

Ethno-Religious Violence and Education: The Impact of Social Milieu Decisions in Southern Thailand

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Abstract

In our quest to answer the age-old question of whether “two or more self-differentiating culture groups coexist within a single political structure” (Connor, 1994) researchers has been interested in the role of education mostly as a driver for radicalization (Waghid, Y. and Davids, N., 2015, Tahir, 2017). In our research, we find that in the case of southern Thailand’s ethno-religious conflict the decision to attend private Muslim schools is only partially driven by the conflict itself. In the decisions to attend public schools or a private Islamic school the insurgency was far lower in the minds of teachers, parents and administrators while educational quality and social milieu indicators were more pronounced.

Since the colonial rivalry between France and Great Britain turned Siam, present day Thailand, into a buffer state, the Thai Buddhist state and the Malay Muslims of southern Thailand have been locked in ethno-religious conflict. Siam’s buffer function was consolidated during the Anglo-Siamese Treaty of 1909, which officially brought the former Malay sultanate of Patani under the control of the king of Siam, ultimately leading to an on-going struggle to establish an independent Malay Muslim sultanate state (Harish, 2006, Liow 2009). Presently, from a total of about five million Thai Muslims, approximately 4 million live in the southern most provinces of Thailand (Gilquin, 2005: 39-40). The Islamic separatist campaign resurgence during period of the US War on Terror in 2001 vastly escalated in 2004 when the insurgents attacked a military installation and twenty schools, followed by massacres by government security forces during the Krue Se Mosque and Tak Bai incidents months later (McCargo, 2014; Pongsudhirak, 2006). Since the current round of violence erupted, approximately 6,321 people have been killed—among those, 182 teachers and 526 children (Deepsouth Watch, 2016). Over the past 12 years, insurgent groups have burned one in three public schools, or 297 out of 876. Pattani province has the highest number of incidents with 133 schools burnt, followed by 83 schools in Narathiwat Province, and 81 schools in Yala Province (Ministry of Education, 2015). This conflict was expected to greatly decrease children’s opportunities to inclusive and quality education. A cursory look at the dropout rate of public schools in the three southern border provinces of Yala, Pattani, and Narathiwat basically confirms that at the height of the violence, the majority of the pupils stayed home (Office of the Higher Education Commission, 2010; Office of the Minister, 2014). Yet, when we conducted our personnel interviews the conflict was far lower in the minds of teachers, parents and administrators when it came to educational opportunities for the people in the region. The administration’s frame of mind indicates that, although violence was one of several variables affecting student attendance in public schools, it was not the determining factor. In fact, while the violence hit its peak, students were simultaneously moving from public schools towards private Islamic schools (called Pondoks), and this parallel movement cannot be explained simply by the existence of violence. Our on-site interviews highlight the complexity of parental decision regarding the education of their children and points to the lack quality instruction, and cultural insensitivity on the part of Thai schools as the culprit for these changes. At face value, the numbers do not look good for the minority’s children. The Malay Muslim students have the lowest level of educational attainment; only 9.20% of Muslims have completed secondary education, including those who graduated from private Islamic schools, compared to 13.20% of Buddhists (Human Rights Watch, 2010).

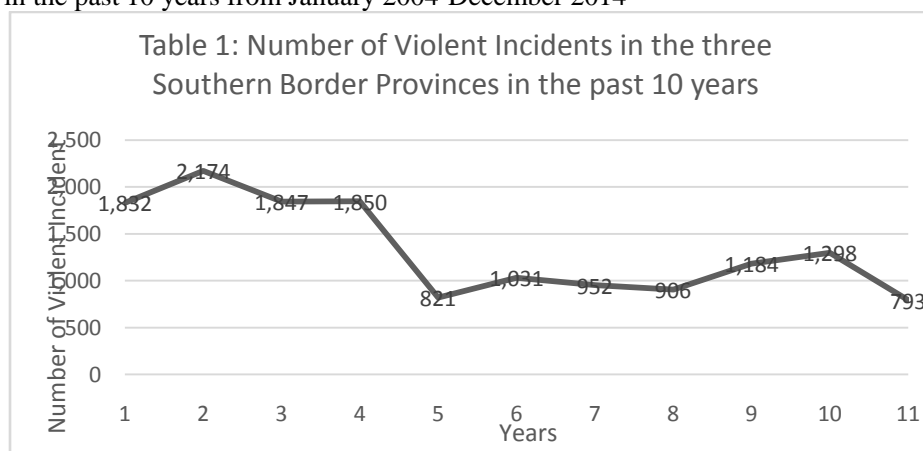
Moreover, the government educational system in the three southern border provinces is currently being undermined by the destruction of public schools by separatist Malay Muslim groups and poor quality of private Islamic schools (Office of the Higher Education Commission, 2010; Office of the Minister, 2014).

