



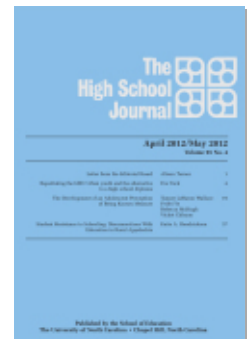
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Repatriating the GED: Urban youth and the alternative to a high school diploma

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This article discusses competing perspectives on the value of the General Educational Development (GED) credential. Although scholars and journalists debate the worth of the credential, urban youth continue to pursue the GED, especially as proxy for inadequate schooling. Using qualitative data from a participatory action research project, the author appraises the value of the GED from the perspectives of urban youth, and argues that youth place significance in the credential in ways previously ignored and under theorized by educational researchers, practitioners, and policymakers.

The General Educational Development (GED) credential is widely perceived as an alternative to a high school diploma, although it is not evenly recognized as *equivalent* to a high school diploma. This article will explore different perspectives on the value and use of the GED, especially the perspectives of youth who have earned or are in the process of earning the credential. The strategy of this article is to contrast scholarly and popular perspectives on the value and use of the GED with the perspectives of youth who pursue and earn the credential. Utilizing qualitative data from a comprehensive participatory action research project, I will critique the existing literature on the diminished value of the GED and argue that the GED is valuable in youth lives for a range of reasons, most notably as a legitimized exit route from caustic high schools. In this way, the value of the GED is repatriated to the youth who seek it.

Nationally, secondary school graduation rates are disproportionately lower for Black, Latino and Native American youth, at 40–50%, than White youth, who have graduation rates of 60–70%. Secondary school graduation rates are also disproportionate by income: youth from low-income families are twice as likely to be non-completers as youth from middle-income families, and six times more likely to be non-completers than youth from high-income families (Fine and Ruglis, 2008). The GED is commonly viewed one way for students who have not completed a high school diploma to earn a credential that will allow them to gain access to college, or sustained employment, but many sources say that it is not a reliable or effective path.

The empirical data discussed in this article are from a mixed-method participatory action research study, the Gateways and Getaways Project, which spanned 18 months in 2006 and 2007 in New York City.¹ I assembled a diverse group of youth aged 17–21, and together we designed the study, created the study instruments, collected the data, analyzed the data, and disseminated our findings (see also Tuck, et. al., 2008 & Tuck, 2009a). We called our group the *Collective of Researchers on Educational Disappointment and Desire* (CREDD). The project amassed both qualitative and quantitative data, but this article reports only on qualitative interview data; data reported in this article are from our one-hour semi-structured individual

¹ This article discusses a portion of the study which is described in full in Tuck, 2012.

interviews (n=25) with youth GED earners and seekers, and with youth GED earners now in later adulthood (n=10), including six GED instructors.

In 1996, the New York State Board of Regents along with State Commissioner of Education Richard Mills decided to phase out the local diploma option and make five Regents exams mandatory for graduation.² “(W)hile the practice of aligning curricula and exams in New York is not new,” Sipple, Killeen, and Monk (2004) note, “the mandate that every student in the state must pass the exams in order to graduate from high school is unprecedented” (p. 143). The phase-out process, which began in 2000, has been long and uneven. As noted, the empirical study reported in this article was conducted in 2006–7, when for the first time, the only way to earn a high school diploma in New York City was by passing the five exit exams. The employment of the once-voluntary Regents exams as mandatory exit exams has had a dramatic impact on school-level policies and practices, including practices which surreptitiously encourage some youth to pursue a GED instead of a high school diploma.

Theoretical Approaches and Frameworks

The GED has long been viewed as an alternative to a high school diploma, but it is not an equal alternative because GED earners experience diminished returns when compared to high school diploma earners in post-secondary school access and completion, job placement, life-long earnings, health, and incarceration rates. Most life outcomes for GED earners more closely resemble school non-completers, often called dropouts, than diploma earners. Still, in the past thirty-five years, the numbers of secondary school-aged youth who pursue the GED have steadily increased. The approach of this article is to review valuations of the GED by scholars and journalists, woven with urban youth perspectives of the GED in a way that highlights the contrasts and nuances in divergent values placed on the credential.

This article has a theoretical foundation in critical theory and indigenous theory. First, it engages a political economy of the GED (Anyon, 2009). By this I mean that it will look at the GED as a political and economic device, as something that is in service to the current school system within American capitalism. I will map the functions of the GED, including producing uneven outcomes to high school diplomas, and helping school systems with graduation rates that hover at 50% to still appear viable. By developing an analysis of the political economy of the GED, I am able to show that, despite the conclusions of those who cry its paltry worth, the GED performs a major service for American public schooling—as a back door exit from schools succumbing to the high pressure of neoliberal accountability education policies.

Second, the article utilizes the indigenous theoretical concept of repatriation (Tuck, 2011) to interpret the ways that urban youth place value on the GED. The word repatriate comes from the Latin word *repatriare*, which means restoring homeland, or going home again. Within indigenous contexts, repatriation often refers to the returning of the human remains of our relations, but is also regularly refers to the reclaiming of sovereignty, land, subsistence rights, cultural knowledge and artifacts, theories, epistemologies and axiologies.

