

## Perceptions of Public Management and Educational Improvement in Yala, Thailand: A Community-Based Qualitative Inquiry

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### ABSTRACT

The education system in Yala, a conflict-sensitive and multicultural province in Southern Thailand, faces persistent challenges shaped by sociopolitical instability, cultural diversity, and governance constraints. This study investigates the perceptions of teachers, community leaders, and local officials regarding public management practices and their influence on educational improvement in Yala. Using a qualitative approach grounded in Community-Based Participatory Research (CBPR), data were collected through nine semi-structured individual interviews and two focus group discussions (FGDs), each involving three participants. Thematic analysis revealed four major insights: (1) a persistent disconnect between national education policies and local realities; (2) uneven access to teacher professional development due to geographic, cultural, and security barriers; (3) the underutilized potential of religious and cultural institutions in education governance; and (4) a trust gap between the community and central authorities that undermines participatory governance. These findings underscore the need for culturally inclusive, decentralized, and conflict-sensitive public management strategies. The study contributes both theoretically and practically by offering locally grounded insights for policymakers, educators, and scholars seeking to improve education systems in post-conflict, multicultural settings.

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**Keywords:** community participation; conflict-sensitive governance; decentralization; education; public management; teacher development

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### INTRODUCTION

Education serves as a crucial driver of social progress, particularly in regions characterized by multicultural identities and political sensitivities, such as Yala, Thailand (Pherali, 2023). Located in the *Deep South*, Yala illustrates the complex intersection of national education reform initiatives with deeply rooted socio-political tensions, cultural diversity, and governance challenges. Although Thailand has promoted decentralization and teacher development as part of national reform agendas, the educational realities in Yala continue to exhibit stark disparities, constrained teacher capacity, and a disconnect between policy frameworks and the lived experiences of communities (Office of the Education Council [OEC], 2017).

The province's population, predominantly *Malay-Muslim* with unique religious and linguistic backgrounds, has long struggled against the central government's push for cultural uniformity (McCargo, 2008; Deep South Watch, 2021). Educational policies prioritizing the Thai language and a Buddhist-centered curriculum have often been perceived by locals as tools of assimilation, undermining trust and diminishing engagement with state-led education efforts (McCargo, 2010; Uddin et al., 2022). Although decentralization was intended to provide more local flexibility, many schools and local educational offices in Yala still operate under highly centralized control, limiting their responsiveness to specific community needs (Mutebi, 2004; Lall, 2011).

A central question emerges around the role of public management in addressing these complex governance conditions. Public management reforms grounded in frameworks such as *New Public Management* (NPM), *Public Value Management* (PVM), and broader good governance principles aim to advance decentralization, efficiency, and stakeholder participation (Hood, 1991; Osborne, 2006). Yet, in conflict-prone regions like Yala, these reforms often fail to achieve their aims because of local capacity constraints and cultural misalignment (Painter, 2006; Brinkerhoff, 2011).

Much of the existing literature on Thailand's education system focuses on policy analysis or quantitative measures like achievement tests or literacy rates. However, there remains a significant gap in examining how community-level stakeholders—including teachers, religious leaders, and local administrators—interpret public management initiatives intended to improve educational outcomes (Brooks & Sungtong, 2015; Creswell & Poth, 2018). Understanding these perceptions is essential to designing context-sensitive reforms that reflect on-the-ground realities and community trust, both of which are critical to policy effectiveness.

Addressing this research gap, the present study investigates the perspectives of local stakeholders on public management practices related to teacher development and community involvement in education within Yala. The research is informed by *Public Management Theory* (Osborne, 2010), *Constructivist Theory* (Guba & Lincoln, 1994), and *Community-Based Participatory Research* (Israel et al., 2005), providing a framework that values co-produced knowledge and authentic local participation. By examining these dynamics in Yala, the study aims to contribute to broader policy debates on culturally responsive governance and decentralization within fragile, multicultural contexts.

This study aims to explore the perceptions of teachers, community leaders, and local officials regarding public management practices in education, identify challenges and opportunities in teacher professional development, and assess the role of community participation in improving educational governance. By addressing these objectives, the research seeks to provide valuable insights for policymakers in designing culturally sensitive and decentralized education policies, support educators in developing contextually relevant training programs, and empower communities through inclusive governance models. The findings will contribute to broader theoretical and practical discussions on public management and education in conflict-sensitive regions, ultimately fostering sustainable improvements in Yala and similar multicultural settings.