Although past research explores the ongoing unrest in Southern Thailand from the perspective of ethno-religious conflict (Askew, 2007, 2008, 2009, Engvall & Anderson, 2014; Funston, 2010; Joll, 2015; Yusef, 2007, McCargo, 2010), Islamic education management (Porath, 2014, Liow, 2009b, Wisalaporn, 2009); multicultural education management (Farrungsang, 2008; Sungtong, 2012) school leadership (Brook & Sungtung, 2015) and education reform (Liow 2009a, 2010; Nitjarunkul, Sungtong, & Placier, 2014), there is no prior research written about the effects of the social environment on compulsory education in the conflict areas of Southern Thailand. Although some may simply label this conflict as “relative deprivation” in which the marginalized react with rebellion, our findings are more consistent with instrumental explanations of violence, in which communities do not base their education choices solely on the existence of violence. Considering the importance of education on a person’s political views—not to mention whether or not they become religiously radicalized—has made education a battleground in Thailand. It has been argued that the Thai state has used education as a “weapon of mass assimilation” (Feigenblatt, et al. 2010), but this view ignores the very complex relationship between the Thai state and the southern Muslim communities. One example is McCargo’s work (McCargo, 2010), which sheds light on the complexity of Islamic Councils which have been transformed not only by radicalism or their potential for it but also by in the political leadership’s relationship to the Thai military. In this context, the decision to attend or not an Islamic school is itself an important political decision. What then are the most important parameters for such decision? It is the contention of the authors that because of the separatist violence in southern Thailand, research has ignored the equally-as-important effects of the social milieu upon the decision to pursue education or not. A string of interviews conducted in these regions provides a clear example of how complicated such decisions are and cautions research that uses a single causal variable to explain the shortcomings of compulsory education in Southern Thailand. Clearly, the limited number of interviews conducted is a restriction on assigning causality, but our findings could serve as indicators for further research.

Politics, Violence and Schooling in Southern Thailand

The regional conflict in southern Thailand goes back nearly a century, but its recent iteration has its roots in 2001 (Brook & Sungtung, 2015). Along with the War on Terror, the southern provinces of Thailand witnessed heightened tensions and unique attacks unseen before in the history of the conflict. Following the rising of tensions and the inevitable Thai military heavy handed cordoning of the region, the insurgents responded in January 2004 with several massacres. The region sank further in to the vicious circle of civil conflict as more insurgent attacks brought further and harsher measures against the local population (Human Rights Watch 2010).

Further escalation of violence and increased military presence, coupled with the government’s heavy handed response, resulted in the insurgent movement managing to gain sympathy among local communities (May, 2009). The problem has worsened since the enforcement of the Emergency Decree on Public Administration in Emergency Situations in 2005, which provides government officials with immunity from criminal, civil, and disciplinary liability. As a result, the government of Thailand led by Thaksin Sinawatra, a populist Prime Minister, further clamped down on the region. To make things more complicated, Sinawatra, was ousted in 2006 by his own military, and by 2014 the victims of this insurgency had risen to almost fifteen thousand people. Table 1 shows the number of violent incidents in the 3 Southern Border Provinces in the past 10 years from January 2004-December 2014



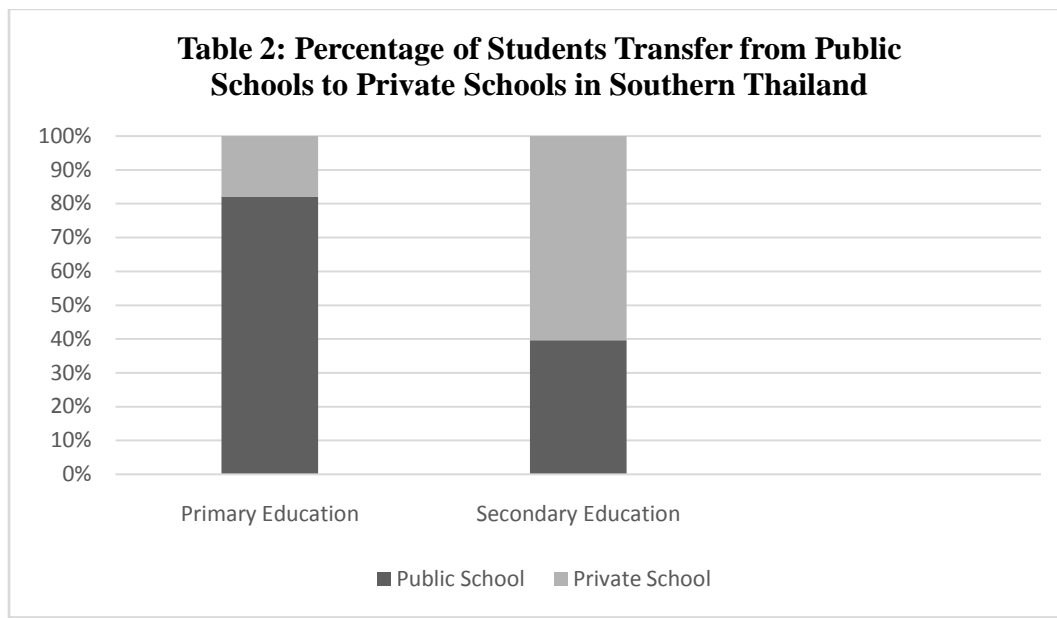
Sources: <http://www.deepsouthwatch.org/>

