department stores or in technology-based space such as websites like face book, hi5, and twitter. Sometimes, GED students represent their “GED look” and other looks in other occasions. Their looks depend on how they want others to perceive them in a certain space.

Discussion

Inconsistency of GED students has the characteristics that are interchangeable to the authority of the particular area. The students will single-handedly adapt or choose their own identities as Foucault mentioned concerning power, identity, and social movement. To bring out their personal identities, they will negotiate with the power of the area. Therefore, in general, the inconsistency of the identities can occur as a result of the power and the context of the particular area (Hall, 1990).

To consider establishing academic managements and policies for GED students, one must realize their inconsistency because they have a collective identity and inconsistency of identity. It is necessary to have academic managements based on the inconsistency that are not so dominant and will not create a sense of the other for them to effectively express their opinions and identities. This idea has already been successful in New Zealand for Maori students in a research, “Social Identity in Young New Zealand Children” (Bruce, 1998). He sees the inconsistency of identity that Maori students have can lucratively alleviate violence of racism. Hence, it is important to give much weight to identity diversity and influential factors, which are space and the occurring factors.

GED students stay in social spaces to learn and transmit their identities within their group. Apart from this, they prefer to do activities with their friends and families who play an important role for the process of building their identities. Therefore, it is essential to use the space they are familiar with, especially cyber space, as the key strategy to develop

academic space. The reason is GED students and their surrounding people have a potential to access technology, and their family members are also highly educated which is one of the key factors to enable learning ability. It is evident that this method works elsewhere. For example, Child Watch International Research Network aims to build a network to help develop children and youth. (Nakornthap, 2006)

In order to help GED students to lead normal lives, it is important to construct academic spaces that correspond with their identities and ease tendency for them to be in jeopardous area. One must stress “positive thinking skills,” “physical and mental wellness,” and “productive living” for them, and they need cooperation from many sectors such as public, cooperate, society, family, and school to build academic spaces that are suitable with their lives. This includes technology-based space and activity-based space that emphasize two principles; sense of insider and needs. To be accessible to their identities, ways to lead lives, and living space, Improvements must be developed to be in contact with their needs for further and effective results.

Recommendation for Future Research

1. Recommendation for policy

This research will provide suggestions in terms of policy as follows:

1) Recommendation for quality space for GED students: the space should be a place where they can easily find all kinds of student-related information. It will emphasize a construction of a space where students can get together in an appropriate time, suitable with their hands-on life style. Furthermore, it also allows the expressions and technology to cooperate in order to inform information to them, and the decoration should be in-trend and respondent to the age of the GED students.

2) An academic policy for perceptive life can be conducted via a development package for survival skills in terms of consumption, morality, socialization, and Thai culture to reinforce immunity and be perceptive to media and technology.

3) A cooperative policy for academic institutions and related organizations; these bodies must provide necessary skills and information of differences between urban and suburban areas that they lack.

4) A policy and strategy for academic improvements for minority group; GED minority group students have more ability and social opportunity than regular minority students. They must be given learning opportunities and chances to attend to activities that they can express their identities.

2. Recommendations for research

This research will provide suggestions for future research as follows:

1) There should be studies on stories about Thai students who attend international and other programs to learn their identities, give academic definition, and academic space. These will help better understand them and academic space in Thai society.

2) There should be researches on the same area by a variety of research procedures. This will allow different perspectives other than mentioned principles in research to create different points of view in analyzing related points and the students' lives.

3) There should be studies on tendency and condition of Thai adolescents who attend international programs. It also includes influential factors to conduct development strategies for the Thai academic system.

4) There should be studies to carefully watch, prevent, and improve performance of the students who do not accept the nurturing process from the schooling system.

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