

Examining the Enactment of Child Protection Policies in Kazakhstan's State Schools

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Date: 17 November 2025

To the attention of Amanat Baigenzheyeva, MSc in Educational Leadership Program

Dear Amanat,

This letter confirms that your research project titled “**Examining the Enactment of Child Protection Policies in Public Schools in Kazakhstan**” has been approved by the Nazarbayev University Graduate School of Education Institutional Research Ethics Committee (NUGSE IREC). You may now proceed with your fieldwork and data collection as indicated in your ethics application. Please note that the NUGSE IREC must be contacted if there are any changes to the protocol during the period of your fieldwork.

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Should you have any questions or concerns related to this protocol or fieldwork, please let me know. The approval is effective until **28/02/2026**.

Best wishes for your research work!

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Abstract

Thesis title: Examining the Enactment of Child Protection Policies in Kazakhstan's State Schools

Key words: child protection, safeguarding, policy enactment

This thesis explores the enactment of child protection policies in state schools in Kazakhstan, with a particular focus on how safeguarding is understood and practiced by school staff. Although Kazakhstan has introduced legislative and policy reforms aimed at protecting children's rights and wellbeing, limited research has examined how these policies are enacted within everyday school contexts. This study seeks to address this gap by investigating educators' and school administration's perceptions, experiences, and practices related to child protection in schools.

The research is guided by Stephen Ball's policy enactment theory, particularly the concepts of policy as text, policy as discourse, and policy as practice. A qualitative research design was adopted to explore how child protection policies are interpreted and implemented by teachers, psychologists, social pedagogues and school administrators in Kazakhstani state schools. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews and analyzed thematically.

The findings reveal that while participants generally recognized the importance of child protection, safeguarding practices were often shaped by institutional constraints, cultural norms, and limited professional preparation. Many educators associated child protection primarily with discipline and student behavior management rather than broader safeguarding responsibilities. Participants also highlighted challenges such as unclear role distribution, lack of training, time constraints, and insufficient collaboration among school staff.

This study contributes to the limited body of literature on child protection and safeguarding in Kazakhstan's education system. It highlights the gap between policy intentions and school-level realities and emphasizes the need for clearer safeguarding frameworks, professional development, and stronger institutional support for educators.

Аңдатпа

Диссертация тақырыбы: Қазақстанның мемлекеттік мектептерінде балаларды қорғау саясатының жоспарға асуын зерттеу

Кілт сөздер: балаларды қорғау, қорғау, саясатты қабылдау

Бұл диссертацияда Қазақстандағы мемлекеттік мектептерде балаларды қорғау саясатының қабылдануы зерттеледі, әсіресе мектеп қызметкерлерінің қорғауды қалай түсінетініне және жүзеге асыратынына баса назар аударылады. Қазақстан балалардың құқықтары мен әл-ауқатын қорғауға бағытталған заңнамалық және саяси реформаларды енгізгенімен, шектеулі зерттеулер бұл саясаттың күнделікті мектеп жағдайында қалай жүзеге асырылатынын зерттеді. Бұл зерттеу білім берушілердің және мектеп әкімшілігінің мектептердегі балаларды қорғауға қатысты түсініктерін, тәжірибелерін және тәжірибелерін зерттеу арқылы осы олқылықты жоюға бағытталған.

Зерттеу Стивен Боллдың саясатты қабылдау теориясына, әсіресе саясат мәтін ретінде, саясат дискурс ретінде және саясат тәжірибе ретінде деген ұғымдарға негізделген. Қазақстандық мемлекеттік мектептерде балаларды қорғау саясатының мұғалімдер, психологтар, әлеуметтік педагогтар және мектеп әкімшілері тарапынан қалай түсіндірілетінін және жүзеге асырылатынын зерттеу үшін сапалы зерттеу дизайны қабылданды. Деректер жартылай құрылымдалған сұхбаттар арқылы жиналып, тақырыптық түрде талданды.

Зерттеу нәтижелері қатысушылар балаларды қорғаудың маңыздылығын жалпы мойындағанымен, қорғау тәжірибелері көбінесе институционалдық шектеулерге, мәдени нормаларға және шектеулі кәсіби дайындыққа байланысты болғанын көрсетеді. Көптеген педагогтар балаларды қорғауды кеңірек қорғау міндеттерімен емес, негізінен тәртіп пен оқушылардың мінез-құлқын басқарумен байланыстырды. Қатысушылар сондай-ақ рөлдердің анық емес бөлінуі, оқытудың жетіспеушілігі, уақыт шектеулері және мектеп қызметкерлері арасындағы ынтымақтастықтың жеткіліксіздігі сияқты қиындықтарды атап өтті.

Бұл зерттеу Қазақстанның білім беру жүйесіндегі балаларды қорғау және қорғау бойынша әдебиеттердің шектеулі болуына ықпал етеді. Ол саяси ниеттер мен мектеп деңгейіндегі шындық арасындағы алшақтықты көрсетеді және айқын қорғау шеңберлерінің, кәсіби дамудың және педагогтарға күшті институционалдық қолдаудың қажеттілігін атап көрсетеді.

Аннотация

Название диссертации: Изучение реализации политики защиты детей в государственных школах Казахстана

Ключевые слова: защита детей, обеспечение безопасности, реализация политики

В данной диссертации исследуется реализация политики защиты детей в государственных школах Казахстана, с особым акцентом на то, как обеспечение безопасности понимается и практикуется школьным персоналом. Несмотря на то, что Казахстан провел законодательные и политические реформы, направленные на защиту прав и благополучия детей, исследования, посвященные тому, как эти политики реализуются в повседневной школьной среде, ограничены. Данное исследование призвано восполнить этот пробел путем изучения восприятия, опыта и практики педагогов и школьной администрации в отношении защиты детей в школах.

Исследование основано на теории реализации политики Стивена Болла, в частности, на концепциях политики как текста, политики как дискурса и политики как практики. Для изучения того, как политика защиты детей интерпретируется и реализуется учителями, психологами, социальными педагогами и школьными администраторами в государственных школах Казахстана, был использован качественный исследовательский подход. Данные были собраны посредством полуструктурированных интервью и проанализированы тематически.

Результаты исследования показывают, что, хотя участники в целом признавали важность защиты детей, практика обеспечения их безопасности часто определялась институциональными ограничениями, культурными нормами и недостаточной профессиональной подготовкой. Многие педагоги связывали защиту детей в первую очередь с дисциплиной и управлением поведением учащихся, а не с более широкими обязанностями по обеспечению безопасности. Участники также указывали на такие проблемы, как нечеткое распределение ролей, недостаток обучения, нехватка времени и недостаточное сотрудничество между сотрудниками школы.

Это исследование вносит вклад в ограниченный объем литературы по защите детей и обеспечению безопасности в системе образования Казахстана. Оно подчеркивает разрыв между политическими намерениями и реальностью на уровне школ и акцентирует внимание на необходимости более четких рамок обеспечения безопасности, профессионального развития и более сильной институциональной поддержки педагогов.

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Chapter 1: Introduction

Child protection and safeguarding have become critical global priorities, as the incidence of crimes committed against children continues to rise worldwide, according to official statistics reported by Save the Children (2024). Protecting and safeguarding children in a constantly changing world full of political instabilities becomes harder and harder every year. The Annual Children and Armed Conflict Annual Report of the Secretary-General (2024) has identified a staggering 25 % surge in grave violations compared to 2023. It is also becoming more difficult to keep children safe at school from both their own peers and adults. The UNICEF report (2025) on keeping children safe at school suggests that globally, half of students aged 13–15, some 150 million, report experiencing peer-to-peer violence in and around school. Slightly more than 1 in 3 students between the ages of 13 and 15 experience bullying, and about the same proportion are involved in physical fights.

According to the goals of UN Agenda 2030, leaders committed to creating a world in which every child grows up free from violence. It is crucial to recognize that the violence affecting a billion children today will undermine the health, prosperity and stability of our societies tomorrow. As schools are the place where children spend most of their time growing up, it is of high importance to prioritize child protection at schools.

1.1 Background and Context

Kazakhstan, having ratified the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC), has made formal commitments to safeguarding children's rights in all sectors, including education. Over the past two decades, the government has introduced a number of strategic policies aimed at protecting children from abuse, neglect, and exploitation. These include national legislative frameworks such as the Law on the Rights of the Child (2002), announcing 2022 as the year of children and their rights, the Family and Gender Policy Concept 2030, the national programme of "Protecting Children from Online Violence, Abuse and Exploitation in Kazakhstan", funded by the Safe Online

Fund, introducing Compulsory Social Health Insurance (CSHI) system for all children, reviewing the national school policy on child protection, introducing nationwide school anti-bullying policies, various education-sector initiatives, and general steps to enhancing legal protections for children since receiving Independence in 1991.

Kazakhstan's partnership with global actors like UNICEF, UN, USAID and the Council of Europe has helped to shape these policies by embedding international standards into local legal documents and reform strategies. The aim of these reforms is to establish a more child-centered system that protects young people in all institutional settings, particularly in schools, which are critical spaces for early intervention and support (UNICEF, 2017).

Despite these intentions, the reality on the ground tells a more complex story. Formative evaluation of the system for prevention and response to violence against children in Kazakhstan both at schools and outside from 2011 to 2020 commissioned by UNICEF Kazakhstan and the Kazakh Human Rights Commissioner reports the fact that while laws and policies appear to be robust on paper, multiple cases of child abuse and neglect both at homes and schools suggest that their implementation and enactment remain ineffective and, in some instances, entirely symbolic (UNICEF & Commissioner for Human Rights in the Republic of Kazakhstan, 2021).

Modelling for Integrated Child Protection System in Kazakhstan (2011) suggested systemic shortfalls in enactment and interpretations of safeguarding systems in Kazakhstan public schools. It highlighted specific issues with schools' being unable to identify children in need of protection and unawareness of school staff of referral mechanisms. One of the examples of failure to report a safeguarding issue at school was in 2024, it was revealed that in Kyzylorda that a sixteen year old minor school girl had been sexually trafficked by her own classmates and had been missing the school for six months. While her parents did not notice anything wrong, school leadership along with teachers had failed to notice, report and seek for the minor for six months since the start of the horrendous crime according to Azattyq Asia (2025).