The violence in Southern Thailand since 2004 seems to have been directed at persons who hold government bureaucratic positions, such as the police and teachers. Teachers have been especially targeted as agents of cultural imperialism. The Pattani Freedom Fighters, one of the insurgent groups, identified Thai education as their main target because it is “a symbol of infidel occupation and suppression of ethnic Malay Muslim identity” (Human Rights Watch, 2007).

Presently, education in Thailand is free until 12 grade for primary and secondary level students and compulsory for all Thai citizens between the ages of six and fifteen. As with all educational systems it has been accused of not being inclusive enough (Bualar, 2015), focusing on quantity rather than quality and not favoring critical thinking (Leekpai, 2000, Sandrine, 2015). In traditional Thai education, the emphasis is on Buddhism and morality and was usually provided by monks. Wats, or temples, were the school’s or community’s centers for the traditional Thai society. Similarly, the Pondok has been a central symbol of the Malay Muslim identity for centuries (Liow 2009a). Porath argues that recent reforms were aimed at providing tools for southern pupils of the Muslim religion with social and cultural tools to navigate the demands of modern day Thailand (Porath, 2014). Recent research (Joll, 2012) has shown that the two communities have fused some significant cultural practices; nonetheless, all these efforts have not achieved a difference in the violence that is plaguing the region, and the problem is staring to seem intractable (Askew 2008).

Pondoks, the local Islamic schools, provide more than just a religious education; they remain an integral part of ethnic Malay lives. The Malay identity is constructed and maintained from a range of social and religious functions in and around the Pondoks. For about a century the Thai majority made many attempts at cultural assimilation, but local southerners resisted this assimilation because they had no voice and the cultural programs were massively discriminatory. Furthermore, the Thai government faced numerous challenges in responding to separatist recruitment and indoctrination in unregistered Pondoks, and frequently made mass, arbitrary arrests of Thai Malay Muslim students and teachers (Human Right Watch, 2010). Later on in 1982, the government required Pondoks to register with the Ministry of Education in order to receive financial support from the government. The registered Pondoks began teaching a combined secular and religious curriculum and changed their name to Private Islamic Schools (Private Education Act, 1982). These schools were gradually accepted by Malay Muslim families despite the lower quality of education (Brooks, 2015). The lack of governmental oversight means the majority of government funding are in the pockets of the school owners and little is spent to improve students’ quality of education. Naturally, such practices show as poorer academic performance compared to public schools and the average national standard. Hence, Malay Muslims started to increasingly pursue Islamic education in the Middle East and South Asia because they increasingly receive financial support from foreign countries which act as subsidy, making it cheaper than secular education in Bangkok. The Thai government does not fully recognize educational degrees from Muslim countries, implicitly associating Muslim education with the problems in the South (Yusef, 2007). At the same time, the local public schools have been a space of contention because of the tendency to privilege mainstream Thai Buddhist cultural norms over Malay Muslim culture—by not teaching Islam in public school at all, for example. There is also no means of dealing with the resentment of the past. In 1999, the government allowed public schools to tailor curriculum to meet Malay Muslim’s identity needs (National Education Act, 1999).

In 2004, Malay Muslim violence erupted in response to military presence in public schools, which had been enforced in order to protect teachers and students from insurgent attacks (Brooks, 2015). The armed conflict presents huge challenges for education, despite encouraging developments in promoting education and enabling multicultural environment in the armed conflict areas of the three Southern Border Province in Thailand. The Thai government requires Thai Malay Muslim students to attend public school until 6th grade to learn the Thai language and mainstream Thai culture, after which they are allowed to choose their own schools, since most Thai Malay Muslims prefer to preserve their own ethno-religious and linguistic heritage. Consequently, the majority of Thai Malay Muslim parents often transferred their children to Private Islamic schools that teach combined Islam and secular subjects (Office of the Private Education Commission in the Three Southern Border Province, 2013).



