

## School Leadership Practices in the Conflict Region of The South Thailand - Pattani

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**Abstract:** This study aims to gain an understanding of the leadership practices of the principals in the conflict region of South Thailand – Pattani. It was a qualitative case study. This study was located at two private Islamic schools in the Yala province, Southern Thailand. Data were collected through interviews and observation. The informants were 14 in total consisting of two principals, two deputy principals, and ten teachers from studied schools. The collected data were analyzed following the interactive model proposed by Miles, Huberman, and Saldana. Audit trail and member checks were used to check the credibility of the data. The results show that building a good relationship with communities and working together to develop a safe environment at school are considered to be important. The principals also motivate students to go to school. In order to make students enjoy studying at school, the principal put a serious effort to provide adequate learning facilities and school infrastructure and to develop the teaching competencies of their teachers. Furthermore, they assure the student parents that it is safe to allow children to go to school.

**Keywords:** *school leadership, leadership in a conflict region*

### I. INTRODUCTION

Pattani is one of the oldest regions in Southeast Asia, also known as Lang-Suka in the past (Fathy, 1994: 9). Patani is part of the southern region of Thailand, which consists of four provinces, namely Yala, Pattani, Narathiwat, and Satun. The population makes up 4% of the total population of Thailand and the majority are Muslim. Thus, they have a different culture from the majority of the Thai population who are Buddhists (Bueto, 2010).

Historically, Pattani was a prosperous and influential kingdom in Southeast Asia. At the end of the 17<sup>th</sup> century, Pattani experienced a period of decline due to political instability. As a result, the regions of Pattani began to break apart from the kingdom's rule. In 1785, the Buddhists eventually conquered the kingdom after several attacks (Ibrahim, 2002).

The integration of Pattani into the Thai political system has caused several protests. In 1816, there was a rebellion by the Malays against the Buddhists. At the same time, the Thai government implemented a new divide and rule government. This government caused the

Pattani to split into seven smaller regions, namely Patani, Nongcik, Jamu, Jalor, Teluban, Lengeh, and Raman. Each country was led by a king (Ibrahim, 2002).

In 1832 AD, during British colonialism to Asia, there was a competition between British and Thai for control of the Malay Peninsula. Thai succeeded in conquering Pattani and ruled the region based on the 1902 Thesaphiban Law and the 1909 Anglo-Siamese treaty. Thai received tacit recognition of its authority over the Malays and the southern regions (Patani, Yala, Satun, and Narathiwat) in exchange for relinquishing control of the four states of Malay, which at that time became part of Malay-England.

In 1906, the Thai government adopted a system known as *boriwen cit hua muang* (central region). In this system, the seven smaller regions were made into one, named Monton Patani (Big City of Patani), divided into four provinces, namely Patani, Yala, Narathiwat, and Saiburi. Each province is headed by a governor (Pitsuwan, 1989: 108)

After the Pattani sultanate was entirely ruled by Buddhists in 1902, the Muslims in this area were isolated from the state bureaucracy. They were often seen as a problem by the Thai government because of differences in religion, language, and culture. This region can be seen as a gray area, where two different cultures, Islam and Buddhism, overlap. Culturally, although the majority of the Muslim community in Southeast Asia reside in the Malay regions, politically, Muslims in Patani have become part of Thailand, a country which is based on Buddhist teachings (Muzani, 1993: 325)

The conflict emerged in South Thailand, Pattani, when the government organized reform programs that touched on fundamental matters relating to Islam, which prompted ethnic, cultural, and religious sentiments among the Malay Muslims (Hasbullah, 2003: 266). This — in the view of the Pattani people — could be seen from the implemented government policies. Regarding the education policy, firstly, the government made it mandatory to use Thai in the classroom learning process. In the long term, this policy would slowly weaken and even eliminate the Malay language, which was the identity of the Pattani people. Secondly, the government was discriminating in providing educational facilities and infrastructure for schools where Muslim children study. This policy reduced the quality of education, which resulted in a decrease in the number of interests in the schools. Third, the government imposed a government curriculum on Islamic schools, and schools that adopted the government curriculum turned into Islamic schools or *madrasah*. As a result, Islamic schools taught both Islamic curriculum and academic curriculum. In addition, there are very few opportunities available for strategic positions in public service for the Muslim community despite the fact that they made up 85% of the total population of Pattani. These are the fundamental points that

underlie their demands and struggles from 1903 until the present (Madmarn, 1999; Hasbullah, 2003).