Formative evaluations conducted by organizations such as UNICEF and the Commissioner for Human Rights (2022) consistently highlight shortcomings in practice. Problems include lack of clarity in reporting procedures, limited staff training, insufficient coordination with local authorities, and weak institutional follow-through according to the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child - Kazakhstan State report/follow-up (CRC/C/KAZ) (2024) collaborated with the Y. Altynsarin National Academy of Education. These gaps result in environments where school staff are either unaware of their responsibilities or feel ill-equipped to act effectively in safeguarding roles.

According to OECD Review of schools in Kazakhstan (2015), Kazakhstan's child welfare reforms, though aligned with global deinstitutionalization models, frequently lack enforcement mechanisms and are perceived by stakeholders like school staff as top-down directives. Schools, as institutions operating within a highly centralized education system, are particularly affected by these symbolic reforms. They often lack both the autonomy and the operational capacity to enact child protection policies in ways that are contextually meaningful and sustainable. Without autonomy, schools struggle to tailor protective practices to their unique cultural and demographic contexts, thus diminishing the overall impact of national reforms.

If we question why the implementation gap persists, the reasons might be a combination of factors. One of the root causes of the enactment gap lies in Kazakhstan's centralist governance model. Kazakhstan, like other Central Asian States, achieved its independence in 1991. Again, like other ex-Soviet States, Kazakhstan continues to operate a child protection system that is still largely based on the pre-1991 Soviet model (UNICEF, 2011). It relies heavily on institutionalisation and has an under-developed children's services sector. The child protection system's shortcomings and the mechanisms by which child protection is delivered have been commented on in a number of reports. Reforms are often designed and imposed at the national level with limited consultation or adaptation at the school level. This rigid top-down approach constrains the ability of school leaders and teachers to exercise discretion or professional agency in interpreting and applying policies (Yakavets et al., 2023).

Moreover, unclear job descriptions and general unawareness of safeguarding culture from school staff brings in another challenge for enactment. Modelling for Integrated Child Protection System in Kazakhstan (2011) suggested systemic shortfalls by school management and other staff members in clear enactment procedures and interpretations of safeguarding systems in Kazakhstan public schools.

Another reason can be the idea of cultural behavioural norms and attitude to corporal punishment of children by adults. UNICEF and local authorities in Kazakhstan (2023) found that about 75% of adults support corporal punishment to control the behavior of their children. Every second child aged between 2-14 is exposed to or involved in violent forms of discipline in the family in Kazakhstan according to UNICEF (2023). This culture adds up to the possibility of children getting physically abused both at home along with aforementioned possibilities of getting abused by peers and/or teachers at schools. Mori et al. (2021) found that feeling unsafe at school was related to a range of mental health difficulties, including emotional problems and suicidal behavior leaving another reason why it is so important to keep children physically and mentally safe at schools and home.

Furthermore, broader socio-cultural factors, such as stigma around abuse, lack of parental awareness, and prevailing norms about adult-child relationships, can also undermine protective mechanisms. These systemic inequalities highlight the need for a more holistic, school-embedded understanding of child protection and safeguarding on a national level.

In summary, although Kazakhstan has adopted ambitious child protection frameworks, little is known about how these policies are enacted in everyday school practices, especially in urban state schools where densely populated classrooms make it harder to track safeguarding. There is no clear job specific definition and responsibilities of school psychologist, no clear reporting systems with designated leads supervising issues. Also, while Kazakhstan's legal and strategic frameworks indicate a strong rhetorical commitment to child protection, there exists a significant enactment gap at the school level because of centralized governance model in education according to

Formative evaluation of the system for prevention and response to violence against children in Kazakhstan commissioned by UNICEF & the Human Rights Commissioner (2011-2020).

1.2 Problem Statement

Although Kazakhstan has established a broad legal foundation for child protection, actual practice within the education system remains inconsistent and problematic. This gap is particularly evident in public urban schools, where structural, institutional, and professional challenges intersect to hinder the realization of policy goals. According to Khamzina (2025) child protection protocols are rarely internalized or operationalized by school staff. Instead, they are often perceived as bureaucratic obligations rather than meaningful safeguards. The review of legal documents and analysis of cases showed that laws operate in theory while in practice the story is usually not for the favor of children.

The Human Rights Watch (2019) report and Formative evaluation of the system for prevention and response to violence against children in Kazakhstan from 2011 to 2020 - Commissioned by UNICEF Kazakhstan and the Kazakh Human Rights Commissioner (2021) highlighted that many educators are unaware of inclusive practices or feel unable to act on suspected abuse cases due to fear of institutional retaliation or administrative inaction.

Leadership engagement can also be lacking in many cases. Thus, it can be concluded child protection is viewed as a supplementary school element, oftentimes missing the whole point and rationale for safeguarding and child protection. Without a strong directive from principals or vice-principals, child safeguarding is rarely positioned as a strategic priority within schools. If school leadership is not yet prepared to follow official legislative protocols, we can assume that teachers, administrative staff can be unsupported and under-trained, while school psychologists, who are often designated as protection officers, lack clear job descriptions or procedural tools. These systemic challenges underscore the importance of understanding how school staff interpret, respond to, and sometimes resist the mandates of child protection policies.

1.3 Research Purpose

This study sought to explore how child protection policies are understood, interpreted, implemented and, most importantly, enacted by educational professionals working in urban state schools in Kazakhstan. By focusing on frontline actors such as school heads, deputy academic and pastoral heads, teachers, social pedagogues, school psychologists, and administrators, the study aims to uncover the barriers and enablers that shape the everyday enactment of protective policies.

1.4 Research Significance

The significance of this research lies in its potential to contribute to a better understanding of policy implementation dynamics in post-Soviet education systems, particularly in Kazakhstan's highly populated urban cities. While considerable attention has been given to Kazakhstan's educational modernization agenda, few empirical studies have focused on the micro-level experiences of school staff as they engage with child protection mandates. This study is important because it examined a pressing yet insufficiently explored issue within Kazakhstan's public education system: the constrained and poorly defined role of school psychologists and other safeguarding related responsible positions in addressing student behaviour (Hernández-Torrano et al., 2021; Myrzapeissova et al., 2025). In contrast, existing research indicates that in Kazakhstan their effectiveness is limited by unclear role expectations, insufficient training in behaviour management, and weak involvement in school-wide decision-making processes (Hernández-Torrano et al., 2021). The findings of this study may inform future training initiatives, school leadership programs, and national reform strategies to bridge the gap between policy and practice.

1.5 Aims and Objectives

The general aim was to examine how school staff in urban state schools in Kazakhstan understand, interpret, and enact child protection policies.

Specific Objectives:

By conducting the research, it was possible to explore how teachers, social pedagogues, school psychologists and school leaders understand and enact child protection policies and how they perceive their roles in safeguarding children. By understanding school staff's perceptions of their roles, the research opened ways to define safeguarding more clearly. Moreover, another important objective was to identify institutional and professional barriers and enablers to effective policy implementation. Also, the study focused on assessing how national child protection reforms influence day-to-day practices in urban school settings. Finally, it was highly important to notice and highlight specific strategies or conditions that enhance or hinder protective outcomes for students.

1.6 Research Questions

To achieve the stated purpose, the study was guided by the following research questions:

1. How are child protection policies understood and enacted by school staff (school leaders, teachers, social pedagogues and school psychologists) in urban state schools in Kazakhstan?

This question explored the extent to which school staff, including teachers, administrators, social pedagogues, and psychologists, are aware of existing child protection policies and how they interpret them in daily practice. The purpose was to uncover whether policies are seen as meaningful safeguarding tools or as compliance-driven bureaucratic requirements.

2. What institutional, structural, and professional factors influence the success or failure of policy implementation?

This question examined the broader conditions that shaped how policies are enacted, including governance structures, leadership support, inter-agency coordination, and teacher capacity. Its purpose was to identify systemic enablers and barriers that either strengthen or undermine school-level safeguarding practices.

1.7 Outline of the Thesis

This thesis is organised into six chapters. Chapter 1 introduces the background of the study, outlines the research problem, and presents the research aim, questions, and significance. Chapter 2 reviews the relevant literature on child protection and safeguarding in Kazakhstan and Central Asia, policy enactment and the role of centralised way of management and policy implementation in effective understanding and enactment of policies at schools, with particular attention to Kazakhstan's urban context. It also introduces the theoretical and conceptual frameworks guiding the study. Chapter 3 describes the research methodology and justifies the choices with literature. Ethical considerations and study limitations are also addressed. Chapter 4 presents the findings of the study, organised into key themes derived from the data. This chapter focuses on reporting participants' perspectives without interpretation in relation to existing literature. Chapter 5 discusses the findings in relation to the conceptual framework and existing research in relation to the research questions. Finally, Chapter 6 concludes the thesis by summarising the key findings, outlining the study's contributions, and presenting implications for policy and practice, as well as recommendations for future research.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

2.1 Introduction

Child protection in schools has become a central concern for education systems worldwide, not only because schools are spaces of academic learning but also because they are key institutions responsible for ensuring the safety and well-being of children as children of all ages spend the most of their time there. The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC, 1989), ratified by Kazakhstan in 1994, establishes children's right to be protected from all forms of violence, neglect, and exploitation. In practice, this means schools are expected to operate as protective environments, offering mechanisms to prevent, identify, and respond to risks affecting children's physical, psychological, and social development.

In many education systems, schools are mostly expected to take on responsibilities beyond teaching, including student welfare and safeguarding. However, these expectations are often not matched by sufficient resources, professional development, or clarity of roles (Munro, 2011; Parton, 2014). This challenge is particularly noticed in centralized or transitional education systems, where reforms are introduced rapidly but rarely matched with systemic support at the school level (Silova, 2010).

This chapter reviews the existing literature relevant to child protection in Kazakhstan's state schools, situating it within international debates and regional post-Soviet trends. It is organized into six sections: 1) global perspectives on child protection in schools, 2) the post-Soviet and Central Asian context, 3) Kazakhstan's national policy frameworks, 4) empirical studies from Kazakhstan, 5) key thematic barriers and enabling factors, and 6) identified research gaps.

2.2 Global Perspectives on Child Protection in Schools

International Norms and Frameworks

Globally, the expectation that schools should play a frontline role in safeguarding children is rooted in the UNCRC (1989), Sustainable Development Goal 16.2 (“end abuse, exploitation, trafficking and all forms of violence against and torture of children”), and the UNESCO Safe to Learn framework (2020). These frameworks emphasize the need for schools to not only ensure academic learning but also prevent violence, provide safe reporting mechanisms, and cultivate inclusive environments. The World Health Organization (WHO, 2016) and UNICEF (2017) further stress the importance of a “whole-school safety approach” that integrates health education, leadership, teacher training, parental engagement, and inter-agency collaboration.