Sources: Analyzed from Office of the Private Education Commission in the Three Southern Border Province, 2013

The educational movement that started in 2004 is generally associated with the conflict in the region while public spending to solve the conflict in the area seems to be more instrumental, as our interviews seem to indicate. Between 2004–2014 public spending reached 206,094 Million baht (5,724,844,000 USD) (Thailand Bureau of Budget, 2014). Many of the decisions regarding education in the three Southern provinces appear to be driven as much by the quality of the teaching staff and the family background as it is by safety considerations and fear of the other. While the interviews were conducted, common themes emerged from the students, their teachers and their families. The rest of this paper is dedicated to aggregating and analyzing these themes, after which we offer some thoughts for further research in this complex educational cultural and institutional structure in Thailand.

Research Design

This qualitative case study took place in the three southern border provinces of Thailand consist of Yala, Pattani and Narathiwat. As outsiders to the culture of the study, we were able to develop rapport through face-to-face interviews and focus groups with 40 key informants. Twenty four key informants identified as Thai Malay Muslims and 16 identified as Thai Buddhists; 22 were female and 18 were male; 21 were in Pattani, 12 were in Yala, and 7 were in Narathiwat (see Table 3). These key informants were purposely selected because they best represented the population we attempted to study. . Ethical approval for the research was obtained in November 2014 by the Institutional Review Board (IRB) of Srinakharinwirot University with the declaration of Helsinki regarding ethical principles for research in human subjects (certificate of approval no. SWUEC/E-127/2557). In addition, written informed consent was obtained by the participants prior to the study.

Data collection took place over two weeks during two field visits in February 2015 and January 2016, as well as during some phone interviews between the two field visits in July 2015. To more deeply explore the key informants' experiences in the education system, open-ended and probing questions focused on key informants' experiences in their schools, factors that influence students' education, their perception of violence in the education system, and the dynamics of education in Southern Thailand after the current round of violence erupted in 2004. Interviews lasted 50 minutes to three hours. In addition, the researcher arranged follow up communication with some key informants to verify and confirm the data. The techniques used for enhancing the rigor of data collection for this study were triangulation. The data were obtained from different sources representing different key informants' experiences and perceptions in different periods of time. All interviews and focus groups were audio recorded and transcribed verbatim with separated files being kept for each case. The content analysis used to analyze both interviews and focus group discussions.

RESEARCH FINDINGS

Our findings are divided into two main sections: first, themes related to the quality of education in three southern Thai provinces and second, themes related to the social milieu of children in the three southern border provinces of Thailand.

Educational Quality Themes

Centralization has harmed educational levels in the south because it failed to account for cultural diversity. An interviewee, a female Buddhist public education specialist, stated, “The education in the South is the same as other parts of the country because the school system is centralized and run by government regulation. The only different is public schools in the south teach both Buddhism class and an Islamic class; the Buddhist students learn about Buddhism while Muslim students learn about Islam.” The absence of multicultural education continues to segregate the Thai Buddhist and ethnic-Malay Muslim students despite the government attempts to mollify the community needs by allowing the registration of private Islamic schools and tailor the numbers of public schools the population rates in the south, 85% ethnic-Malay Muslim and 15% Thai Buddhists. A female Muslim teacher from private school said, “Well, the Muslim students are now allowed to wear long sleeves and Hijab’s in public schools. Anyway, most Malay Muslim parents prefer to send their children to private Islamic schools, instead of public schools because they can learn in combined Islamic and secular classes.”

Genuine multicultural education remains nonexistent in southern Thai schools because Buddhist cultural norms in the public curriculum are considered a threat to Islamic values by the parents. The Malay Muslims who choose to attend public schools generally refuse to practice mainstream Buddhist traditions and prefer to practice their own traditional Malay Muslim ceremonies, so within public schools there are two separate activities for the Buddhist and Muslim students to avoid tension and conflict. As a female Thai Buddhist teacher from Educational Opportunity Expansion School mentioned, the separated activities between Thai Buddhist and Malay Muslims are now normal for most schools in the three southern border province: “Normally, the schools in the three southern border provinces have separated traditional activities and religious ceremonies for the Thai Buddhist and Malay Muslim students.” This situation increases student separation and social division, especially some symbolic activities like the Teachers’ Day Observation “Wai Kru’s Day.” A day in which all Thai students pay respect to the teachers in Thai Buddhist etiquettes, Teacher’s Day Observation is consider a threat to Islamic values because Muslims believe they cannot participate in a holiday that gives humans the same kind of respect that is normally reserved for the deity. Therefore, many public schools are now having two separate ceremonies during the Teachers’ Day Observation: one ceremony is for Thai Buddhist students and another ceremony is for Malay Muslim students.