This study aims to gain an understanding on how the principals of private Islamic schools lead in conflict situations in Yala Province, South Thailand-Pattani. Research on this topic is still very rare (Raihani, 2017). This research, therefore, is needed to gain a deep understanding of the various ways that school leaders take to lead in difficult areas due to cultural conflicts (Brooks, 2015). This study contributes to the development of literature on this topic needed to formulate school leadership theory in areas of political-ethnic violence conflicts (Raihani, 2017).

### **1.1. School leadership in a context of conflict regions**

Leadership is commonly defined as a process to influence people's attitudes and behaviours and the organizational system within which people work (Bush, 2011). There has been growing consensus that school leadership is a major factor influencing school effectiveness (Bush, 2007; Bush & Glover, 2003), school improvement (Hallinger & Heck, 1998), and student learning (Leithwood & Levin, 2010; O'Donoghue & Clarke, 2010). As the studies suggest, the influence is indirect. It is mediated by its influence on teachers, classroom, and school conditions.

There is growing evidence that context matters for school leadership. On this, Gronn and Ribbins (1996, p. 454) argued over twenty years ago that a "context of situation, culture, and history constrains leadership and gives its meaning. It is a vehicle through which particular leaders can be empirically understood". This was stressed later by Clarke and Wildy (2004). They argued that leadership is generally context-bound and should be understood from the 'inside out'. By this, they mean that it should be understood from the perspective of actual leaders and their interactions with others in a specific context.

Studies indicate that school leadership in the context of conflict regions faces many problems. The problems are related to trauma, death, shortage of teachers, damage to school infrastructure and facilities, education funds, an environment that is dangerous or not conducive to learning, armed society, or such things, which result in anxiety and despair (Nkengbeza, 2016). This is in line with Earnest's (2013) study of school leadership in the conflict regions of Sri Lanka. School leaders in the areas dealt with students who could not attend school regularly because of varied reasons, such as war, the inability of families to pay for their children's education, lost or damaged resources, or dealing with psychological problems caused by the conflict. In addition, effective professional development programs for school leaders were also lacking (Earnest, 2013).

Successful school leadership in such conflict regions needs to be contextually responsive. Studies found that in a conflict region of Southern Thailand, school leaders need to build a good relationship with local communities to gain communities' trust and support. This leadership practice contributes, for example, to the increasing number of student enrollment (Raihani, 2017) and school safety (Brook, 2015; Brook & Sungtong, 2015) of Islamic schools. The Islamic school leaders also developed relationships with international communities or organizations. They believe that for the Muslims in Thailand to advance, they need to open their minds to changes and be exposed to external ideas. One way to do so is by creating partnerships with as many international organizations as possible (Raihani, 2017).

## II. METHOD

This is qualitative research, which is based on the post-positivism philosophy, which examines objects in their natural settings, puts the researcher as a key instrument, takes purposive and snowball sampling, conducts triangulation for data validity, applies an inductive approach to data analysis, and emphasizes more on meaning more than generalization (Sugiyono, 2015: 15). This research is a case study, which is considered to be appropriate for examining an activity of the process of a group or an individual (Creswell, 2019), which are the leadership practices of elementary school principals in conflict areas.

This research took place in two private Islamic elementary schools in the conflict region of South Thailand, Pattani, more specifically in Yala province. The source of data was the school leaders, namely two school principals, two deputy principals, and ten teachers in total. The data collection techniques involved interviews and observation. Analysis of the collected data was carried out using an interactive model by Miles, Huberman & Saldana (2014), which includes data collection, condensation, display, and drawing conclusions.

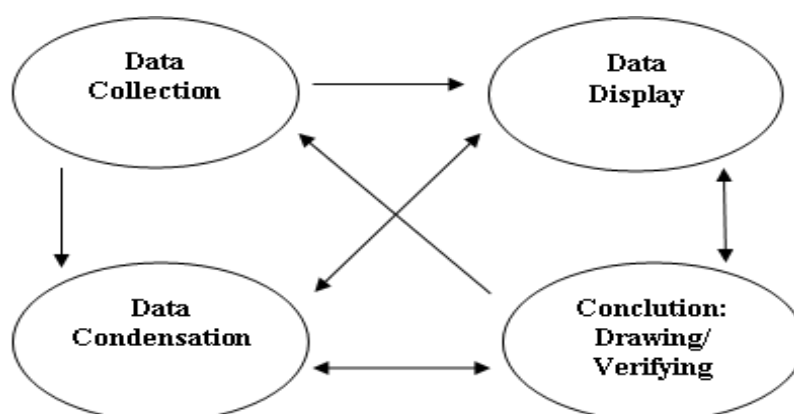


Figure 1. Components of interactive data analysis

In order to check the credibility of the data, this study employed an audit trail and member check by sending the researcher's interpretation back to the participants. The participants then reviewed it. If the participants consider the interpretation represents their reality, then, the interpretation is considered to be credible.

