

From Policy to Practice in Teacher Professional Training: Systemic Misalignment in Pre-Service Teachers' Implementation of Child-Friendly Education for Vulnerable Students

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Abstract. This study examined the implementation of Child-Friendly Education (CFE) policies during pre-service teacher training, focusing on how student teachers enforce non-violence, anti-bullying, and inclusiveness principles for vulnerable students during clinical practice. Using a qualitative design with multi-stage coding (open, axial, and selective), the study was conducted in six secondary schools in Balikpapan, involving 24 pre-service teachers, principals, and mentor teachers. Findings reveal a systemic misalignment between policy expectations, pedagogical enforcement, and the multidimensional reality of student vulnerability. While pre-service teachers show early adaptive efforts through personalized interaction and increased sensitivity, these practices remain situational, fragmented, and dependent on uneven guidance and school-based support. Key constraints include inadequate readiness for inclusive pedagogy, difficulty addressing hidden disabilities, and inconsistent policy translation during practicum. Theoretically, this study argues that the policy-practice gap is not merely a field-level phenomenon but is embedded in the formation of the teaching profession itself, with systemic inequities stemming from the teacher education framework rather than school-level implementation alone. This study underscores the need for coherent integration of policy, curriculum, and practicum design to better prepare future educators for inclusive, child-friendly practice.

Keywords: Child-Friendly Education, Pre-service Teachers, Policy-Practice Equity, Professional Service of Teachers, Systemic Inequalities

1 Introduction

The implementation of inclusiveness-based education policies, such as Child-Friendly Schools (CFS) or Sekolah Ramah Anak (SRA), has become a global agenda in fostering an education system that is equitable and responsive to student diversity. Conceptually, this approach emphasizes not only access to education, but also meaningful participation and learning success for all learners [1], [2]. However, various studies

show that the successful implementation of these policies is often hampered by the gap between policy design and practice on the ground [3], [4].

In the last decade, inclusive education literature has developed rapidly with a focus on transforming the education system towards substantive inclusivity. Research emphasizes the importance of structural support, including disability services, pedagogical differentiation, and accurate data systems [5], [6]. Nonetheless, many education systems are still stuck in symbolic inclusion practices, where policies have been formally adopted but have not been effectively implemented [7], [8]. This shows that there is a fundamental gap between normative commitment and implementation capacity.

The policy enactment perspective provides a more dynamic analytical framework in understanding the implementation of education policies. Policy is seen not as a static text, but rather as a practice that is reconstructed by actors at the school level [9], [10]. In this context, teachers and principals play the role of agents who interpret and adjust policies according to local conditions [11]. However, recent research shows that the enactment process is often constrained by structural factors such as resource limitations and the complexity of the student's context [12].

Furthermore, street-level bureaucracy theory explains how frontline actors, such as teachers, use discretion in implementing policies in the midst of system limitations [13], [14]. Contemporary studies show that this discretion does not necessarily reflect professional innovation, but is often a response to structural pressures and institutional limitations [15], [16]. Thus, the implementation of education policy cannot be separated from the interaction between actors, contexts, and structures.

Although these three perspectives have developed significantly, a research gap remains largely unexplored regarding how the interaction between policies, practices, and students' vulnerabilities results in systemic mismatches in the implementation of inclusive education. Most studies tend to examine policy or practice aspects in isolation, without integrating the dimensions of the student context in depth [4], [17]. As a result, the understanding of implementation complexity remains partial.

In this context, research on the implementation of SRA is important, especially in school settings that face a diversity of vulnerable students, such as extreme poverty, hidden disabilities, and psychosocial issues. Studies show that these multidimensional vulnerabilities are often not accurately identified in the education system, thus hampering the effectiveness of interventions [18], [19]. This underscores the need for an approach that is not only policy-based, but also data-based and integrated with services.

This study aims to fill this gap by examining the implementation of SRA through a qualitative approach based on coding analysis (open, axial, and selective coding). The main focus of the research is to identify the relational patterns between policies, school practices, and student vulnerabilities, as well as how these interactions shape the dynamics of implementation at the school level. This approach allows for an in-depth exploration of the implementation process that is often unreachable by quantitative methods [20].