The escalation of ethno-religious separation also affects the relationship between the public schools and the Muslim community. Many Buddhist teachers, for example, claimed they are now reluctant to visit Muslim communities because they are not familiar with the Malay Muslim etiquettes. A female Buddhist Thai Teacher from public school said, “In the past as a teacher here for 20 years I know almost everyone in the community, and I always attend Muslim funerals, but nowadays I am afraid to go there because I am not sure whether or not it is appropriate for me to be there as I don’t know their custom that much.” A male Thai Buddhist principal from public school claimed he used to visit students and families in the remote communities and conflict zone where there are very high prevalent of insurgent attacks but he is now quite afraid to visit the area. He said, “I used to ride a minibike to the remote village and the red zone alone to visit students and their families because it is my duty to do so. I was scared but took caution, and I travel in different routes to be safe from insurgent attacks. However, nowadays, I won’t go there anymore.” A male Thai Buddhist official from Polytechnic College claimed he had transferred to different schools in southern Thailand. Moreover, he has organized various school outreach programs in many communities. Sometimes he has to confront with the local mafia and feel unwelcome there “Well, I visit many communities in the southern region because I have to set up the outreach programs in the areas. I sometimes feel threatened and unwanted there, but I have a technique keep myself safe from the attacks like always traveling different routes on different times and avoid travel around 7-9 AM and between 4-6 PM because these times the insurgents are out to get public teachers. Actually, the insurgents are not so scary. The local mafia are much scarier. In some places, I know I cannot go there anymore for my safety.”

Consequently, the numbers of children enrolled in public schools are decreasing gradually. As a female Buddhist public teacher mentioned “Children are increasingly dropping out of public schools. Only children in urban areas go to school continuously. The poor children don’t go to school, while the Muslim families send their kids to Pondok or Islamic schools.” In addition, the public schools social environment is perceived to be not appropriate for the Muslim students as a male ethnic Malay Muslim teacher from Private Islamic school said, “The public schools have tried to integrate Islamic studies in their curriculum to attract more Muslim students.

Yet many parents still not sending their kids to public schools because the school environment is not appropriate for Muslim children; for example, Muslim male and female students should not sit together.” Clearly the feeling of parents and teachers in the community affects their decision on which school to choose. As a male Malay Muslim Vocational Education Specialist also highlighted an important of parent’s decision on their children education, “Parents want their children to go to religion schools so they can learn and understand Islam. They see some kids in public schools are living together in the same studio apartment and afraid that public schools corrupt their children.”

The segregation of Thai Buddhist and Malay Muslim students is not only the result of insensitive education policies. The targeting of public schools also adds a substantial incentive to join Islamic schools: avoiding potential harm—a complexity that resulted in the decrease of the numbers of student enrolled in public schools. A female Malay Muslim teacher from elementary school stated, “In the past ten years many public schools are bombed, burnt, and have many other incidents. So nowadays, children are less likely to go to public schools since these schools always closed due to the insurgent attacks.” Subsequently, the public schools are losing reputation, as well as student enrollment, to competition with private Islamic schools. On the other hand, the private Islamic schools teach a half-day of religion and a half-day of the national curriculum and thus have increasingly gained approval from the Muslim families. As one female Buddhist public educational specialist said, “There was a public policy to register Islamic schools. Therefore, these schools have gained more popularity among Malay Muslim parents because their children can learn combined lessons of Islamic principles and public curriculum.” Even so, the issues of the quality of education the children in Islamic schools are receiving is a concern even among those who teach there. A male Muslim teacher from private Islamic school claimed, “Most private Islamic schools only care for high numbers of enrollment but don’t care about the quality of education because all they want is to get the matching funding from the government. They don’t care about the students’ educational experience; all they care is how to recruit more students. In addition, the government’s policy simplifies the registration process of the private Islamic schools, which lead to the establishment of more private Islamic schools. More competition to recruit students for each school less quality of education for the students.”

