

Bridging the Gap in Child Safeguarding: Teachers' Interpretation of Safeguarding Policies and Perceived Competence in Inclusive Schools (A Phenomenological Study)

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Abstract: This qualitative phenomenological study interprets the experiences of teachers who work with students with disabilities in inclusive schools in Malang, Indonesia. In the safeguarding context, although existing literature has extensively examined safeguarding policies and/or programmatic effectiveness, less attention has been paid to the psychological and professional burdens experienced by teachers within high-risk contexts of victimization faced by children with disabilities. To address this gap, in-depth semi-structured interviews were conducted with 20 teachers from inclusive primary and secondary schools. Data were analyzed using Reflexive Thematic Analysis (RTA) and interpreted through Bronfenbrenner's socio-ecological framework to situate teachers' experiences within interconnected micro-, meso-, exo-, and macro-level systems. Through three main themes, the findings illustrate how teachers interpret safeguarding challenges as embedded within structural and institutional constraints, including the absence of clear written Standard Operating Procedures (SOPs), limited competency-based training, and fragmented inter-professional collaboration within schools. Rather than attributing safeguarding difficulties to individual moral shortcomings, teachers' accounts highlight tensions arising from role ambiguity, elevated emotional labor, and systemic misalignment between national policy mandates and school-level implementation. Teachers also describe how they navigate these difficulties through adaptive agency, including developing informal networks and external support mechanisms to compensate for institutional gaps. These practices are interpreted as efforts to support professional role fulfillment while navigating the demands and risks associated with implementing child safeguarding in inclusive school settings.

Keywords: Child safeguarding; inclusive education; teachers; socio-ecology; structural burdens.

INTRODUCTION

Child safeguarding constitutes a fundamental obligation within educational systems, as mandated by international human rights policy such as the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (United Nations, 1989) and the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (United Nations, 2006). These frameworks explicitly recognize that students with disabilities face heightened and structurally embedded risks of victimization within school environments, which are consistently higher than those experienced by students without disabilities and manifest through bullying, neglect, and discriminatory practices (Rose & Gage, 2017; Ručman & Šulc, 2025). In Global South contexts such as Indonesia, these risks persist despite the formal adoption of child-friendly school initiatives, including *Sekolah Ramah Anak* and the establishment of Violence Prevention and Handling Teams. National monitoring data continue to report high levels of school-based violence (SIMFONI PPA, 2025), indicating a persistent gap between policy intent and everyday school practices. Research in Indonesia further indicates that parents report their children attending schools labeled as inclusive and safe for students with disabilities, highlighting formal commitments that do not always translate into lived safety in school environments (Subasno, Yulius, & Samulia, 2025). This condition positions students with disabilities not merely as subjects requiring reactive protection after incidents occur, but as a group necessitating proactive and systematic safeguarding embedded within educational systems.

Within this safeguarding context, teachers occupy a pivotal yet complex position as the primary actors responsible for translating policy commitments into school practices (Görzig et al., 2025; Lashley, 2023). Beyond their instructional duties, they are expected to recognize risk, prevent harm, and respond to incidents involving students with disabilities. However, when institutional guidance, written procedures, and professional development are limited, practice tends to gravitate towards child protection, understood as reactive, incident-driven responses, rather than child safeguarding, which emphasizes prevention, preparedness, and shared responsibility across the school community (Lashley, 2023; Waisath et al., 2024). This conceptual and practical disjunction places substantial psychological and professional demands on teachers, who must navigate ambiguous role expectations and uneven competence development in high-risk contexts. Consequently, safeguarding is frequently enacted through individual judgment and situational coping, rather than through coherent, school-wide systems that systematically support students with disabilities.

Despite the growing body of literature on child safeguarding in education, existing studies have predominantly focused on policy frameworks, program evaluations, or prevalence data, with limited attention to how safeguarding is interpreted and enacted by teachers in their professional practice. Empirical research that foregrounds teachers' lived experiences remains particularly scarce in relation to students with disabilities, whose safeguarding needs are often discussed at abstract policy or systemic levels rather than through the perspectives of frontline practitioners. Moreover, much of the safeguarding scholarship is situated in Global North contexts, particularly in the United Kingdom, offering limited insight into how safeguarding policies are negotiated within resource-constrained school systems in the Global South, where formal mandates may coexist with uneven institutional support. As a result, there remains an insufficient understanding of how teachers make sense of their safeguarding responsibilities, navigate the distinction between safeguarding and protection, and manage both professional and emotional demands when supporting students with disabilities in routine school settings.

In response to these gaps, this study aims to explore how teachers in Indonesian primary and secondary schools experience, interpret, and enact child safeguarding for students with disabilities in their everyday professional practice. Using a qualitative, phenomenological approach, the study foregrounds teachers' lived experiences to illuminate how safeguarding responsibilities are understood and negotiated within school contexts shaped by formal policy mandates and uneven institutional support. Rather than proposing a new theoretical model, this study offers contextually grounded empirical insights into the safeguarding-protection distinction in practice and into the professional and emotional demands encountered by teachers. By situating these findings within a Global South context, the study contributes to child safeguarding scholarship by expanding existing debates on implementation gaps and providing practice-oriented implications for strengthening inclusive safeguarding systems in schools, while illustrating how safeguarding practices are shaped across interconnected individual, organizational, and policy contexts.

