In the wake of their dramatic story of rescue from the flooded caves in Northern Thailand, which gripped the world for weeks, the 11 boys were ordained as Buddhist novices for “spiritual cleansing” and a “promise made by their families” in gratitude for their safe return and to remember one rescuer who died (“Thai cave boys,” 2018, para.6, para. 2; Lalit, 2018). Nevertheless, this gesture is more than just an act of faith or fulfilling a vow; it is a necessity for their psychological and mental health. The distraught boys needed to “retain some of the solitude of temple life, as the government has discouraged for the time being...
any interviews with them, wielding the threat of legal action under child protection laws” (Lefevre, 2018, para.7).

This event highlights the significance of a common practice in most Buddhist nations in Southeast Asia: the ordination of young boys into temples. It has been considered as a source of high prestige and a rite of passage for men. Interestingly enough, this religious-cultural system has been criticized for inflicting forms of discrimination. There are some observers who opined that temples are no longer safe for children as cases of sexual abuse have been reported and that it is difficult to prosecute the people involved as monastic life in temples is governed by a culture of fear, secrecy and impunity (Ekachai, 2019). Be that as it may, the tradition of boy novices will surely continue amidst those lingering sensitive issues—which a plethora of academic works have been extensively documented in its counterpart in the Catholic Church (Keenan, 2013; Terry, 2008; 2015; Terry & Ackerman, 2008).

Although the extant literature on Buddhism in Southeast Asia focused at great length on its historical evolution, distinct practices, developmental potential, and legacies (McDaniel, 2006; Ishii, 1986; Keyes, 1994; Swearer, 2010, 2013; Schober & Collins, 2012; Soucy, 2017; Okabe, 2014; McCargo, 2004), there is a dearth of scholarship on this specific Buddhist practice. This limited academic interest in boy novices is puzzling, considering its potential source of theoretical and comparative implications. Towards this end, we hope to examine the lived experience of boy novices in two Buddhist temples in Vietnam and Thailand. This comparative study aims to bring about a much more nuanced and richer understanding of this age-old tradition.

This study argues that the practice of boy novices developed among children certain positive skills associated with mindfulness. Instead of detrimental effects, interviewed boy novices revealed that their time in the temple made them more patient and persevering, especially in enduring the long hours of meditation and chanting of sutra. By allowing their voices to be heard and narratives to surface, we got a glimpse of the lifeworld of these boy novices. Overall, this comparative case study demonstrated that the boy novice tradition in both countries exemplified several defining features and salient provisions affirming the general principles enshrined in the UN convention on the rights of children. It ultimately underlines the continuing prominence of religion in contemporary Southeast Asia.

After this introduction, this paper will be organized as follows. The first part explains the framework and research method used in this study. It will discuss how the comprehensive framework of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) can serve as an effective heuristic lens in gauging children’s rights and assessing their impact on their overall well-being. The second part presents the comparative religious profile of Thailand and Vietnam—with a specific focus on its Buddhist practice. Situating the boy novice practice within the broader dynamics of how Buddhism developed in each country makes a fuller and more holistic analysis. The third part presents the results of the study. It will then discuss and analyze them using the framework. Lastly, the fourth part concludes the paper and identifies areas of future research.

**Framework and Research Method**

The UNCRC is an international human rights treaty that laid out the civil, economic, health, social, political, and cultural rights of children (U.N. General Assembly, 1989). UNCRC defines the child as a person under 18 years of age; however, this is largely contested, above other matters, by some participating states, which have a different threshold (Reynaert et al., 2009; Oestreich, 1998; Beigbeder, 2001). Since its adoption in 1989, 196 countries have ratified or abided by it (United Nations Children’s Fund [UNICEF], 2009). Fundamentally, the UN convention is composed of 41 articles that pertain to different kinds of rights. These rights can be classified under a rubric of interrelated themes (U.N. General Assembly, 1989; Beigbeder, 2001; UNICEF, 2009), such as:

1. **survival rights** – including the child’s right to life and the needs that are most basic necessities;
2. **development rights** – including the right to education, play, leisure, cultural activities, freedom of thought, conscience, and religion;
3. **protection rights** – to ensure children are protected against all forms of abuse, neglect, and exploitation; and
participation rights - which covers children’s freedom to express opinions, to have a say in matters affecting their own lives, and should have increasing opportunity to participate in the activities of society, in preparation for adulthood.

Specifically, The UNCRC put great emphasis on the following salient provisions:

Article 2: …each child within their jurisdiction without discrimination of any kind, irrespective of the child’s or his or her parent’s or legal guardian’s race, colour, sex, language, religion, political or other opinion, national or social origin, property, disability, birth or other status. …the child is protected against all forms of discrimination or punishment on the basis of the status, activities, expressed opinions, or beliefs of the child’s parents, legal guardians, or family members;

Article 3: …the best interests of the child shall be a primary consideration.;

Article 6: … every child has the inherent right to life…ensure to the maximum extent possible the survival and development of the child.