Private Islamic schools are interested in registering with the Ministry of Education only to obtain financial support from the government and are not beholden to public regulations or accountability in regards to the quality of education, which has led to higher dropout rates, lower standardized test scores, and ineffective administrative processes. A Vocational Education Specialist said, “In the beginning, there were not many Private Islamic schools because the old Pondok operated by the volunteering spirit of the communities. Since, the change in public policy was implemented and Private Islamic Schools are given public funds based on attendance. Private Islamic schools are increasingly registered with the government to get funding, but they don’t care about government regulation or qualities of education.” A male Thai Buddhist from the local Polytechnic College also addressed the issue of public funding on Private Islamic School. “The government spends a lot of money to operate registered private Islamic Schools but does not monitor it quality of teaching,” he conceded. A male Muslim teacher from private Islamic school mentioned to us that in addition to the private Islamic schools vying for enrollments, they specifically go out of their way to ignore poor performance or bad behavior. He argued, “Because the schools get money from the government by numbers of students enroll in the school, so the management try to retain students as much as possible. Some students don’t even come to schools, but I pass them to keep them registered. We rarely remove students, only those students who get in a big trouble or cause serious danger to schools then we might withdraw them.”

Regardless of the above claims, other key informants pointed out some advantages of private Islamic schools. A female Muslim teacher from private Islamic school said, “There is a comparison between children who study in public schools, religion schools, and those studying both curriculums in private Islamic schools. Those children who study both religion and regular curriculum get more benefit because they know both, they are more well-mannered, they understand Islamic values, know how to behave and become modernized at the same time.” A religious leader addressed the career advantages of going to private Islamic school as follows: “Attending private Islamic schools has more advantages, the children can become Toh Imam or religious leaders in their community, in case they cannot find good jobs as civil servants, while those children who only go to public schools might be unemployed if they cannot find a job in the future.”

The Islamic education is an important feature of the marketing of private Islamic schools in southern Thailand, which appeals to the communities and is attracting children from public schools, but also to those who were attended Pondok or religious schools. As one female Malay Muslim teacher from public school said, “In the past children went to Pondok or public schools but when the private Islamic schools widely spread out, everyone seems to go there.”

Social Milieu Themes

The findings indicated that the children's immediate environment, such as family and classroom, strongly influences their basic education, which is within normal parameters even for children in the armed conflict areas of the three southern Thai border provinces. Within these immediate social systems, children are socialized and educated, as they interact with and learn from family, peers, and teachers. It is precisely where their radicalization might begin, especially in light of the lack of governmental supervision, administrative guidelines and teacher esprit de core. We thus asked several questions in which we asked the interviewees to provide us with their ideas about how what we call "social milieu" issues might affect the way children in the three southern provinces of Thailand are learning.

Family Background

Children's participation in education in southern Thailand is strongly influenced by how well the family functions because this is during the time that children are dependent upon families to meet their needs. As a female Muslim student from public school claimed, "My parent tells me to go to school, they advise and help with my further study in the secondary education." Another female Muslim students from public school said she will attend a public school where her father graduated: "I will go to this school because my father graduate from there. My parents encourage me to go to this school" A female Buddhist teacher from an Educational Opportunity Expansion School claimed, "Parents are the most important people to for student's education." A female Buddhist public school teacher explained that parental education background as an important element in supporting children's education as follows: "The family educational background is important. Parents who graduated from public schools will encourage their children to attend public schools, while parents who graduates from Islamic schools will support their children to go to religious schools." The female Muslim teacher from Public School elaborated, "Children's education depends on parental engagement with schools. When parents committed with certain schools, they are more likely to send their children to the school or similar one."

Peer Relationship

Peer relationships greatly contribute to children's choices and behaviors, which can be discussed in terms of negative and positive benefits. In this context, peer relationships can be a powerful influence on the value of education and the decision to continue school. As a female Malay Muslim student from Public School asserted, for example, "My friends in the elementary school especially my close friends pressured or supported me going to school. Friends from my groups always discussed where should we study? Which schools is better? Which school is fun? This schools have this type of uniforms etc." A Buddhist female student from a private school claimed she decided to attend public school because her peers go to public school: "I decide to go to public school because my elder friend went there." At the same time, peer pressure can be a negative factor for some children to engage in drug abuse and withdraw from school especially in rural areas. As one male teacher from private Islamic school explained, "Children will go to school if they are not engage in Kratum (illegal drugs widely spread in the three southern border province). Especially, those children in rural areas tend to gather together with their friends and pressures others to do drugs."

Quality of Teachers

Teachers are some of the key persons with a potential to nurture or inhibit fruitful connections between students and schools. It was clear from the site visits and the process of interviewing that teachers in the South of Thailand are in the minds of everyone. As a female Muslim student from private school explained, "Teachers can influence and support students' education in the next level. Good teachers normally advise students to go to school and ask students this type of questions-what will you study? What do you want to do when you grow up?"