METHOD

Research Design

This study utilizes a qualitative phenomenological design, underpinned by an interpretivist paradigm. This approach was selected to explore the lived experiences and subjective meaning-making (Creswell, 2015) of teachers regarding Child Safeguarding practices for students with disabilities in inclusive schools (Ayton et al., 2023; Horrigan-Kelly, 2016). This paradigm inherently acknowledges teachers as active agents who construct meaning and shape safeguarding practices within the school environment.

Research Setting

This study was conducted in Malang City, East Java Province. The research setting comprised 10 state mainstream schools (five primaries, five middle schools) across five sub-districts, all of which practiced inclusive education. These schools were recommended by the Malang City Education Office based on the high number and diversity of their students with disabilities.

Two of these schools (one primary, one middle) also utilized partial segregation classes, supported by SEN (Special Educational Needs) support teachers (GPK). In the primary school, this segregated class served students from all six year groups across most subjects, with one SEN support teacher; students joined regular classes for only two subjects. In the middle school, the segregation class, supported by three SEN support teachers, functioned as a support unit to develop students' independence or provide targeted support in specific subjects. At the start of the new academic year, one primary school had abolished its segregation class; consequently, students with disabilities were fully integrated and managed by their respective class teachers.

Participants

Participants were selected using purposive sampling based on four inclusion criteria: (1) the school currently enrolled students with disabilities; (2) the school reflected diversity in its student disability profile; (3) the teacher had current or previous experience teaching or supporting students with disabilities; and (4) the participant provided informed consent. In accordance with these criteria, 20 teachers agreed to share their professional experiences (as detailed in Table 1). These participants were considered sufficient to support analytic depth and interpretive richness for a phenomenology-informed study (Creswell, 2015) and for the application of Reflexive Thematic Analysis (RTA) (Ahmed, 2024, 2025; Braun & Clarke, 2006, 2012; Byrne, 2022)

Data Collection

Primary data were collected via semi-structured interviews conducted between March and May 2025. The interview protocol and instruments were peer-reviewed to ensure procedural consistency and question relevance (Creswell & Poth, 2021; Miles et al., 2014). Key areas of inquiry included: 1) Teachers' understanding of Child Safeguarding policy; 2) Challenges faced during implementation; 3) Perceived support needs; and 4) Strategies utilized by teachers. Although participant demographics (including years of service) are detailed in Table 1, the data were not specifically used as analytic categories in the thematic analysis.

Table 1. Participant's Demographics

Description	%
Gender	
Female (n=16)	80
Male (n=4)	20
Education	
Bachelor of Education (n=3)	15
Bachelor of Education – early childhood education & care (n=1)	5
Bachelor of Education – primary school (n=7)	35
Bachelor of Education – Physical Education (n=1)	5
Bachelor of Education – guidance & counseling (n=5)	25
Bachelor of Psychology (n=2)	10
Bachelor of Social Work (n=1)	5
Formal Teaching Experiences	
≤ 9 years (n=12)	60
≥ 10 years (n=8)	40
Teaching Experiences of Children with Disabilities (also in informal learning)	
≤ 9 years (n=16)	80
≥ 10 years (n=4)	20
Teaching Level	
Primary school (n=11)	55
Middle school (n=9)	45
Position	
Class teacher (n=8)	40
Subject teacher (n=1)	5
Guidance & Counseling (GC) teacher (BK), SEN support teacher for middle school (n=6)	30
SEN support teacher (GPK) for schools with segregation class; non-permanent contracts status (n=4)	20
Coordinator of SEN support teacher for a school with no segregation class (n=1)	5

Data Analysis

The data analysis proceeded through two interpretation phases, guided by six stages of Reflexive Thematic Analysis (RTA) (Ahmed, 2024, 2025). The first phase focused on close engagement with the data at the semantic level to identify patterns of meaning in participants' accounts. In the second phase, the analysis moved toward an in-depth, latent interpretation of these patterns, attending to underlying assumptions and contextual influences shaping teachers' experiences. The six RTA stages undertaken were: (1) data familiarisation, (2) coding, (3) generating initial themes, (4) reviewing themes, (5) defining and naming themes, and (6) producing the report.

Interviews were transcribed using a paid AI service; all transcripts were then manually verified for accuracy of text, language, and intonation. The NVivo 12 Pro software suite was utilized to support data organization and management. Finally, the resulting thematic structure was interpreted using an adapted version of Bronfenbrenner's Socio-Ecological Model as a post-analytic lens to situate teachers' experiences across interacting systemic levels.

Trustworthiness and Rigor

To ensure the trustworthiness and rigor of this qualitative study, several measures were implemented. First, to address interpretative subjectivity in the initial analysis, the researchers adopted an ongoing stance of reflexivity, recognizing their positionality and professional backgrounds as integral to the analytic process. Reflexive engagement supported the credibility of the findings by making interpretative assumptions explicit, rather

than by seeking researcher neutrality. Second, during the latent analysis phase, dependability and confirmability were supported by maintaining audit trails and analytic memos, which documented coding decisions, theme development, and evolving interpretations. These practices enhanced the coherence and transparency of the analytic process, supporting an interpretivist, reflexive thematic approach rather than aiming for bias elimination.

Finally, the detailed methodological description and the use of Bronfenbrenner's socio-ecological model to present the findings were intended to support transferability. This transparency allows readers to assess the study's potential applicability and conceptual contribution across different educational contexts, without implying statistical generalization.

Ethics Approval

This research has received Ethics Approval from the Research Ethics and Academic Integrity Committee of STP-IPI Malang under approval number: EC-021/IPI/XI/2024. All research procedures, including participant protection, informed consent, and data confidentiality, were conducted in accordance with the Ethical Research Guidelines of STP-IPI Malang. Informed consent was obtained from all participants following a full explanation of the research. Participation was entirely voluntary, and individuals were assured of their right to withdraw at any time without consequence.