Evidence from the Western countries, such as the UK, shows that safeguarding practices are most effective when there is, first of all, clear role definition (designated safeguarding leads in every school) (IB organization, 2020). According to Walsh et al. (2012), knowledge of child protection legislation and school policy, attitudes toward the reporting role and ability to override concerns about the consequences of reporting can influence the school safeguarding system and child protection directly. This is a clear indication that in safe and healthy environments for children educators are aware of child protection norms and policies, have strong protective attitudes towards students and are not scared of consequences of reporting. Another important factor is regular professional training for teachers and staff.

The UK’s statutory guidance Keeping Children Safe in Education (Department for Education, 2023) requires schools to designate child protection officers, establish clear reporting pathways, and embed safeguarding across curricula. Similarly, Finland’s child welfare system, anchored in law (e.g. the Child Welfare Act), emphasizes early intervention or “open care”, family support, and preventive social services involving schools, health clinics and social services. Schools are part of a broad welfare state network aimed at mitigating risks such as neglect, abuse, or bullying.

Persistent Global Challenges

Even in well-resourced systems around the world, challenges remain. For instance, research indicates that teachers often feel unprepared to recognize signs of neglect or sexual abuse (Munro et al., 2019). Also, overloaded workloads have been shown to reduce the capacity of practitioners to engage in safeguarding tasks according to the local authority reports and case reviews in England, 2015; Community Care analyses (2022). Children with disabilities and marginalized groups are at heightened risk due to systemic discrimination and lack of tailored protections (Jones et al., 2012). Finally, as we move on with modern technologies, the rise of digital risks, including cyberbullying and online exploitation, has created new vulnerabilities that many school systems are struggling to address (Livingstone & Stoilova, 2021).

2.3 Relevance for Kazakhstan

These global insights provide a critical reference point for Kazakhstan. They highlight that while laws and frameworks are essential, the effectiveness of child protection depends heavily on school-level implementation, capacity building, and cultural change. According to McLaughlin, Winter, and Yakavets (2023), reforms in Kazakhstan are introduced within a centralized governance model, with policies designed and mandated at the national level before being implemented across schools. Although the reforms for the sake of protecting children exist, the way it is implemented and taken into consideration is usually a centralized rule rather than a collective goal.

2.4 Post-Soviet and Central Asian Context

Child protection in schools across post-Soviet states is shaped by the legacy of centralized governance, hierarchical school cultures, and limited traditions of safeguarding. Under the Soviet system, schools were primarily instruments of socialization and discipline, with little recognition of children's rights as independent subjects (Silova, 2010). Corporal punishment, though discouraged officially, was culturally tolerated, and reporting mechanisms for abuse were almost non-existent (Visser

et al., 2022). UNICEF and local authorities in Kazakhstan (2023) found that about 75% of adults support corporal punishment to control the behavior of their children. Every second child aged between 2-14 is exposed or involved to violent forms of discipline in the family or society in Kazakhstan according to UNICEF (2023). This altogether partially caused collective tolerance for child abuse in all forms in the society.

Research in Russia, Kyrgyzstan, and Uzbekistan shows similar patterns: reforms often adopt international child rights language but remain symbolic in practice due to weak enforcement and low teacher agency. In many systems including Central Asian, school psychologists or social pedagogues exist but are under-trained, poorly resourced, and often marginalized within school hierarchies (Kulmala et al., 2017, 2021).

For Kazakhstan, this broader regional context highlights the persistence of top-down policy design, limited inter-agency coordination, and cultural acceptance of adult authority over children - all of which create challenges for embedding safeguarding into daily school practice.

2.5 Kazakhstan's National Policy Frameworks

Kazakhstan has formally aligned itself with international standards on child protection, beginning with its ratification of the UNCRC (1994) and adoption of the Law on the Rights of the Child (2002). More recent initiatives include the Family and Gender Policy Concept 2030, the Comprehensive Plan for Child Protection 2023–2025, and the establishment of a Children's Rights Ombudsperson. In 2022, the government declared a "Year of Children," emphasizing reforms in children's education, health, and protection (UNICEF, 2023).

Despite these formal advances, the child abuse happening all around Kazakhstan suggests that implementation remains inconsistent. Evaluations by UNICEF and the Commissioner for Human Rights (2022) note gaps in reporting procedures, unclear staff roles, and weak coordination between schools, police, and social services. In practice, safeguarding responsibilities are often left to school psychologists, whose mandates are poorly defined. Surveys done by UNICEF and the Commissioner for Human Rights

(2022) also indicate that a majority of teachers see child protection as outside their primary role, treating it instead as administrative compliance.

Cultural norms further complicate implementation: UNICEF (2019) reported that around 75% of adults in Kazakhstan approve of corporal punishment as a disciplinary method, and nearly half of children aged 2–14 experience violent discipline at home. These attitudes spill into schools, undermining protective mechanisms and reinforcing silence around abuse.

Thus, while Kazakhstan has established a robust legislative framework, a significant policy–practice gap persists, rooted in governance structures, professional capacity, and cultural norms.

2.6 Empirical Studies in Kazakhstan

Recent empirical research provides little insight into how child protection is understood and practiced in Kazakhstani schools.

First, studies on teacher perceptions of child protection in the Kazakhstani context do not exist making this research extremely necessary.

Second, the role of social pedagogues and school psychologists has emerged as central yet problematic. Research from Karaganda Buketov University scholars shows that social pedagogues and psychologists are frequently tasked with safeguarding duties without clear mandates, training, or institutional authority (Ilyassova & Zhamburbayeva, 2024). Their work is largely reactive, responding to crises rather than preventively safeguarding or systemic. At the same time, empirical data suggest that there is the limited role and unclear function of school psychologists in managing student behavior (Hernández-Torrano et al., 2021; Myrzapeissova et al, 2025). Internationally, school psychologists are recognized for their vital role in supporting students' behavioral, academic, and emotional development through tiered interventions and systemic collaboration (Eklund et al., 2017). However, evidence suggests that in Kazakhstan, their impact is restricted by vague job descriptions, limited training in behavior support, and

poor integration into school-wide decision-making processes (Hernández-Torrano et al., 2021).

Third, bullying and peer violence remain widespread. A UNICEF study (2023) reported that nearly one in three children experience bullying in schools, while public awareness of anti-bullying initiatives is low. In Kazakhstan, even among future teachers, there is awareness of child rights at the international level, but understanding of how those rights translate into school practices remains limited (Sönmez et al., 2024). Thus, making children vulnerable and unprotected by their own teachers as well. Also, recent pilot programs, such as KiVa and Dosbol LIKE, show promise in raising awareness, yet they remain small-scale and insufficiently institutionalized (Astana Times, 2025).

Finally, vulnerable groups, particularly children with disabilities, face persistent exclusion. Human Rights Watch (2019) documented systemic neglect in mainstream schools, including inaccessible infrastructure and discriminatory attitudes among staff. Such findings reveal that safeguarding frameworks in Kazakhstan often fail those most at risk. Taken together, these studies show that while awareness of child protection is growing, practice remains fragmented, reactive, and uneven across school types.

2.7 Policy Enactment Barriers and Enablers

The literature identifies several recurring factors that either constrain or support the implementation of child protection policies in Kazakhstan's schools.

Firstly, according to McLaughlin, Winter, and Yakavets (2023) Kazakhstan's centralized education system leaves little room for schools to adapt national policies to local contexts. Policy directives are often vague, and school staff report uncertainty about reporting procedures (UNICEF & Commissioner for Human Rights, 2022). Secondly, school leadership plays a decisive role in setting priorities. Whereas principals actively support safeguarding, teachers are more engaged; in many cases, however, leaders treat child protection as a compliance exercise rather than a strategic priority. Yakavets et al. (2023) find that although safety or child protection is not their explicit focus, the patterns suggest that elements such as emotional and psychological well-being may not yet be

deeply embedded in many teachers' and school administration's notions of pedagogical practice. Thirdly, there is a lack of inter-agency coordination. Effective child protection requires collaboration with social services, police, and health professionals, yet these linkages are weak. Schools lack formal liaison structures, leading to delayed interventions when abuse is suspected (UNICEF, 2023). Finally, high tolerance for corporal punishment and stigma around reporting abuse create additional barriers. Many teachers hesitate to report child abuse happening at home, act for fear of retaliation, administrative inaction, or community backlash (UNICEF, 2019).

As many as there are barriers for child protection, there are enabling factors. Positive signs include the introduction of digital reporting platforms, targeted training programs, and growing media attention to cases of abuse (UNICEF, 2023). International collaboration particularly through UNICEF and the EU has also fostered pilot projects aimed at aligning Kazakhstan with global best practices.

Overall, these studies suggest that successful implementation depends less on the existence of formal laws and more on clarity, leadership, teacher empowerment, and systemic coordination.

2.8 Summary and Research Gap

Synthesis of Literature

The reviewed literature highlights three consistent patterns across global, regional, and Kazakhstani contexts.

First, international frameworks such as the UNCRC and UNESCO's Safe to Learn initiative have established clear expectations that schools must function as protective environments. Most importantly, successful safeguarding practices worldwide are associated with well-defined staff roles, systematic training, and inter-agency cooperation (Munro, 2011), as well as child-centered mechanisms that ensure children's voices are heard in reporting and protection processes (Lundy, 2014). However, even in high-resource settings, teachers report low preparedness, and vulnerable groups such as children with disabilities remain underserved (Jones et al., 2012).

Second, the post-Soviet and Central Asian experience shows a recurring gap between policy rhetoric and practice. Soviet legacies of hierarchical governance, adult-centered authority, and weak recognition of child rights continue to shape implementation (Silova, 2010). While many reforms adopt international discourse, they remain symbolic when not matched with systemic support, teacher agency, or local adaptation (Cummings & Niyozov, 2012).

Third, in Kazakhstan, national frameworks have been strengthened in recent decades, including the Law on the Rights of the Child (2002), the Family and Gender Policy Concept 2030, and the Comprehensive Plan for Child Protection 2023–2025. UNICEF-supported initiatives, such as QR code reporting systems and anti-bullying programs, signal progress. Yet implementation challenges are persistent: teachers lack training and ownership, school leaders often deprioritize child protection, psychologists operate without clear mandates, and inter-agency collaboration remains weak (UNICEF & Commissioner for Human Rights, 2022). Cultural norms, particularly tolerance of corporal punishment, further undermine protective practices (UNICEF, 2019).