The main contribution of this research is the development of the concept of "systemic misalignment," a condition of structural misalignment between normative poli-

cies, school adaptive practices, and the reality of student vulnerability. This concept goes beyond the traditional policy–practice gap approach by emphasizing complex multi-level interactions. By integrating the perspectives of inclusive education, policy enactment, and street-level bureaucracy, this study offers a new theoretical framework to understand the implementation of education policy more comprehensively [12]

This research aims to critically examine how child-friendly education policies are enforced in the context of teacher professional practice, especially in situations characterized by multidimensional student vulnerability and systemic constraints. Specifically, this study seeks to (1) identify patterns of interaction between policy expectations, school-based practices, and student vulnerability, (2) analyze how pre-service and in-service teachers construct adaptive responses during instructional practice, and (3) develop grounded theoretical explanations of systemic misalignment as an emergent condition that shapes policy implementation. Using a qualitative approach based on multi-stage coding (open, axial, and selective), this study positions empirical data as the basis for theoretical construction, thus ensuring analytical rigor and conceptual precision in explaining the dynamics of policy-to-practice translation.

Overall, this research not only provides an empirical contribution in the context of SRA implementation, but also enriches the theoretical discourse on the implementation of education policies from upstream pre-service teacher students to downstream professional teachers educated from the outset on the importance of child-friendly schools. The findings of the research are expected to serve as a basis for the development of more responsive and integrated policies, and to encourage the transformation of the education system towards substantive and sustainable inclusivity.

2 Methods

2.1 Research Design

This study adopts a constructivist qualitative approach, utilizing a multi-stage (open-axial-selective) coding design to build a theoretical explanation of the dynamics of policy enforcement. This design is well-suited for exploring complex social processes and how educational actors interpret mandates in the context of life [20], [21]. Moving beyond mere description, this investigation uses the principles of qualitative inquiry to develop data-driven conceptual constructs [22], [23]. This methodology is in line with the research objectives of identifying relational patterns between policy, pedagogy, and student vulnerability, capturing the non-linear nature of policy enforcement [10], [12].

2.2 Context and Participants

The research was conducted in Balikpapan, East Kalimantan, involving six secondary schools selected through purposive sampling. These schools were selected based on their formal designation as Child-Friendly Schools (SRAs) and their role as partner

institutions for the Teacher Professional Training (PPL) program. Participants (N=42) were categorized into three operational levels:

1. Strategic Level: 6 Principals (responsible for policy governance).
2. Operational Level: 12 Mentor Teachers (responsible for pedagogical implementation).
3. Practice Level: 24 Pre-service Teachers (enforcing policies during clinical practice).

The inclusion criteria for pre-service teachers require that they have completed semesters 1–6 with a minimum achievement index (GPA) of 3.0 in the undergraduate teacher inclusive-education program, and are currently undertaking field experience practice (PPL) in semester 7, teaching classrooms with identified vulnerable students (e.g., students with hidden disabilities or extreme socio-economic challenges). The sample of 42 participants across six schools was determined a priori based on the study's research instrument and scope, targeting all principals, mentor teachers, and pre-service teachers engaged in the six SRA designated practicum sites; data collection then proceeded through semi-structured interviews with this predetermined cohort.

2.3 Data Collection

Data were generated through three main sources to ensure robust triangulation:

1. In-depth semi-structured interviews: Conducted with all 42 participants, with a focus on policy perceptions, pedagogical adaptations, and perceived systemic barriers [24]. The interviews lasted between 45–75 minutes and were audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim.
2. Field observations: The researchers conducted non-participant observations during the teaching practicum sessions to document the implementation of child-friendly principles in real time.
3. Reflective journals: Pre-service teachers provided a weekly logbook detailing their challenges in addressing students' vulnerabilities.

