Exploring Educational Dynamics in Conflict-Affected Areas of Southern Thailand: A Qualitative Case Study with an Islamic Education Approach

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Abstract

The ongoing conflict between the central Thai government and the predominantly Muslim provinces of Southern Thailand, particularly Yala, Pattani, and Narathiwat, has significantly impacted various sectors, including education. The ethnic and religious divisions inherent in this conflict have posed challenges to implementing educational policies. This study explores how local elite politics influence the integration of Islamic education and the national curriculum in these conflict-prone areas. A qualitative case study approach was employed, utilizing semi-structured interviews, observations, and document analysis to gather data from key stakeholders, including school leaders, policymakers, and educators. The findings reveal that despite efforts to incorporate religious and secular curricula, local educational systems face persistent challenges in maintaining balance amidst the broader socio-political tensions. This study also highlights the role of local elite politics in shaping educational policies, particularly in the context of religious and cultural identity. It underscores the need for more flexible and culturally inclusive educational policies that not only meet national standards but also respect the unique cultural and religious needs of the Muslim community in Southern Thailand. The novelty of this research lies in its focus on the intersection of local politics, education, and conflict in a qualitative context, offering new insights into how education can be leveraged as a tool for peacebuilding and social cohesion in conflict-affected regions.

Keywords: Local elite politics, Islamic education, Educational integration, Conflict-affected areas, Southern Thailand.

Abstrak

Konflik yang berlangsung antara pemerintah pusat Thailand dan provinsi-provinsi di Thailand Selatan, yang melibatkan perbedaan identitas budaya dan agama, telah menciptakan tantangan besar bagi sistem pendidikan. Penelitian ini bertujuan untuk menyelidiki bagaimana politik elit lokal mempengaruhi implementasi kebijakan pendidikan Islam dan kurikulum umum di wilayah yang mayoritas Muslim dan rawan konflik. Menggunakan pendekatan kualitatif, penelitian ini mengumpulkan data melalui wawancara, observasi, dan analisis dokumen untuk memahami dinamika pendidikan di kawasan yang tidak stabil ini. Temuan penelitian menunjukkan bahwa meskipun terdapat upaya untuk

mengintegrasikan kedua kurikulum tersebut, sistem pendidikan lokal menghadapi kesulitan dalam menjaga keharmonisan di tengah ketegangan yang berlangsung. Penelitian ini menyoroti pentingnya kebijakan pendidikan yang inklusif secara budaya untuk menciptakan stabilitas dan menjaga identitas budaya komunitas Muslim di Thailand Selatan. Dengan demikian, hasil penelitian ini memberikan wawasan tentang bagaimana kebijakan pendidikan yang sensitif terhadap konteks lokal dapat mendukung proses perdamaian dan rekonsiliasi dalam masyarakat yang terpecah.
Kata Kunci*: Politik elit lokal, Implementasi pendidikan Islam, Thailand Selatan*

INTRODUCTION

.The intricate interplay between education and conflict represents a critical area of investigation, particularly in regions marred by prolonged instability and violence (Buchert, 2012). This field of study encompasses a spectrum of contexts, ranging from relatively peaceful environments to periods of intense conflict, post-conflict reconstruction, and long-term peace and reconciliation initiatives (Smith, 2005). The significance of understanding these dynamics is underscored by the potential for education systems to either exacerbate or mitigate conflict, necessitating a systemic analysis of educational investments from a conflict perspective (Smith, 2005). While quantitative analyses offer valuable insights into measurable outcomes, a qualitative approach is particularly crucial for unraveling the nuanced and often deeply contextualized realities of education within conflict zones (Tuntivivat, 2016). Qualitative research excels at capturing the lived experiences, perspectives, and meanings attributed to educational processes by those directly affected, including students, teachers, parents, and community members (Cardozo & Shah, 2016). This depth of understanding is essential for informing effective and culturally sensitive interventions aimed at fostering resilience, promoting social cohesion, and building sustainable peace (Burde et al., 2016).

Existing literature has explored various facets of education in conflict-affected societies, including the role of education in post-conflict reconstruction (Tao et al., 2016), the impact of conflict on educational provision (Tidwell, 2004), and the potential of education to promote peacebuilding (Tao et al., 2016). However, these studies often present a broad overview, potentially overlooking the unique contextual factors that shape educational experiences in specific conflict zones, like Southern Thailand (Novelli & Cardozo, 2008). Existing research may not fully address the specific challenges and opportunities present in Southern Thailand's educational landscape, where a complex interplay of historical grievances, ethnic tensions, and political factors contribute to the ongoing conflict. Notably, the existing body of literature lacks an in-depth exploration of the specific mechanisms through which education can either exacerbate or mitigate conflict in Southern Thailand, considering the region's unique socio-political context, and nuanced cultural dynamics. A more granular, context-specific approach is needed to identify the specific challenges and opportunities for leveraging education as a tool for peacebuilding in Southern Thailand.