Article 12: …assure to the child who is capable of forming his or her own views the right to express those views freely in all matters affecting the child, the views of the child being given due weight in accordance with the age and maturity of the child. (U.N. General Assembly, 1989).

Taken together, these general principles have not only provided a clear vision that “promotes a world of peace, tolerance, equity, respect for human rights and shared responsibility—in short, a world fit for children” (UNICEF, 2009, p.1), but it also accentuated the need to care for children and its inalienable rights as a natural concern for all states, parents, relatives, and for the local community (Beigbeder, 2001). As such, this would include domestic institutions—religious in nature or otherwise. In this study, we will use such salient provisions on children’s rights as the heuristic tool in examining the practice of boy novices.

Children’s rights have become an important domain of study in the past decades due in large measure to the adoption of the UNCRC in 1989 (Reynaert et al., 2009). Despite the inherent problems in it, as some states became parties simply to refrain from being indifferent about children (Quennerstedt et al., 2018; Oestreich, 1998), the adoption is regarded as part of a broader “machinery of international humanitarian law” (Miljeteig-Olssen, 1990, p. 148) and “the global human rights industry’ (Stammers, 1999, p. 991).

Considering that there are documented tensions emanating from scholarly endeavors about children’s rights (Skelton, 2008; Bell, 2008; Morrow, 2008), this study follows the lead of Harcourt and Hägglund (2013) in pursuing what they call a “bottom-up perspective” to wherever children spend their daily life in order to bring about the meanings and contextualization of children’s rights (Reynaert et al., 2009). By starting where the children are, in this case in a religious setting, this study foregrounds their lifeworld to allow their voices to be heard as “seen through the lens of their everyday experiences of life” (Harcourt & Hägglund, 2013, p. 286).

To better examine the religious experience of boy novices, this study uses phenomenological qualitative research (PQR) as a research method. In its broadest sense, the phenomenological method aims to “describe, understand and interpret the meanings of experiences of human life” (Bloor & Wood, 2006, p. 129). It looks at questions about what it is like to experience a particular situation that will elicit concrete events and experiences (Todres & Holloway, 2004). As a research design and method, phenomenology has been widely employed in the social and health and medical sciences (Paley, 2016; Khan, 2014; Aspers, 2009; Sundler et al., 2019; Neubauer et al., 2019). Owing to its ability to “articulate transferable meanings of what makes an experience what it is” (Bloor & Wood, 2006, p. 130), phenomenological researches also witnessed application in related disciplines such as religion (Allen, 2005; Cox, 2010; Ryba, 2009; Blum, 2012) and education (Padilla-Diaz, 2015; Dall’Alba, 2009; Friesen et al., 2012; Bolton, 1979; Kim, 2012; Van der Mescht, 2004). This current study is a modest attempt to contribute to the growing body of literature that utilizes phenomenology as a mode of inquiry in clarifying religious phenomena and their implications toward education.
Consistent with the phenomenological methods of using in-depth interviews, field notes and narratives in data collection to produce a genuine description of the experiences that the children lived through, we acted as the “mediator between the voices and experiences of the research respondents and the broader community of interested people” (Bloor & Wood, 2006, p. 130). In doing so, several protocols and ethical considerations were observed, such as seeking informed consent from all respondents, anonymity in reporting, and scheduling of the interviews. Given that boy novices are under 18 years old, we sought permission from their respective Temple masters and senior monks, who graciously agreed so long as the interviews were not audio-recorded. Following the research ethics and practice in doing children research (Skelton, 2008; Bell, 2008; Morrow, 2008), we relied on their field notes during the whole fieldwork—a standard practice in doing observational study in qualitative research (Flick, 2018; Philippi & Lauderdale, 2018; Maharaj, 2016). The interview questions were centered around their reasons for entering the temples, the issues and concerns that each boy encountered while on the temple premises, and how they overcame the daily demands of monastic life while studying and being a child. Additionally, because this is a cross-country study, there was variation in terms of the mode of the interview. Although the local language was used in the personal interview in Vietnam, we relied on the translation of an English teacher who was present during the interview of each respondent in Thailand. In both countries, a total of 24 respondents were interviewed, that is, 16 boy novices (six in Vietnam, 10 in Thailand), six senior monks (three for each), and two lay persons (the English teachers in Thailand who also acted as the translator). Fieldwork was carried out from January to August 2018.