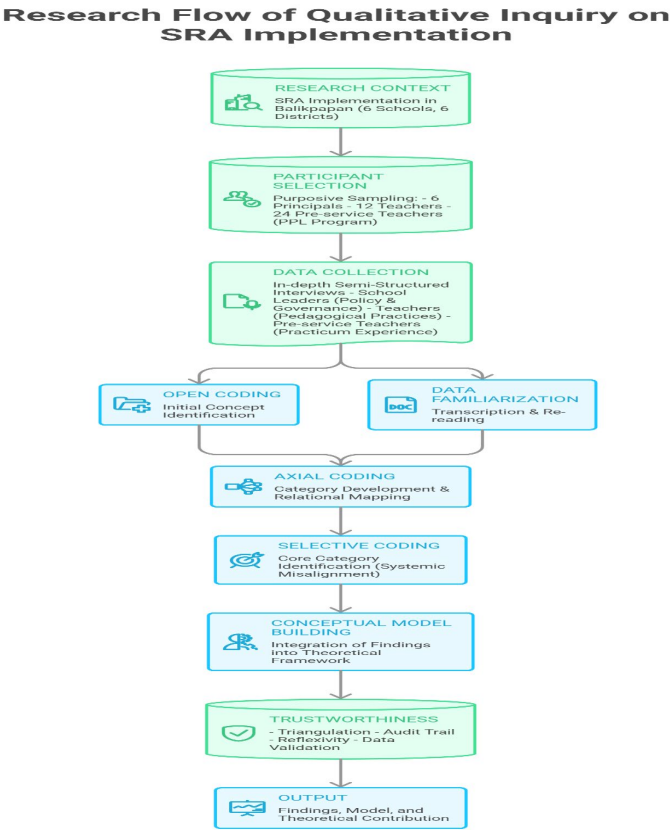


Fig. 1. Qualitative Data Collection and Analysis Flowchart

2.4 Data Analysis Procedure

The analysis followed the systematic coding framework proposed by [25]:

1. Open coding: Initial breakdown of interview transcripts into discrete units of meaning, generating 48 preliminary categories related to misalignment.
2. Axial coding: Identifying relationships between categories to form sub-themes, such as “mentorship inconsistency” and “pedagogical fragility.”
3. Selective coding: Integrating sub-themes into the core category of Systemic Misalignment, which serves as the central explanatory construct of the study. To minimize the risk of pre-existing theoretical frameworks predetermining the categories, open coding was conducted inductively using participants’ own language, and theoretical interpretation through policy enactment and street-level bureaucracy theory was only applied after axial coding, once relationships among categories had stabilized. Data from the three participant groups, principals, mentor teachers, and pre-service teachers, were first analyzed separately to identify group-specific patterns before being integrated during axial and selective coding to construct the cross-group

thematic structure presented in the Results. Table 2 presents illustrative examples of the coding process, from raw interview excerpts through initial codes and axial categories to the final selective themes.

Table.2 Illustrative coding matrix from open coding to selective themes.

Raw excerpt (translated)	Initial code	Axial category	Selective theme
We generally understand the direction, that schools must provide a sense of safety and comfort for children. But once it comes to daily practice, we're sometimes still unsure of the boundaries. For example, when correcting a student, we want to maintain discipline, but also make sure we don't make the child feel pressured. So teachers often have to figure out their own way of applying it	Ambiguity in translating normative policy into disciplinary practice	Discretionary boundary-setting under unclear guidance	Theme 1: Systemic Misalignment
It's usually more about teachers' understanding and the conditions in the field. Because every child is different. A rule that looks good conceptually, once applied in the classroom, the situation is sometimes not what we imagined	Gap between conceptual policy and field reality	Discretionary boundary-setting under unclear guidance	Theme 1: Systemic Misalignment
It has happened, especially in how we handle students. Some teachers think a student should be firmly corrected, while others prefer a more personal approach. Actually the goal is the same, it's just the way of applying it that's different	Inter-teacher variation in policy interpretation	Inconsistent enactment despite shared normative goals	Theme 1: Systemic Misalignment
There were some students who, when only explained verbally, had a hard time following. So while teaching I tried explaining again with simpler examples. Actually I hadn't planned that, I did it because I saw they were still confused	Unplanned instructional adjustment triggered by observed confusion	Reactive, non-anticipatory pedagogical response	Theme 2: Pedagogical Fragility
It's usually more spontaneous. Because before entering the classroom we've already made a lesson plan, but conditions in	Gap between planned lesson design and in-the-moment	Reactive, non-anticipatory pedagogical response	Theme 2: Pedagogical Fragility