### **III. RESULTS**

#### **3.1 School leadership practices at DW school in a conflict region**

##### **3.1.1 The DW school**

The DW school was established in 1946. At that time, the founder had just returned from Saudi Arabia. This school originally consisted of a mosque and small huts for students who studied the Quran with him. In 1961, the government allowed the official establishment of this school and provided funds to renovate the classrooms. In 1967, the status of the school was changed from a dormitory-style school to a community school that specifically taught Islam. The school's vision is to produce individuals who are knowledgeable with strong characters in following Islamic teachings. The curriculum combines religious learning with academic learning. Graduates are expected to be able to communicate well using Thai, Malay, and understand international languages.

This school has become a quite prominent private Islamic school. The total number of students in 2019 was 1087, with a total of 108 teachers. The school has adequate learning facilities and infrastructure. There are laboratories, a computer room, a library, classrooms, a school health unit, a canteen, and sports fields and facilities. This school provides separated dormitories for boys and girls. The community around this school is happy about the school and supports its programs and activities.

DW school is situated in the red zone of a conflict area. This is in an area where frequent wars and conflicts occur. Thus, students and parents, as well as teachers and principal are often worried about going to school. When conflicts occur, they find it difficult to teach optimally.

##### **3.1.2. School leadership practices of the principals at the DW school in a conflict region**

The principal realized that the conflicts had an impact on the ways the teaching-learning process was conducted. Students felt afraid of going to school. Teachers felt anxious about their children's safety during the school trip and while studying at school. The teachers felt the same way as they were not able to teach optimally and did not feel safe when they were at school. This study shows that the school principal took some actions as a response to the situation.

The principal put the safety of the school community first in managing teaching-learning processes. When the situation was considered unsafe for the people at school, he decided to close the school. Besides, he informed students and teachers about the personal safety precautions that should be taken when wars or bombings occurred.

"When a conflict occurs, the school is closed until it stops. This is done for their (students and teachers) safety." (WKS, 17-03-2020)

"The principal says that the students must remain vigilant. When they hear gunshots or explosions, they should immediately squat. They are also asked to be more careful of strange objects." (WBK, 13-03-2020)

This condition shows that there is a need for responsive acts in conducting the teaching-learning processes during a conflict situation.

The school principal tried to anticipate the impacts of the conflict in the area by involving the local community as school security officers. The school principal also maintained good relationships with the local community. Good relationships between the principal and the community might reduce conflict so that all conflicts could be resolved.

"I work with the local community and security. Thus, I have to maintain good relationships with them." (WKS, 17-03-2020)

"I collaborate with the police officers, army, and local authorities to maintain the school safety." (WKTU, 12-03-2020)

"I ask for supports from the school board and parents to run the school during the conflict." (WKTU, 12-03-2020)

"We work, encourage, and support each other. The school is often involved in a community program to strengthen the relationships. The local community plays the main role in protecting and providing safety when there is an unexpected conflict." (WKTU, 12-03-2020)

The principals involved in this study believed that building a good relationship with communities is important, especially to create a safe environment.

The principal encouraged students to keep on going to school. He emphasized the importance of learning. Besides, he talked to parents who were worried about their children's safety during the school trip. He informed the parents that the school would be closed only when the situation was considered not safe.

"I visit their houses to support and encourage both parents and students to not stop going to school regardless of the conflict." (WBK, 13-03-2020).

As they said, parents permit their children to go to school when the situation is safe.

### **3.2. School leadership practices at the BW school in a conflict region**

#### 3.2.1 The BW school

BW school is a private Islamic school. This school used to be a mosque which was then developed into a school for learning Quran. This school was then turned into an Islamic school. This school is also located in the red zone of a conflict area.

BW school is currently implementing two curricula, namely the curriculum for religious education and academic education. Each curriculum has its teachers and administrative staff. The total number of teachers is 46, and the total number of students is 532. Some students live quite far from the school. The majority of students come from families with middle to lower socioeconomic status.

This school has sufficient facilities to support learning because it has 15 classrooms, a computer room, a laboratory, a library, a school health unit, an extracurricular room, and a prayer room. There are sports facilities in this school. The teacher's office and the principal's office are separated. This school also provides separate dormitories for girls and boys.