Comparative Religious Profile of Thailand and Vietnam: A Tale of Two Buddhist Nations

Conventionally, Buddhism in Thailand is considered as “Theravada”—to underscore its “southern” variety (McDaniel, 2006; Woodward, 2004; Mitchell, 2001), whereas Buddhism in Vietnam is labeled as “Mahayana”—to highlight its “northern” influence in particular from Confucian China (Van, 2019; Nguyen & Hoàng, 2008). However, recent scholarships argue that generally, Buddhism in Southeast Asia “defies rigid classification” because it is far more diverse and eclectic than previously thought (Swearer, 2010, 2013, p. 127; Schober & Collins, 2012). Nevertheless, it is essential to understand how Buddhism has evolved in each country to fully account for its historical development and institutionalization. In particular, this section will focus on how Buddhism has been integrated as part of the nation and state-building efforts in Thailand, on the one hand, while it has been “revived” as a result of competing ideologies during the colonial and post-colonial rule in Vietnam, on the other hand. In this manner, it not only shows how their distinct experience shaped the practice of recruiting boy novices and monkhood in both nation-states but also in adding rigor and nuance in the analyses that are not divorced from the overall religious landscape (Soucy, 2012).

Thailand

As part of the nation-building and social control process to suppress regionalism, the 19th-century Siamese kings Rama the Fourth (Mongkut) and Rama the Fifth (Chulalongkorn) made notable efforts to formalize the Buddhist ecclesiastical system and educational practices in Siam (former name of Thailand) and in their spheres of influence (McDaniel, 2006). Concrete measures as far as instituting ecclesiastical ranks, religious textbooks printed in Siamese script, the conduct of monastic examinations, the use and teaching of Pali Buddhist Canon, and teachers were sent to the rural and urban areas in Siam and its holdings—all these to shore up the country against foreign missionary influence, formalize the curriculum, and modernize the entire educational system (McDaniel, 2006; Ishii, 1986; Keyes, 1994). Not long after, monks and other high-educated religious leaders were brought to Bangkok to study at two new monastic universities (Mahachulalongkorn and Mahamakut). Interestingly, these two Buddhist schools serve both monks and laymen, underscoring the inclusive nature and extent of such institutions.

The rationale behind this official government policy is to address issues pertaining to access to education. Subjects were revised in the curricular program accordingly to cater to both religious courses and general courses. As a result, laymen and monks could attend the same schools from early childhood to higher education. Most of them were able to learn both professional subjects and theology either in
public schools or in monasteries (Ishii, 1986; Keyes, 1994). These all-encompassing “Buddhist” reforms also include students having the chance to study scripts in not only Thais but also Pali, the original language in Buddhist sutras. Financially, the King takes care of all fees for any students, provided they pass the exam to study in the institutions, which are equivalent to modern high schools or universities (Ishii, 1986; Keyes, 1994). As a consequence of these royally-supported religious reforms, Buddhism has been prominently figured and increasingly tied to the Thai state that has become its enduring “democratic” legacy (McCargo, 2004). Although the presence of Buddhist monks in officiating ceremonies and teaching the tenets of the Buddha goes much deeper, the intimate relationship between the state and monasteries became fully entrenched as an aftermath of this intensive reformation.

Concomitantly, the practice of “temple boys,” which is considered an important ordination ritual before achieving monk status, became the norm. Village temples were established and developed into centers of education and religion where it is common practice for “parents to send their sons to local Theravada temples to study the Buddhist sutras” (Hansen, 1999, p. 109). The boys (who were mostly between seven and ten years old) became novices, received new names, and started wearing the yellow robe (Hansen, 1999). Moreover, the whole enterprise gets the entire community to participate as “all villagers contributed financially to the celebration in the temple, and…in the village the boys now enjoyed higher status and respect through their connection to the temple” (Hansen, 1999, p. 110).

This practice stood the test of time and has remained to this day. Interestingly, despite its conspicuousness, it is an exceptionally understudied area. Scholars of Thai Buddhism are generally interested in the “forest revivalist movements,” which grew out as a result of “lax” Buddhist practice that emphasizes strict meditation and spiritual exercises (Lopez, 2016). Others are concerned about how monks survived in an age of rapid social changes and transformation (Okabe, 2014). There is, however, only scant attention on the practice of boy novices. In the ones that do take an active interest, it is tangentially looked at and perfunctorily viewed as an excuse for some people to escape military conscription (Bowie, 1998; 2017). This study hopes to address that gap.

**Vietnam**

Although Buddhism in Thailand has become intertwined with its monarchical state, Buddhism in Vietnam could not have been more estranged from its modern communist state. Considered as an opiate of the masses in its Marxist ideological parlance, religion was initially banned by the Communist Party of Vietnam. Taking a cue from its communist neighbor from the north, a similar kind of cultural revolution transpired in Vietnam, which had a deleterious impact on Buddhist local infrastructure and practice (Kojima & Badenoch, 2013).

