Education Fever and Other Academic-Related Illnesses as Diagnosed by the Thai Movie "Bad Genius"

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Abstract

Poverty, politics, and even education issues are typical disputes highlighted in movies. Storylines particularly revolve around a student or teacher's daily struggle in school, or a flawed education system. By employing a content-based movie analysis, the movie Bad Genius is scrutinized and themes are presented according to established research objectives. Five major education issues are identified in this study: corruption, high stakes testing, academic pressure, education equity, and academic dishonesty. The movie is an attempt to document seemingly ignored societal cancers in our very own classrooms that breed worse and serious wounds. The movie serves as a gentle reminder in rekindling value and values education among students. It is about time to revisit school curricula and academic programs as the race to make it to the top becomes competitive and challenging.

INTRODUCTION

A movie as a media platform serves as a vehicle in communicating issues and pressing concerns of the society. According to Streib, Ayala, and Wixted (2017), there is a tendency to expose poverty and social class divide through media contents for adult consumers. The plot of the story could revolve around narratives that reflect human experiences and interests. Societal struggles are at the forefront of particular movies, and these are the crucial aspects that draw viewer interests and curiosity. In a study by Asep Saepul Muhtadi (2016), it has been noted that social reality is reflected in the "transformation of character symbols" in the novel Dracula and the movie Dracula Untold. It is without a doubt that the consumers of movie contents are also the source of narratives and storylines. It is critical to note how movies are capable of creating an impact on an individual's value and belief system. Clearly enough, each movie brings its own message relayed to its viewers (Imama & Kumala, 2017). In a study by Susanto and Fajar (2020), students also benefit in understanding various concepts when movies are utilized. Hussain and Ahmad (2016) considered movie as 'influential channel' in relation to the learning of students.

Poverty, politics, and other social ills are typical disputes highlighted in movies. These are the topics frequently presented engulfed in various characters' daily life. At the end of the day, moviegoers are left with the choice of reconciling the movie's plot and the viewer's personal understanding in order to find the viewing experience meaningful and valuable. These stories are captured in such a way that it bridges what is going on-screen and the viewer's personal cultures. Movies are indeed powerful to reach the audience and effectively affirm its role in the society as a form of art and activism. As concluded by Cahyaningsih Utami (2018), movies serve to convey information as well as 'educational tools.' Moreover, there are substantial advantages when it comes to 'individual outcomes and the instructional process' once movies are integrated and used in class (Topal et al., 2020).

The education sector has also been an aspect of the society that is frequently showcased in movies. Storylines particularly revolve around a student or teacher's daily struggle in school, or a flawed education system. Education systems across cultures reflect similar and interconnected ideas amidst spatial and temporal boundaries. The strong desire to do well in academics has pushed families to put pressure on the performance of school children. As academic achievement is equated to life success, students as well as their parents are forced to go through the complexities of studying and being superior in school. In a study by Van Beveren et al., (2018) various reflections on 'educational taboos' are facilitated by school movies.

Thailand's education landscape has been an interesting niche of school narratives and efforts towards achieving academic achievement of students. Similar to other countries, students in Thailand have also been subject to pressing school issues. Charoenwanit (2019) conducted a study

on the relationship of cyber-bullying and academic achievement, general health, and depression and he recommended that parent encourage their children to open up about issues confronted at home and school. When it comes to individuals in the academe, Tarat and Wongsawat (2019) identified that problems at work can be accounted to work overload, inefficient communication and dwarfing professional growth and development. A study by Phutikettrkit and Thomas (2019) revealed that there exists a weak positive relationship between Thai students' perception of procedural justice and academic dishonesty. Thomas (2020) asserted in his Thailand-based study that academic dishonesty continues to be a serious concern for teachers.

Academic issues have taken the local Thai scene by surprised when a "high-tech cheating ring" was discovered as students seek admission to medical and dental faculties (Fredde, 2016). According to a report by Mala (2016), high-tech glasses and smart watches were used in leaking the exams, in which the university acted upon by requiring students to retake the test. Stress levels among student was studied by Maritta et al. (2017) and found out that Thai "adolescents' high stress levels were associated with having a high number of depressive symptoms." When it comes to education policy and planning, Wittayasin (2017) noted that "poor quality education and education inequality are two main educational problems which need a serious consideration." Phromwong (2017) opined that in order to cut poverty and alleviate inequality in income, "universal education to Lower-secondary level (9th grade) is recommended".