I appreciate that in this article I am combining unlikely discourses in my use of an indigenous framework in an urban context. I do this because I believe it to be conceptually useful. Urban contexts are characterized by what Fine and Ruglis call “circuits of dispossession,” in which social and educational policies,

Simultaneously install in public institutions mechanisms for corporate and carceral profit while accelerating the disparagement of the public sphere...[moving] across sectors of economics, education, health, and criminal justice carving a racialized geography of youth development (for some) and dispossession (for others) that appears to be so natural (Fine and Ruglis, 2009, p. 20, parentheses mine).

² At the time of this writing, New York State is now undergoing another revision which will reduce the number of required Regents exams to three; exit exams in Social Studies will no longer be mandatory.

Often overlooked by non-native scholars, indigenous decolonizing theory is a rich resource for theorizing dispossession within settler colonialism. Settler colonialism is a persistent social and political formation in which newcomers/colonizers/settlers come to a place, claim it as their own, and do whatever it takes to disappear the Indigenous peoples that are there. Because settler colonialism has not only shaped how the US nation-state has managed Indigenous people but all peoples on presumably valuable land, indigenous theories of settler colonialism and contestations of that structure are especially relevant to the theorizing of urban space and urban schooling. Settler colonialism is the context of the dispossession and erasure of poor youth and youth of color in urban public schools. I employ the concept of repatriation to describe youth responses to educational dispossession and practices of disappearing (such as those practices described in Sipple, Killeen & Monk, 2004, discussed below) in their schools.

Research Background

In the fifty United States, in 2009, 747,809 people took at least one GED test; 86% completed the battery of tests and 69% passed, earning a GED credential. In the early 1990s, 1 in 7 secondary school completion credentials was a GED, both nationwide and in New York City, the location of the empirical study. In the 2000s, the use of the GED increased to be 1 in 5 nationwide, and 1 in 4 in New York City.

The first GED exam was crafted in 1943 as a credential for veterans. The GED, based on the Iowa Test of Educational Development, was crafted by the American Council on Education for university use as a major tool for evaluating the 2.2 million veterans who entered higher education under the GI bill. The GED is offered throughout the United States and its territories, and Canada, and is sponsored by the GED Testing Service of the higher education lobbyist group, the American Council on Education (ACE). A series of five parts that test proficiency in mathematics, reading, science, social science, and writing, the GED is administered by official GED testing sites that are overseen by provincial, state, or territorial governments. It was not until over 50 years after the GED's inception, in 1998, that GED earners were differentiated from high school diploma earners in US census questionnaires. However, GED earners are occasionally still calculated as high school graduates in statistics of local, state, and federal education systems and agencies, especially when it is politically advantageous to include GED earners as high school graduates in public data.

In its over 65 year history, over 15.2 million people have earned the credential. While established as an exam for adults, the past 35 years have been marked by a growing population of teenagers who opt out or are forced out of a traditional high school diploma track for a GED. Rachal and Bingham have referred to this as the adolescentizing of the GED (2004). "For the vast majority of non-credentialed adults, and increasing numbers of teenagers, the GED has become America's largest high school, and its cheapest" (Quinn, 2002, p. 1).

On March 15, 2011, the American Council on Education issued a press release announcing that it will collaborate with Pearson, a ubiquitous producer of textbooks and other learning materials, to revise the GED exams in order to align with the Common Core State Standards. The collaboration will take place under the umbrella of a new "public-private business," that will operate under the old banner of the GED Testing Service, and will feature a national test preparation program. This decision has many implications which will continue to shape the lives of youth and adults, including the reconfirmation of the GED as *the* alternative to the high school diploma in the United States, and the expanding influence of Pearson in both credentializing and test preparation (American Council of Education, 2011).

Use of the GED Option by New York State Public School Districts

More than half of states in the US use exit exams to determine eligibility for secondary school graduation. Sipple, Killeen & Monk (2004) conducted a qualitative study that sought to understand the impacts of state-level mandatory exit exam policy and the "alternative outcomes that

may serve as a pressure release on the system” (p. 144) in a diverse sample of school districts in New York State. The study found that school districts frequently aligned curriculum to Regents exams, and that some districts used the generation of Individualized Education Plans (IEPs—the documents which designate students as requiring special education), as a strategy for differentiating Regents testing modifications. Most important for this discussion,

Four of the five superintendents and an array of high school principals shared a ‘strategy’ of shifting students on the verge of dropping out to GED programs. This practice allows districts to report that the student did not drop out. The end result is that the state dropout data does not capture transfers to GED or alternative schools. To be counted as a dropout, districts need to completely lose track of a student. This was commonly discussed as students “disappearing”... While no respondent admitted to pushing students toward this path, several administrators across the districts made certain the students understood their options and that earning a GED was one. Several administrators stated, earning the GED ‘is better than nothing.’ One Deputy Superintendent noted that it was common ‘to put a student in a car and drive him downtown’ to the GED center.” (Sipple, Killeen & Monk, 2004, p. 159)

All of the districts in the study used the GED option to balance the pressures of keeping dropout rates down, increasing graduation rates, keeping school tax burdens low, and increasing rates of students’ securing a Regents diploma. The GED option was the only option for districts trying to meet competing demands with limited resources. The GED provided a way for some students to disappear. Administrators and school personnel literally delivered students to GED centers, and one opened an in-house GED program when nearby GED centers were too full. The study yields windows to the practices that push students out of high school toward the GED from the perspectives of school personnel. These accounts confirm what youth told us in our study.