Overall, the evidence reveals a consistent policy, practice gap, whereby schools are tasked with safeguarding responsibilities but lack the clarity, capacity, and authority to fulfill them effectively.

Chapter 3: Conceptual Framework

3.1 Introduction

This chapter outlines the conceptual framework underpinning the current research on the enactment of child protection policies in Kazakhstan's urban state schools. The framework serves as a guide for examining how national safeguarding directives are understood, interpreted, and practiced by educators and school leaders in localized contexts. Rooted in theories of policy enactment of Ball et al.'s (2012), this framework integrates empirical findings from the reviewed literature, particularly concerning issues of governance, teacher autonomy, policy ownership, and structural implementation barriers. By organizing these themes into an interconnected model, the chapter establishes a theoretical lens through which the implementation process can be critically analyzed.

3.2 Theoretical Foundation: Policy Enactment and Implementation Gaps

The framework builds upon Ball et al.'s (2012) theory of policy enactment, which posits that policy implementation is not a passive or linear process, but rather a complex act of interpretation and negotiation by multiple actors across varying contexts. Ball et al. (2012) state that a policy is not only implemented, it is interpreted, translated and practiced based on the norms, culture and understanding of the actors. According to Ball et al. (2012) policy text, discourse and practice could vary. Different actors read the same policy or same text differently. Policy shapes how problems are defined. That way, policies carry values, ideologies, and power relations, thus they might push schools to focus on paperwork rather than real protection of children. Finally, different actors enact policy differently. Each actor has different authority, different understandings, different interests, different emotional responses. Unlike earlier implementation theories that viewed policy enactment as a top-down cascade from policymakers to practitioners, Ball et al. (2012) emphasize the agency of frontline workers, in this case, school leaders, teachers, social pedagogues, psychologists and school inspectors in adapting, resisting, or transforming policy mandates based on their institutional realities.

This theoretical lens is particularly relevant in Kazakhstan, where national reforms, though ambitious in their formal articulation, are often detached from local conditions. In the Kazakhstani context, the power and influence of different actors can be different. If school leaders might understand child protection as protecting children from harm in practice, some other actors experiencing pressure might interpret or practice child protection as a bureaucratic document or formal obligation to have. Their real enactment might be different. Thus, policies designed at the national level may not account for on-the-ground challenges such as different knowledge awareness, unclear procedural guidelines, or competing institutional priorities. As a result, there is often a disjuncture between policy text and policy practice, commonly referred to as the implementation gap.

This idea is echoed in the work of An and Kulmala (2021), who describe Kazakhstan's reforms, particularly in the area of child welfare, as largely symbolic. According to their analysis, reforms are frequently crafted to satisfy external observers or international development partners, rather than to stimulate meaningful systemic change. This critique is crucial in framing the study, as it helps explain the persistent gap between Kazakhstan's formal commitment to child protection and the variable quality of its school-based practices. While policies appear comprehensive and progressive in legal terms, their actual implementation is conditional upon the interpretations and actions of actors at the school level actors who often operate under considerable institutional constraints.

3.3 Influencing Factors in Implementation

Based on the conceptual foundation and the reviewed literature, the framework identifies four interrelated factors that significantly influence the way child protection policies are enacted in urban Kazakhstani schools. These include: (1) policy clarity and communication, (2) leadership support, and (3) teacher capacity and workload.

1. Policy Clarity and Communication

One of the primary barriers to effective implementation is the lack of clarity in how child protection policies are communicated to school staff. Many teachers and administrators are either unaware of the specific expectations attached to these policies or find them vague and contradictory. According to UNICEF and the Commissioner for Human Rights (2022), a considerable proportion of school staff report insufficient training and minimal exposure to practical guidelines on reporting, responding to, or preventing child abuse within school settings. This lack of procedural clarity results in inconsistent practices across schools, undermining the goals of national reform. If staff are uncertain about their responsibilities or fear negative repercussions for acting, they may choose inaction, even when children are at risk.

2. Leadership Support

Leadership plays a pivotal role in translating policy into practice. School leaders who actively prioritize child protection set the tone for how seriously safeguarding measures are integrated into daily operations. Many Kazakhstani schools operate under rigid administrative cultures, where principals may lack either the autonomy or the incentive to prioritize protective measures. This leads to a passive or reactive approach, where safeguarding is treated as a compliance exercise rather than an ethical commitment to student well-being. Leadership support thus emerges as a critical enabling condition for successful policy enactment.

3. Teacher Capacity and Workload

Teachers are central actors in the implementation of child protection policies, yet they often face structural and professional limitations that impede their engagement. A recurring theme in the literature is the issue of teacher workload and competing demands. With responsibilities that already include heavy administrative duties, curriculum delivery, and extracurricular oversight, many teachers report being overburdened and under-supported. When safeguarding policies are introduced without sufficient training or workload adjustments, educators may perceive them as an additional administrative burden rather than a core professional responsibility, as evidenced by survey findings

showing widespread concerns about inadequate training and excessive safeguarding workload (TES, 2023).

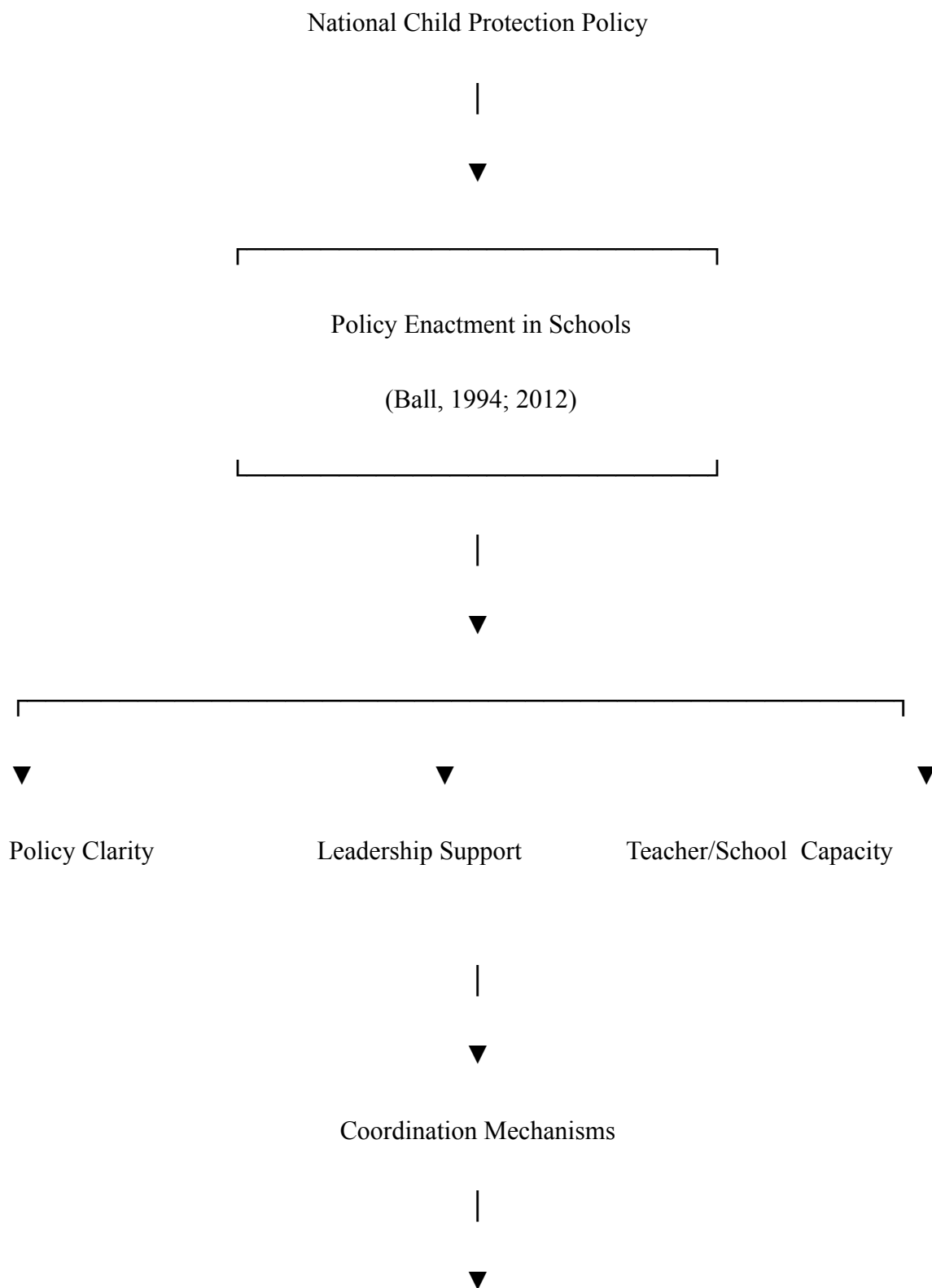
Moreover, a lack of specialized knowledge about child protection procedures can result in inappropriate responses or inaction. Teachers' awareness of child abuse and neglect procedures has been found to depend significantly on prior training, with unclear reporting guidelines and limited procedural knowledge contributing to reduced reporting and delayed responses (Abdulrahman et al., 2026). Teachers may be uncertain about how to recognize signs of abuse or neglect, how to engage with children sensitively, or how to report concerns without violating school hierarchies or norms. Without sustained investment in capacity-building and mentorship, teachers are unlikely to fulfill the protective roles envisioned in policy documents.

3.4 Summary of the Framework

Together, these four domains form the conceptual foundation of the study. Policy clarity shapes how school staff interpret their roles; leadership provides the support structures needed for implementation; teacher capacity affects frontline responses; and inter-agency coordination determines the extent to which schools can access external resources. All these factors interact dynamically within the broader policy environment, influenced by Kazakhstan's centralized governance and socio-cultural context.

By adopting Ball et al.'s (2012) policy enactment perspective, the study recognizes that policy implementation is not merely a technical issue but a deeply social and contextual process. This framework enables a nuanced exploration of the conditions under which school-based actors engage with child protection policies and the challenges they encounter in doing so.

3.5 Conceptual Framework Diagram



Policy Actors

(Principals, Teachers, Psychologists, Inspectors)

|



Interpretation & Adaptation

|



Safeguarding Practices in Schools

3.6 Application of the Framework

The conceptual framework developed for this study emphasizes that the success or failure of child protection policy enactment in schools depends not solely on the existence of formal policies, but on the interaction between several critical factors: institutional clarity, leadership support, teacher capacity, systemic coordination, and interaction of all the actors. Recognizing this, the framework does not treat enactment as a binary process of compliance or non-compliance. Instead, it conceptualizes enactment as a dynamic and situated practice, shaped by both individual agency and structural constraints at the school level.