The movie Bad Genius can be considered a success given the awards it has received both in Thailand and in the international scene. As an evidence of the proliferation of Thailand pop-culture in the Southeast Asian region and beyond, the movie gains popularity in terms of movie admissions and consistent engagement. As the movie is originally used Thai language, foreign viewers enjoy the movie through the use of English subtitles. True enough, it is imperative to note how the movie goes beyond language and cultural boundaries as viewers are captivated by the movies' plot and the portrayal of the characters in the movie.

Thailand popular culture is on the rise and this is apparent with the global attention that the industry is receiving. The quality of media contents and the audience reach are obvious manifestations of its proclaimed success and promising landscape. It is also imperative to note how Thailand popular culture could eventually contribute to strengthening local regional identity in the context of movie and cultural contents.

This study aims to critically identify and analyse education problems presented in the movie Bad Genius. Issues are classified into themes these serve springboard in education discourse and debate in the hope of addressing temporal challenges to equitable access to education. It is worthy to note how movies could be utilized in providing inputs to dialogue on pressing education issues, as well as societal concerns.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

This study is anchored on Bourdieu's social capital theory, defined as: "the aggregate of the actual potential resources which are linked to possession of a durable network of more of less institutionalized relationships of mutual acquaintance or recognition" (Tzanakis, 2013). Profit is identified to be the main intention while individuals maintain and sustain networks and links. The perspectives of Bourdieu have led to the idea that relating the activity of social capital to the education of individuals enable "social reproduction" (Rogošić & Baranović, 2016). Various forms of capital and resources are used to further advance an individual's position. As differential entitlements to credentials are observed, social inequality persists (Bourdieu, 1986). It is worthy to note how the society is embedded with mechanisms that strongly emphasize network and linkages to cement authority, power, and connection. Banking on one's economic capital is seen as the critical resource that dictates the flow of all other resources in the society.

Developing relationship that eventually leads to common benefits and recognition is central to establishing networks and linkages in the society. To be able to build these lines of recognized connection, individuals consistently work and equip themselves with the potentials in order to gain advantage in the society as they seek power and recognition.

Equity Theory as a lens could also serve as a foundation in viewing the aspects of resource distribution, fairness, benefits and rewards. The interplay of these concepts aptly captures how individuals see fair dealing as a driving force to be motivated in sustaining the relationship. Kollmann et al. (2020) studied how financial rewards impact job satisfaction in the context of young and old employees. It is critically vital to recognize inequities as these create a direct effect on an individual's motivation. Perceptions of inequity would eventually strategize to gain equity through any ways possible.

METHODOLOGY

The Thai movie *Bad Genius* is purposively chosen by this study as it reflects particular schooling issues, both in the basic and higher education levels. The spatial and temporal elements of the movie are central to the decision of choosing this movie for the study. The characters in the movie are faced with various challenges concerning their education and these make the movie an appropriate fit for the study. To be particular, this paper highlights scenes and conversations that directly present problems in the education sector that involve stakeholders, particularly the students themselves.

By employing a content-based movie analysis, contents are summarized and presented as themes. The study is divided into two main parts. The first section deals with a brief discussion of the movie while the second part presents and elaborates education problems. The researcher employed the following steps in the data analysis:

1. Education problems are identified as themes and are discussed in the movie.

2. Classified themes are described and interpreted.

3. Springboard for discussion on education issues are offered based on the findings of the study.

As the study does not involve any human participants, it does not entail any ethical concerns. It does not pose harm or threat to any individual and the data gathered are solely used for academic purposes only.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

This section presents the discussion of the study and divided into two parts: (a) brief narrative of the movie; and (b) education problems as identified themes in the study.

The good movie called 'Bad Genius'

The movie which is based fictitious characters and events earned 3 million dollars in 2017 and bagged numerous film awards in the same year and in 2018. These recognitions are unquestionable for viewers who can relate to the movie's realism, specifically the main character's dilemma. According to Jun-li and Wen-dan (2017), the film reflects the reality as it takes people into contemplation about education issues.

Lynn is a girl who came from a broken family and was raised by her father, who works as a teacher. Though gifted and excels academically, Cassum (2018) states that parental divorce has a significant impact on adolescents such as interpersonal conflicts and struggle through a lot of stress, this can be observed in the main character's personality all throughout the movie. While she has an advantage, she lacks the opportunity since education is expensive, out of desperation, just like any parents who invest much on their children's future, they would usually go beyond their financial capacity to support their children. According to Blake (2019), the most expensive international education around the world can be found in Asia. The perception is that the cost of education is directly proportional to its quality.