the classroom are sometimes different	adaptation		
It's not always easy. Sometimes we only find out after observing their behavior several times. There are children who seem fine, but it turns out they have a particular difficulty	Delayed recognition of student vulnerability absent formal data	Diagnostic gap in vulnerability identification	Theme 3: Blind Spots of Inclusivity
The difficulty is that we have to recognize it ourselves from the child's behavior. We're afraid of misjudging. If we treat them too differently that's also not good, but if we don't pay attention that can make the child fall further behind	Fear of misjudgment in the absence of diagnostic support	Diagnostic gap in vulnerability identification	Theme 3: Blind Spots of Inclusivity
The mentor teacher generally helped me, especially when I was still confused about classroom conditions. But indeed I couldn't always be accompanied because the mentor teacher also has many other tasks. So there were some things I eventually learned on my own once I was already in the classroom	Inconsistent mentor availability	Mentorship variance under institutional workload constraints	Theme 4: Fragmented Mentorship
Because the mentor teacher wasn't always in the classroom, I had to try handling it myself. After that, I would tell the mentor teacher and ask for advice on how best to handle that student	Post-hoc rather than real-time mentoring support	Trial-and-error professional formation	Theme 4: Fragmented Mentorship

To enhance analytical rigor, the coding process was managed using NVivo 12 software, allowing for a transparent audit trail of the data-to-theory transition [26].

2.5 Methodological Rigor

To ensure trustworthiness, the study adhered to the criteria established by [27]: (a) credibility via prolonged engagement and triangulation of data sources; (b) transferability through thick descriptions of the Balikpapan school contexts; (c) dependability via an external audit of the coding process; and (d) confirmability through a reflexivity statement acknowledging the researchers' roles as teacher educators.

3 Results

The qualitative analysis of interviews, observations, and reflective journals yielded four major themes that characterize the implementation of Child-Friendly Education (CFE) during teacher professional training. These themes collectively construct the core phenomenon of Systemic Misalignment.

3.1 Theme 2: Pedagogical Fragility Between Humanistic Intent and Tactical Survival

PSTs demonstrated a strong humanistic commitment to non-discrimination and restorative approaches. However, this study found a significant Pedagogical Fragility in their practice. While they showed high sensitivity toward students' emotional needs, their ability to perform Deep Pedagogical Differentiation remained limited.

Surface-level Inclusivity. PSTs adopted child-friendly values (e.g., anti-bullying, character building) but struggled to modify instructional content for students with specific learning needs.

Spontaneous Adaptation. Pedagogical adjustments were often reactive (spontaneous responses to classroom disruptions) rather than proactive (planned instructional design).

3.2 Theme 1: The Anatomy of Systemic Misalignment Adaptive Enactment under Constraints

The study identifies a profound misalignment between normative policy expectations and the operational realities of the classroom. Pre-service teachers (PSTs) function as transitional actors who attempt to bridge the gap between high-level CFE policies and the messy reality of vulnerable students. However, findings reveal that their pedagogical actions are characterized by Adaptive Enactment, a survival-based response to systemic pressures. Rather than a structured implementation, PSTs' practices are situational and fragmented, often decoupled from the theoretical frameworks provided in their university curriculum. We use the term "street-level bureaucrats in training" not to suggest PSTs hold full discretionary authority, but to signal their liminal status: PSTs exercise a bounded, apprentice form of discretion in real-time classroom decisions, anticipating the fuller discretionary role of licensed teachers.

3.3 Theme 3: The Blind Spots of Inclusivity Encountering Multidimensional Vulnerability

A critical finding is the PSTs' encounter with hidden vulnerabilities. While they could identify visible poverty, they were largely unequipped to recognize and address hid-

den disabilities (e.g., undiagnosed neurodivergence) and complex psychosocial traumas. In the absence of formal diagnostic records, vulnerable students were identified through a triangulated combination of mentor-teacher and principal reports, direct classroom observation by pre-service teachers and researchers, and interview accounts from students and, where accessible, parents.

a. Identification Gap. There is a stark mismatch between PSTs' professional competence and the multidimensionality of student vulnerability.

b. Intervention Mismatch. Due to a lack of formal diagnosis data at the school level, PSTs' interventions remained generalized and failed to address the specific idiosyncratic needs of the most vulnerable students.