This paper aims to address these gaps by providing a qualitative case study of educational dynamics in conflict-affected areas of Southern Thailand. Unlike broad quantitative studies that may overlook critical nuances, this research seeks to delve into the lived experiences and perspectives of individuals directly involved in the education system, thereby providing a richer and more nuanced understanding of the challenges and opportunities at play. The purpose of this paper is to explore the multifaceted role of education in shaping social dynamics,

fostering resilience, and contributing to peacebuilding efforts in Southern Thailand, by examining how education is perceived, experienced, and utilized by various stakeholders within the conflict-affected region. This study seeks to uncover the intricate connections between education and conflict, paying particular attention to how educational practices and policies can either perpetuate or alleviate tensions within the local context.

This research will test the argument that education in Southern Thailand, while intended to promote national unity and development, can inadvertently exacerbate existing social divisions and inequalities if not implemented in a conflict-sensitive manner. This research posits that the effectiveness of education as a peacebuilding tool hinges on its ability to address the root causes of conflict, promote inclusive participation, and foster a sense of shared identity among diverse communities (Brown, 2011). This will be tested by analyzing qualitative data gathered from interviews, focus group discussions, and ethnographic observations conducted in selected schools and communities in Southern Thailand. Ultimately, this paper seeks to contribute to a more nuanced and contextually grounded understanding of the role of education in conflict-affected areas, informing the development of more effective and equitable educational policies and practices that can contribute to sustainable peace in Southern Thailand.

METHOD

This study adopts a qualitative approach, using case studies and ethnographic methods to examine educational dynamics in conflict-affected areas of Southern Thailand. The aim is to understand how educators and policymakers respond to the challenges of integrating Islamic and general education (Ma, 2023). Data collection methods include semi-structured interviews, direct observations, and document analysis to comprehensively understand the relationship between local elite politics, educational practices, and the broader socio-political context.

The research was conducted from January to February 2024 in selected schools across Yala, Pattani, and Narathiwat, which play a significant role in implementing education policies amidst ongoing conflict. Key informants such as madrasah leaders and policymakers were interviewed to explore issues related to curriculum integration and the influence of local elites on education (McGrath et al., 2018; Finn et al., 2022). Classroom observations provided insights into teacher-student interactions (Sandhu, 2024), while document analysis involved reviewing policy guidelines, curriculum documents, and historical reports (Pierre, 2019).

The study focused on several institutions, including Madrasah Al-Falah in Pattani, Thammawittaya Mulniti as an integrated Islamic school, Madrasah Al-Madani with a strong emphasis on integrated curriculum, and Bamrong Islam School. Data were analyzed using a grounded theory approach involving coding and categorizing interview transcripts, observation notes, and policy documents (Leko et al., 2021). Emerging patterns were examined within the theoretical frameworks of Islamic education and conflict resolution (Ma, 2023; Farghaly, 2018) to ensure both empirical relevance and academic rigour.

RESULTS

The analysis of qualitative data from interviews, observations, and document analysis reveals key findings on the educational dynamics in conflict-affected regions of Southern Thailand. NVivo 11 software was employed to analyze the data, with a particular focus on the Word Frequency Query, which highlighted *education* as the most frequently mentioned term, accounting for 4.02% of all responses. This finding reinforces the central concern of educators and policymakers in the region: balancing religious and secular education in a context marked by political and cultural tensions.

Figure 1. Word Frequency of Educational Dynamics in Conflict-Affected Areas of Southern Thailand.

Figure 1. Illustrates the results of a word frequency analysis conducted on the qualitative data collected through interviews and document analysis. The figure highlights the most frequently mentioned terms, including education, *religion*, and curriculum, reflecting the central focus on the integration of Islamic education into the national curriculum amidst the socio-political context of Southern Thailand.

The prominence of terms like *Islamic education* and *cultural identity* emphasizes the critical role that religious and cultural considerations play in shaping local educational practices. These findings underscore the tension between the national education system and the need to preserve local Muslim identities, pointing to the challenges faced by educators and policymakers in balancing secular and religious education.

This word frequency analysis highlights the key issues affecting education in conflict zones, suggesting the need for more flexible, culturally inclusive policies that respect the unique needs of Southern Thailand's Muslim communities.