## RESEARCH METHOD

This research employed a qualitative approach grounded in the constructivist paradigm and informed by *Community-Based Participatory Research* (CBPR). The study aimed to explore how public management practices influence educational improvement in Yala, Thailand, with a focus on teacher professional development and community engagement. A qualitative design was chosen to enable a deep exploration of local perceptions, lived experiences, and socio-political contexts, particularly in a region marked by cultural diversity and historical conflict (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Guba & Lincoln, 1994). A case study strategy was adopted to investigate this issue within a bounded geographic and institutional context,

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offering a focused lens on the interplay between governance and education in Yala Province (Yin, 2018).

Data collection was carried out using multiple methods to ensure triangulation and contextual richness. These included semi-structured interviews, focus group discussions (*FGDs*), document analysis, and non-participant observation. A total of nine individual interviews were conducted with teachers, education officials, and community leaders. Additionally, two *FGDs* were held with six participants in total, allowing for small, trust-based discussions among peers. These discussions provided insight into collective views and reinforced the themes identified in individual interviews. The interviews and *FGDs* were guided by thematic question sets aligned with the study's theoretical framework and were conducted in Thai and *Yawi* languages where appropriate. All sessions were audio-recorded with participant consent and transcribed for analysis. Supplementary data were collected through the review of policy documents, training guidelines, and school governance records, as well as field notes gathered from observations of school and community events.

Participants were selected using purposive sampling to ensure diversity and relevance. The sample included individuals who had direct experience with education governance and had worked for at least two years in their respective roles. This included five teachers from both public and Islamic schools, four community leaders such as religious figures and parent representatives, and three local education officials. This stakeholder composition allowed for a comprehensive exploration of how different actors experience public management practices in the education sector (Patton, 2015).

The instruments used in the study included semi-structured interview guides, *FGD* protocols, and checklists for document analysis and observation. These tools were developed based on the theoretical foundations of *Public Management Theory*, *Constructivist Theory*, and *CBPR* (Osborne, 2010; Guba & Lincoln, 1994; Israel et al., 2005). All research instruments were reviewed by academic supervisors and pilot-tested for clarity and contextual appropriateness before the fieldwork. Data analysis followed a thematic approach based on the six-step model proposed by Braun and Clarke (2006). The researcher conducted both inductive and deductive coding to identify recurring themes and patterns. Themes were reviewed across different data sources to ensure consistency and credibility, and member-checking was conducted with selected participants to validate the interpretations (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

Ethical principles were strictly followed throughout the research process. Approval was obtained from the institutional ethics committee prior to data collection. Participants were fully informed about the purpose of the study, their right to withdraw, and the measures taken to ensure confidentiality. All names and identifiable information were anonymized. Special attention was paid to cultural sensitivity, including the researcher's conduct, dress, and scheduling around religious practices in this Muslim-majority region. This research process ensured not only methodological rigor but also mutual respect and trust-building with the local community.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

This study identified four major themes from the qualitative data gathered through interviews and focus group discussions with teachers, community leaders, and education

officials in Yala. These findings reflect local perceptions of how public management practices affect educational development, particularly in the areas of teacher professional development and community engagement. The results address both research questions and offer insights that extend current theory and practice in culturally responsive public administration.

First, participants consistently described a disconnect between national education policies and the lived realities of the local context. Teachers reported that the centralized nature of curriculum design and teacher training often failed to reflect the linguistic and cultural needs of the Malay-Muslim population. One teacher explained, “The training we receive is all in Thai, and most of it is not applicable to our students. They don’t speak Thai at home. It makes everything harder.” This experience supports previous findings that standardized education policy in the Deep South lacks cultural and linguistic sensitivity (Srisompob & Panyasak, 2018; Yusuf, 2014). Community leaders similarly expressed frustration with how educational reforms overlooked local traditions, values, and languages. These findings reflect a structural flaw in public management design, where top-down governance fails to engage bottom-up needs, particularly in conflict-sensitive regions (Mutebi, 2004; McCargo, 2010).