3.4 Theme 4: Fragmented Mentorship and the 'Decoupling' of Policy from Practice

The implementation of CFE is further hindered by inconsistent support structures. The study found that mentorship from school principals and mentor teachers (Guru Pamong) is highly idiosyncratic.

a. Mentorship Variance. In many cases, PSTs were left to navigate complex inclusive settings with minimal guidance, leading to a "trial-and-error" professional formation.

b. Structural Barriers. The absence of specialized support units (e.g., Disability Service Units) and the heavy administrative burden on mentor teachers created an environment where CFE policies are formally acknowledged but practically marginalized.

3.5 Synthesis of Findings

Theoretically, these findings indicate that Systemic Misalignment is not a failure of individual practitioners, but rather the outcome of a Curriculum-Practice Disconnect. Current teacher professional training equips students with normative awareness that is, an understanding that they are expected to be child-friendly yet fails to equip them with the technical-pedagogical capacity needed to address the complex vulnerabilities of students encountered in the field.

4 Discussion

4.1 Systemic Misalignment in Policy Enactment and Normative Reorientation

The findings of this study confirm that the implementation of child-friendly education in the context of teacher professional training takes place under conditions of systemic misalignment, a structural disconnect between policy expectations, learning practices, and the reality of student vulnerability. The penetration of child-friendly values has only reached the level of normative understanding, but has not been fully operationalized into procedural compliance. In contrast to previous studies that placed schools as the main unit of analysis, this study highlights that pre-service teachers (PSTs) experience this tension firsthand as transitional actors. It expands the perspective of policy enactment by positioning them as street-level bureaucrats in training who negotiate policies under limited conditions [9], [12], [16]. This gap is exacerbated by the integration of inclusive policies that are not yet aligned with the teacher education curriculum [28]

4.2 Professional Learning as Situated Negotiation and Adaptive Agency

The transformation of pedagogic practices carried out by PSTs reflects the process of situated learning, where professional knowledge is formed through direct experience [29], [30]. However, our findings suggest that these adaptations are often fragmentary and tend to replicate teacher practices without a strong reflective framework, imitation before reflection. From the perspective of street-level bureaucracy, this adaptive practice is a compensatory mechanism to survive in a system that is not supportive [13], [15]. Without systemic support, practical experience does not automatically result in mature competencies [30]. This underscores the need to strengthen a more structured teacher agency from the practicum period onward, in order to bridge theory and field reality [31].

4.3 Navigating Multidimensional Vulnerability and Mentorship Variability

The involvement of PSTs in dealing with students with multidimensional vulnerabilities reveals the limits of teacher preparation, especially in identifying hidden disabilities. These findings are consistent with the literature stating that teacher education programs often do not prepare prospective teachers for the complexity of real inclusion [5], [6]. This condition is exacerbated by mentorship variability, where the quality of teacher guidance is not standardized, creating an uneven learning experience [32], [33]. This inconsistency of mentoring reinforces systemic misalignment, where the formation of a professional identity becomes highly dependent on the luck of the institutional context rather than on a rigorously designed curriculum [34].

4.4 The Paradox of Outcomes and Theoretical Repositioning

Observational and interview data suggest that pre-service teachers' interventions were more readily visible in students' emotional well-being than in measurable academic outcomes, although this study did not employ standardized instruments to assess either dimension systematically; this observation should therefore be interpreted as a preliminary impression rather than a measured finding. This shows that despite the creation of a supportive environment, structured pedagogic strategies for diversity are not yet optimal [18]. Theoretically, this study contributes by repositioning pre-service teachers as key actors in understanding systemic misalignment. We argue that systemic asynchrony is not just a post-graduation implementation phenomenon, but one that has been internalized since the professional training stage [12]. Therefore, it is necessary to design a training system that integrates policies, curricula, and field practices holistically to overcome the barriers to inclusive pedagogy [7], [8]. Figure 2 synthesizes these relationships into a conceptual model, distinguishing associations empirically supported by this study's data from theoretical propositions that warrant further investigation.