This framework served as a foundational tool in both the data collection and analysis phases of the study. Data collection involved semi-structured interviews with key school stakeholders, including teachers, school leaders, and psychologists, social pedagogues as well as the review of relevant institutional documents such as safeguarding guidelines, school regulations, and professional development records. The interview protocol was designed to elicit detailed reflections on the four core dimensions identified in the framework: 1) clarity of policy communication, 2) leadership engagement, and 3) teacher capacity and workload.

During the analysis stage, qualitative data from interview transcripts and document analysis was thematically coded using these four factors as sensitizing concepts. This analytical strategy enabled the researcher to systematically assess how each factor operates within different school contexts, highlighting both common patterns and unique cases of policy interpretation. Coding was not limited to rigid categories; rather, it remained open to emergent sub-themes that reflect the lived experiences and nuanced understandings of the participants. For instance, while some schools may have reported strong leadership support but weak external coordination, others may have struggled primarily with staff awareness and training. This flexible approach ensured that the framework was not imposed on the data but used as a guide to uncover contextually grounded insights.

Most importantly, the application of this framework also allowed the study to interrogate intersections between the identified factors. For example, the interaction between policy clarity and leadership support have revealed how well school leaders translate national directives into actionable school-level procedures. Similarly, exploring the link between teacher capacity and inter-agency coordination have exposed how external support (or its absence) shapes individual confidence in handling safeguarding responsibilities. Through such analysis, the study aimed to map not only individual challenges but also systemic patterns that hinder or facilitate the implementation of child protection measures.

In this way, the framework provided a coherent and theoretically grounded structure for understanding how safeguarding policies are enacted in Kazakhstan's urban state schools. It bridged macro-level policy design with micro-level school realities, thereby offering a practical lens for policymakers and practitioners interested in narrowing the implementation gap.

3.7 Conclusion

In conclusion, this chapter has presented the conceptual framework guiding the study. Drawing on Ball et al.'s (2012) theory of policy enactment, the framework challenges simplistic assumptions of top-down enactment by centering the role of individual agency, school-level structures, and broader institutional constraints. Three primary factors as policy clarity, leadership support, and teacher capacity emerged from the literature as central to understanding the complexities of child protection policy implementation.

This framework is not only theoretical but also deeply practical, informing both the design and interpretation of the study. It set the stage for the methodological approach described in the next chapter, where these dimensions will be operationalized through qualitative tools to uncover how protective practices are shaped, adapted, or resisted within urban Kazakhstani schools.

Chapter 4: Methodology

4.1 Research Paradigm

Case study research is a well-established approach for exploring policy enactment in real-world contexts (Yin, 2018). This study adopted a case study design to examine how safeguarding mandates are interpreted and enacted at the school level and shaped by contextual factors such as leadership, resources, and institutional culture.

This research was situated within the interpretivist paradigm, which holds that reality is socially constructed and shaped by individual experiences, contexts, interactions, and institutional contexts (Crotty, 1998; Denzin & Lincoln, 2018). Rather than seeking objective and universally generalisable truths, interpretivism recognises that multiple, context-dependent meanings coexist within social settings. Knowledge is therefore understood as co-constructed through interaction between researcher and participants, rather than discovered as fixed reality (Charmaz, 2014). Unlike positivist paradigms, which focus on objective measurement and generalizable truths, interpretivism acknowledges the existence of multiple, co-existing realities, particularly in social and institutional settings. This perspective is especially relevant to the study of educational policy implementation, as it allowed for a rich, nuanced exploration of how school actors interpreted and enacted child protection frameworks within the complexity of their daily work environments.

In the context of Kazakhstan's education system, where hierarchical governance, policy ambiguity, and role complexity are prevalent, this paradigm enabled the researcher to delve into subjective meanings and lived experiences rather than assuming uniform policy uptake. The study sought to understand how different stakeholders (teachers, school leaders, psychologists, social pedagogues) made sense of national child protection directives, how they navigated their roles, and what institutional or personal factors influenced their decisions and behaviors in safeguarding children.

Thus, the interpretivist paradigm not only informed the data collection and analysis approach but also ensured that findings remain context-sensitive and grounded in participants' realities.

4.2 Research Method

In line with the interpretivist paradigm, this study adopted a qualitative case study design to explore how child protection policies are interpreted and enacted in urban public schools in Kazakhstan. Case study research was particularly suitable for this study, as it allowed the researcher to examine the complex interactions between national policy, institutional structures, and individual actors in a real-world context (Robert K. Yin, 2018; Bent Flyvbjerg, 2006). By focusing on two mainstream urban schools in Almaty, the study provided rich, contextualized insights into the ways school leaders, teachers, and student support staff negotiate their roles in enacting child protection mandates.

The study explicitly adopted Stephen Ball's (1994, 2012) policy enactment framework to guide both data collection and analysis. According to Ball, policy is interpreted and enacted differently depending on the interactions between policy texts, policy actors, and institutional contexts. In this study, national child protection policies were conceptualized as policy texts, while school leaders, teachers, and psychologists/social pedagogues were considered policy actors whose understanding and enactment are shaped by organizational structures, leadership practices, resources, and school culture. This theoretical lens allowed the research to go beyond a descriptive account of policy compliance and instead explore the ways in which actors interpret, adapt, or negotiate policies within their specific institutional and cultural contexts.

The choice of a case study design allowed for analytical generalization rather than statistical generalization. The two selected schools provided contrasting yet typical examples of urban public schools operating under centralized governance. Selection criteria included urban location, Ministry of Education oversight, and the presence of a designated child protection focal point, such as a psychologist or social pedagogue. Within each school, six to eight participants were selected purposively to represent multiple perspectives, including school leadership, classroom teachers, psychologists/social pedagogues, and school inspectors. This stratified sampling ensured that the experiences of actors occupying different institutional roles were captured,

consistent with Ball's emphasis on the importance of understanding policy enactment across organizational hierarchies (Merriam, 2009; Patton, 2015; Flyvbjerg, 2006).

By situating the research within both an interpretivist paradigm and Ball's enactment framework, the study was able to capture the nuanced ways in which child protection policies are interpreted, contested, and enacted in practice, highlighting both the opportunities and constraints that shape policy implementation in Kazakhstan's urban schools.

4.3 Sampling Strategy

The research adopted a purposive sampling strategy, selecting both research sites and participants based on criteria aligned with the study's objectives. Purposive sampling was widely used in qualitative research to identify information-rich cases that can provide in-depth insight into the phenomenon under investigation (Michael Q. Patton, 2015). Rather than aiming for statistical representativeness, this approach prioritises conceptual relevance and depth of understanding.

Two urban public schools were selected as the primary sites of inquiry. Case selection followed a form of typical case sampling, which sought to examine sites that reflect common structural and organisational conditions within the broader system (Patton, 2015; Bent Flyvbjerg, 2006). The selected schools were located in a major metropolitan area (Almaty) and operated as state-funded institutions under the authority of the Ministry of Education. Urban schools were chosen because they are often positioned as key implementation sites for national reforms while remaining embedded within centralised governance structures characteristic of Kazakhstan's education system.

An additional, though not mandatory, selection criterion was the presence of a designated child protection focal person (e.g., a school psychologist or social pedagogue), ensuring that safeguarding responsibilities were formally recognised within the institution. These criteria aimed to ensure that the selected cases are both contextually typical and information-rich in relation to child protection policy implementation.

Within each school, approximately six to eight participants were recruited through purposive stratified sampling to capture variation across institutional roles. This included one to two members of the school leadership team (principal or vice principal), one school psychologist or social pedagogue, one school inspector (if applicable), and three to five classroom teachers across different grade levels. This sample size was considered appropriate, since phenomenological research typically relies on small, focused samples, often ranging from one to ten participants with purposive sampling for recruitment (Starks & Trinidad, 2007). Background information about the participants were provided in Table 1.

Such role-based stratification allowed the study to explore how safeguarding policies were interpreted and enacted across different layers of the organisational hierarchy. As qualitative scholars note, sampling in interpretivist research seeks depth and multiplicity of perspectives rather than numerical adequacy (Sharan B. Merriam, 2009; John W. Creswell & Poth, 2018). The proposed sample size was considered sufficient for generating rich, contextualised data while allowing for detailed cross-role analysis within each case.

Table 1

Participants demographic information

Participants	School position	Years of experience	Gender
P1	Deputy Head	12 years	Female
P2	Head	10 years	Female
P3	Social Pedagogue	5 years 6 months	Female
P4	Psychologist	30 years	Female
P5	Teacher	8 years	Female
P6	Teacher	18 years	Female
P7	Teacher	7 years	Female
P8	Primary Teacher	1 year	Female
P9	Primary Teacher	3 years	Female
P10	Teacher	4 years	Female

P11	Primary Teacher	1 year	Female
P12	Primary Teacher	1 years	Female
P13	Primary Teacher	1 year	Female
P14	Head	7 years	Female
P15	Deputy Head	2 years	Female
P16	Social Pedagogue	7 years	Female
P17	Teacher	30 years	Female

4.4 Data Collection Tools

The research employed primary qualitative data collection methods: semi-structured interviews. The use of this source is consistent with case study methodology, which emphasises the importance of triangulation to enhance depth, credibility, and contextual understanding (Robert K. Yin, 2018; Sharan B. Merriam, 2009). Combining interviews of a variety of participants enables the study to capture both participants' lived experiences and the formal policy frameworks shaping institutional practice.

4.4.1 Semi-Structured Interviews

Semi-structured interviews served as the primary source of empirical data. Qualitative interviewing is particularly suited to interpretivist research, as it facilitates exploration of meaning-making, perception, and lived experience (Steinar Kvale & Svend Brinkmann, 2009). Unlike structured interviews, the semi-structured format balances flexibility with thematic guidance, allowing participants to articulate their perspectives in their own terms while ensuring alignment with the research objectives (Johnny Saldaña, 2016).

The interview protocol was informed by the study's conceptual framework and focused on participants' understanding of national and school-level child protection policies, perceived roles and responsibilities in safeguarding enactment, access to training, resources, and institutional support, perceived barriers (e.g., workload,

ambiguity, role conflict), perceived enablers (e.g., collaboration, leadership support), perceptions of school culture and inter-agency coordination.