Methodology and Methods

The qualitative interview data reported here are just a slice of the data collected in the Gateways and Get-aways Project. The Gateways and Get-aways project was conducted as youth participatory action research (PAR), which positioned pushed-out youth and young GED earners as researchers and experts on their own lives. Participatory action research is practiced all over the globe. Rather than a set of methods, PAR is best described as an ethic, as a set of beliefs about knowledge, where it comes from, and how knowledge is validated and strengthened (Fine, 2008). PAR seeks to “return to the people the legitimacy of the knowledge they are capable of producing through their own verification systems...as a guide to their own action” (Fals-Borda and Rahman, 1991, p. 15). Elsewhere my co-researchers and I have discussed the design and implementation of our study (Tuck et. al., 2008; Tuck, 2009a); this article focuses on a selection of our findings.

I conducted the Gateways and Get-aways Project, between 2006–2007, in New York City, with seven youth co-researchers, aged 17–21, several of whom had been pushed-out of their former schools, and ultimately earned a GED.³ These youth were my co-researchers and co-designers in this study, not my research subjects. We developed the research questions, designed the study, collected the data, analyzed our data, and determined our findings collaboratively (see also Tuck et. al. 2008; Tuck, 2009b).⁴

³ My co-researchers on this project were Jovanne Allen, Maria Bacha, Jodi-Ann Gayle, Alexis Morales, Crystal Orama, Sarah Quinter, and Jamila Thompson. In addition to this core group, five other youth school non-completers and GED earners participated in the design of the study. They included Rafael “Q” Quinde, Luis Ravelo, Shermel James, Christopher Alvarez, and Tyrone West.

⁴ Several of my youth co-researchers and co-designers, after the plans for the study and each research instrument were drawn, did decide to participate in the study by sharing their own experiences and perspectives in individual interviews. Co-researchers who also were interview participants in the study were Jovanne and Alexis, and Tyrone, a co-designer, also participated in an interview.

The Gateways and Get-aways Project involved semi-structured individual interviews (n=35), focus groups (n=9, with 95 youth), and a questionnaire (n=476) with New York City youth. To participate in our study, youth needed to be 14–22 years of age, be residents of New York City, and be current or former students in New York City public high schools. The larger study also involved cold calls to college admissions officers and employers (n=80), and a variety of other innovative secondary methods constructed to engage out-of-school youth (see Tuck, 2012, for a discussion of the larger study). Empirical data reported in this article are from our one-hour semi-structured individual interviews (n=25) with youth GED earners and seekers. I will also present data from our interviews with adults over the age of 30 who earned their GEDs as youth (n=10), including six who eventually became GED instructors.

Youth interview participants (n=25) were between the ages of 16 and 22. Eleven of the youth interview participants identified as female, and 14 identified as male. Ten of the youth interview participants identified as Latina/o, 9 identified as Black, 3 identified as white, 2 identified as Asian, and 1 identified as biracial, Black and white. Eighteen of the youth interview participants had already earned a GED at the time of the interview, the remaining 7 identified as GED seekers.

Adult interview participants (n=10) were over the age of thirty, but had earned a GED as teens. Our design included these interviews in order to get a more longitudinal perspective on the value of the GED credential in the life of a youth earner. Six of the adult interview participants identified as female, and 4 identified as male. Four identified as Black, 3 identified as white, 2 identified as Southeast Asian, and 1 identified as Latina. Six out of our 10 adult interview participants now or frequently served as GED instructors. In this article, I also report data from an interview with one adult GED instructor who was not a GED earner.

I developed the interview questions with my youth co-researchers. We developed a list of questions that we asked each youth and adult participant, but encouraged interview participants to share any other ideas they deemed relevant. The interview protocol was piloted with six volunteers, which helped us to ensure that our questions were eliciting what we intended to learn. We developed the questions so that participants could reflect upon the following:

- How the participant first learned about the GED, and what she first heard
- Ways in which seeking and earning a GED met and did not meet the participant's expectations
- The participant's experiences in high school experience before leaving
- Observations by the participant on how the GED is valued by society
- Participant's advice to someone who is considering a GED
- Participant's perspectives on how schooling might improve

Participants were referred to us by GED instructors, friends, and family. Participants received a voucher for a movie ticket for their time. With the aid of a semi-structured interview guide, my youth co-researchers and I conducted the interviews one-on-one with participants, usually in a convenient but quiet public meeting place, using paper and pen to take notes for follow-up questions, and recording the discussion with a tape recorder. The recordings were then transcribed verbatim. My youth co-researchers and I developed a coding system, and first used post-it tabs and then used Atlas.ti software to code all of our transcripts. We created data displays to confirm emerging patterns, and were conscientious about disconfirming evidence and outliers.

As noted in the introduction, the main strategy of this article is to contrast the scholarly and popular literature on the GED with youth perspectives on the credential. To do this, I will present a broad-strokes overview of the scholarly and journalistic literature, highlighting themes addressed by our empirical data: the GED and the US labor market, and the GED and higher education. Then I will present youth perspectives on the GED and the US labor market, and the GED and higher education. I then will present themes that emerged in our

data, youth perspectives or valuations of the GED, that go largely ignored by the literature. These themes comprise the *lived* value of the GED. In the discussion section, I will apply the concept of repatriation to youths' valuations of the GED.

Scholarly and Journalistic Valuations of the GED

Debating whether the GED is a “meaningless piece of paper” (Marriott, 1993), or if it is like the Wizard of Oz who gives a trivial gift with the expectation that Dorothy or the Tin Man ascribe its meaning (Quinn in Greene, 2002), much of the existing research and journalism conclude that the GED credential is practically worthless.