Most key informants claimed teachers in the south are failing at the task of teaching and preparing students for further education, through some combination of apathy or incompetence. Moreover, the recent education reforms emphasized the national qualifications framework to ensure consistency in educational training adversely affected the quality of teaching. Teachers spend more time preparing for quality assurance and less time on teaching and guiding students. As a Thai Buddhist mother said, "Quality of teachers are so poor because smart people do not become teachers. In addition, schools close frequently due to the conflict, teachers have no times to teach because they have to do other activities such as preparing for quality assurance. Many senior teachers with experience either passed away or retired. So there are many young, inexperienced and poor performance teachers who cannot even spell correctly. Sometimes I have to correct teachers writing when I help my kids do their homework." A male Muslim educational specialist claimed "the teachers don't come to classes, the schools are always closed, teachers have many administrative works to do, and when the evaluation period approaches, teachers spend all their time on quality assurance—they don't teach for three months! Teachers just write assignments on the blackboard so they can prepare for quality assurance.

In addition, some teachers cannot teach. Teachers don't have particular knowledge or skills to teach students in certain subjects. For example, some teachers graduated with PE Degree, but teach Math, Sciences, or English. They don't know how to pronounce in English, they don't know how to use scientific tools."

The quality of teacher is even worst in Private Islamic School due to low incentives and low compensation. As Vocational Education Specialist said, "In the beginning, there were not many Private Islamic schools, so there were teachers from public schools that helped teaching there also. Nowadays, the government gave funding to Private Islamic Schools, so many schools are registered. However, those schools only pay teacher 4,000-5,000 baht salary despite the minimum wage for teacher is 15,000 baht. Well, it is a business and private Islamic teachers are getting ripped off with no other choices. So what do you expect? No quality of teaching of course! A male Buddhist Deputy Director from public school also addressed the issue of Private Islamic School teacher: "Honestly speaking and not try to accuse someone here, most religious teachers which have graduated from the Middle East like Afghanistan and Pakistan have only learned about Islam and got some information from those countries and come back to teach students here. Those teachers only know about religion so they can only teach Islam with only 4,000-5,000 baht salary and they always compare with Buddhist teachers who got 15,000 baht salaries. This is an inequity between Muslim teachers and Buddhists teachers. Some of them even become a head of insurgency. I worked with religious schools for many decades. I know and have told Thai authorities to watch out for those religious teachers." One male Muslim teacher from Private Islamic School the downsides of the Pondok education as, "Poor quality of education, poor support from management, same old technology, same teaching as teachers are busy with other tasks, teachers don't have time for innovation or new lesson plans—just teach the same things even myself I do that sometimes".

A female public education specialist argued, "We need to bring the teachers back to children, not allow teachers to do the quality assurance to trainings and other activities. We must get the teachers back to classes and teach." Teachers, bureaucracy and a multicultural setting can become the source of conflict and complicate an already complicated situation.

School Outreach Programs

The findings point out that school outreach programs, which focus on the immediate connectivity between teachers and community play an important role in improving student's enrollment rates. One can actually call this face-to-face marketing with products tailored for each individual customer. It carries much weight in the decision-making process of which schools to attend to in southern Thailand. As a female Buddhist teacher from public school said, "The secondary teacher came to elementary school every year in order to recruit the children to attend their school." A male Muslim teacher from private Islamic school elaborated on this point: "Teachers from the same villages will recruit children to attend school because private Islamic schools want to have as many children as possible. Some small schools go as far as assign teachers to recruit students to join their school as much as possible to get more government funding and disregard of quality of education" A Guidance counselor from Educational Opportunity Expansion Schools claimed school outreach programs can help increase student's school enrollment: "Our school goes to the village to give guidance to students. Sometimes, we see students 11-12 years old and never go to school so we invite them to enroll in first grade."

Social Support

Social support has been identified as an important characteristic to promote academic achievement and positive educational outcomes for children in the conflict areas of the three southern border provinces as a male Malay Muslim private education specialist claimed, "The main problem of children in the three southern provinces are low income families which cannot afford to send children to school. Therefore, if those poor children have some financial support to go to school. It might increase numbers of enrollment." A religious leader emphasized on supporting the fragile students: "The government need to support the weak students. The good students will be surviving, but those weak one need government support." A female Buddhist public education specialist focused on schools collaborate with community agencies to provide children's support as follows: "Social Support within the local community help children to attend school, local government and communities need to work with schools on helping students. The local government within community have both money and people power; they are ready to support the children." At the same time a Buddhist mother's concern with children's physical, cognitive, and social-emotional needs said, "The social environment in the three southern border provinces are so negative. Children have seen their teachers murdered in schools and all the bad news on TV, all of these are negative. We need to create positive environments for children. We seriously do!" A female Buddhist Teacher from Educational Opportunity Expansion School claimed Religious leaders or community leaders also have an important role in supporting students to school:

“Well, most parents here believe the religious leaders and many of them are committees in our schools so they can help us supporting students to come to school.”