Key Findings
Forms of Educational Tension

In the region, one of the most pressing tensions identified was balancing religious education with secular academic requirements. The challenge was expressed by educators who struggled to deliver Islamic teachings alongside secular subjects as mandated by the national government. In addition to teacher Informant A, another teacher at a different Islamic school

in Yala, Informant B, highlighted the stress that comes with having to teach secular subjects: Informant B (Teacher, Madrasah Al-Ikhlas, Yala): "*We are expected to teach the national curriculum, but in practice, it's impossible to ignore the religious needs of the students. The parents expect us to give them a proper Islamic education as well. How can we focus on both?*"

Another educator, Informant C, a principal at Thammawittaya Al-Qur'an School, described the long-standing struggle between maintaining the school's religious identity and fulfilling government educational policies. He mentioned: Informant C (Principal, Thammawittaya Al-Qur'an): "*It's a constant balancing act. While the national curriculum is important for students' futures, religious education cannot be sidelined. We often end up adjusting our teaching hours, but even then, it's never enough.*"

Teachers in the region also discussed how the constant tension between secular education and religious education is felt in every aspect of school life, from curriculum planning to the classroom dynamic. One teacher, Informant E, elaborated on how this tension affects students' learning experience: Informant E (Teacher, Madrasah Darul Ilmi):* "*The students are caught in the middle. They know they have to meet national standards, but the core of their education is religious. We cannot ignore that. It often leads to frustration among students, who feel torn between two educational systems.*"

The pressure to compromise on religious education was a common theme. Several educators suggested that while the national curriculum aims to provide a modern, competitive education, it is difficult to fully integrate it into the existing structure of Islamic schools.

Impact of Policy on School Administration

In addition to challenges in the classroom, school administrators also struggle with government policies that attempt to blend religious and secular educational content. Policymakers revealed the difficulty in implementation, especially in conflict zones where local needs are unique. Informant D, a policymaker, elaborated: Informant D (Policymaker, Pattani): "*The government's education policy looks good on paper, but the practical application in areas like Southern Thailand faces too many challenges. There is a lack of resources, and cultural sensitivities often create friction between government goals and local practices.*"

In line with this sentiment, Informant F, a principal from Islamic School Al-Ikhlas in Narathiwat, shared: Informant F (Principal, Islamic School Al-Ikhlas):

"While the policy calls for integration, the curriculum is designed more for public schools in urban areas. Here, the situation is different. Our teachers are asked to carry both roles, and there's no clear guide on how to deal with the added complexities of being in a conflict zone."

Another respondent, Informant G, a policymaker from Narathiwat, explained how the government's role complicates efforts to integrate religious education: Informant G (Policymaker, Narathiwat): "*What works in less conflicted areas doesn't always work here. We need policies that take into account the ongoing unrest and the need for a curriculum that is both culturally sensitive and academically rigorous.*"

Moreover, Informant H, a local education officer, discussed the regional policy variations that complicate the uniformity of educational implementation: Informant H (Local Education Officer, Yala): "*Different regions have different needs. While the Ministry of Education sends a*

universal policy, it's not always appropriate here. Schools in these areas should have more autonomy to adapt the curriculum to local conditions."

The policy-related concerns continued to resonate throughout the interviews, as respondents emphasized the importance of adapting national policies to the local context rather than imposing a one-size-fits-all approach.

Community Expectations

Islamic local communities in Southern Thailand have strong expectations of their schools, not only as academic institutions but also as cultural and religious sanctuaries. The sentiment about preserving religious identity came up often in the interviews, with community leaders and school principals stressing how local educational values conflict with national policies. Informant I, a principal at an Islamic school in Pattani, provided additional context: Informant I (Principal, Islamic School Al-Nur, Pattani):

"We are expected to follow the government's curriculum, but we can't forget that our community sees education as a way to preserve Islamic values. It's not just about learning subjects-it's about learning how to live a life that aligns with our faith."

Informant J, a community leader in Yala, echoed this sentiment by commenting on the strong community pressure to prioritize Islamic teachings: Informant J (Community Leader, Yala): "*Parents are adamant that their children must have a solid foundation in Islamic studies. They worry that a purely secular education will cause them to lose their identity. This creates tension between the school and the government's educational mandate.*"

The cultural role of schools in preserving local identity was also a recurring theme, as community leaders frequently voiced concerns that Islamic schools were becoming increasingly secularized. Informant K, a local educator, explained: Informant K (Local Educator, Pattani): "*Parents often tell us that while they understand the importance of secular subjects, they don't want their children to forget who they are. Schools here have a responsibility not just to educate but to keep the community's faith alive.*"

NVivo Analysis Output

The NVivo analysis provided critical insights into how educational policies interact with local religious needs. As depicted in Figure 1, the Word Frequency Query showed that "education," "religion," and "curriculum" were the most frequent terms. The emphasis on religion (appearing in 3.5% of responses) further suggests that the integration of religious education is a central theme.
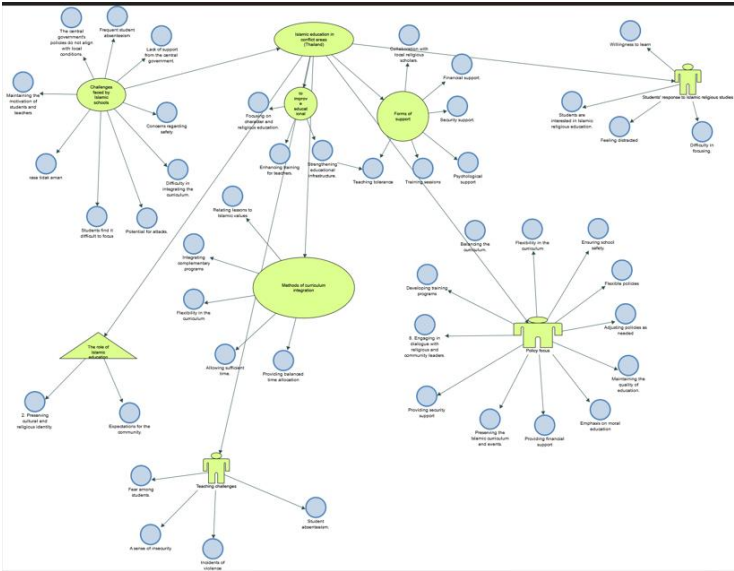
Figure 2. **Word Frequency of Educational Dynamics in Conflict-Affected Areas of Southern Thailand**