Academic studies declare that GED earners are more likely to be placed in remedial courses in two-year colleges than high school diploma earners (Hamilton, 1998), they lack perseverance and a strong work ethic (Tyler, 1998), and will earn significantly less over a lifetime than high school diploma earners. Studies report that wages of those with GEDs are practically identical to non-completers without GEDs, controlling for years in high school (Cao, Stromsdorfer, & Weeks, 1996) and insist that very few will go on to complete a two-year or four-year college degree (Boesel, 1998; Tyler, Murname, & Willett, 2003).

The GED in the US Labor Market

GED earners do not experience the same rates of success as high school diploma earners in the US labor market. (Boesel, 1998; Boesel, Smith, & Alsalam, 1998; Greene, 2002; Heckman & Cameron, 1993, 2005) These studies illustrate that employment rates are much higher for high school diploma holders than GED recipients. Men with GEDs have higher job turnover rates than men who have no secondary schooling credentials, and actually do not work as often. (This is not documented for women who have GEDs.) Overall, high school diploma earners work more and have lower job turnovers than GED earners. While GED earners' yearly wages are 8% higher than those of “dropouts,” they are 9–12% lower than high school diploma earners' wages. Further, over a lifetime, GED earners' wage earnings are “statistically indistinguishable” to those of “drop-outs” (Cameron and Heckman, 1993; see also Greene, 2002).

In 2009, 40% of GED candidates cited wanting higher wages or a better job as the compelling reason for wanting the credential.⁵ However, employers that participated in designing the most recent version of the exam (2002) were largely low wage employers. The American Council on Education asked employers such as Taco Bell, Safeway, Motorola, and Red Lobster to help revise the GED exam in 2002 at least in part because of employers' complaints about the work habits, or the socialization, of GED earners. Informing both the material covered and preparation practices for the GED exam has been a way for corporations to access and mold a future generation of workers, preparing them to meet corporate needs (Kleiner, 2001, p. 3).

In 2009, 7% of GED candidates nationwide sought to earn a GED in order to join the military. Because of a historical dissatisfaction with the performance of GED earners-turned-recruits, each US military branch limits the number of GED-earner recruits to a maximum of 5%, depending on how successfully or unsuccessfully they are able to recruit high school diploma earners to service. In 2006, the army had an “education plus” program that paid for GED preparation and exam fees, but at the time of this writing, the US Army does not accept people with a GED in most areas of the county.

[H]owever the Army reserves the right to waive certain disqualifications and allow enlistment if deemed in the best interest of the individual and the service. If you will only need a waiver for the GED, it is highly likely that you will be accepted. Please note that when the Army did

⁵ In 2009 over 60% of GED candidates took the exams for educational reasons. 52% took the exams for personal reasons (being a good role model, feeling accomplished). 50% took the exams for employment reasons, and 7% took the exams to gain entry into the military (ACE, 2009).

accept a GED, they [sic] were required to score at least 50 on the ASVAB [Armed Services Vocational Aptitude Battery] (United States Army Information Website).

The GED in Higher Education

In 2009, over 60% of GED candidates listed the pursuit of higher education as a reason for taking GED exams. Of this group, 30% percent indicated they planned to enroll in two-year college, 24% planned to enroll in a trade school or receive technical training, and 20% planned to enroll in four-year college (American Council on Education, 2010).

Findings of prior investigations on the GED maintain that the 44% of GED earners who enter associates degree programs are half as likely as high school diploma earners to complete their degrees, and only 2–8% of GED earners who seek bachelor's degrees attain them, as compared to 20% of high school diploma earners (Boesel, Smith, and Alsalam, 1998; Kleiner, 2001; Jobs for the Future, 2006). Scholars have concluded that in many ways, the difference between high school diploma earners and GED earners is a difference in socialization, and the ways in which those who complete high school are more cogently socialized for a college classroom that mirrors secondary schooling (Boesel, Smith, and Alsalam, 1998).

Semi-structured Youth Interview Results

While market-value and academic-value clearly have a powerful impact on GED earners' lives, absent from prior studies is an understanding of the ways in which GED earners experience *the value of the GED in their own lives*. Existing narratives of the GED, because they are focus on the use-value of the GED and not the *lived* value of the credential, are borne of and contribute to societal conditions that stigmatize the GED and GED earners.⁶ Youth participants in our study described the contrasting images of the GED in society, and in their own lives. In an interview, youth GED earner Guillermo explained, "I think society at large views it basically like a toy, like a Cracker Jack box kind of thing, you know? But at the same time, the state of education is so in-flux that it's a real opportunity."

Having provided an overview of the scholarly and journalistic valuations of the GED, I now turn to our empirical results from our one-hour semi-structured interviews with youth GED earners and seekers (n=25).

The GED is Not an Equivalent to a High School Diploma, but a High School Diploma was Out of Reach: Youth Appraisals of the Value of the GED Compared to the Value of the High School Diploma

The youth we interviewed compared the value of the GED to the value of a high school diploma with complexity; their comparisons were full of nuance and context. Most felt that the GED is indeed not equivalent to a high school diploma, but that seemed less important when a high school diploma was structurally out of reach. Asia confessed that prior to being pushed out of school, she had a disparaging view of GED earners. "I laughed [at GED earners and seekers], 'You dummy. You can't go through high school,' and once I was sitting in a classroom getting my GED, I was like, 'How could you say that to somebody? How could you make them feel bad like that?'"