Grace, a classmate and friend, offered Lynn money in exchange of providing answers during the school exam. Eventually, Pat, another rich student, who happens to be Grace's boyfriend, thought of bringing the money-making 'business' to a large scale, to which Lynn agreed. In time for the international college admission test, Lynn connived with another genius, Bank, to take the test in advance and leak answers to those who paid them. Big amount of money was at stake for doing this scheme.

The movie, according to Cruz (2017), exposes loopholes in education and in the obsession of youth for success. The characters in the movie want to satisfy the expectations of their parents thus,

those that are well-off opt to pick choices that would save them from being an embarrassment to their families. While students who don't have the capacity to provide enough for their education are aware of their situation, they are the ones who usually find ways to help their parents financially.

Corruption and Education: Money, Tuition, and Exorbitant Fees

According to a study by Nabaho and Turyasingura (2019) on battling academic corruption, the education sector or academic corruption erodes social trust, worsens inequality, and sabotages development. It erodes the trust of the employers and the general public in the country's higher education system, prepares under-qualified professionals, teaches distorted values and culture, and undermines the cherished value of education. It also distorts the efficiency and quality output of the system. It sabotages development and undermines the formation of educated, competent, and ethical individuals for future leadership and the labour force, affects policy making and planning, school management and procurement, and teacher conduct.

Examples of academic corruption include cheating and other academic violations; bribery, nepotism, and favouritism in school admissions, teacher appointments, and licensing of education facilities; bid-rigging in the procurement of textbooks and school supplies; diversion of funds and equipment; teacher absenteeism; and exploitation of schoolchildren for unpaid labour. Finally, corruption inadvertently sends a message, replete with danger, to the students that "personal success comes, not through merit and hard work, but through favouritism, bribery and fraud" (Chapman & Lindner, 2016). In a scene where Pat is offering Lynn to accept the money in exchange of help during the examination, it is revealed that the school asks money from academically-challenged students; "*The more stupid you are, the more you need to pay*".

As the Headmistress is confronting Lynn after getting caught receiving monetary gains for sharing exam answers, she explains that "*Remember, school is a place for studying, not for making money*". This however is a clear contradiction of what is observed in the movie as rich people use their money to survive the academic battle. While it is a valid and logical argument that a school is not an appropriate setting to earn money, reality bites as those learning institutions capable of delivering quality education are those that can't be afforded by the poor.

Specifically, in the aspects of exorbitant fees, bribery, and other financial mismanagement, the education sector worldwide, especially in developing countries, has been performing monetary malpractices for a period of time. In Nigeria, schools are also involved in corruption when a principal or teacher accepts, solicits, or extorts a bribe from the students or parents. It is also abuse when schools proprietors or teachers also actively offer bribes to circumvent education policies and processes for competitive advantage and profit (Nwankwo & Nweke, 2016). In Bangladesh, about half of the

households reported are paying some form of bribes for children's education (Shahe et al, (2018). In Kenya, many principals of high school have continued to charge more than the recommended fee. Some of the schools have hidden charges which are not included in the official receipts. Some of these hidden charges include tuition fees that have been outlawed by the government but continue to be levied by most primary schools (Taaliu, 2017).

As Lynn is convincing Bank to join her in executing the tactics to use for the admission exams, she tells him that; "*Even if you don't cheat, life cheats on your anyway*". It shows how school and exam cheating is not confined on academic concerns alone as the main character tries to justify the act by showing how inequity and unfair practice is normal.

In some ways, the most inconsequential cost of corruption is the waste of the financial resources that get misdirected. The more serious costs are incurred when (a) children unable to afford bribes are denied access to schooling or examinations, (b) talent is misallocated due to the promotion being awarded on the basis of bribery rather than merit, and (c) a generation of children come to believe that personal effort and merit do not count and that success comes through manipulation, favoritism, and bribery. When corruption is so pervasive that it comes to be viewed as a basic mechanism of social and economic interaction, it instils a value that is highly destructive to the social and economic development of a country (Nwankwo & Nweke, 2016).