Presents a hierarchical coding analysis using NVivo, highlighting key themes such as "*policy*," "*cultural identity*," and "*religious curriculum*." These themes underscore the ongoing challenges in balancing secular and religious educational content in Southern Thailand.

The analysis reveals the tension between adhering to the national curriculum and meeting the local Muslim community's religious and cultural expectations. This is visually represented in the Conceptual Map (Figure 2), which illustrates the complex relationship between national education policies and local religious needs. It emphasizes the need for more flexible, culturally sensitive educational policies that balance national standards with local cultural identity.

Tabulated Quotes from Research Findings

The following table now includes additional quotes from the expanded set of interviews:

Table 1. Conclusion of interview with informant

Informant	Role	Position	Significant Quote
Informant A	Teacher	Madrasah Al-Falah	"We face constant pressure to comply with national curriculum standards, but we also cannot afford to compromise on religious education."
Informant B	Teacher	Madrasah Al-Ikhlas	"We are expected to teach the national curriculum, but we can't ignore the religious needs of the students. The parents expect us to give them a proper Islamic education as well."
Informant C	Principal	Thammawittaya Al-Qur'an	"It's a constant balancing act. While the national curriculum is important for students' futures, religious education cannot be sidelined."
Informant D	Policy Maker 1	Pattani	"The government's policies strive to integrate both general and religious education, but there are numerous challenges in

			implementation, particularly in conflict areas."
Informant F	Principal	Thammawittaya Mulniti	"This school is a place where the community expects both academic success and the preservation of religious identity."
Informant G	Policy Maker 2	Narathiwat	"Government policies must ensure that all students, whether in public or Islamic schools, receive a standard level of education."
Informant H	Local Education Officer	Yala	"Different regions have different needs. Schools in these areas should have more autonomy to adapt the curriculum to local conditions."
Informant I	Principal	Islamic School Al-Nur	"We are expected to follow the government's curriculum, but we can't forget that our community sees education as a way to preserve Islamic values."
Informant J	Community Leader	Yala	"Parents are adamant that their children must have a solid foundation in Islamic studies."
Informant K	Local Educator	Pattani	"Parents often tell us that while they understand the importance of secular subjects, they don't want their children to forget who they are."

DISCUSSION

Educational Tensions in the Shadows of Religion and National Policy Madrasahs in Yala Province, Southern Thailand

In the region's educational landscape, a deep tension has emerged in trying to balance religious education with secular academic demands (Bano, 2010). This challenge is particularly voiced by educators who struggle to convey the teachings of Islam in a comprehensive manner, in line with the curriculum set by the central government, which emphasizes secular subjects (Sidiq & Ikhwan, 2018). This tension is reflected in various aspects of school life, from curriculum planning to classroom dynamics, which have a significant impact on students' learning experiences (Roy et al., 2020). Educators such as Informant A and Informant B, who teach at different madrasas in Yala, highlighted the difficulty in meeting these dual expectations, as parents expect strong religious education while schools are also obliged to follow the national curriculum (Winarno & Mujahid, 2024). Informant B particularly emphasized the pressure stemming from having to teach secular subjects, illustrating the dilemma faced in balancing students' religious needs with the demands of the national curriculum. Informant C, a principal at Thammawittaya Qur'an School, highlighted the ongoing struggle between maintaining the school's religious identity and fulfilling the government's education policy.

This tension faced by educators has far-reaching implications for students, who often feel caught between two different education systems. This can lead to frustration and confusion among students, who feel torn between meeting national standards and maintaining their core religious education. The pressure to compromise on religious education is a central theme, and many educators feel that the demands of the national curriculum make it difficult for them to provide a comprehensive religious education. Education, in a broader context, is a conscious

and planned effort to change human behavior, both individually and in groups, through teaching and training (Arasyiah & rohiat, 2020). Religious education, in particular, plays an important role in shaping the character, spirituality and moral-ethical understanding of individuals (Maintaining Religious Identity in the Era of Pluralism in Indonesia, 2024). However, its implementation on the ground is often faced with various challenges, especially in contexts where there is overlap or conflict between religious and secular values. In the era of globalization and modernization, Islamic educational institutions face the challenge of remaining relevant and competitive (Maintaining Religious Identity in the Era of Pluralism in Indonesia, 2024). This requires the ability to integrate Islamic values with modern knowledge and skills, and to produce graduates who are not only religiously pious but also professionally competent.