Sophia told us that the GED is seen as, "less than a diploma. You're a little—not dumb—but you're not as smart as the average. Even though they say that the GED test is harder." To this point Jovanne observed, "I think they're sending the wrong message because they say is the GED is fast, easy, get out of school, go to college. But that's not what it's about. They should let you know that... the GED is not for everybody just like high school is not for everybody."

⁶ In addition to these analyses, due to the prevalence of GED programs in prisons, (Garner, 2005; Tyler and Kling, 2004) some might think of the GED as a credential for prisoners.

Misinformation About the GED Can Have Serious Consequences for Youth School Leaving: Youth Accounts of Deciding to Pursue a GED

Even in the stigmatized context of the GED, youth reported that they were explicitly advised by school personnel to get the GED because it would serve, as in Tyrone's telling, as "an alternative—no, they said an equivalency—to high school. I [would have] an equivalency so I could be just as good as a high school diploma [earner]. But it is not true."

Most of our interview participants first learned about the GED from a dean, principal, teacher, or guidance counselor. In these cases, school personnel assured youth that GED was an alternative to a high school diploma that would afford them the same options as a diploma. Note that the title of the GED certificate awarded in New York State is the "New York State High School Equivalency Diploma."

Zhi, a recent immigrant from China, was told about the GED by school personnel when he tried to enroll in high school. He followed that advice, and now regrets the decision: "If you get a GED you cannot go to many senior colleges. You can only go to community college. GED is seen as easier... than normal high school. For many new English [speakers]... it's a bad, bad choice." The information Zhi was given is correct, but only in part, and it's a good example of the shaky availability of needed information on the GED. Many immigrant youth who don't speak English are placed in pre-GED classes, even though they may have the skill base to pass the exam on a faster track. This can unnecessarily extend their route to the GED, and GED programs are generally not designed to teach English. However, youth can attend senior colleges, especially after they have gone to community college, and, as the spring 2006 debate between then-Governor George Pataki and several local campuses demonstrated (Arenson, 2006), there are four year colleges that quietly accept GED youth as first year students rather than as transfer students. Still, by turning him away at the door, school personnel denied Zhi his right afforded by New York State law to attend public school until the age of 21.

In our interviews with youth GED earners and seekers, we learned that some school advisers also underplayed the difficulty of the exam procedures and the exam itself. At the time that they left school to pursue a GED, many young people were unaware that youth fifteen and younger are not eligible to take the exams in New York State. Sixteen year old youth can only take the exams if they are joining the military, or if they have completed a GED preparation program and have reached the compulsory school attendance age (seventeen in New York City.) Seventeen and eighteen year old youth also need to show documentation demonstrating that they are in State institutions like hospitals or prisons, are a member of a graduating class that has already graduated, or it has been more than one year since officially leaving school, among other scenarios.

Jordan told us,

Not for nothing, taking your GED is not that easy. [It's not] like taking your [driver's] license [test]; all you got to do is go to the DMV, stand on line for a million hours, take a primary, six months later come back, take the road test, and you got your license. But to get your GED, it's a whole big spectacle, and ... it's not like they give it every week. It's only specific days of the year that they give it in specific locations throughout the five boroughs.

Pilar confirmed other youths' experiences of the content on the battery of tests as difficult,

A lot of it is very technical. Things that you learn in high school, I guess, that I clearly didn't remember... I remember the math being totally hard. Other things, I hustled a lot of it. It was a lot of logic and ... trick questions. A lot of things about people, necessarily, quote unquote leaders of America... Social studies, things like that. Science, biology of the body.

The GED is Not Always Taken Seriously on Job Applications: Youth Perspectives on the GED in the US Labor Market

As in the existing literature, youth interview participants derive much of the value of the GED from how it has worked for them as a passport to good jobs and higher education. And, as in the existing literature, they have found that the GED yields disappointing or mixed results. Potential employers told Asia, “[Go back and] get your high school diploma.’ People said, ‘don’t get your,’ what do they call it? ‘*The Good Enough Diploma?*’ She continued,

I don’t think society takes it seriously. I’ve been in job interviews and I’ve shown them my GED and people have looked at me like, ‘What??’ And haven’t called back. But, you know, I’ve moved on with my life. I found a job that I like and I enjoy and I’m going to school, so just because I have my GED doesn’t mean it’s going to stop my program.

Still, many youth reported counter-stories to the gloomy job prospects for GED earners. For example, Jason told us,

I’ve been on a lot of interviews where they said, ‘Hmm, I see you got a GED. You didn’t do your 4 years of college.’ But, it’s all about the individual, how he sells himself and how he presents himself. A person can actually tell if you’re intelligent or if you just took a short cut; and you got the GED but you didn’t really *get it*, you know, you’re dumb as a doorknob. Sure, some people look down on it. But once they see you personally, how you present yourself and that you are a bright person, and educated, it all works out for you.

Alex put it in these terms, “I’ve been discriminated on some job interviews for having a GED. ‘Don’t call us, we’ll call you.’ But some places you go to, they do give you that benefit of the doubt. Like I said, a lot of people in this world, their kid has to get the GED as well.”

Other youth, like Raymond, were very pleased with the GED for allowing employers to do just that, give them the benefit of the doubt. “I have a good job, a good paying job. At that, I work in a hotel association, I make good money. All I needed was a GED.”