Testing what is at stake in high-stakes testing

The test defines students based on the result of the standardized test that gives them anxiety and will do anything just to pass it. In the movie Grace was offered by Pat's parents to study in the USA where they graduated because they believe that if you enrolled in a popular school you will have a better future. It is the make or break of their dreams, which is why they all wanted to pass the test for the university that they like. It was time when Grace asked for Lynn's help to pass the STIC exam. According to Ali and Jalal (2018), the working world required more efficient and highly qualified personnel. The test promotes competition which could help them to land on a prestigious college that will equate to a high-status job and bright future.

However, working industries claim that most new employees are arrogant even with a higher GPA so they tend to look for a character than skills. Emphasizing non-cognitive skills and addressing non-cognitive assessment similar to cognitive assessment in higher education are necessary steps toward creating transformative reform (Martin, 2019).

In a scene, rich student Pat utters; "*We get to choose the university, the university doesn't get to choose us*". This is a direct manifestation of how high stakes testing has created an impact on people's mind as they long to challenge the norm. University admission exams are considered to be

a measure of one's success and the movie has captured how those with money and power could manipulate the system and make it work for their own good.

The last few movie scenes show Bank offering Lynn another cheating scheme, which yields more examinees than the previous one in Australia. It particularly shows how Bank is determined to earn a lot of money by taking the exam ahead of time and leaking it to those who will pay him. High stakes testing has corrupted the minds of individuals who are willing to pay without hesitations just to pass the exam. Conversely, Bank is also determined to pursue this venture even if it means risking his future, all for the sake of money. Inequitable access to education and inequality issues breed more serious social problems. High stakes testing puts Bank into temptation; "*You can get millions from now on. Why do we need to work at the desk?*".

Under pressure: Academic pressure

In the study made by Nguyen (2015) regarding the academic stress of Asian-American undergraduate students, apart from expectations coming from their family as the main drive for them in achieving academic success, reasons such as obligation to repay parents for their sacrifices and financial stability appeared to be one of the huge factors that causes academic pressure to Asian students. Meanwhile in the movie, though gifted academically, Lynn, the main character, doesn't want to be a burden to her father who wanted to provide her quality education to pursue studies abroad. However, the kind of education that her father wants for her has a price to pay—an expensive one to be exact. On the other hand, though they can afford it, the supporting characters in the movie got all the pressure to excel academically from their parents' expectations. This is supported by a study conducted by Naumann et al., (2012), according to them, most of Asian parents get upset if their children get a C (or equivalent to 2.0 / 73.0-77.0%) which makes them extremely unsatisfied or upset which results in the 'thirst' to be always the best or in the first place. These factors stir up stress to students academically.

Find the difference: education inclusivity, equity, and access to all

"*If you teach me, I will buy you mild every day*". This seems to be an innocent offer but the line clearly defines the Grace has the resources and Lynn's intelligence is her only weapon to survive the fierce academic journey. While it appears as a fair deal and win-win transaction, the scenario is central in determining how social constructs of money and power dominate even the smallest agreement among students. It structures how those with way and means are able to navigate the society, directly or indirectly creating effects on education inclusivity and equity. Jemeli and Fakandu (2019) explains that equal data societies are societies where individuals have prepared access to information, equal

access to literacy and communication devices in languages and formats that suit them irrespective of their individual situations, the abilities to interpret and create them and use opportunities to change information and competencies into balanced livelihoods. On the other hand, education is a game of business wherein as a young age students learned the corrupt practices. When Lynn discovered that Grace's Math reviewer was the same as their test and had a conversation with Pat about the tea money, it was then she felt betrayed by her school and education inclusivity has a prize after all.

In one of the scenes, Grace talks to Lynn, saying; "*If I had a brain half your size, I wouldn't have done something stupid as this!*". It is clear how education equity and access significantly creates a divide among those who can afford, and those who are left behind. Those with money are able to exhaust their resources in order to get by, leaving the poor, minority, and vulnerable groups out of the circulation.

The practices for students who can't make the grades but they can give to have a grade. Nearly 80% of higher-income high school students participate in extracurricular activities, compared to less than 60% of low-income students (Spencer, 2016). It simply says that money makes the world go round and marginalized students have to cope with reality. Jiang et al. (2017) point out that being a child in a low-income or poor family does not happen by chance. Parental education and employment, race/ethnicity, and other factors are associated with children's experience of economic insecurity. This fact sheet describes the demographic, socioeconomic, and geographic characteristics of adolescents and their parents. A student who may come from a financially stable or marginalized student must indeed need parental support as they pursue their studies, like what Lynn father did as he provides everything for his daughter when it comes to school needs even if they are not financially stable.