Semi-structured interviews were particularly appropriate for policy enactment research, as they allowed for exploration of how formal mandates are interpreted and negotiated within everyday practice (Merriam, 2009).

Each interview lasted approximately 45–60 minutes. Participants were interviewed in their preferred language (Kazakh or Russian) to ensure clarity and comfort. With informed consent, interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim. Transcripts were translated into English for analysis using Google Translate services by the researcher herself who happens to have IELTS Academic 8.0 and BA in English Language and Literature. The interview data constituted the primary dataset for subsequent thematic analysis.

4.5 Data Analysis

The collected data was analyzed using thematic analysis, guided by both the interpretivist paradigm and Ball's policy enactment framework. Thematic analysis allowed the researcher to identify patterns and meanings within the qualitative data while remaining sensitive to the contextual and subjective experiences of participants (Braun & Clarke, 2006, 2019; Saldaña, 2016; Guest, MacQueen, & Namey, 2012).

Data analysis proceeded in several stages. First, transcripts of semi-structured interviews and collected documents were reviewed repeatedly to achieve familiarity and seek patterns. Initial codes were then generated, capturing segments of data relevant to the study's conceptual dimensions, including policy clarity, leadership support, teacher capacity, coordination, and contextual influences. Codes were both deductive, reflecting the framework informed by Ball's concepts of policy text, actors, and context, and inductive, allowing new insights and themes to emerge from participants' lived experiences.

Following coding, the researcher grouped related codes into broader themes. These themes were reviewed and refined iteratively to ensure that they accurately reflect

the data and align with Ball's framework. For example, themes captured how actors interpret ambiguous policy texts, negotiate responsibilities under hierarchical leadership, adapt enactment to local constraints, or engage in symbolic compliance versus genuine enactment.

By combining thematic analysis with Ball's policy enactment framework, the study did not only identify common themes and patterns but also provide a theoretically informed interpretation of how child protection policies are enacted at the school level, highlighting the interactions between policy texts, actors, and organizational contexts in shaping practice.

4.6 Trustworthiness and Rigor

To ensure methodological rigor, this study adopted strategies aligned with established qualitative criteria for trustworthiness. In interpretivist research, quality is evaluated not through statistical validity but through credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability (Yvonna S. Lincoln & Egon G. Guba, 1985). These criteria provided a framework for assessing the integrity and transparency of qualitative inquiry.

Credibility refers to the extent to which findings accurately represent participants' perspectives. To enhance credibility, interview summaries were returned to participants for verification (member checking), allowing them to confirm or clarify interpretations. Member checking is widely recognised as a strategy for strengthening internal validity in qualitative research (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Sharan B. Merriam, 2009).

Transferability concerns the extent to which findings may be applicable to other contexts. Rather than claiming statistical generalisation, qualitative research supports analytical transferability through thick description. Detailed accounts of school settings, participant roles, and institutional dynamics will enable readers to assess the relevance of findings to similar educational environments (Merriam, 2009).

Dependability refers to the stability and transparency of the research process. To address this, a research log and audit trail maintained, documenting methodological

decisions, coding procedures, and any changes to the research design. Maintaining an audit trail enhances procedural transparency and allows for external review of the analytic process (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

Confirmability relates to the degree to which findings are grounded in the data rather than researcher bias. A reflexive journal was kept throughout the study to document assumptions, positionality, and emerging interpretations. Reflexivity is particularly important in interpretivist research, where the researcher is acknowledged as an active participant in knowledge construction (Virginia Braun & Victoria Clarke, 2019). This practice strengthens transparency and analytic integrity.

Collectively, these strategies enhanced the credibility, transparency, and ethical robustness of the study, ensuring that findings are grounded in participants' experiences while maintaining methodological coherence.

4.7 Researcher Positionality and Reflexivity

In qualitative research, the researcher is an active participant in knowledge construction, and their background, experiences, and perspectives inevitably shape the research process (Sharan B. Merriam, 2009; Yvonna S. Lincoln & Egon G. Guba, 1985). Acknowledging and reflecting on these influences is central to maintaining methodological rigor in interpretivist inquiry.

As a researcher familiar with Kazakhstan's education system and fluent in Kazakh and Russian, I brought both insider knowledge and contextual understanding to the study. This positionality facilitated effective communication with participants, nuanced interpretation of school documents, and an awareness of cultural and institutional norms that shape policy implementation. At the same time, it carried the risk of assumptions or preconceptions influencing data collection and analysis.

To address this, I maintained a reflexive journal throughout the research process, documenting my reflections on participant interactions, emerging interpretations, and decisions made during data collection and analysis. Reflexive practices also included

critically examining how my professional background, personal values, and experiences shaped the framing of interview questions, the coding of data, and the interpretation of findings (Virginia Braun & Victoria Clarke, 2019).

By systematically reflecting on positionality, the study enhanced transparency, minimizes potential bias, and strengthened the credibility and confirmability of findings. This reflexive approach was particularly important in research on child protection, where social sensitivities, hierarchical dynamics, and ethical considerations demanded careful, self-aware engagement with participants and data.

4.8 Ethical Considerations

Ethical considerations were central to the design and conduct of this study, given its focus on child protection and safeguarding in school settings and the involvement of staff responsible for sensitive safeguarding practices. Prior to commencing fieldwork, ethical clearances were obtained from the Nazarbayev University Graduate School of Education (NUGSE) Research Ethics Committee to ensure that all research activities complied with national regulations and institutional guidelines. In addition, formal permission was sought from the administrations of the participating schools to facilitate access to staff and documents and to ensure adherence to institutional policies.

Participants were provided with detailed information about the study's purpose, procedures, and their rights, and written informed consent will be obtained prior to participation. They were informed that involvement was entirely voluntary and that they may have withdrawn at any time without penalty. These procedures aligned with the principles of respect for autonomy and beneficence in qualitative research (Sharan B. Merriam, 2009; Yvonna S. Lincoln & Egon G. Guba, 1985).

Confidentiality and anonymity were maintained throughout the study. Participant numbering was used for schools, staff, and any individuals mentioned in documents, and all personally identifying information was removed from transcripts and reports. Audio recordings, transcripts, and other research materials were securely stored on

password-protected devices accessible only to the researcher, following established best practices for data protection in qualitative research (Yin, 2018).

Given the sensitive nature of child protection, the researcher took measures to minimize potential emotional distress. Interviews were conducted respectfully and non-judgmentally, and participants were able to pause or terminate interviews at any point if they felt uncomfortable. Ensuring participant well-being was a priority, in accordance with the principle of non-maleficence (Braun & Clarke, 2019).

Finally, the researcher maintained a reflexive journal throughout the study to document reflections on personal assumptions, positionality, and potential biases. This practice supported transparency and confirmability, ensuring that the analysis remains grounded in participants' perspectives and experiences, in line with interpretivist principles (Braun & Clarke, 2019; Merriam, 2009).

Through these measures, the study upheld the highest standards of ethical conduct, protecting participants' rights, promoting their well-being, and ensuring the integrity and credibility of the research process.

4.9 Limitations

While this study was designed to provide an in-depth understanding of how child protection policies are interpreted and enacted in urban schools, several limitations were anticipated. First, the issue of generalizability was acknowledged. As a case study focusing on two public schools in Almaty, the findings were statistically generalizable to all schools in Kazakhstan. Instead, the study aimed to produce analytical generalizations, offering insights that may resonate with other schools facing similar structural, cultural, and policy contexts (Yin, 2018; Flyvbjerg, 2006).

Second, the study may have encountered social desirability bias. Participants, particularly school leaders and staff, may have provided responses that align with perceived institutional expectations or norms, given the hierarchical nature of the school system. To mitigate this, the rapport was established to ensure confidentiality, and

encourage participants to share candid reflections while emphasizing that there were no right or wrong answers (Merriam, 2009; Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009).

Third, language and translation may have introduced subtle limitations. Interviews were conducted in Kazakh and Russian, and subsequently translated into English for analysis. Despite careful translation procedures, there may have been slight shifts in meaning or nuance, which the researcher addressed through back-translation and cross-checking to preserve accuracy (Saldana, 2016).

By acknowledging these potential limitations, the study maintained transparency, rigor, and methodological integrity, ensuring that findings were interpreted cautiously and within the appropriate contextual boundaries.

Chapter 5: Data Analysis

5.1 Analytical Approach

This study employed qualitative data analysis to explore how child protection policies are understood and enacted within public urban schools in Kazakhstan. Semi-structured interviews with school staff were analyzed using thematic analysis, a widely used method for identifying and interpreting patterns in qualitative data. The analytical procedure followed the framework developed by Virginia Braun and Victoria Clarke, which involves a systematic process of coding and theme development.

Thematic analysis was selected because it allows researchers to explore participants' perceptions, experiences, and interpretations of institutional practices. Given that the study focuses on how child protection policies are enacted in everyday school contexts, thematic analysis provides flexibility to capture the complexity of teachers' experiences and institutional practices.

The analysis was also informed by the policy enactment framework developed by Stephen J. Ball. Ball argues that policies are not simply implemented in a linear way but are interpreted, translated, and thus enacted by actors within specific institutional contexts. This framework guided the interpretation of how school staff understand child protection responsibilities and how institutional conditions shape their practices.

5.2 Familiarization with the Data

The first stage of the analysis involved familiarization with the data. All interview transcripts were carefully read multiple times to gain a comprehensive understanding of participants' experiences and perspectives. During this stage, preliminary notes were taken regarding recurring ideas, patterns, and statements related to child protection and safeguarding practices within schools.

Initial observations indicated that participants often discussed child protection in relation to general safety, discipline, and student well-being, rather than referring to specific safeguarding frameworks or formal procedures to protect or identify potential children in abuse or danger. Many participants described their responsibilities in broad terms such as ensuring that students “do not harm themselves,” maintaining classroom discipline, and protecting children from physical or psychological harm. These early observations suggested that participants’ understanding of child protection may be shaped more by everyday teaching and administrative responsibilities than by formal policy frameworks.

5.3 Coding Process

After familiarization with the data, the transcripts were systematically coded. Coding involved identifying meaningful segments of text that related to the research questions and assigning descriptive labels to these segments. The coding process was conducted manually and included both inductive and deductive coding approaches. Inductive coding allowed themes to emerge directly from participants’ responses, while deductive coding was informed by the study’s conceptual framework on policy enactment. Examples of initial codes included limited training in child protection, general understanding of safety and well-being, reliance on general school instructions, lack of specific safeguarding procedures, teachers’ overloaded responsibility for student safety, and informal responses to child welfare concerns. These codes were then grouped into broader categories reflecting patterns across the interviews.