The GED Can Yield Access to College, but There may be More Steps Involved: Youth Perspectives on the GED and Higher Education

Many youth pursued a GED so that they would still have a way to enter college. In most cases, this process was not as easy as anticipated, and there were disappointments along the way. Benji told us, “I wanted to go to a certain college, but I couldn’t go because I didn’t have a 300 on my GED. That’s the one bad thing that happened.” Jovanne experienced a setback when she learned that she would have to attend community college before transferring to a senior college, but she isn’t defeated. “I can’t go straight to a four year university. I mean, that’s closed but I never was sure I wanted to knock on that door anyway. I wanted to go to CUNY (City University of New York) and I don’t want to bury myself in student loan debts and things like that.”

However, the youth in our interviews were tenacious in their pursuit of higher education. Asia, a young mother of two, earned her GED and now is completing a four year college program. “Soon as I get my bachelor’s, I’m going to go on and get whatever else I need to get. I’m trying to get my MBA.”

Though he hasn’t yet taken steps towards college admission, Jameak says, “That’s always the plan. College is always open. They accept you at any age.”

The GED Can be an Emergency Escape Exit from Insufferable High Schools: Youth Perspectives on the Immediate Value of the GED as Emergency Escape Exit

One immediate value that every young person emphasized was the GED as emergency escape exit from their former schools. The value youth placed on the GED in their lives had a direct relationship to the quality and experience offered by their high schools. Riccel reported,

“I wanted to get [my GED] because I felt that high school was not really providing for me what I needed.” For some youth, like Riccel and Jaqui, schools didn’t deliver the academic rigor that they desired. Jaqui described this scenario,

I think it’s better to get a GED. To me, high school was a waste of time. When I was in high school, they used to give us a workbook and a reading book. Let me tell you something, I used to do my workbook within a week. The rest of the school year I was a truant. I got promoted twice and left back once. So it defeated the purpose... With all the time that I had left over, I spent it across the street from [my school.] There’s a morgue across the street... I spent a lot of time there. I spent a lot of time all over the place, anywhere other than the classroom because I [already had] finished my workbook. All I had to do was tear out the pages and hand them in.

Other youth interview participants observed that their schools did not meet their personal needs when having problems at home, asserting their high schools were “not flexible enough to deal with me while I was dealing with much bigger shit,” as in Francine’s words.

Alex told us that he valued the GED option because it got him out of a school situation that he felt would lead to “heartbreak,” telling us, “Sometimes you have to take other steps and precautions to stay out of trouble so I decided to go and join the GED program.” Miguel confirmed this point, though insisted it wasn’t an option, “I had to get away from the bad elements: the drugs, the guns, the gangs.”

The GED Can Provide a Sense of Accomplishment and Open Doors that are Otherwise Closed: Youth Perspectives on the Lived Value of the GED

Our interviews with youth GED earners and seekers helped us to see the significance of the lived value of the GED, something that goes undetected in analyses that focus on the mobility of the credential. Several youth discussed the ways in which earning a GED helped to improve the way one feels about herself. Ling Lin, a recent immigrant from China, told us, “When I get my GED I’m going to feel more confident about my English and believe in myself.” James explained how earning his GED would change him, “I feel like without having my GED, I’m nothing... When I do that, I’ll be able to be a force.”

Selden, now a GED instructor, said, “My self esteem was actually lifted knowing I had acquired my GED.” Pilar told us, “I got a really high score. Very impressive. I impressed myself.”

Youth told us that they saw themselves “going far” with the GED, and saw the GED as the first of many steps toward a good life. “You can get very, very far with it. And you’re not going to get very far without it,” Ebony said.

Youth talked to us about the GED as a key to doors that would otherwise be closed to them. “You can go to college with that,” Jameak commented. “You can go to college. And once you’re on a job interview and they see college on the paper, *that’s* a big deal.”

Rafael talked with us explicitly about keys and doors,

I think it opens certain doors. It can open certain doors. It’s like if I give you a key ring full of keys and just give it to you and you don’t know that one of the keys on there opens the door to the bank around the block, it does you no good. You[’re] just sitting there with some keys there. But if you know it and you get that key ring, you’ll try every door, and you’re going to find some good things.

Rafael’s elaborated metaphor of the key ring is a powerful analysis of what the GED can mean in youths’ lives: having the GED credential is a reason to try other avenues around obstacles; it doesn’t guarantee success, but it might crack open some opportunities that would have otherwise been closed to them.

The GED provides youth with a sense of accomplishment, even if humble. Ebony told us that now when she meets another young person with a GED, “I feel like they earned it, they deserved it. Cause it’s something very hard, it’s not something easy.” For some, like Selden, recognizing the accomplishments takes a little while longer.

In the beginning, I felt a little less than. I felt that because I didn’t stick to my commitment of high school. So you feel, if I didn’t stick to my commitment, then you know, I felt like I was a failure even though I had the GED. But then I have to look at the positive side of having a GED, that what people learn in four years, I didn’t in do the four years, but I did acquire the knowledge.

GED Programs Can be More Flexible than High Schools: Youth Perspectives on the Value of GED Programs

Beyond the immediate and lived value of the GED, for many youth, the value of the GED is associated with their experiences in GED programs. In these cases the GED class sizes were smaller, and youth received more focused attention. Jameak said, “I really like the reading we do [in my GED program] because it is on my level but is interesting to me and my life.” Alexis appreciated having “people who are dedicated to their work, [who] really work hard to help you out” as staff members of the GED program she attended. She continued, “They stay late hours, help tutor you. They also actually influence other kids to help you, and they ask you to tutor other kids on your strong subjects.”