It only changed after the government initiated a series of renovations in 1986 called as Đổi Mới. This renovation not only led to a series of social and economic changes instituted by the state that opened Vietnam to the market economy, but it also reduced restrictions on religions (Fjelstad & Hien, 2011). Since then, several religious groups that went underground have resurfaced or are being formed upon obtaining official recognition from the State. This policy is carried out to ensure that religious practices or rituals match the “legitimate interests of the majority”—a sensitive political matter which naturally was met with fierce domestic opposition (and international condemnation) for it restricts “freedom of religion” and violates human rights (United Nations Human Rights Office of the High Commissioner, 2014). The reticence of the government may stem from the period of political and religious tension between the South Vietnamese government and the civil resistance movement led chiefly by Buddhist monks in 1963–1965, otherwise known as the “Buddhist crisis” (Roberts, 1965). Notwithstanding, the said reforms allowed the practice of Buddhism (and other religions) in the country in a comparatively unimpeded manner. Although Buddhism came much earlier to Vietnam, it was not until its recent past (i.e., as a result of post-1986 reforms) that extensive practice of Buddhism became widely and openly observed, due in large measure to the “liberal” bent of a “socialist” state.

Despite the presence of Theravada tradition, Buddhism in Vietnam is classified as Mahayana to emphasize its Chinese influence, such as the Zen school (Nguyen & Barber, 1998; Soucy, 2017). Operating in a predominantly Confucian milieu (Nguyen & Hoang, 2008), Vietnamese Buddhism developed a syncretic dimension that integrates elements of Taoism and indigenous cultural values that appeal to the hearts of
the local population (Nguyen & Barber, 1998; Van, 2019). It is no surprise that despite the “elite” view of religion, that is, as imposed by the state, there exist pervasive “popular” religious expressions among Buddhist Vietnamese (Soucy, 2012). This manifests in the way people pray to the buddhas, chant sutras, offer incense to gods or ancestors, and have their fortunes read without being principally preoccupied with theological implications of their actions (Soucy, 2012). In other words, for most people in Vietnam, religion is “lived rather than experienced intellectually” (Soucy, 2012, p.16).

Much like its Thai counterpart, the practice of boy novices is also central in Vietnamese Buddhism as part of the normal coming of age (Kojima & Badenoch, 2013). However, there is a dearth of academic scholarship on this matter. The mainstream view is typically concerned with the effect of colonial domination, the horrific war interregnum, and the migration and dispersal of Vietnamese refugees (Fjelstad & Hien, 2011; Soucy, 2017). However, little scholarly pursuit has been carried out on the boy novice practice, especially in this contemporary period.

The next section discusses the findings which bring about the narratives of boy novices. It will be analyzed using the salient provisions of the UNCRC.

**Beyond Cultural Tradition: Diverse Intentions for Ordination to the Temple**

Given the persistence of the boy novice practice, it can be argued that the preservation of cultural tradition should be high on top of the primary motivating factors. Although such is expressed in terms of their filial piety, it is not the most important reason among the respondents. Generally, boy novices were driven to join the monastic life by sheer socioeconomic circumstances beyond their immediate control, that is, poverty, conflicts in their regions, and broken family relations, among others. One Vietnamese boy novice7 confided that his family is struggling financially and going inside the temple is a way for his family to manage their difficult situation at home. This is echoed by his fellow novice whose parents got divorced and he was sent to the temple because “no one can take care of me.”

For Thai boy novices, their motivation is a matter of life and death. In an interview3, one novice recalled how his family had to escape from their war-torn village for their safety. Although there were not many Buddhists in Southern Thailand (it is a minority), his family believed that entering the monastery would give him some form of sanctuary. Although some novices knew that living a monastic life was quite difficult8, they were convinced by their grandparents, relatives, and guardians to join the temple because it was for their own good. As revealed by the Senior Monk7, Southern Thailand has been facing security issues and terrorism, which is why most of them are taken in immediately to the temple for “refuge” from the conflict and the horrors of war.

Yet aside from these personal accounts of family tragedies, there are some who entered with sincere good intention as they are genuinely “attracted by the ceremonies, by the monks in their robes and their hands filled with donations.”9 Considering that Theravada Buddhism has a tradition of almsgiving which the monks would walk around in the communities and neighborhoods for people’s generosity, some of the interviewed kids were naturally drawn to them and even called them “idols.”9 In recounting their time before joining the temple, some boy novice would remember the time they “stay in front of our house, waiting for the monks to arrive, offer food to them, and having them blessed.”10 Others would mention that upon seeing the monks, they thought of them as having that “beam of light”11 which they wanted to emulate as well and thus asked their parents to join the temple. As a traditional religious practice, offering food to monks is part of being a good Buddhist. In an interview12, it was said that Thai Buddhists would earn merits for their generosity and kindness.