#### 3.3.2. School leadership practices of the principals at the BW school in a conflict region

The school principal said that the conflicts that occurred in the school environment had an impact on teaching-learning processes at the school. Due to the conflict, the teachers, parents, and students felt restless, anxious, and worried. The school principal tried to minimize the impact of the conflict by maintaining good relationships with the community. This effort is believed to play an important role in minimizing the impact of conflicts.

“The school community and I discussed conflicts with the village head in order to find a way to prevent the school from the conflict impacts. What we do is telling the teachers and students to not worry about the unstable situation.” (WBK, 16M20)

“We work together with the local community, village head, and security officers. This is done to make sure that teachers and students feel safe.” (WKS, 13M20)

"I advise teachers and students to maintain good relationships with the local community. I am sure that this makes school safer and more conducive during conflicts.” (WKTU, 12M20)

“I try to avoid any conflict with the community for the sake of the school safety.”

The school principal believed that parents' support and trust may help improve education in conflict areas. Thus, they increase teachers' and students' awareness to work together to create

a better condition for learning at school. This is important for the sustainability of education in conflict areas.

The school principal also strived to develop a comfortable and conducive school environment. They provided infrastructure and learning facilities and developed teachers' competence. They believed that those may encourage students to keep on learning at school.

“try to provide learning facilities and infrastructure as well as a comfortable and beautiful environment to improve student motivation in learning.” (WBH, 13M2020)

The school provides learning media in accordance with the current situation and era to make learning more conducive and make students happy at school.

"We provide opportunities for teachers to take part in training related to learning media use and learning strategies to increase student motivation. If the teaching-learning process carried out by the teachers is effective and conducive, students will enjoy learning at school." (WBH, 13M2020)

Besides, the principal motivated students to keep on going to school and learning.

"I encourage them to keep on learning to get the better achievement." (WBH, 13M2020).

These show that the school principals intend to make schools keep on running although the conflicts occur.

#### **IV. DISCUSSION**

The results of this study show that the school leadership practices in both schools are similar. The principals involved the surrounding community from various elements. They worked together with the police, army, and village heads to maintain the school safety, made it more conducive and ran effectively during the conflicts. The principals also tried to avoid conflicts with the community and emphasized the importance of maintaining good relationships with the community. Those school leadership practices were responses to the conflicts that occur.

The results of this study are in line with several previous studies. Establishing good relationships with the community is one of the school leadership practices in conflict areas such as Southern Thailand (Brook, 2015; Brook & Sutong, 2015; Raihani, 2017). Principals need to maintain a good relationship with the community, especially to ensure the safety of the school, students, and teachers. When the community is happy and trusts the school, they will support various school programs and activities. Further, the results also show the importance of maintaining good relationships with the government. School principals should compromise to



"win". They need to accept government policies to adopt general education with compensation for obtaining educational funding for school development (Raihani, 2017).

Both school leaders also motivated students to go to school regularly. The principal of the DW school did it by conducting home visits to talk to parents and students in person. He told them about the importance of going to school. Meanwhile, the principal of the BW school considered providing adequate learning facilities and infrastructure as an effective strategy to make students always want to go to school. In a conventional perspective, student attendance is important to assure the learning quality of students. However, in a conflict situation that gives risks of physical attacks or injuries, the perspective might need to be reconsidered. Pherali (2016) argued that in that kind of dangerous situation, asking children to travel to school is too risky. He then suggests that children are better to learn at home or in communities where they live in

The principal of the BW school also developed the teaching competencies of their teachers by allowing teachers to participate in training. Doing so, it was expected that teachers would develop safe and joyful learning for students. It was believed that that kind of learning could increase the motivation of students to go to school. This finding is in line with Nkenegza's (2016) study. The school leaders in the conflict environment of Libera promoted staff development. They did it by providing teachers an opportunity to join workshops and developing collective, collaborative professional learning. Also, they acted as mentors and coaches. They believe that staff development is important for the success of educational change.

## **V. CONCLUSION**

School leadership practices in the conflict region of Yala, Southern Thailand, Pattani, respond to the situation at hand. A prominent school leadership practice exercised by the principals was building good relationships with the community to maintain school safety. School safety was the concern of school principals to anticipate the decline in students' learning enrollment and achievement due to the conflicts. The school principals motivated students to keep going to school. Also, the principals took a personal approach to the parents so that they continued to support their children to study at school. In order to make the schools safe and comfortable learning places, the principals provided students with learning facilities that students needed and developed teachers' teaching competencies.

## Acknowledgment

This study did not receive any funding from any institution.

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