In part, GED programs can provide this kind of personalized attention and support because they are crafted to be flexible. When we started our interview with Asia, the young woman who plans to pursue an MBA, we asked her, “Is there any question I should ask you?” She answered,

Definitely ask me what impact this has had on my life. Like it was so much better for me to be able to go to school at night and get my GED. I couldn’t get my high school diploma. I figured my GED would be better because it was a six month class. I was only 17 when I got my GED and I’m 22 now. I am a mother of two beautiful children. My son is 6 months and my daughter is 2.

Semi-structured Adult Interview Results

This section presents relevant data from interviews conducted with adults who earned a GED as youth (n=10). Six out of our 10 adult interview participants also became GED instructors. One of the GED instructors who participated in the study was not a GED earner (Kersha).

The Sense of Accomplishment Accumulates Over Time: Perspectives on the Lived Value of the GED by Youth GED Earners Now in Adulthood

Our ten adult interview participants, teen GED earners now in their 30s and 40s, all described a deepening of their feelings of accomplishment as time went on. Although the sense of accomplishment may not have been pronounced when earning the credential, life experiences and the perspectives permitted by the passing of time gave the adults a more complete sense of satisfaction for having earned a GED as teens. Patricia, now in her late 40s, told us,

Just talking about it makes my whole person smile. Yeah, even though I didn’t accomplish what I wanted to accomplish at the end, the journey is still happening. One never *learns*, we’re always learning. Nobody knows everything about anything. We constantly learn. That’s one of the things the GED has really given me. Given me the eyes to search. Has opened my eyes, if you will, to how wonderful education can be. Because it also has to do with the person, doesn’t it? What kind of person. We all do things for different reasons. I’m giving you my reasons and my experience. But for somebody, coming in I’d let them walk in my shoes for a little bit. You know what I’m saying? And let them feel that. Let them feel what I’m feeling. At least try to make them feel a little bit of what I’m feeling. Of the joy. Of the experience. It was just wonderful for me.

The life lessons and conclusions that this group of now-adult GED earners contributed to this study suggest that the lived value of a credential develops over a long span of time, and is easier to observe in hindsight.

The GED May Not Be Equivalent to a High School Diploma, but All High School Diplomas are Not Equivalent Either: GED Instructors' Perspectives on the Value of the GED as Compared to a High School Diploma

In interviews, we asked GED instructors if they think the GED is an equivalent alternative to the high school diploma. All of the GED instructors told us that in their views, the GED is not an equivalent credential to a high school diploma. Yet, in a textured response, Kersha observed that not all high school diplomas are equivalent either,

But do I think all high school diplomas are equal to one another? No. I think it depends on the quality of the education received at any place. Obviously, the GED is going to suffer a little bit, because like I said before there isn't a deep exploration. That could be challenging depending on how long the student goes to the preparation classes and how much the instructor is invested in moving beyond the actual test. Maybe, that class and the preparation they get there could mirror the information that they would receive in a low performing school where the principal and teachers don't care but the students do. The kids are just in class doing worksheets all day. Which happens. No, I don't equate them, but I do not equate all high school diplomas either.

GED Classes Can Be More Flexible Than High School Classes: The Value of GED Programs from the Perspectives of GED Instructors

GED instructors shared with us how the flexibility of a GED program has allowed them to employ engaging pedagogies, even though like high schools they were "teaching to a test." Mr. Smith told us,

I do some special workshops and music or music society. History, some special lectures from my travels. Slides and storytelling and other things that may stimulate the other parts of their beings because if you just teach GED with GED books it can get to be pretty boring and pretty taxing. You have to teach to the whole person.

Kersha also spoke of the freedom she has had to expand class discussions beyond direct GED preparation, while also getting students ready to succeed on the exams.

I've always been lucky enough to have a group of students where we build classes where they want more than the test. And so, although the actual test was a big aspect of how we structured the class- where I brought other material in and we'd watch movies, read the newspaper- all of those things that help them have bigger conceptualizations of knowledge, and not just that knowledge that is presented the test... You've got to build a class where people feel like they are generating things.

Alongside revitalized classroom content, several GED instructors positioned their work as educators as oriented around respect for students, as in Mr. Remi's words, "I try to respect them and meet them where they are. I try to push them where they don't want to go. Create a comfortable atmosphere for learning." For Mr. Smith, this approach to his students comes from realizing, "A lot of students I've had have had many problems in their lives. And it really taught me that sometimes failure or sense of failure doesn't depend on a piece of paper. It depends on the student himself or herself. It depends on life circumstances."

Discussion

As other alternatives in New York City such as night high schools, vocational schools, and now most recently, the local diploma have been stripped away, the need for an alternative route to secondary school completion such as the GED has become more pronounced. However, existing

analyses of the GED deem it a consolation prize, or worse, as “not worth the paper it was printed on” (Greene, 2002). More, recent immigrant students who are speakers of first languages other than English are often dissuaded from enrolling in high school and pushed toward GED programs (Advocates for Children, 2007).