Although others are more motivated as they choose to be ordained because they like it13 and that it is a form of honor and pride for themselves and their family, some of the novices were ordained for only 7–10 days as a way of “showing respect and homage”14 to their deceased relatives or loved ones. This kind of reasoning is particularly strong among those Thai families that migrated abroad. Whether fulfilling an act of remembrance, an act of devotion, or to be closer to the traditional Buddhist practice of their ancestors, overseas Thai families send13 their children to the temple almost every summer. Interestingly, although some of them—particularly the eldest16, entered the monastery simply to escape military conscription, others became novices after being actively recruited
by visiting monks\textsuperscript{17} and not of their own volition. Some boys said that they had “no interest”\textsuperscript{18} in joining the temple, but their parents told them that it was an “opportunity to study junior high school.”\textsuperscript{19} Taken together, there are multifold dimensions as to how the boy novice tradition is practiced and observed.

**Trouble in Paradise? Adjusting to the Temple Life, Narratives of Bullying and Other Forms of Perceived Discrimination**

Adjusting to temple life is challenging enough for boy novices. For Vietnamese boy novices, their typical day begins at dawn—as they wake up and immediately chant the sutras. For Thai boy novices, their day starts with doing the early alms collection. Because of this early rise that most of them are not accustomed to, many of them fall asleep or are still sluggish.\textsuperscript{20} After that, they have breakfast and prepare themselves to go to school. Their meals are traditionally vegetarian food—which some boy novices complain about because some of them want to eat meat.\textsuperscript{21}

In addition, while at the school, most novices have to stay inside the premises for the entire day, and since no one can prepare their lunch, they would end up watching the other children eating meat. Unlike in Thailand where they have their own specific Buddhist schools in which boy novices get isolated from other kids, boy novices in Vietnam had to join the school with the lay children. This posed some concerns as they did not get along well with the other kids. One boy novice shared a story\textsuperscript{22} of how his lay classmates made fun of his bald head. It was also difficult for them to simply talk to their girl classmates.

Moreover, boy novices also cited instances of feeling insecure and jealous towards their fellow boy novices. Because most of the novices hailed from poor and working class families, there is bound to have socioeconomic class tension among them with those boy novices from middle-class to well-to-do families. As temples become the best option to have better education and living condition\textsuperscript{23} for those boy novices from poor socioeconomic backgrounds, there are certain occasions when novices with better socioeconomic profiles receive better gifts, better food from their family, and even better robes than others. Most importantly, although their parents cannot visit them\textsuperscript{24} and only get the chance to go home one time as some of them live in remote areas in Southern Thailand, novices from well-to-do families can see their parents often. In addition, it was mentioned\textsuperscript{25} by their teacher that boys that come from better socioeconomic backgrounds tend to have better academic performance, especially in foreign languages such as English and Chinese.

In the afternoons, the boys return back to the temple to do all related chores and tasks. They would go on tending to the maintenance of the temple until nighttime. After dinner, Thai boy novices will do the evening chanting and learn the Pali language; Vietnamese boy novices will be given time to do self-study (e.g., homework), do burning incense, and resume chanting sutras.

Given this somewhat rigid routine, some senior monks acknowledged that most of the boy novices are struggling to balance the demands of temple duties and academics. Not all of them are performing well in their classes, but the temple leaders do not require the boys to get high marks “as long as they pass academic subjects to finish their schooling.”\textsuperscript{26} This is especially the case during Buddhist holidays when the temple is filled with visitors and tourists and most of their time is spent on ceremonial preparations. Boy novices cited those busy times as affecting their performance,\textsuperscript{27} and it did not help that they had no friends in the class either. Interestingly, it was intimated\textsuperscript{28} that there were boy novices in the past who, after their time in the temple, performed better academically and got their university degrees.

**Children will be Children: Overcoming Difficulties Through Meditation**

Given their innocent age and the demands of monastic life, boy novices naturally longed for something most children want and deserve: time to play. Although they were given time to socialize and converse with their peers and even with lay children, to most of them, it is not enough.\textsuperscript{29} On average, they were only given 30 to 45 minutes per day—a small amount of time for normally growing and hyperactive children. As future monks, they are trained to be calm, a model for others, and to exercise restraint and control, which is why there is limited time for them to play around and is instructed to spend more time studying and memorizing the sutras.\textsuperscript{30}
temple, they were “extremely shy” in approaching strangers as the temple imposed regulations on them. One Thai boy novice fondly recalled that while they are allowed to speak to foreigners since they can practice their language and communication skills: “I am afraid of talking with the visitors for a long time because I cannot remember all the rules. I am afraid that I will do something wrong that a novice should not do.”