In addition, government intervention in religious education, although aimed at improving the quality and standards of education, is sometimes perceived as a form of excessive control or intervention. In this context, it is important to find the right balance between the autonomy of religious education institutions and accountability to the government. Solutions for harmony and diversity in the education system, therefore, are not merely legalistic, but require social intervention, public education, in-depth dialogue, and implementable policies at the grassroots level. Islamic Religious Education is an important aspect that must get top priority in education, because providing religious education means developing the basic human nature that is carried from birth (Hamalik, 2006). This basic nature, if not maintained and cared for properly, will be difficult to develop and may even wither (Hamalik, 2006). The development of the Islamic religious education curriculum in question is the expansion, elaboration, development or refinement of a set of Islamic Religious Education subject matter and what is the learning experience of students in a planned, systematic and directed manner so that the objectives of Islamic religious education can be achieved optimally (Hamalik, 2006). This curriculum must be designed in such a way that it is able to answer the challenges of the times and meet the needs of society, without sacrificing fundamental religious values.

In this context, the integration of specialized competencies related to artificial intelligence, such as collaboration, melioration, and ethical reasoning, into frameworks such as Bloom's Taxonomy becomes crucial to maintaining the relevance of modern education (Gonsalves, 2024). Indeed, this transformative endeavor not only equips learners to intelligently navigate the AI-enhanced landscape but also fosters deep critical thinking capabilities, which are crucial for intelligent information synthesis and thoughtful decision-making (ROZIQIN, 2024). This transformative step is crucial as it prepares students to harness the transformative potential of AI while equipping them with the necessary skills to address the challenges and ethical dilemmas posed by this new technology (Gonsalves, 2024). The integration of AI into education can also promote reflective thinking, encouraging students to critically evaluate the limitations and potential of AI (Gonsalves, 2024). In addition, AI can act as a consultant, competitor, or reflective tool in strategic decision-making, thus encouraging the synthesis of contributions from human and AI actors (Gonsalves, 2024). Therefore, in effectively utilizing generative AI to enhance students' critical thinking, especially in practical marketing applications, it is imperative to align its use with industry-specific competencies (Gonsalves, 2024).

The utilization of Artificial Intelligence has brought significant changes in various sectors, including education (Oktavianus et al., 2023). AI offers the potential to improve the quality of learning through content personalization and adaptation to students' individual needs (Huda & Suwahyu, 2024). The implementation of AI in Islamic Religious Education may include the use of machine learning, chatbots, and augmented reality to provide relevant and adaptive content (Huda & Suwahyu, 2024). Data-driven recommendation systems and predictive analysis can help optimize the education process to provide better support to students (Widodo et al., 2024). However, the integration of AI in education also poses challenges, including issues of student data privacy and security. It is important to ensure that students' personal data is protected and used ethically. Therefore, by integrating ethical considerations and addressing potential biases, AI can enhance the educational experience and equip students with the skills necessary for future success (Gonsalves, 2024))(Huda & Suwahyu, 2024. The use of AI in education also raises ethical and social concerns, including potential dependency and lack of accountability in decision-making (ROZIQIN, 2024).

Transformative education has the potential to equip students with critical thinking skills that are critical for the 21st century, thereby harmoniously aligning educational goals with the needs of a modern and rapidly evolving world (Gonsalves, 2024). In addition, transformative education emphasizes the need to continuously evaluate and update teaching strategies and instructional methodologies in response to technological advances, changing industry trends, and changing student needs. Educators can therefore ensure that students acquire relevant and up-to-date skills and knowledge necessary to thrive in the ever-evolving professional landscape..

Education Amid Conflict: Negotiating Religious Identity and the State Curriculum in Southern Thailand

In conflict-affected Southern Thailand, educators in Islamic school's face challenges in balancing religious and secular education due to state-imposed curricula that often conflict with religious objectives. This issue is not unique to Thailand, as marginalized communities worldwide encounter similar tensions in aligning educational aspirations with state policies that overlook local cultural identities (Pahleviannur et al., 2022); (Jackson, 2018). Furthermore, the increasing enrollment in Islamic secondary schools and declining attendance in state institutions highlight emerging educational segregation along religious lines (Bazzi et al., 2020). To address these challenges, educational frameworks in Southern Thailand must adopt inclusive models that harmonize religious teachings with national policies, ensuring a balanced and culturally responsive approach (INSAWAN, 2023). Indeed, the fundamental problem in the conflict in Southern Thailand, both sides have not been able to restrain themselves, or give in to each other to find a middle way. The government still seems to want to impose its policies, including on the education sector, on the people of Southern Thailand, while on the other hand, the people of Southern Thailand tend to be a priori with whatever policies come from the government. The point is that if an inclusive model can be created, it must start with a change in the perspective of each party, or in other words, not thinking negatively about each other.