These common, yet covert practices concretize the defacto reliance on the GED as a last alternative to contemporary schooling. The GED,

Serves as a systemic safety valve for a system with comparatively high dropout rates. The GED program is a low-cost way to integrate hundreds of thousands of off-track individuals back into the mainstream of society, while at the same time providing as efficient means for the educational system to appear to meet its goals of equality of educational opportunity. (Smith, 2003, p. 375)

In an essay called “Scattered Speculations on the Question of Value,” Gayatri Spivak (1987) calls for a conceptualization of value outside of ideology and materialist production. Spivak advocates the locating of new chains of value which are delinked from the labor-power materialist predication. On the value of the GED, Thomas Smith writes, “The human capital perspective helps us to understand why the GED is not functioning in the same way as credential more strongly linked to skills acquisition, although it provides little insight into why the demand for the credential remains so strong” (Smith, 2003, p. 403). Without seeking to understand the *lived* value of the GED from the perspective of the youth who continue to flock to a supposedly depleted credential, we are left to assume that the youth are making decisions that go against their own interests. Considering the themes that emerged in our interview data, one can appreciate, in Spivak’s words, a “new chain of value” (1987, p. 205) of the GED in youth lives: it is a moment of completion in a system seemingly determined to ensure your failure, a crossing of the finish line after a life-time of being tripped up, it is an act of hope, of desire, of repatriation.

Repatriating the Value of the GED

Repatriation is a socio-cultural political process that is engaged in restoring homeland, or going home again. Prior to the 1980s, the term was almost exclusively applied to people who returned to their homelands (Conn, 2010). Repatriation took on a different meaning in U.S. indigenous contexts—referring to the return of Indigenous human remains and objects—after the United States Congress passed the Native American Graves Protection and Repatriation Act (NAGPRA), and the World Archeological Congress adopted a similar resolution, both in 1990. Thus, in Indigenous contexts, repatriation refers to the reclaiming of what has been stripped from us in the ongoing processes of colonization. The term still most frequently is applied to the return of Indigenous skeletal remains and funerary objects (Mihesuah, 2000) but I advocate for broadening the term to describe other scenarios in which Indigenous and oppressed peoples reclaim rights, narratives, ways of knowing, research, and curriculum (Tuck, 2011).

I see it as appropriate and useful to apply the language of repatriation to how youth view their own pursuits of the GED because of the ways in which they have been denied access to adequate schooling and school completion. By calling attention to the values that youth attribute to the GED that are obfuscated in existing GED inquiries, we can reimagine these attributions as youth repatriations of the value of the GED that enact a larger repatriation of youth education.

To call the pursuit of the GED by a young person who has been pushed out or denied schooling an act of repatriation is not a romanticization. Youth were clear with us to not romanticize the GED, emphasizing that it is a credential of basic education, that the test itself is very technical, and uncritically patriotic. They also underlined the difficulty of the GED exams. When we asked what Yvette would like for the rest of the world to know about the GED, she told us, “That test is damn hard!” GED instructor Kersha confirmed this point by saying, “I think that in all actuality, work-wise it might be easier to go to high school, get straight Ds in all your classes and get your high school diploma.”

Tyrone had this advice for youth who are still in school who are considering the GED: If you have to get your GED, get it. If you are 25, and you didn't graduate high school, get it, get it now. If you are 16 and you are a junior, stay in school. Don't be stupid. Just stay in school. It's not worth it just leaving school to possibly jeopardize your chances of getting employed or going to college... But if you have to get it, that's more power to you, I hope you do well. But if not, if you don't have to get it, if you have the [option] to stay in school or get your GED, stay in school. I don't regret getting my GED, I really don't. I wasn't going to graduate on time anyway. I got my GED and I'm glad I got it. But if you have the option of staying in school and getting your diploma, do that.

In each of our interviews with GED earners and seekers we asked, "Would you recommend getting a GED to others?" The most frequent and resounding answer was, "No. Unless you are in the position I was in." The GED is a powerful yet punished alternative to the high school diploma. Youth GED earners and seekers valued the GED because it served as desperately needed escape hatch and last option standing. At the same time, pursuing a GED marked a refusal to let go of their right to learn and live satisfying lives. For some of the youth such as Alex, Asia, Jacqui and Riceel, pursuing a GED was a way to reclaim their educational futures, even though it involved leaving high school. Pursuing a GED was a form of repatriating their education.

Conclusion

It is important to look beyond market and higher education factors to determine the value of the GED, or of any credential. In our study, peeking beneath the surfaces of these factors revealed the dense intricacies of youth lives, and the meanings they attribute to earning a GED. What results is a textured, nuanced valuation of the GED that reflects the contradictions, compromises, and complexities of reclaiming an education within/outside a school system hyper-characterized by assessment (see Tuck, 2012).

The repatriated valuations that youth applied to the GED were largely conditional: Youth agreed with the journalistic and scholarly literatures that the GED does not yield the same returns as a high school diploma, but that reality could not be parted from their realities in which achieving a high school diploma testing-as-accountability educational policy environment was unlikely. The GED is not always taken seriously by job applications, but it is sometimes enough to spark an opportunity. The GED can open access to college, but there may be more steps involved in the process.

Most important are the valuations that youth attribute to the GED which go unrecognized by the journalistic and scholarly literatures. The GED can be an emergency escape exit from inadequate high schools. The GED can provide a sense of accomplishment in a life in which accomplishment has been denied. This sense of accomplishment, as we learned from youth GED earners now in adulthood, deepens over time.

As we learned from GED instructors, the GED may not be equivalent to a high school diploma, but not all high school diplomas are equivalent either. The GED is dynamically valuable to the New York City public school system because it is a legitimate way of siphoning underperforming students out of classrooms unable to make space for them in a high stakes accountability environment. The GED option masks the numbers of students who are pushed out of New York City public high schools. The use(s) and value(s) of the GED are supremely tenuous, yet *lived* valuations of the GED hold profound implications for the purposes and practices of schooling and learning.

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