5.4 Development of Themes

Following the coding stage, related codes were organized into broader themes that captured recurring patterns in participants’ experiences and perceptions. The themes were reviewed and refined to ensure they accurately represented the dataset and addressed the research questions.

The first theme discovered was limited professional training in child protection. Many participants indicated that they had not received specialized training related to child protection or safeguarding. Instead, teachers reported participating in general safety or emergency training sessions such as earthquake, terror attack, intruder, fire drill which were often unrelated to child protection issues such as abuse, bullying identification or reporting procedures. For example, one participant noted that while teachers attend certain safety courses, these trainings mainly address emergency preparedness rather than child protection in everyday school contexts.

This finding suggests that although academic staff including teachers, social pedagogues, psychologists and administration recognize their responsibility for student safety, they may lack formal knowledge about specific child protection mechanisms.

Another theme was a broad and informal understanding of child protection. Participants commonly defined child protection in general terms such as protecting students from harm, ensuring emotional well-being, and maintaining a safe classroom environment. These definitions often focused on physical safety, discipline, and psychological comfort in the classroom, rather than on formal safeguarding frameworks.

Teachers frequently described their role as ensuring that students do not injure themselves or experience bullying or emotional harm. While this indicates a strong sense of responsibility for student well-being, it also reflects a limited conceptualization of child protection as a formal institutional process.

Another theme emerging from the interviews was the reliance on general school instructions and internal regulations. Participants reported that at the beginning of the academic year they typically sign various instructions and guidelines related to safety and professional responsibilities.

However, these documents often appear to function as general administrative procedures rather than comprehensive child protection policies. Participants rarely referred to specific safeguarding frameworks or structured protocols for responding to cases of abuse or neglect.

This suggests that child protection policies may exist in a formal sense but are not always clearly operationalized in daily school practice.

The fourth theme was teachers and class teachers as primary actors in child protection. Participants frequently described themselves as the primary actors responsible for ensuring students' safety and well-being. Teachers emphasized their role in monitoring students, preventing conflicts, and responding to issues that may arise within the classroom.

This emphasis on individual responsibility reflects the central role teachers play in safeguarding students within school environments. However, it may also indicate a lack of clearly defined institutional structures or collaborative mechanisms for managing child protection cases. All participants, particularly, class teachers or class tutors indicated the importance of time and stated that the shortage of time makes it impossible to fully engage with children's wellbeing. While there are designated school officials as social pedagogues and psychologists, whose main jobs are directly related to safeguarding and child protection, their responsibilities were mostly to deal with children in difficult family, social and/or financial situations rather than safeguarding accountabilities.

5.5 Summary

This chapter outlined the analytical approach used to examine the interview data. Through thematic analysis, several key themes were identified, including limited professional training in child protection, broad interpretations of safeguarding responsibilities, reliance on general school regulations, and the central role of teachers and class teachers in ensuring student safety.

These themes illustrate how child protection policies are interpreted and enacted within school environments. The next chapter presents the findings in greater detail, supported by direct quotations from participants, in order to further explore how child protection practices are experienced and implemented in Kazakhstan state schools.

Chapter 6: Findings

6.1 Introduction

This chapter presents the findings derived from thematic analysis of interview data. The findings are organized around key themes reflecting how child protection policies are understood and enacted by school staff in urban state schools in Kazakhstan. Participant quotations are used to illustrate and support the identified themes. The themes are:

1. Broad and Informal Understanding of Child Protection
2. Limited Professional Training in Child Protection
3. Reliance on General School Regulations as a part of Enactment
4. Teachers as Primary Actors in Safeguarding
5. Structural and Institutional Constraints

6.2 The understanding and interpretation of safeguarding and child protection policies by school staff (RQ1)

This section presents the findings that are related to the first research question (RQ1): How are child protection policies understood and enacted by school staff (school leaders, teachers, social pedagogues and school psychologists) in urban state schools in Kazakhstan? Three themes emerged from the data in relation to this question: broad and informal understanding of child protection, limited professional training in child protection, and reliance on general school regulations as a part of enactment.

Theme 1: Broad and Informal Understanding of Child Protection

This section presents how school staff understands and interprets safeguarding and child protection in their daily professional duties. All participants understood these concepts as essential and of highest importance. They also defined children's mental and physical safety as their number one priority. The definitions of safeguarding and child protection included features like safety, emotional wellbeing and keeping children safe at school and at home. Also, several participants extended this conceptualisation to include

protecting and monitoring children with disciplinary issues, children from socially vulnerable backgrounds as part of the same spectrum of concern.

Notably, all participants commonly defined safeguarding and child protection in general and informal terms, often associating it with maintaining safety, discipline, and emotional well-being. For example, one participant described child protection as:

“making sure children feel safe, that there is no bullying, and everything is calm in the classroom” (P2).

Another participant stated:

“It’s about looking after children, like being responsible for them” (P4).

These definitions reflect most participants’ understanding of safeguarding and child protection. These definitions also suggest a broad and individualized understanding of child protection, detached from formal safeguarding frameworks. This suggests that child protection is interpreted as part of everyday teaching and/or administrative responsibilities rather than a structured institutional process.

Drawing on Stephen J. Ball’s conceptualisation of policy as text, policy as discourse, and policy as practice, several important insights emerge. At the level of policy as text, the absence of references to formal safeguarding policies, reporting protocols, or legal frameworks indicates that policy texts are either not sufficiently internalised or not made visible in staff interpretations. This suggests a gap between official policy documentation and practitioners’ working knowledge.

At the level of policy as discourse, safeguarding and child protection are reinterpreted through a discourse of care, responsibility, and classroom order. Rather than being framed as a rights-based or procedural safeguarding system, the discourse emphasises moral duty and the maintenance of a safe and controlled environment. This reflects how policy meanings are constructed within local contexts, shaped by professional norms and institutional culture.

Finally, at the level of policy as practice, child protection is enacted informally through routine interactions and individual judgement. In line with Ball et al. (2012), policy enactment here appears fragmented and personalised, relying on teachers' interpretations rather than consistent procedural frameworks. The lack of explicit reference to reporting mechanisms or structured interventions suggests that safeguarding practices may vary significantly across individuals, potentially limiting the effectiveness and consistency of child protection implementation.

In summary, while safeguarding and child protection are recognised as important, they are primarily understood and enacted as part of everyday professional responsibility rather than as a formalised institutional process. This highlights a critical disconnection between policy texts and their enactment in practice.

Theme 2: Limited Professional Training in Child Protection (RQ1)

As part of examining school staff's understanding and interpretation of safeguarding and child protection, participants were asked about their professional training in this area. Across both schools, participants consistently reported a lack of specialised training in child protection. While all staff had participated in safety-related training, these sessions were largely limited to emergency preparedness, such as earthquake drills, fire safety, and intruder alerts, rather than safeguarding practices like recognising abuse, understanding preventive mechanisms, or following reporting procedures.

As one participant explained, "We have trainings, but mostly about fire safety or earthquakes, not about how to recognize abuse" (P4). Similarly, another participant noted, "There is no specific training on child protection, we just follow general instructions" (P5). These accounts suggest that, although schools provide training on general physical safety, they do not equip staff with the knowledge and skills required to effectively identify and respond to child protection concerns. As a result, safeguarding remains underdeveloped as a professional competency.

Drawing on Stephen J. Ball's conceptualisation of policy as text, discourse, and practice, several critical gaps can be identified.

At the level of policy as text, safeguarding is weakly articulated within training frameworks. Existing policy texts appear to prioritise emergency preparedness, with limited emphasis on child protection competencies such as recognising abuse, responding appropriately, or following formal reporting procedures. This suggests that safeguarding policies, if present, are not sufficiently translated into structured professional development.

At the level of policy as discourse, "safety" is constructed in a narrow and predominantly physical sense, focusing on visible and immediate risks such as fires or natural disasters. This discourse marginalises less visible but equally critical issues, such as emotional abuse, neglect, and safeguarding vulnerabilities. As a result, teachers' professional understanding of safety becomes aligned with risk prevention rather than child protection.

At the level of policy as practice, the lack of targeted training limits teachers' ability to enact safeguarding policies effectively. In line with Ball et al. (2012), policy enactment is constrained by the absence of necessary knowledge and skills, leading to inconsistent or minimal responses to child protection concerns. Consequently, safeguarding is under-enacted in schools, with staff relying on general instructions rather than informed, procedural action.

In summary, the findings reveal a misalignment between policy expectations and professional capacity. While safety is prioritised at a surface level, the absence of specialised training undermines the effective implementation of child protection practices, highlighting a critical gap in policy enactment.

Theme 3: Reliance on General School Regulations as a part of Enactment (RQ1)

Another recurring finding across participants was the reliance on general school regulations rather than specific child protection policies as their understanding of safeguarding and understanding. Participants referred to formal procedures such as

signing safety instructions at the beginning of the academic year; however, these were not perceived as practical tools for addressing safeguarding concerns as it was already mentioned. General school regulations were primarily described as mechanisms for maintaining discipline, regulating academic processes, and ensuring institutional order, including attendance, dress code, and behaviour rules. In contrast, safeguarding and child protection involve preventing harm, identifying abuse or neglect, and ensuring children's holistic safety and well-being.

As one participant explained, “At the beginning of the year we sign all the safety documents” (P1), while another noted, “There are rules, but they are very general, not specific to situations like abuse or neglect” (P6). These accounts indicate that policies formally exist within schools but lack specificity and practical relevance for safeguarding situations. Consequently, staff are left without clear procedural guidance, which may lead to inconsistent or inadequate responses to child protection concerns.

Drawing on Stephen J. Ball's conceptualisation of policy as text, discourse, and practice, this theme reveals important tensions between formal regulation and safeguarding implementation.

At the level of policy as text, schools appear to rely on broad regulatory documents that emphasise general safety and discipline, while specific safeguarding procedures remain underdeveloped or insufficiently articulated. This creates an illusion of policy presence, where safety is formally acknowledged but not operationalised in relation to child protection risks such as abuse or neglect.

At the level of policy as discourse, safety is framed predominantly in terms of discipline, control, and order. This discourse prioritises visible rule compliance and behavioural management, while marginalising the preventive and protective dimensions of safeguarding. As a result, child protection is not constructed as a proactive, rights-based responsibility but rather becomes subsumed within broader notions of maintaining school order.