Nevertheless, navigating the intersection of national educational policies and local religious identities presents significant challenges for educators, who must balance competing demands that impact their teaching practices (Nitjarunkul et al., 2014). Teachers play a critical

role in shaping students' religious identities, making it essential to balance academic requirements with identity formation (Cohen-Malayev et al., 2014); (Remiswal et al., 2022). Moreover, armed conflicts further disrupt educational access and achievement, necessitating comprehensive reforms that prioritize safety, community engagement, and culturally responsive curricula (Shemyakina, 2011); (Unfried & Kis-Katos, 2023). Ultimately, inclusive educational strategies that integrate religious identities can foster reconciliation, equity, and a sense of belonging in conflict-prone areas (Remiswal et al., 2022).

However, educational reforms in Southern Thailand must navigate socio-political complexities and cultural sensitivities by balancing academic rigor with the preservation of religious identity. Local communities express concerns over the marginalization of religious education, necessitating integrative strategies that accommodate both secular and religious curricula (Cohen-Malayev et al., 2014)). Such an approach fosters inclusivity and mutual understanding within a multicultural society (Shaker, 2023). Ghobadzadeh (2013) argues that religious and secular frameworks can coexist to enhance social cohesion, whereas marginalizing religious education risks fostering disengagement and intolerance among youth. Therefore, to mitigate this, curriculum models should promote dialogue and respect (Shaker, 2023). Effective educational reform requires collaboration among educators, community leaders, and policymakers to create a system that upholds academic standards while preserving cultural identities, ultimately contributing to long-term social harmony. In the context of Southern Thailand, because this region is famous as the center of the Islamic Community, the leaders of the Community referred to here, of course, also include scholars. Because in general, in some communities that are majority Islamic, they listen to and follow the opinions of scholars, rather than the statements of community leaders who are administratively appointed by the state.

The success of educational reform in Southern Thailand hinges on policy flexibility and sensitivity to local socio-political dynamics, particularly in balancing religious and secular curricula Bano & Dyonisius, 2021). The region's diverse cultural and religious landscape demands adaptive policies that align national educational goals with local traditions. However, implementation remains challenging due to resource limitations, inadequate teacher training, and rigid frameworks (Lilly et al., 2023). Consequently, effective policymaking must incorporate community involvement and local knowledge to foster resilience and relevance (Rhodes et al., 2021). Current policies often prioritize academic outcomes over cultural preservation, necessitating a shift toward holistic approaches that empower educators to navigate these tensions (Lilly et al., 2023). Additionally, professional development opportunities and blended educational methodologies can enhance policy effectiveness by integrating qualitative insights with quantitative data, ensuring that reforms are responsive to the lived experiences of local communities (Wantik et al., 2024).

Furthermore, the intersection of local politics and education in Southern Thailand underscores the profound influence of political dynamics on educational outcomes. Schools serve as both academic institutions and cultural preservers, reinforcing community cohesion amidst ongoing conflict (Pherali, 2021). However, tensions arise between national education policies and local expectations, as regional governance and Islamic councils often impose guidelines that may not align with standardized curricula (Pherali & Turner, 2017). In such contexts, education becomes a tool for cultural survival and community resilience, necessitating

the integration of local narratives into curricula to mitigate societal fragmentation (Rai, 2020). Thus, policymakers must adopt a flexible approach that incorporates local voices, ensuring that educational frameworks balance academic rigor with cultural preservation. Training programs for school leaders and adaptable curriculum policies can enhance community acceptance and foster a more inclusive education system (Pherali, 2021). Of course, it is not an easy problem to realize inclusive education, but of course it is not impossible to realize it. Starting from school leaders who have an open mind and attitude, it will then spread to the level of students. One thing that is also worth paying attention to, is related to the use of religious norms as a guideline in life, especially in the school environment. Understanding of textual norms must also be assisted by insights sourced from the thoughts of scholars. In essence, textual norms must be contextualized in accordance with the current developing situation and conditions.

Ensuring safe educational spaces in conflict-affected regions like Southern Thailand is crucial to maintaining school neutrality and shielding students from political tensions. Neutral educational environments function as sanctuaries where students can pursue learning free from ideological conflicts, mitigating the psychological stress associated with polarized societal narratives (d'Errico et al., 2021). Nevertheless, the infiltration of political ideologies into curricula risks alienating marginalized students and exacerbating social divisions Harrison et al., 2021). Inclusive educational settings that embrace cultural diversity enhance student engagement and academic success by fostering a sense of belonging and security Bowers & Worrell, 2020). Conversely, the politicization of education and the vulnerability of schools to violence in conflict zones deter attendance and impede educational outcomes (Save the Children, 2019; (Remiswal et al., 2022). Therefore, safeguarding schools from ideological and physical threats while promoting culturally responsive and inclusive curricula is essential to ensuring that education remains a stabilizing force in conflict-prone societies (Cohen-Malayev et al., 2014). Education as the vanguard in changing the perspective of a person or community related to the conflict that occurs, of course, is needed in this abnormal situation. Do not think the other way around, education is instead used as a tool to propagate, so that the situation becomes more chaotic and uncontrollable. As is commonly understood, the emergence of change begins with changing the way of thinking of a person or a community, and this is very effective in the scope of education, because it is considered a very objective area and provides an open space for freedom of thought.