Recognizing the sensitive nature of Child Safeguarding, stringent measures were implemented to ensure anonymity and confidentiality. All identifying information, including participant and school names, was anonymized using codes, and all data were stored securely. Any documentation required for publication, such as photographs, has been redacted to obscure faces and specific institutional identities.

The principle of harm minimization was paramount. Interviews were conducted in a supportive environment, and all interpretative findings are presented in a manner that avoids stigma and declarations of conflicts of interest.

FINDING AND DISCUSSION

Finding(s)

The analysis revealed three interrelated themes that capture how teachers experience, interpret, and navigate Child Safeguarding in inclusive school settings. Rather than functioning as isolated categories, these themes reflect different layers of teachers' everyday professional realities. To maintain analytical coherence, the findings are organized using Bronfenbrenner's Socio-Ecological framework, illustrating how teachers' actions are shaped by interactions across structural, organizational, relational, and individual levels.

1. Theme 1: Conceptions of Role and Policy Dislocation examines how teachers understand their safeguarding responsibilities and how gaps between policy intentions and school-level implementation shape their assessments and actions (Tables 2 & 3).
2. Theme 2: Risk Landscapes and Dual-Role Demands focuses on the challenges teachers encounter in their direct, day-to-day interactions with students, parents, and colleagues, highlighting the psychological and relational burdens embedded in safeguarding practice (Table 4).
3. Theme 3: Response Mechanisms and Adaptive Models explores how teachers respond to these challenges by developing coping strategies, exercising professional agency, and articulating the forms of systemic support they perceive as necessary for sustainable safeguarding (Table 5).

The following section elaborates on Theme 1, foregrounding teachers' lived understandings of Child Safeguarding at both individual and structural levels, and tracing how experiences of uncertainty and role strain are linked to broader patterns of policy dislocation.

Conceptions of Role and Policy Dislocation

Teachers consistently described uncertainty and hesitation when confronted with safeguarding situations involving students with disabilities, not due to a lack of moral commitment, but because of unclear procedures, blurred boundaries of responsibility, and limited guidance on appropriate action. Viewed through a socio-ecological lens, this uncertainty reflects a broader policy dislocation originating at the macrosystem level: although safeguarding protocols such as TPPK are formally mandated, they are rarely translated by school administrations (exosystem) into clear, written, and accessible Standard Operating Procedures (SOPs). The absence of shared SOPs undermines collaboration at the mesosystem level, resulting in fragmented and informal safeguarding practices, and ultimately leaves teachers at the microsystem level unsure how to act in everyday interactions with students with disabilities. As a consequence, safeguarding is enacted primarily through reactive Child Protection responses rather than proactive, planned prevention, a pattern closely linked to limited access to safeguarding information and insufficient understanding of the diverse and intersecting needs associated with different disabilities (Table 3).

Table 2. Conceptions of Role and Policy Dislocation

No.	Sub-Thematic	Illustrative Empirical Data	Psychology Implication	Sociology Implication
1	Conception of Safeguarding vs. Protection	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Teachers perceive a moral duty to protect students present at school. ▪ Teachers implement child protection as a reactive measure in response to incidents, driven by this duty. 	Role Conflict: A gap between a perceived moral duty (protection) and the lack of formal tools (safeguarding) forces teachers into a reactive stance.	Macrosystem Deficit: A systemic failure to provide clear safeguarding guidance forces teachers into a 'survival mode', compelling them to default to reactive protection.
2	Regulation and the Structural SOP Gap	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ No detailed, structured, or written Child Safeguarding SOPs are known to teachers. ▪ Policy awareness is limited to the general school vision and mission. ▪ General lack of awareness regarding the specific TPPK (see Table 3). ▪ The TPPK is perceived as a specialist-only team. ▪ Policies are communicated orally by school leadership, not formally disseminated. ▪ Reliance on generic student conduct books or the teacher's code of ethics. ▪ Limited school operational funding. 	Diminished Perceived Control: Minimal policy/SOP dissemination reduces teachers' sense of predictability and control over high-risk situations, thereby limiting professional self-efficacy.	Implementation Dislocation: Safeguarding implementation fails due to the absence of SOPs, poor policy dissemination, and financial constraints that impede teacher training and the provision of adequate resources.

No.	Sub-Thematic	Illustrative Empirical Data	Psychology Implication	Sociology Implication
3	Internalized Stigmatizing Norms and Culture	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Low awareness/knowledge of disability (e.g., fear of incompetence, or viewing students with disabilities as burdensome). ▪ Low collegial empathy (Stereotype: students with disabilities are the sole responsibility of SEN support teachers or are 'classroom disruptors'). ▪ Absence of adequate training, or failure by trained teachers to disseminate knowledge/skills to colleagues. 	Role-Burden Rationalization: An erosion of self-efficacy and a fear of failure leads teachers to use stereotypes to rationalize and transfer responsibility to specialist (SEN) staff, thus reducing personal accountability.	Mesosystem Pathology: Dysfunctional school social norms inhibit collegial collaboration (mesosystem). This is rooted in a lack of unified training required to challenge stigmatization and align professional perceptions.
4	Admissions Policy Implications: The Zoning Law Impact	Admissions policy based on 'zoning' places schools in 'red zones' (high-risk areas), perceived to increase incidents of harassment and violence.	Increased Role-Stress: Teachers experience additional pressure from managing social risks originating from exosystem factors (the zoning environment).	Macrosystem Vulnerability: The zoning policy (macrosystem), when implemented without adequate social support (exosystem), creates new vulnerabilities within the school micro-environment.
		Deliberate non-use of the 'disability affirmation' pathway to achieve <i>de facto</i> inclusion.	Ideological Motivation: Intrinsic motivation driven by a 'pure' ideal of inclusion. Staff feel equipped to serve diverse needs without specific regulation, enhancing their collective efficacy.	Macrosystem Negotiation: The school engages in 'bottom-up' implementation, rejecting potentially stigmatizing labels (the affirmation pathway) to achieve genuine equality of access.
		The school offers the affirmation pathway, but parents opt for the standard zoning pathway.	Information Asymmetry: The school lacks specific information about the student's needs (when admitted via zoning), significantly increasing the teacher's cognitive load.	Stigma Impact: The affirmation pathway (macrosystem) is perceived as 'labeling'. Parents avoid it to protect their child from anticipated mesosystem stigmatization.