Conclusion

Because of education’s ability to be a ladder for social promotion it has been a political battleground since its inception. In Thailand, public education is at best performing unevenly (Bualar, 2016) at worst has been used to deny Southern Malay-Muslims their cultural heritage (Feigenblatt et al., 2010). Education then, has become the focus of an ethnic insurgency boiling in the Thai south for the better part of two decades with no sign of abating. Educators are routinely targeted in as agents of the state. Yet in our research points to the effects of the conflict upon educational decisions only partially, the conflict itself was far lower in the minds of teachers, parents and administrators when it came to educational opportunities for the people in the region. Although the violence was one of several variables affecting student attendance in public schools it was not the determining factor in our cases. In fact, while the violence hit its peak a parallel movement of students from public schools towards private Islamic schools called, Pondok or Private Islamic School, took place which cannot be explained simply by the existence of violence. Our on-site interviews highlight the complexity of parental decisions regarding the education of their children and points to several expected problems in an educational system as vast as Thailand’s. Our interviews clearly indicate that Social Milieu themes are significant enough to affect educational decisions. The research also seems to direct us for further research on foreign funded private Islamic schools and their impact in the local societies of Southern Thailand.

APPENDIX

Table 3: Key informants

	Key Informants	Provinces	Religion	Gender
1	Director of Center of Special Development Zone of Southern Border Provinces and Principal of Pattani Technical College	Pattani	Muslim	Male
2	Chairperson of Pattani Vocational Education and Principal of Pattani Industrial and Community Education College	Pattani	Buddhist	Female
3	Expert on Vocational Education in Special Development Zone of Southern Border Provinces and professor of Pattani College of Agricultural Technology	Pattani	Buddhist	Female
4	Deputy Director from Institute of Vocational Education Southern 3	Songkhla	Buddhist	Male
5	Student Institute from Vocational Education Southern 3	Songkhla	Buddhist	Female
6	Student Institute from Vocational Education Southern 3	Songkhla	Buddhist	Male
7	Teacher of Institute from Vocational Education Southern 3	Songkhla	Buddhist	Male
8	Student from Technical College	Narathiwat	Buddhist	Female
9	Teacher from Technical College	Narathiwat	Muslim	Male
10	Guidance Counsellor from Technical College	Narathiwat	Buddhist	Male
11	Deputy Director from Technical College	Narathiwat	Buddhist	Male
12	Principal from Technical College	Narathiwat	Buddhist	Male
13	Student from Public school	Narathiwat	Muslim	Male
14	Student from Public school	Narathiwat	Muslim	Female
15	Teacher from Public school	Narathiwat	Buddhist	Male
16	Teacher from Public school	Narathiwat	Muslim	Male
17	Parent from Public school	Narathiwat	Muslim	Female
18	Parent from Public school	Narathiwat	Buddhist	Male
19	Student from Pattani Industrial and Community Education College	Pattani	Muslim	Female
20	Student from Pattani Industrial and Community Education College	Pattani	Muslim	Female
21	Teacher from Pattani Industrial and Community	Pattani	Muslim	Male

	Education College			
22	Student from Pattani Educational Opportunity Expansion Schools	Pattani	Muslim	Female
23	Student from Pattani Educational Opportunity Expansion Schools	Pattani	Muslim	Male
24	Guidance Counsellor from Pattani Educational Opportunity Expansion Schools	Pattani	Muslim	Male
26	Teacher from Pattani Educational Opportunity Expansion Schools	Pattani	Buddhist	Female
27	Student from Yala Polytechnic College	Yala	Muslim	Male
28	Student from Yala Polytechnic College	Yala	Muslim	Male
29	Principal from Yala Polytechnic College	Yala	Buddhist	Male
30	Deputy Director from Yala Polytechnic College	Yala	Buddhist	Female
31	Teacher from Private Islamic School	Yala	Islam	Male
32	Teacher from Private Islamic School	Yala	Islam	Female
33	Teacher from Private Islamic School	Patanni	Islam	Male
34	Teacher from Private Islamic School	Pattani	Islam	Male
35	Principal from Private Islamic School	Narathiwat	Islam	Male
36	Religious Leader	Narathiwat	Islam	Male
37	Religious Leader	Narathiwat	Islam	Male
38	Private Education Specialist	Pattani	Islam	Male
39	Public Education Specialist	Narathiwat	Buddhist	Female
40	Private Education Specialist	Yala	Islam	Female

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