This study highlights the need for educational frameworks that address both academic achievement and the preservation of cultural and religious identities. Future research should explore localized curriculum models that integrate national standards with cultural contexts (Wasehudin et al., 2023). Additionally, understanding the role of teacher autonomy in implementing culturally responsive pedagogy is crucial, as studies suggest that educators must navigate curricular adaptation in sensitive environments (Demir & Kızılhan, 2021). Furthermore, evaluating the impact of safe educational spaces on student outcomes can offer valuable insights into fostering academic success and emotional well-being (Bramberger & Winter, 2021). Further research should investigate interventions that foster cultural resilience and assess their effects on social cohesion and academic performance (Remiswal et al., 2022); (Salha et al., 2024). Finally, longitudinal studies assessing the long-term impacts of culturally responsive educational practices on student identity formation, community integration, and

academic trajectory would also provide valuable insights into the sustainability of such initiatives. Because recognized or not, to remove trauma in children in conflict areas requires time and a special approach. Indeed, on the surface the conditions look normal and seem peaceful, but like a time bomb, this condition will change quickly if there is a trigger.

Table 2. Key Findings on the Challenges of Balancing Religious and Secular Education in Southern Thailand

Key Findings	Description
Curriculum Tensions	There is a conflict between the national curriculum and religious education in Islamic schools in Southern Thailand, often leading to difficulties in meeting both needs.
Educational Segregation	The increase in enrollment at Islamic schools highlights the educational segregation along religious lines, with a decline in attendance at state institutions.
Inclusive Education Model	An inclusive education model is needed to harmonize religious teachings with national policies, creating a balanced and culturally responsive approach.
Role of Teachers	Teachers play a crucial role in shaping students' religious identities and must balance academic demands with identity formation.
Impact of Conflict on Education	Armed conflict disrupts educational access, requiring educational reforms that prioritize safety and culturally responsive curricula.
Social and Cultural Sensitivity	Educational reforms must consider the local social and cultural context to effectively balance secular and religious curricula.
Collaboration for Reform	The success of educational reform depends on collaboration among educators, religious leaders, and policymakers to create an inclusive curriculum that respects local values.
Policy Flexibility	Education policies need to be more flexible and sensitive to local dynamics, incorporating local knowledge and experiences.
Role of Schools in Social Cohesion	Schools in conflict zones should not only serve as academic institutions but also strengthen social and cultural cohesion.
Educational Safety	Ensuring safety in educational spaces is crucial to protecting students from conflicting political ideologies and maintaining a neutral space for learning.

Exploring Educational Dynamics in Conflict-Affected Areas of Southern Thailand an Islamic Education Approach

The integration of Islamic educational principles within the existing educational framework in conflict-affected regions, such as Southern Thailand, presents a unique lens through which to analyze and address the multifaceted challenges and opportunities present in these areas. By examining the dynamics of Islamic education in Southern Thailand, particularly within the context of *pesantren* and the cultivation of values, a deeper understanding of the role of education in fostering peace, reconciliation, and community resilience can be achieved. The traditional Islamic boarding schools, known as *pesantren*, serve as vital centers for religious

instruction, community development, and the preservation of cultural identity, and these institutions often play a pivotal role in shaping the attitudes and behaviors of individuals within their communities (Zulmuqim et al., 2020). Understanding the specific characteristics of *pesantren*, including their institutional systems, curricula, learning systems, and typologies, provides critical insights into how these institutions can be leveraged to promote peace education and mitigate the adverse effects of conflict (Suadi et al., 2018). The unique pedagogical approaches employed in *pesantren* and other Islamic educational settings, with their emphasis on moral development, communal responsibility, and spiritual growth, can contribute to the development of a more holistic and culturally relevant approach to education in conflict-affected areas (Rahmawati et al., 2020).