Vulnerability of Specific Roles

This gap was experienced most acutely by teachers in structurally vulnerable roles within schools, particularly SEN support teachers (GPK) and those with non-permanent employment status (no state-employed SEN support teachers were available for comparison). These teachers reported uneven collegial support when assisting students with disabilities, often feeling that responsibility was not shared equitably with class teachers. This pattern suggests that teachers' cognitive gaps and role conflicts are shaped more by limited formal guidance and an internal school culture that does not consistently support collaborative safeguarding, rather than by individual capacity. Primary school teachers appeared to experience this gap more frequently than their middle school counterparts. Across participants, 40% reported inadequate policy support and described responding to safeguarding concerns through immediate, teacher-initiated child protection actions

triggered by unforeseen emergency incidents; notably, these experiences were disproportionately concentrated among primary school teachers (Table 3).

Exacerbating Factors: Stigma and External Risks

The policy gap was further exacerbated by an internal culture of stigmatization at the mesosystem level. Several teachers (four SEN support teachers and one class teacher) described a limited sense of shared responsibility among colleagues across classrooms, particularly toward students placed in SEN resources provision (including segregation, integration, or preparatory classes), which constrained collaborative safeguarding practices. In addition, four teachers identified a broader macrosystem risk linked to the school admissions zoning policy, noting that safeguarding risks persisted even in schools that had implemented disability affirmation pathways, as their catchment areas were located within ‘red zone’ communities identified by the National Narcotics Agency (BNN) as vulnerable to violence. This contextual exposure was perceived as heightening the risk of harassment among students, while only one of the 20 participants reported that their school did not apply the disability-affirmation pathway intended to promote educational equity.

Despite these structural and cultural constraints, not all teachers were aware that the formal Child Safeguarding protocols under the TPPK were publicly available and accessible through the national education data system (DAPODIK), as outlined in Table 3. In the absence of clear and consistently disseminated documentation, participants described relying on a strong sense of personal responsibility, often framing their role in parental terms. This orientation was reinforced primarily through oral guidance from head teachers and disciplinary staff rather than through clearly recognized written policies. In mainstream schools without dedicated SEN support teachers (GPK), safeguarding support was additionally sustained through locally developed program modifications, initiated by schools as practical responses to the TPPK mandate, such as ‘No Bullying Cadres’ and ‘Grace Students on Tuesday’ (Table 3).

Table 3. Teachers’ Knowledge of Prevention and Intervention

Indicator	Details of Teacher Knowledge and Resources	Primary Sch. Teacher (n)	Middle Sch. Teacher (n)	Frequency %
Formal Protocol Awareness	Awareness of the TPPK - Child Safeguarding Protocol Team	2	1	15
Proactive Mechanisms	Modification of prevention strategies into School Innovation Programs (e.g., "Against Bullying Campaign")	5	1	30
Existing Written Guidelines	Reliance on the Code of Conduct Book/ <i>Buku Tatib</i> (as the primary formal guidance tool)	4	7	55
Absence of Proactive Policy	Only use of reactive response or Child Protection measures, with no formal Child Safeguarding policy/program/mechanism/guideline established	6	2	40

Risk Landscapes and Dual-Role Demands

The second theme addresses the phenomenological dimensions and sociological pressures experienced by teachers as primary Child Safeguarding teachers. Teachers reported a significant psychological burden and high daily demands when interacting with students (microsystem) and engaging with parents or colleagues (mesosystem). This burden was exemplified through accounts of high cognitive load, as teachers described managing complex behaviors of students with disabilities, such as internalized distress or emotional dysregulation, sudden aggression towards peers or staff, stimming, syndrome-related implications, or seizure-related episodes, and navigating the perceived impact of these behaviors on students' learning and participation (Table 4). These experiences were frequently described in contexts where teachers perceived limited access to training and resources. Such conditions were accompanied by expressions of reduced confidence in their safeguarding role. Furthermore, teachers reported role ambiguity regarding the boundaries between parents and the school, which intensified their sense of role-related stress. This ambiguity was described in relation to parental behaviors such as overprotectiveness, concealment of a child's condition, limited educational understanding, inconsistent support for therapeutic interventions or positive discipline, and disregard for feedback from teachers.