Eventually, most of them got used to the monastic life as they “have to adjust with it” as they did not want to return to life before entering the temple. Part of the ways they did to overcome their fears and cope with their condition was through meditation walks. This calms them down and brings their concerns to the enlightened one, as one Vietnamese boy novice said, “I usually offer flowers to the Buddha, asking for help. I keep coming to Buddha statues alone. The Buddha knows my heart and my mind.”

Another Vietnamese boy novice revealed that he sought assistance from the older novices and even the monks on how to deal with his anxieties, and they suggested a prayerful moment with the Buddha. This is echoed by Thai boy novices who were told that if they ever felt homesick, they just had to “offer water to the Buddha, talk to the Buddha. Sometimes, I sleep in the praying hall for the whole night.”

In addition, most senior monks would remind them to instill a long-term mindset as a way of putting their worries and troubles in their proper context. For instance, some of them would interpret their struggles inside the temple as an important step to “finish high school in the city, that is why staying at the temple is still the best choice for them.” For others, especially those from well-to-do families in Thailand, they contacted their relatives or family members through their phone to seek advice and guidance in those trying moments.

However, for those who really could not manage the temple life, they left. This is a big problem for the temple leaders and senior monks: turnover rate. In every 10 novices who entered the temple, only 1 or 2 of them stayed on average. In an interview with a senior monk in Mahayana Buddhist temple, he said some of his peers want to have a family, precisely why they left the monk life—to get married. Some have left to pursue and practice different careers, such as doing business, whereas others simply cannot find their “enlightenment” to continue with their monastic life. Whatever their reason for leaving the monastic life, some have returned to monkhood upon their retirement in the secular world.

Despite such challenges, the practice of boy novices continues to this day. The kind of solidarity that exists among the boy novices and the constructive reflective assistance that other novices and monks provided to the young boys eventually help them adjust to the monastic life. As one Vietnamese boy novice poignantly put it:

When I first arrived here, I cried a lot. I did not like the food. I struggle big time. But, eventually, I began to like it. Our daily routine of waking up early to do meditation, alms collection, and studying made me appreciate the kind of life monks have led. I became more patient, and I understand the values of perseverance. I think I want to become like them in the future.

Analysis and Discussion

Based on the narratives above, it can be argued that the Buddhist practice of boy novices in a Mahayana temple in Vietnam and the Theravada temple in Thailand possess certain dimensions that conform to the general principles of UNCRC. The manifold reasons revealed by interviewed boy novices that range from respect for cultural practices shaped by parental authority and paying homage to endure the dangers and perils of the outside world such as poverty, wars, and breakdown of basic family relations can be seen as essential aspects of achieving survival and protection rights for children.

The monks and religious leaders’ effort to provide shelter and education for these boys fulfill Article 6 of UNCRC, which ensures that every child has the inherent right to life and assures its survival and development. Although there were accounts of bullying voiced especially towards lay students, pangs of jealousy toward their peers, and complaints about the lack of having leisure time, the boys were able to handle them by seeking help and assistance from their fellow novices and the monks. And although these concerns do not necessarily constitute or fall within the definition of life-threatening discriminatory practices as stated in UNHCR Article 2, we argue that this must be properly dealt with because it may potentially have a long-standing impact on the children (Dupper, 2013). Existing studies argued on the importance of a child’s right to play as constituting a fundamental human
right (Davey & Lundy, 2011; Lester & Russell, 2010). As Lundy (2007, p. 931) argued, a commitment to encouraging children’s perspectives is “not an option which is the gift of adults, but a legal imperative which is the right of the child.”

Nevertheless, the initiative of the novices and the proactive approach from the temple leaders cultivated, to an extent, a nurturing environment that satisfies UNHCR Article 3 on achieving the best interests of the child. By simply raising their own concerns to their fellow novices and towards the senior monks underlines the commitment of the temple leaders to UNHCR Article 12. That is, children’s participation rights are upheld as they are free to express their opinions, which is vital for their cognitive development and formation as eventual adults. Most importantly, the daily routine expected of living in monastic life—the meditation, ceremonies, rituals, chanting, praying and the solitude which the boy novices were exposed to and mastering its craft—not only gave the children a new lease of life (i.e., to pursue their own dreams like finishing school, having a refuge from conflict, and living out from dire condition) but it developed in them a different mental attitude—one that allows them to cope and transcend from their physical and “worldly” struggles.