Moreover, the integration of Islamic values into the curriculum and teaching practices can help to foster a sense of shared identity, promote interfaith dialogue, and challenge the narratives of division and hatred that often fuel conflict. It is essential to acknowledge the potential for conflict resolution education rooted in cultural values to positively impact students' understanding and management of conflict, particularly in regions grappling with social fragmentation stemming from historical conflicts (Ritiauw et al., 2018). In the traditional *pesantren* model, education extends beyond the mere transmission of knowledge, focusing also on the cultivation of moral character and spiritual understanding (Apriani et al., 2021). This holistic approach aligns with the broader goals of peace education, which seeks to foster empathy, critical thinking, and a commitment to nonviolent conflict resolution. By understanding how *pesantren* integrate religious and ethical teachings into their curricula, educational stakeholders can gain valuable insights into the design and implementation of culturally sensitive peace education programs. The cultivation of moderate religious values is very important to avoid intolerance, various conflicts, separations, and extremism in religious practices (Rusmiati et al., 2022). These educational institutions play a crucial role not only in imparting religious knowledge but also in shaping the character and moral compass of their students.

Furthermore, the concept of value education within the Islamic tradition provides a robust framework for promoting ethical behavior, social responsibility, and civic engagement. The emphasis on values such as justice, compassion, and forgiveness can serve as a powerful antidote to the grievances and resentments that often underlie conflict (Mempertahankan Identitas Agama Dalam Era Pluralisme di Indonesia, 2024). By exploring how these values are taught and internalized within *pesantren*, researchers can identify best practices for promoting positive social change and building a more just and equitable society. Education in and for peacebuilding encompasses formal education, integrating a curriculum focused on peace-related skills, values, knowledge, dispositions, and attitudes in every subject, alongside peace education as a separate subject (Nesterova et al., 2022). Peace education programs, whether implemented through formal schooling or non-formal community initiatives, can play a crucial role in addressing the root causes of conflict and promoting peaceful coexistence (Abdi, 2019). In areas affected by violence and instability, education can serve as a powerful tool for fostering resilience, promoting social cohesion, and building a more peaceful future. Peace education aims to create a culture that reflects human nature as peaceful people (Mokotso, 2022).

Moreover, the role of teachers and religious leaders in shaping the attitudes and behaviors of students cannot be overstated. These individuals serve as role models and mentors, and their commitment to peace and reconciliation can have a profound impact on the lives of their students. Therefore, empowering educators through specialized training in peace education methodologies and conflict resolution strategies is crucial for fostering inclusive and supportive learning environments that promote constructive dialogue and critical self-reflection among students. The values of Al-Quran are forms of knowledge, belief, understanding, insight and ethical demands of human behavior in ecological communities (Suherman et al., 2019). The values include the principles of justice, equality, and tolerance, which are essential for fostering mutual respect, cooperation, and peace (Ilmi et al., 2023). The integration of peace education is essential because of threats to human survival that have manifested in different forms. Understanding the intricacies of educational dynamics in conflict zones necessitates a comprehensive approach that takes into account the interplay of cultural, religious, and political factors, while also recognizing the potential of education to serve as a catalyst for positive change and lasting peace (Setiadi & Ilfiandra, 2020).

CONCLUSION

This study reveals the complexity of balancing national education policies with religious expectations in conflict-affected Islamic schools in Southern Thailand. A key finding is the significant impact of local political dynamics on how schools integrate religious and secular curricula. Additionally, the study highlights how the militarization of educational spaces affects the psychological well-being of students and teachers, ultimately hindering both academic and social mobility. Indeed, the situation is normal in Southern Thailand. However, in some parts, we still find guard posts by heavily armed soldiers and barbed wire as a barrier for those entering and exiting Southern Thailand. If the Thai government wants to form a new view, especially for the youth of Southern Thailand, then all these attributes synonymous with military territory should be eliminated.

The research contributes to the existing body of knowledge by confirming previous studies on educational tensions in conflict zones while introducing new insights into how localized political influences shape policy implementation. This study also challenges some earlier assumptions by demonstrating that policy rigidity, rather than outright opposition, is a primary factor preventing successful curriculum integration. Furthermore, it introduces a culturally responsive approach as a critical framework for education reform in conflict areas.

However, this study is not without limitations. The research focuses on a specific geographic region with a limited sample size, which may not fully represent the broader dynamics of Islamic education in Thailand. Additionally, the lack of diversity in age groups and school types presents constraints in generalizing the findings. Future research should consider a more extensive sample that includes different education levels and incorporates perspectives from students and parents. A mixed-methods approach that combines qualitative insights with quantitative data analysis could also enhance the validity of future findings, ensuring a more comprehensive understanding of educational challenges in conflict settings.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Future research should explore the impact of Islamic education integration across different educational levels, including primary, secondary, and higher education. Investigating the perspectives of students, parents, and community leaders, in addition to policymakers and educators, would provide a more holistic view of the educational challenges faced in Southern Thailand. The understanding of Islam that is developing in Southern Thailand, of course, also needs to be mapped. Because it must be admitted, a person's understanding of Islamic teachings will also indirectly shape their mindset and action, including in the field of education. A mixed-methods approach combining qualitative and quantitative analyses can also offer a deeper understanding of the factors influencing education in conflict zones. Additionally, further studies should examine the long-term effects of educational reforms on peacebuilding and socio-economic development in conflict-affected areas.

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