Table 4. Risk Landscapes and Dual-Role Demands

No.	Sub-Thematic	Illustrative Empirical Data	Psychology Implication	Sociology Implication
1	Cognitive and Structural Burdens of Supporting Students with Disabilities	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Complex student behaviors and co-occurring conditions (e.g., high emotional needs, puberty-related issues, syndromes, brain seizures, stimming, unprovoked aggression, sudden destruction of property). ▪ Inadequate reasonable accommodation (e.g., students carried by parents to upper-floor classrooms; non-accessible toilets), linked to financial constraints (Theme 1). ▪ Poor collegial collaboration (SEN support teachers [GPK] feeling ignored by class teachers, or vice versa); teachers report fatigue from a lack of shared responsibility. ▪ The Head Teacher's personal commitment is not formalized into school-wide policy. 	Cognitive Load: Teachers experience information and behavioral management overload without adequate tools. This triggers professional frustration and diminishes self-efficacy.	Lack of Reasonable Accommodation (Exosystem): The school's structural failure to provide requisite infrastructure and training (exosystem) manifests as an acute burden on individual teachers (microsystem).
2	Role Boundary Ambiguity (Parent-School Relations)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Parents acting as 'shadow teachers' (e.g., coddling, completing student's work). ▪ Parents engaging in unilateral or confrontational actions. ▪ Parents are unresponsive to school communication. ▪ Lack of parental support for therapeutic interventions. ▪ Uncommunicated changes to student pick-up/drop-off arrangements. ▪ Parents withholding information regarding their child's disability. 	Boundary Conflict and Role Stress: Teachers experience significant stress due to the ambiguous boundaries of authority and responsibility between the school and parents in managing students' needs and protecting them.	Dysfunctional Mesosystem: A breakdown in communication and trust between the two most critical systems (school-family) undermines and confuses collective safeguarding efforts.

In summary, these sustained psychological pressures and role ambiguities constituted the immediate conditions under which teachers reported developing adaptive response mechanisms to maintain safeguarding practices for students with disabilities in the absence of consistent institutional support.

Response Mechanisms and Adaptive Models

The third theme illuminates how teachers described responding to and adapting within the context of the previously identified systemic dislocations and limited institutional support. While their initial responses to safeguarding incidents were reported as largely reactive, centered on immediate protection and partial resolutions, teachers also articulated a set of adaptive response models that extended beyond incident management and functioned as deliberate strategies to sustain safeguarding practice. These strategies served as forms of collective coping and included efforts to upskill independently and to develop external support networks, such as seeking assistance from psychological services or engaging in informal SEN support teacher (GPK) associations. Such upskilling was described as significantly more challenging for non-permanent teachers, who reported exclusion from systemic support programs reserved for state-registered staff. Beyond these coping practices, participants consistently expressed strong intrinsic motivation for broader systemic and cultural change. They articulated aspirations to move beyond ad hoc responses and towards more predictable and supportive safeguarding environments. In articulating these adaptive models, participants also formulated explicit recommendations for systemic and cultural change, identifying the need for clear, accessible, and well-disseminated Child Safeguarding SOPs; ring-fenced financial support prioritized for disability provision; regular, mandatory, school-wide training that enables cross-staff dialogue on safeguarding and disability; and a genuinely embedded culture of shared responsibility across all school staff. Participants described these conditions as essential to fulfill their dual roles as both educators and protectors in a sustainable manner.

Table 5. Response Mechanisms and Adaptive Models

No.	Sub-Thematic	Illustrative Empirical Data	Psychology Implication	Sociology Implication
1	Reactive Incident Management in the Absence of Formal Guidelines	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Evaluations are conducted by the Head Teacher but remain partial and fail to inform new, written preventative policies. ▪ Minor incidents are resolved reactively and informally (e.g., direct teacher-student or teacher-parent communication) without formal reporting. ▪ Teacher access to independent training (e.g., GTK app), but this is often restricted to state-registered staff. 	Inhibited Organizational Learning: The ad-hoc response style inhibits collective learning and reflective practice. It reinforces the perception of protection as an incidental, reactive duty rather than a planned, safeguarding one.	Feedback Loop Failure: Incidents fail to translate into preventative policy (a mesosystem failure). The feedback process remains purely vertical (teacher-to-leadership) and closed, preventing horizontal dissemination or systemic change.
2	Proactive Development of External Support Networks	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Proactive prevention (e.g., positive habit-building from Year 1). ▪ Teachers consciously avoid sarcastic or discriminatory language. § Publicly celebrating the achievements of students with disabilities. 	Professional Agency and Coping: Teachers demonstrate significant adaptive competence and agency. They proactively construct an external support ecosystem to	Construction of an Alternative Exosystem: Teachers are independently sourcing and creating external resources (an alternative exosystem) to address the failures of the formal school

No.	Sub-Thematic	Illustrative Empirical Data	Psychology Implication	Sociology Implication
		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Collaboration with external agencies (e.g., psychology services, <i>shadow teacher</i> providers). ▪ Support from informal SEN support teacher (GPK) networks. § Support from other subject teachers, school staff, and the Head Teacher. 	compensate for internal organizational deficits.	(mesosystem) and policy (macrosystem) structures.
3	Demand for Systemic and Cultural Transformation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ A call for clear disability affirmation pathways or for all schools to be 'diversity-ready'. ▪ Need for adequate reasonable accommodation (e.g., resource rooms, wheelchair access) and in-school specialists (e.g., psychologists). ▪ A safe school climate where students (victims or bystanders) feel empowered to report incidents. ▪ Need for consistent, written SOPs, disseminated to all staff and parents, that transcend changes in school leadership. ▪ Demand for genuine <i>shared responsibility</i> and collaboration between all stakeholders (SEN staff, class teachers, leadership, and parents). 	Need for Control and Predictability: This articulated demand reflects a fundamental psychological need for professional control, perceived safety, and collective support within the workplace environment.	Demand for Macrosystem Reform: These demands collectively function as a 'bottom-up' blueprint for reform. They call for regulation (macrosystem) and a culture of shared responsibility (mesosystem) to be fully operationalized.