Second, the study found that teacher professional development remains unevenly accessible and inadequately contextualized. Many teachers noted that while training exists, it is overly generic and does not support bilingual or Islamic-oriented pedagogy. For example, an Islamic school teacher shared, “We have our own way of teaching, based on Islamic values. The training we attend doesn’t recognize this at all.” Similar concerns were raised in other Southeast Asian contexts, such as Mindanao, where effective professional development required bilingual and culturally grounded content (Serrano & Tan, 2020). In Yala, logistical barriers such as distance and funding also reduce access to training. These insights highlight how public management systems focused on performance and standardization may overlook place-based realities (Osborne, 2010; Uddin et al., 2022).

The third major finding revealed that cultural and religious institutions in Yala are underutilized in formal education planning. Religious leaders and community organizations expressed a strong willingness to support schools but reported being excluded from decision-making processes. As one village head stated, “We have the experience, and we are trusted by families. But no one asks us when decisions are made.” These dynamics mirror broader concerns in post-conflict governance, where state-centric reforms often sideline local actors and trusted institutions (Uddin & Sarntisart, 2023). The lack of structured collaboration reduces opportunities for culturally anchored education and undermines local trust in public management. This reinforces the importance of participatory governance models, such as CBPR, where communities are not passive recipients of policy but active contributors to it (Israel et al., 2005).

Finally, the issue of trust and participation emerged as a central concern. Many participants emphasized the absence of meaningful dialogue between government actors and local communities. “People are afraid to speak openly,” remarked one FGD participant, “They think nothing will change, or that their ideas will be ignored.” This mistrust is partly rooted in historical marginalization and a legacy of state-centric governance in the Deep South (Yusuf, 2014). Participants expressed that public education was often viewed as a tool of cultural assimilation rather than a shared public good. Constructivist theory helps explain how these perceptions, shaped by experience and identity, affect attitudes toward governance and reform

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(Guba & Lincoln, 1994). When communities feel excluded or misrepresented, even well-intentioned policies risk being rejected.

Taken together, these findings suggest that public management in Yala must be more culturally responsive, locally grounded, and trust-oriented. Technical reforms alone are insufficient in a region where identity, history, and governance are deeply intertwined. A shift toward adaptive governance, informed by local participation and inclusive values, is necessary to align education policy with the needs of diverse communities. This aligns with the broader call for place-sensitive and peace-promoting public administration in fragile and multicultural regions.

### CONCLUSION

This study investigated how teachers, community leaders, and local officials in Yala, Thailand, perceive the role and effectiveness of public management in improving education, particularly in relation to teacher professional development and community engagement. The research found that, despite national education reforms aimed at decentralization and inclusivity, a significant gap persists between policy intent and local implementation. Participants highlighted the cultural and linguistic misalignment of teacher training programs, the underutilization of religious and community institutions in education planning, and a prevailing lack of trust and participatory governance. These findings directly address the research questions and demonstrate that public management in multicultural and conflict-sensitive regions must be adaptive, locally grounded, and inclusive. From a theoretical perspective, the study contributes to *Public Management Theory* by emphasizing the importance of cultural sensitivity and participatory mechanisms in educational governance. The use of *Constructivist* and *CBPR* frameworks further reinforced the value of community perspectives in shaping responsive public services. Rather than treating public management as a top-down administrative function, the study suggests that its success depends on fostering relationships of trust, acknowledging local identities, and co-constructing policy processes with community actors. This research was limited by its small sample size and the focus on a single geographic area, which may restrict the generalizability of findings. In addition, the sensitivity of the socio-political context may have influenced participants' willingness to speak freely, despite measures to ensure confidentiality and trust. These limitations underscore the need for further research that includes broader stakeholder representation and longitudinal analysis of reform outcomes in similar settings.

Based on the findings, the study recommends that public education policies in Yala—and in other culturally distinct regions—be redesigned to allow for greater local input in teacher training, curriculum development, and school governance. Mechanisms for sustained community engagement must move beyond consultation toward genuine collaboration. Future studies could explore the effectiveness of community-designed teacher training models, the integration of bilingual pedagogy into national policy, or comparative case studies across other multicultural regions in Southeast Asia. Strengthening culturally responsive governance in education not only improves learning outcomes but also contributes to social cohesion and peacebuilding in fragile contexts.

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