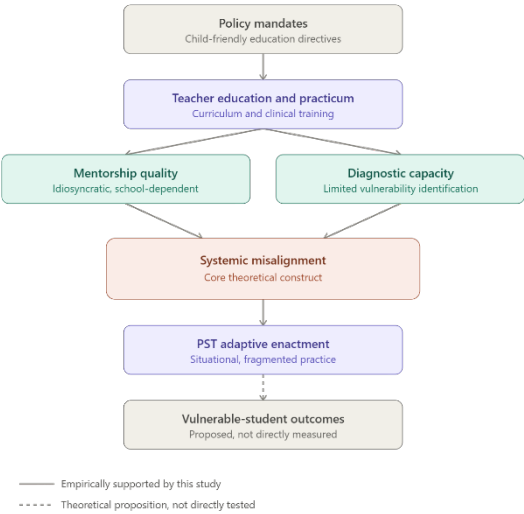


Fig. 2. Conceptual model of systemic misalignment, distinguishing empirically supported relationships from theoretical propositions

5 Conclusion

This study concludes that systemic misalignment in child-friendly education is not merely a failure of school-level implementation, but a structural phenomenon deeply embedded within the liminal space of teacher professional training. By examining the

practicum as a critical site of policy enactment, this research reveals that pre-service teachers (PSTs) function as street-level bureaucrats in training who must navigate the friction between idealistic policy frameworks and the stark realities of student vulnerability.

While PSTs demonstrate significant adaptive agency through personalized engagement and social-emotional support, these interventions remain fragmented and pedagogically fragile. The findings highlight a persistent paradox: while child-friendly policies have achieved normative acceptance, their operationalization is hindered by uneven mentorship, a lack of diagnostic fluency regarding hidden disabilities, and a curriculum-practice gap. Ultimately, this study asserts that systemic misalignment exists on a continuum beginning in professional formation and solidifying in in-service practice. Therefore, bridging the gap in inclusive education requires a fundamental repositioning of teacher education, moving beyond procedural compliance toward a structurally aligned model of clinical practice. Unlike the conventional policy-practice gap or policy decoupling, Systemic Misalignment captures a dynamic, multi-level misfit across policy expectations, adaptive pedagogical practice, and multidimensional student vulnerability, one that originates upstream in teacher professional training rather than solely at the point of school-level implementation.

6 Implications

Theoretical Implications. This research advances Policy Enactment Theory by introducing the concept of the pre-service teacher as a transitional policy actor. It challenges the conventional view that policy friction only occurs among in-service practitioners. By identifying the practicum as a primary site of systemic misalignment, this study provides a new conceptual framework for understanding how inclusive values are either reinforced or diluted during the earliest stages of professional identity formation.

Practical Implications. For Teacher Education Institutions (TEIs), these findings imply an urgent need to shift from a generalist inclusive curriculum to a clinical-diagnostic model. Without standardized mentorship and explicit training in identifying multidimensional vulnerabilities, PSTs will continue to rely on compensatory mechanisms rather than evidence-based inclusive pedagogies.

7 Recommendations

Based on the findings, the following recommendations are proposed:

1. **Policy Synchronization:** Ministry-level educational policies must synchronize the Child-Friendly School (SRA) indicators with the National Teacher Professional Standards (PPG) to ensure that PSTs are evaluated on their ability to enact inclusive policies, not just classroom management.

2. Standardized Mentorship Certification: Schools and universities should develop a collaborative certification for Guru Pamong (mentor teachers) that focuses specifically on reflective-inclusive supervision, ensuring that mentorship variability does not compromise PST learning outcomes.

3. Integrated Clinical Practicum: The practicum structure should be redesigned to include case-study rounds where PSTs, mentors, and specialists (psychologists/special educators) co-analyze student vulnerabilities, thereby bridging the gap between theory and field reality.

8 Limitations

Despite its contributions, this study has limitations that warrant caution. First, the qualitative nature of the data, while rich in depth, is context-specific to the selected practicum sites and may not represent the full diversity of teacher training programs across different geographical or socio-economic regions. Second, the study focused on a single practicum cycle; a longitudinal approach would be necessary to observe how the negotiated practices learned during training translate into long-term professional habits once these PSTs become full-time teachers. Future research should employ mixed methods to quantify the impact of mentorship quality on PSTs' policy-enactment self-efficacy. Additionally, mentorship quality was analyzed thematically across the full sample rather than disaggregated by individual school, limiting our ability to draw site-specific comparisons; future comparative case-study designs across schools could illuminate how local mentorship structures shape pre-service teacher experience.

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