Discussion

Interpreting Professional Duty amidst Policy Dislocation

The first thematic finding illustrates how teachers in this study interpreted their professional duty within the microsystem as an obligation to ensure that students are not neglected and that their rights are upheld (Sharley, 2020). Participants described safeguarding as encompassing the protection of students from harassment, abuse, and violence by any party within the educational environment. In this sense, teaching was understood not merely as a pedagogical role, but as a profession carrying a specific legal and moral responsibility within the broader child safeguarding framework (Görzig et al., 2025; Mathews, 2014). Consistent with inclusive education principles that emphasize entitlement to protection and support for all students (Andriana & Evans, 2020; Obrovská, Svojanovský, & Sharma, 2025), safeguarding was interpreted as a universal obligation aimed at fostering safety and freedom from fear for every learner (Chambers, Cantrell, & Booth, 2021).

Across participants' accounts, safeguarding was not experienced as a clearly delimited professional task, but as a moral and relational duty negotiated within fragmented policy environments. Teachers consistently interpreted safeguarding expectations as formally mandated yet insufficiently operationalized, producing a strong sense of professional obligation without commensurate institutional scaffolding. Importantly, participants did not describe policy as absent. Rather, safeguarding policy was understood as present but

displaced, articulated at the regulatory level, yet weakly translated into everyday school practice.

This interpretation aligns with socio-ecological perspectives that conceptualize professional practice as shaped through interactions across macro-, exo-, and microsystem levels. Within the context of inclusive education, teachers' narratives suggest that safeguarding duties are understood through the convergence of national policy directives, school-level capacity, and classroom-level realities. Crucially, participants did not interpret safeguarding difficulties as evidence of professional negligence. Instead, they framed their experiences as indicative of policy dislocation, in which institutional expectations exceeded the availability of procedural guidance, training opportunities, and material support. At the macrosystem level, teachers referred to the existence of government-issued child protection guidelines. However, their accounts suggest that these frameworks were not always experienced as coherently understood or operationally accessible within their specific school contexts. Inadequate financial support and periods of policy transition were interpreted as constraining opportunities for systematic safeguarding training and the development of written standard operating procedures at the exosystem level. These conditions were perceived as shaping uneven collaboration with parents and colleagues at the mesosystem level.

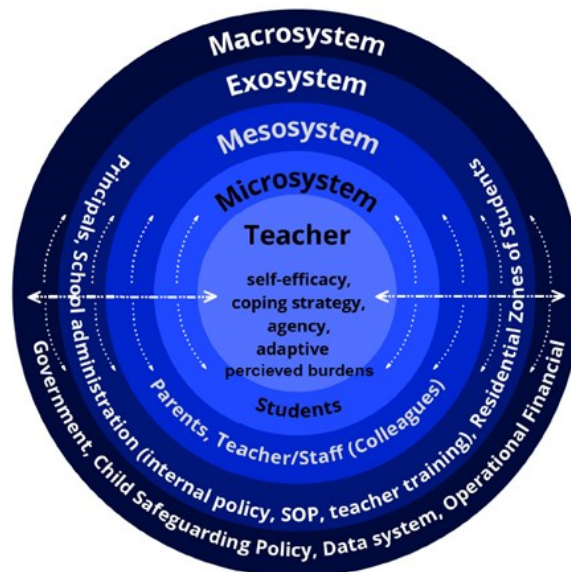


Figure 1. Teachers' interpretive positioning of safeguarding within multi-level policy and school contexts

[This figure presents a conceptual synthesis of teachers' lived interpretations of safeguarding challenges. It does not depict causal relationships but illustrates how participants made sense of safeguarding responsibilities as negotiated across policy, institutional, and classroom contexts. Arrows indicate perceived relational influence as interpreted by participants, not causal effects.]

Within this interpretive frame, safeguarding was experienced as creating a cognitive gap, a space of uncertainty between policy expectations and practical guidance. Participants described responding to safeguarding concerns through reactive, case-specific judgment rather than through planned, preventive practices. From an interpretive phenomenological standpoint, these accounts do not claim that policy arrangements cause safeguarding failure. Rather, they illuminate how teachers make sense of safeguarding responsibilities when

policy coherence is perceived as fragmented, leading to safeguarding being interpreted as an emergency-oriented framework rather than an embedded institutional culture. This ambiguity was experienced as emotionally and mentally taxing, echoing prior findings that link teachers' emotional responses to their perceived capacity to enact child protection responsibilities (Draugedalen, 2023).

A similar pattern of interpretation emerged regarding student admissions systems that lacked a clearly articulated disability-affirmation pathway. Teachers described how schools, often motivated by strong commitments to inclusive ideals, accepted students with disabilities through general, zoning, or academic merit-based pathways. While these decisions were interpreted as ethically aligned with inclusion, participants also noted that such pathways frequently failed to provide sufficient information to anticipate support needs or organize reasonable accommodations. When admissions decisions were perceived as administratively under-specified or unilaterally driven by parental choice, teachers experienced an intensification of cognitive and professional demands in the classroom.

Taken together, this theme suggests that, as teachers interpret it, safeguarding operates within an ambiguous institutional landscape that generates a dual professional burden. Participants described being required to simultaneously manage students' support needs, negotiate parental expectations, and accommodate the workload implications for colleagues. While safeguarding frameworks are designed to protect students, teachers in this study interpreted these arrangements as offering limited protection for educators themselves, particularly when working with students with disabilities. This interpretive tension provides a critical foundation for understanding the phenomenological burden and role duality explored in Theme 2.