In general, the narratives of such a kind of transcendent skill that children honed over their time in the temple can be argued as a form of “mindfulness” strategy. As such, these observational findings provided anthropological and phenomenological evidence to reinforce the long-held suggested views in the extant clinical and psychological studies (Bishop, 2002; Grossman et al., 2004; Kabat-Zinn, 2003). Despite its narrow scope and dissimilar research design, the results of this comparative study provide empirical proof of the benefits of activities that engage the reflective and contemplative dimension of the mind complementing the findings of the vast body of research (usually done in randomized control experiments) on mindfulness or mindfulness-based interventions in schools (Parker et al., 2014; Zenner et al., 2014; Carsley et al., 2018; Saphthiang et al., 2019; Huppert & Johnson, 2010; Kuyken et al., 2013).

Concluding Remarks

This study did not only demonstrate that the practice of recruiting young boys to temples has been integrated or imagined by boy novices themselves but also how in the process; it facilitated a fulfillment of their basic rights as children. Arguably, the boy novice tradition in the Buddhist temples of Theravada, Thailand and Mahayana, Vietnam exemplified several defining features and salient provisions affirming the general principles enshrined in the UNCRC. Consequently, this study found out that the monastic life that the children have led allowed them to gain a mental mechanism that can regulate their emotional response to an otherwise “stressful” circumstance. Although such an internal operating system takes time to develop, it is nevertheless a necessary skill that has general implications for education.

Firstly, at this juncture of abnormal times brought about by a global health crisis, keeping a check on one’s mental health is absolutely vital. School administrators and psychology instructors could integrate and implement meditative-intervention programs to enhance student’s overall psychological well-being (Waters et al., 2015). Although some studies cautioned that its effects are, at best modest (Breedvelt et al., 2019), the prevailing scholarship generally shows a strong association between the frequency of mindfulness meditation interventions and decreased stress (Strait et al., 2020). Also, extant works demonstrate its link to personality variables such as agreeableness and emotional stability (Huppert & Johnson, 2010), increased feelings of calmness, relaxation and self-acceptance, and even reduction in tiredness and aches and pain (Broderick & Metz, 2009; Frank et al., 2015). Considering the distressing impact of the ongoing pandemic on educational settings affecting the extent and practice of learning and academic outcomes, students could help themselves gain a certain degree of mental grit and fortitude by engaging in meditative habits in their everyday routine.

Secondly, both religious and secular schools should actively integrate the UNHCR’s framework of children’s rights, especially their “right to participate” because it is crucial to their cognitive formation and personal development. Given that the ultimate goals of organizations such as the United Nations are for the attainment of sustainable human development, boy novices are being prepared to be mentally healthy citizens necessary to live in a more peaceful and safer world. Ultimately, the prominence of boy novice practice underscores the continuing relevance of religion in contemporary Southeast Asia.
Be that as it may, this study has obvious limitations, given the sensitivity of the subject matter. For future research, it would be interesting to conduct a tracer study of those boy novices and monks who left the temple. Do they have difficulties entering university? Are they currently working? Do they still practice meditation after leaving the temple? Answering such questions offers additional insights into the impact of their monastic training in navigating the challenges of everyday life outside the sacred grounds of houses of worship.

References


Notes

1 There are 12 of them, but the other one did not join the ceremony as he is a Christian. Also, their coach received monk’s orders. He was a boy novice before (“Thai cave boys,” 2018, para. 6, para. 2).

2 Ascertain its veracity is beyond the scope and main objective of this study.

3 Boy Novice # 1, Vietnam. 2018.
5 Boy Novice # 3, Thailand. 2018.
6 Boy Novice # 4, Thailand. 2018.
7 Senior Monk # 1, Thailand. 2018.
8 Boy Novice # 5, Thailand. 2018.
9 Boy Novice # 6, Thailand. 2018.
10 Boy Novice # 7, Thailand. 2018.
11 Boy Novice # 8, Thailand. 2018.
12 Senior Monk # 3, Thailand. 2018.
13 Boy Novice # 9, Thailand. 2018.
14 Senior Monk # 2, Thailand. 2018.
15 Senior Monk # 4, Thailand. 2018.
18 Boy Novice # 9, Vietnam. 2018.
21 Boy Novice # 2, Vietnam. 2018. However, for Thai boys they can have meat and whatever food the lay people offer but they are not allowed anymore to eat solid food after 13:00.
22 Boy Novice # 9, Vietnam. 2018.
23 Boy Novice # 4, Thailand. 2018.
25 English Teacher #1, Thailand. 2018.
26 Senior Monk # 6, Vietnam. 2018.
29 Boy Novice # 3, Thailand. 2018.
30 Senior Monk # 2, Thailand. 2018.
31 Boy Novice # 4, Thailand. 2018.
35 Boy Novice # 4, Thailand. 2018.
37 Boy Novice # 5, Thailand. 2018.
40 Boy Novice # 9, Vietnam. 2018.