"*We are born equally poor. We are not born rich.*". As Lynn tries to convince Bank to be an accomplice in the admission exam scheme, a reference is made on how both of them have to go through the ordeal because they do not have the resources, unlike Pat and Grace. To Lynn, this is the way to get even by receiving money from their rich classmates. "We must try harder to achieve our dreams," is the next statement with vague reference as to how being born poor could try hard enough to succeed.

Being honest about academic dishonesty

"*Teaching my friends is not wrong, right?*" said Lynn as she tried to justify her act and inno-cently proving that she did not do anything wrong. This argument advances a discourse that the school set-up can also be critically examined due to corrupt practices and unfair treatment by favouring those who are rich. Academic honesty is put under fire as values and ethics are compromised. It is indeed an irony to state that the place where honesty and morals are taught has become a breeding ground for dishonesty.

Academic dishonesty, specifically cheating, is not new in educational research. However, according to Galloway (2012), a recent rise in the studies of cheating behaviours in schools has been evident. These data present the reality that cheating has become a pervasive problem in schools wherein a culture that normalizes cheating behaviours has been a widely accepted mechanism for gaining advantage. Studies show that there are common individual factors among students who practice academic dishonesty. One common factor behind cheating is due to the struggle of students in terms of their academic performance--those who do not perform well in school tend to cheat more. However, this does not contradict the data that show that even highly-achieving students have become increasingly dishonest as well. Moreover, students' goals and motivations are also associated with their cheating behaviour. Those who have genuine interest and seek personal development in learning commit less cheating than those who view learning and testing as a means to end or finish their duty at school.

As Lynn's father was confronted because his daughter's scheme was discovered, his faced showed outmost disappointed when he was told that "*You are a teacher, you are supposed to understand*". The school is a place where high standards of conduct is expected, as teacher act as the facilitator and enabler of values education. It is imperative that educators do not tolerate behaviour that manifest against good manners and right conduct.

Contextually, there are also several factors that impact the practice of academic dishonesty collectively. Peer cheating, or the perception that everyone else is cheating, gives a significant impact on students' decision to cheat. In terms of social class, schools that cater middle to upper-class communities tend to play a significant role in committing academic dishonesty (Piff et al., 2012). Moreover, the same study also supports many others in arguing that cheating and other unethical behaviours have been used by those with privilege to increase the inequality gap between themselves and the marginalized. This is said to be attributed to the haughty, elitist mind set of affluent students which results in seeking dishonest means to achieve their desired ends and reject schools' traditional rules and policies. This is also an effort for them to retain their affluent status on campus and fulfil their parents' expectations on them, which usually place a huge pressure on these students. According to these students, cheating has become a justified survival mechanism for them. As Bank talks to Lynn before finally flying to Sydney, Australia to take the exam and provide leakage, he appears to be swayed by the act, as it is rationalized: "*At least I get paid*".

CONCLUSION

It is worthy to note how movies in the contemporary industry have contributed to shape the education landscape. Education systems may differ from geographic boundaries and statutory policies but these are diverse elements that inform how education goals are achieved. Indeed,

education issues are pressing societal concerns that require immediate and research-based solutions. The movie 'Bad Genius' has undoubtedly underscored academic integrity amidst temptations and societal pressure to succeed. It exposes problems education stakeholders have been facing for decades and yet, these issues are still pressing in the contemporary times: corruption, high stakes testing, academic pressure, education equity, and academic dishonesty. The movie is an attempt to document seemingly ignored societal cancers in our very own classrooms that breed worse and serious wounds. With seemingly perpetual social issues discussed in the film such as the rich-poor dichotomy, access to resources, and inequitable opportunities, the movie serves as a gentle reminder in rekindling value and values education among students. It is about time to revisit school curricula and academic programs as the race to make it to the top becomes competitive and challenging. Overall, these pressing questions are triggered by the movie: are we raising academically competent and morally upright students? Are education stakeholders committed to make our schools and classroom a haven for humane and holistic learning?

Future inquiries could focus on different genre and media that tackle education problems to see how each medium present and resolve these issues. A comparative analysis of these media from different region could also showcase how education concerns are treated in a particular culture and society.

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