The Phenomenology of Risk and Role Duality

This second theme examines how teachers in this study interpreted the psychological and operational burdens associated with safeguarding at the microsystem level. Participants described their safeguarding responsibilities as unfolding within conditions shaped by financial constraints at the macrosystem level and limited regulatory and support structures at the exosystem level. Rather than framing these conditions as direct causes, teachers interpreted constrained access to training and infrastructural support as intensifying the cognitive demands of their work. In the absence of specialized safeguarding and disability-related preparation, participants articulated a heightened sense of professional vulnerability that shaped their confidence and perceived self-efficacy.

A salient theme across teachers' accounts was the phenomenological burden associated with safeguarding students with disabilities, particularly in relation to perceived risk and role duality. Participants described navigating simultaneous identities as educators, caregivers, behavioral regulators, and informal safeguarding agents, with no clear boundaries among these roles. This role multiplicity was experienced as emotionally demanding, especially when safeguarding decisions carried potential legal, ethical, or relational consequences. Teachers' narratives revealed that the burden they experienced was not attributable to workload alone, but to the moral weight of decision-making under conditions of uncertainty.

Teachers interpreted safeguarding risk not solely in terms of student vulnerability, but also as a form of professional exposure. The absence of written procedures and formal protection mechanisms heightened teachers' awareness of personal accountability, intensifying emotional labor. These interpretations resonate with scholarship on emotional labor in teaching and inclusive education, which highlights how care-oriented roles tend to

expand under conditions of institutional ambiguity (Bastart, Rohmer, & Popa-Roch, 2021; Mantey, 2017; Odeh & Lach, 2024).

In practice, participants described managing a wide range of daily responsibilities, including designing differentiated instruction, organizing reasonable accommodations, mediating peer-to-peer discrimination, addressing collegial stereotyping, and responding to the unpredictable manifestations of students' diverse conditions, such as associated behaviors, co-occurring syndromes, seizures, or other neurological impairments. These overlapping demands were interpreted as placing substantial cognitive and emotional strain on teachers attempting to enact safeguarding within inclusive environments.

Importantly, teachers did not frame safeguarding challenges solely in relation to student protection. Instead, their accounts foregrounded a perceived lack of planned protection for teachers and the wider school community. Participants described instances in which students with disabilities engaged in aggressive behavior towards peers or staff, experiences that teachers interpreted as revealing gaps in institutional safeguards for all parties involved (McLaughlin, Byers, & Vaughan, 2015; Mishna, 2003). Within this interpretive frame, such situations were understood not as individual failures, but as manifestations of insufficiently articulated institutional roles and responsibilities.

Parental interactions further shaped teachers' experiences of the safeguarding burden. Participants described parental boundary-setting or resistance to school-based interpretations of students' needs as contributing to heightened anxiety and uncertainty in safeguarding decision-making (Lutovac, Keränen, Körkkö, Uitto, & Clandinin, 2024). These dynamics were interpreted as reflecting information conflicts between pedagogical approaches adopted by schools and parents' understandings of a child's condition, contributing to strained mesosystem relationships characterized by limited trust and communication.

From a phenomenological standpoint, the burden described by participants reflects how safeguarding is lived rather than prescribed. Teachers did not depict themselves as overwhelmed by workload per se, but by the emotional and ethical demands of safeguarding decision-making under conditions of institutional ambiguity. These interpretations align closely with Theme 1, in which safeguarding was understood as a professional obligation negotiated within dislocated policy environments. Together, these themes highlight how the absence of clear operational boundaries shapes teachers' experiences of dual responsibility, reinforcing the need to examine safeguarding not only as a student-protection mechanism, but also as an institutional framework that structures professional risk.

Navigating Systemic Deficits: Practitioner Agency and Adaptive Strategies

This third theme examines how teachers in this study interpreted and enacted professional agency in response to perceived systemic gaps in safeguarding infrastructures, including the absence of formal SOPs, limited training opportunities, and constrained collaborative mechanisms. Participants described incident management within their schools as largely situated at the microsystem level, characterized by ad-hoc and reactive responses. These responses were typically confined to the immediate actors involved, such as the student, teacher, and occasionally parents or the Head Teacher, and were not consistently translated into broader institutional learning or procedural revision.

Despite these constraints, teachers' narratives also revealed forms of practitioner agency and adaptive strategy. Participants spoke of informal peer consultation, heightened personal vigilance, and improvisational decision-making as ways of compensating for what they perceived as institutional gaps. These practices were not framed as ideal or sustainable solutions, but as pragmatic responses to safeguarding expectations that were experienced as

under-specified at the organizational level. Within this context, safeguarding was understood as a responsibility requiring continual situational judgment rather than adherence to clearly articulated procedures.

In socio-ecological terms, these adaptive practices illustrate how actors at the microsystem level actively negotiate systemic limitations rather than passively absorbing them. Within inclusive education scholarship, such forms of agency are often interpreted as expressions of professional commitment, while simultaneously signaling structural insufficiencies that necessitate compensatory labor. Teachers in this study interpreted their adaptive practices as necessary for immediate student protection, even as they acknowledged the personal and professional risks associated with acting without formal procedural backing.

One prominent expression of agency involved teachers positioning themselves as behavioral and ethical role models within their classrooms. Participants described consciously avoiding sarcastic or discriminatory language, integrating disability awareness into everyday teaching, offering positive reinforcement, and establishing clear behavioral or learning agreements with students. These practices were interpreted as efforts to cultivate safer classroom environments and align with pedagogical understandings of modeling as a protective practice (Draugedalen, 2023).