Interviews

Vietnamese Respondents

A. Boy Novices

Boy Novice # 1, Vietnam. (2018). He is 5 years old and has spent at least a month in the temple. Interview by the authors, August 23. Mahayana Temple, Hue City, Vietnam.

Boy Novice # 2, Vietnam. (2018). He is 8 years old and has been in the temple for two years. Interview by the authors, August 24. Mahayana Temple, Hue City, Vietnam.

Boy Novice # 3, Vietnam. (2018). He is 13 years old and has been in the temple for 10 months. Interview by the authors, August 25. Mahayana Temple, Hue City, Vietnam.

Boy Novice # 4, Vietnam. (2018). He is 15 years old and has been in the temple for a year. Interview by the authors, August 26. Mahayana Temple, Hue City, Vietnam.

Boy Novice # 5, Vietnam. (2018). He is 15 years old and has been in the temple for a year. Interview by the authors, August 27. Mahayana Temple, Hue City, Vietnam.

Boy Novice # 6, Vietnam. (2018). He is 16 years old and has spent at least 9 months in the temple. Interview by the authors, August 28. Mahayana Temple, Hue City, Vietnam.

B. Senior Monks

Senior Monk # 1, Vietnam. (2018). He is 40 years old and has been in the temple for 25 years. Interview by the authors, August 27. Mahayana Temple, Hue City, Vietnam.

Senior Monk # 2, Vietnam. (2018). He is 40 years old and has been in the temple for 25 years. Interview by the authors, August 28. Mahayana Temple, Hue City, Vietnam.

Senior Monk # 3, Vietnam. (2018). He is 62 years old and has been in the temple for 40 years. He is the head of the temple. Interview by the authors, August 28. Mahayana Temple, Hue City, Vietnam.
Thai Respondents

A. Boy Novices

Boy Novice #1, Thailand. (2018). He is 11 years old and has been in the temple for about a year. Interview by the authors, January 15. Theravada Temple, Pathum-Thani Province, Thailand.

Boy Novice #2, Thailand. (2018). He is 11 years old and has been in the temple for about 9 months. Interview by the authors, January 15. Theravada Temple, Pathum-Thani Province, Thailand.

Boy Novice #3, Thailand. (2018). He is 13 years old and has been in the temple for about a year. Interview by the authors, January 16. Theravada Temple, Pathum-Thani Province, Thailand.

Boy Novice #4, Thailand. (2018). He is 11 years old and has been in the temple for about a year. Interview by the authors, January 16. Theravada Temple, Pathum-Thani Province, Thailand.

Boy Novice #5, Thailand. (2018). He is 12 years old and has been in the temple for about 10 months. Interview by the authors, January 17. Theravada Temple, Pathum-Thani Province, Thailand.

Boy Novice #6, Thailand. (2018). He is 13 years old and has been in the temple for 9 months. Interview by the authors, January 17. Theravada Temple, Pathum-Thani Province, Thailand.

Boy Novice #7, Thailand. (2018). He is 12 years old and has been in the temple for about a year. Interview by the authors, January 18. Theravada Temple, Pathum-Thani Province, Thailand.

Boy Novice #8, Thailand. (2018). He is 12 years old and has been in the temple for about two years. Interview by the authors, January 18. Theravada Temple, Pathum-Thani Province, Thailand.

Boy Novice #9, Thailand. (2018). He is 11 years old and has been in the temple for about two years. Interview by the authors, January 19. Theravada Temple, Pathum-Thani Province, Thailand.

Boy Novice #10, Thailand. (2018). He is 13 years old and has been in the temple for about two years. Interview by the authors, January 19. Theravada Temple, Pathum-Thani Province, Thailand.

B. Senior Monks

Senior Monk #1, Thailand. (2018). He is 43 years old and has been in the temple for 10 years. He is the senior monk who graduated from medical school. Interview by the authors, January 17. Theravada Temple, Pathum-Thani Province, Thailand.

Senior Monk #2, Thailand. (2018). He is 36 years old and has been in the temple for 16 years. He acts as the dorm manager. Interview by the authors, January 18. Theravada Temple, Pathum-Thani Province, Thailand.

Senior Monk #3, Thailand. (2018). He is 45 years old and has been in the temple for 15 years. He has a PhD in Education. Interview by the authors, January 19. Theravada Temple, Pathum-Thani Province, Thailand.

C. Teachers

English Teacher #1, Thailand. (2018). She is 53 years old and has been teaching in the temple for almost 2 years. Interview by the authors, January 19. Theravada Temple, Pathum-Thani Province, Thailand.

English Teacher #2, Thailand. (2018). She is over 60 years old and has been teaching in the temple for over 6 months. Interview by the authors, January 19. Theravada Temple, Pathum-Thani Province, Thailand.