Beyond classroom-level strategies, teachers described extending their agency by constructing external and semi-formal support networks to manage cognitive load and role conflict. Participants reported initiating communication through Head Teachers, establishing informal inter-school SEN support teacher (GPK) networks, and collaborating with external agencies when available. These actions were interpreted as compensatory mechanisms that supplemented the predominantly informal, oral guidance provided by school leadership on violence prevention and safeguarding.

However, participants also articulated clear limits to the effectiveness of such agency. Students' fear of reporting incidents (Wei, Richards, & Graber, 2024) was interpreted as a significant psychological barrier that constrained investigative processes and reinforced uncertainty. Teachers further described their perceived efficacy at the microsystem level as highly contingent on mesosystem dynamics, including parental perceptions and collegial support. Unsupportive parental responses (Knopf & Swick, 2007) and limited collaboration were experienced as weakening collective safeguarding efforts, despite individual initiative.

Crucially, these findings should not be read as advocating individual resilience or practitioner adaptability as substitutes for institutional responsibility. Instead, they point to a pattern in which safeguarding becomes individualized through necessity rather than design. From an interpretive perspective, teachers' accounts suggest that safeguarding effectiveness is understood to depend less on individual disposition than on policy mechanisms that enable shared responsibility. These mechanisms, including written SOPs, role clarification, structured training, adequate resources, and formal parent-school mediation pathways, emerge from participants' interpretations as critical points of alignment between policy intent and lived practice, rather than as prescriptive solutions imposed from above.

Consistent with prior research positioning teachers as educators, socialization agents, and school-level managers who play a role in preventing and responding to violence (Burger, Strohmeier, & Kollerová, 2022), this theme illustrates how practitioner agency functions as an adaptive response to policy dislocation. Rather than resolving safeguarding challenges, such an agency illuminates the conditions under which safeguarding is sustained, negotiated, and constrained within specific institutional contexts.

Limitations of the Study

Whilst this study provides rich phenomenological insights, several limitations must be acknowledged.

First, the findings are not statistically generalizable. As a qualitative study utilizing a purposive sample, the experiences of these 20 teachers in 10 state mainstream schools in Malang City cannot be assumed to represent all teachers in Indonesia. Contexts within private schools, designated special schools (SLB), or rural districts may present entirely different financial, cultural, and policy-related conditions that influence safeguarding practices in distinct ways.

Second, the sample of SEN support teachers (GPK) included in this study primarily consisted of those on non-permanent teachers. Consequently, the perspectives of state-employed (ASN) SEN support teachers, who may experience different levels of job security, authority, and access to institutional resources, were not captured, limiting comparative insight into how employment status intersects with safeguarding responsibilities.

Third, the study relied exclusively on teachers' interview-based accounts. While this approach is well aligned with phenomenological inquiry, the findings reflect participants' situated interpretations and meaning-making processes rather than objective assessments of policy implementation or institutional effectiveness. The absence of classroom observations or document analysis constrains opportunities for methodological triangulation that might have illuminated how articulated understandings align with everyday practices. Furthermore, the study focused solely on teachers' perspectives; incorporating the voices of students with disabilities, parents, and headmasters would provide a more comprehensive understanding of the safeguarding ecosystem.

Despite these limitations, the study's strength lies in its in-depth, bottom-up interpretation of teachers' lived experiences, offering critical insight into the structural conditions and role tensions that shape safeguarding practice in inclusive school contexts.

CONCLUSION

This study demonstrates that Child Safeguarding, as experienced and interpreted by teachers in inclusive school settings, is not understood merely as a matter of individual teachers' moral intent. Rather, participants' accounts consistently framed safeguarding practice as being shaped by broader systemic conditions that structure teachers' roles, responsibilities, and perceived risks. Teachers interpreted safeguarding challenges as emerging from policy and organizational dislocations that were experienced as generating role ambiguity, elevated emotional labor, and uneven professional protection. Nonetheless, teachers demonstrated considerable professional agency, developing adaptive strategies across the microsystem, mesosystem, and exosystem to sustain safeguarding practices in the absence of consistent institutional support. Viewed through a socio-ecological lens, these findings suggest that safeguarding effectiveness is located by teachers within the alignment of policy intent, organizational capacity, and everyday school practice, rather than within individual disposition alone.

From this perspective, participants' accounts point to the importance of clearer, written, and risk-sensitive Standard Operating Procedures (SOPs) that are accessible to all school staff and that function not only to protect students but also to provide procedural clarity and protection for teachers, school staff, and the institution itself when safeguarding decisions are enacted. Such SOPs were understood by participants to enable shared responsibility, reduce role ambiguity, and strengthen institutional accountability. In addition, teachers emphasized the need for continuous, school-wide, disability-informed professional

development that is oriented toward practical boundary-setting and risk recognition, alongside accountability arrangements that clarify shared responsibility while offering procedural protection for teachers' safeguarding decisions. Participants further highlighted the importance of equitable safeguarding arrangements in teacher recruitment, ensuring equal access to safeguarding information, training, and institutional support for non-permanent (honorary) and state-employed (ASN) teachers alike, particularly where safeguarding responsibilities and exposure to risk are functionally equivalent. Collectively, these conditions were interpreted as essential for supporting teacher self-efficacy, reducing structural burden, and positioning safeguarding as a coherent institutional architecture rather than an individualized moral obligation.

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