At the level of policy as practice, this reliance on general regulations leads to gaps in enactment. Teachers may respond to behavioural issues when rules are visibly broken (reactive practice), but may lack the guidance and confidence to identify and address less visible forms of harm, such as emotional abuse or neglect. In line with Ball et al. (2012), policy enactment in this context is shaped by limited and ambiguous policy resources, resulting in uneven and potentially ineffective safeguarding practices.

In summary, the findings highlight a critical misalignment between general school regulations and the specific demands of safeguarding. While regulatory frameworks provide structure and order, their lack of focus on prevention and protection allows potential harm to remain unnoticed, reinforcing the need for more explicit and actionable child protection policies within schools.

6.3 The barriers and enablers influencing success or failure of policy enactment

This section presents the findings that are related to the second research question (RQ2): What institutional, structural, and professional factors influence the success or failure of policy enactment? Two themes emerged from the data in relation to this question: teachers as primary actors in safeguarding and structural and institutional constraints.

Theme 4: Teachers as Primary Actors in Safeguarding

Participants consistently positioned teachers, particularly class teachers, as the primary actors responsible for ensuring student well-being. Their role extended beyond instructional duties to include monitoring students' emotional, behavioural, and social conditions.

As one participant stated, "The class teacher is responsible for everything related to the child. If something happens, we will first of all inform the classroom teacher" (P7). The other added, "We try to solve problems ourselves first before involving others" (P3, P10). These responses suggest that safeguarding is largely enacted at the level of individual teachers, with responsibility concentrated within classroom-based practice rather than distributed across a wider institutional structure.

Drawing on Stephen J. Ball's conceptualisation of policy as text, discourse, and practice, this pattern reveals important implications. At the level of policy as text, the centrality of class teachers suggests that safeguarding roles are either not clearly defined within formal policy documents or are insufficiently operationalised at the school level. The absence of clearly articulated multi-agency roles (e.g., psychologists, social workers, administrators) indicates that policy texts may not provide detailed guidance on role distribution and collaborative responsibility.

At the level of policy as discourse, a strong discourse of personal responsibility emerges. Teachers are constructed as primary caregivers and moral agents responsible for identifying and addressing student issues. This framing emphasises care, duty, and

immediacy but simultaneously downplays the importance of collective, system-based safeguarding approaches. As a result, safeguarding becomes personalised rather than institutionalised.

At the level of policy as practice, safeguarding is enacted informally through individual initiative. Teachers often attempt to resolve issues independently before involving other professionals, which may delay appropriate intervention or limit access to specialised support. In line with Ball et al. (2012), this reflects a form of policy enactment that is highly localised and dependent on individual capacity, rather than coordinated through structured systems.

While this pattern demonstrates a strong sense of professional responsibility among teachers, it also highlights a critical over-reliance on individuals. Without clear institutional frameworks and collaborative mechanisms, safeguarding becomes inconsistent and potentially fragile, dependent on personal judgement rather than supported by systematic processes.

In summary, the findings indicate that safeguarding is heavily teacher-centred, with limited evidence of distributed responsibility. This underscores the need for clearer role differentiation and stronger institutional support to ensure more consistent and effective child protection practices.

Theme 6: Structural and Institutional Constraints

The findings point to a range of wider institutional issues that make it difficult for schools to implement child protection practices effectively. Participants frequently described how everyday working conditions, such as heavy workloads, limited time, unclear division of responsibilities, and weak collaboration among staff, create barriers to consistent and well-coordinated safeguarding efforts. Rather than being a structured and proactive process, safeguarding often becomes something that is handled unevenly and, at times, only when problems arise.

As several participants explained, time pressure is a major challenge: “There is not enough time to focus on these issues deeply, we already have too many

responsibilities” (P8, P10, P14). Others highlighted confusion around professional roles, particularly in relation to specialists: “Psychologists and social pedagogues are there, but we don’t always clearly understand when to involve them” (P2, P3, P4). There was also frustration with policy frameworks themselves, with one participant stating, “The documents and rules by the Ministry don’t work, I want to look at the person who came up with these policies and make sure he or she knows what they are doing” (P5). Together, these perspectives suggest a clear gap between official policy expectations and the realities of school environments.

Using Stephen J. Ball’s framework of policy as text, discourse, and practice, these challenges can be better understood across three connected levels. First, at the level of policy as text, safeguarding policies and ministerial guidelines are often seen as too theoretical or disconnected from the everyday realities of schools. While they set out general expectations, they do not always provide clear, practical guidance that staff can easily follow. As a result, there is a disconnect between what policies say and how usable they are in practice.

Second, at the level of policy as discourse, there appears to be no strong, shared understanding among staff about safeguarding responsibilities. The uncertainty around when and how to involve professionals such as psychologists or social pedagogues suggests that safeguarding is not framed as a collaborative, whole-school responsibility. Instead, it is understood in fragmented ways, which leads to hesitation and inconsistency in decision-making.

Finally, at the level of policy as practice, these structural and organisational challenges directly shape what happens in schools. Limited time reduces opportunities for thorough engagement with child protection issues, while unclear roles make it harder for staff to work together effectively. As highlighted by Ball et al. (2012), the way policies are enacted depends not only on how they are interpreted, but also on the material conditions in which schools operate. In this case, those conditions, such as workload, lack of clarity, and weak coordination, limit the ability to implement safeguarding in a consistent and meaningful way.

Overall, the findings suggest that safeguarding is not simply a matter of knowledge or training. It is also deeply influenced by structural factors within schools. Pressures related to workload, unclear professional boundaries, and weak integration of policies all contribute to a system where child protection practices remain fragmented and reactive, rather than coherent and preventative.

6.4 Chapter Summary

The findings demonstrate that child protection in schools is shaped by a combination of limited professional training, informal understandings of safeguarding, and weak institutional structures. Across the data, safeguarding is consistently recognised as important; however, it is predominantly interpreted through everyday teaching practices and administrative responsibilities rather than through formalised safeguarding frameworks.

Drawing on Stephen J. Ball's conceptualisation of policy as text, discourse, and practice, a clear misalignment emerges. At the level of policy as text, safeguarding policies are either weakly articulated or insufficiently operationalised, with greater emphasis placed on general safety regulations rather than specific child protection procedures. At the level of policy as discourse, safeguarding is framed primarily in terms of care, discipline, and responsibility, rather than as a structured, rights-based, and preventive system. This discourse shapes how teachers understand their roles, often positioning them as the central actors responsible for child well-being. At the level of policy as practice, these limitations result in fragmented and inconsistent implementation. Safeguarding is enacted informally, relying heavily on individual teachers' judgement, with limited collaboration and unclear role distribution among school staff. The lack of specialised training, combined with structural constraints such as time pressures and weak institutional support, further restricts the effective enactment of child protection policies.

Overall, the findings highlight a significant gap between policy intentions and school-level realities, where safeguarding remains underdeveloped as a coordinated and systematic practice. This underscores the need for clearer policy guidance, targeted

professional training, and stronger institutional structures to support effective child protection in schools.

Chapter 7: Discussion

This chapter interprets the findings of the study through the theoretical lens of Stephen J. Ball et al. (2012), with particular attention to the idea of policy enactment and the interconnected concepts of policy as text, discourse, and practice. Rather than viewing policy as something that is simply implemented, this framework allows us to understand how safeguarding and child protection are actively interpreted, reshaped, and sometimes diluted within school environments.

What becomes clear across all five themes is that child protection in schools does not function as a fully developed, coherent system. Instead, it exists in a fragmented form shaped by individual interpretations, limited training, and structural constraints. Teachers are not ignoring safeguarding; on the contrary, they care deeply about student well-being. However, the way safeguarding is understood and enacted differs significantly from how it is typically conceptualised in formal policy frameworks.

7.1 Policy as Text

At the level of policy as text, the findings suggest that safeguarding policies are either not sufficiently visible or not practically useful for teachers. Participants referred to signing documents and following general school rules, but these were largely described as formalities rather than meaningful guides for action. Policies seemed to exist “on paper,” yet they did not translate into clear, actionable steps for dealing with real safeguarding concerns such as abuse, neglect, or emotional harm.

This reflects what Stephen J. Ball et al. (2012) describe as the gap between policy production and policy use. A policy can be officially present, but if it is not clearly communicated, contextualised, or supported through training, it becomes disconnected from everyday practice. In this study, the dominance of general regulations focused on discipline, attendance, and order creates a situation where schools can claim to be “safe,” while more complex and less visible risks remain unaddressed.

In this sense, safeguarding policy is not absent, but it is underdeveloped as a practical tool. Teachers are not equipped with clear procedures or structured guidance, which leaves them to interpret policy on their own.

7.2 Policy as Discourse

At the level of policy as discourse, one of the most striking findings is how safeguarding is understood by teachers. Across interviews, safeguarding was consistently described in terms of care, responsibility, and maintaining a calm and safe classroom environment. This reflects a genuine commitment to students, but it also reveals a narrower understanding of what safeguarding involves.

Following Stephen J. Ball's perspective, discourse shapes not only how people talk about policy, but also how they think about their roles and what actions are possible. In this study, safeguarding is not framed as a structured, rights-based system with clear procedures and accountability. Instead, it is constructed as part of being a "good teacher", someone who looks after students, keeps order, and notices when something is wrong. This becomes particularly visible in the emphasis on class teachers as the central figures in safeguarding. Teachers are seen as responsible for "everything related to the child," which creates a strong sense of personal accountability. While this can be seen as a strength, it also shifts safeguarding away from being a shared institutional responsibility. The system becomes person-dependent rather than process-driven.

At the same time, the discourse of "safety" is largely limited to physical risks and visible problems. Training reinforces this by focusing on emergencies such as fires or earthquakes, rather than on identifying abuse or responding to complex safeguarding situations. As a result, certain types of harm, especially emotional abuse or neglect may remain outside of teachers' immediate awareness.

7.3 Policy as Practice

When we look at policy as practice, the gap between intention and reality becomes even more visible. Safeguarding is not enacted through clear procedures or

coordinated systems, but through everyday actions, decisions, and improvisations by teachers.

In line with Stephen J. Ball et al. (2012), policy enactment is always shaped by context. Teachers work within constraints, they have limited time, heavy workloads, and often unclear guidance. Under these conditions, it is not surprising that safeguarding becomes something they handle informally. They try to solve problems themselves first, rely on their own judgement, and only involve others when necessary.

However, this creates several risks. Without clear procedures, responses to safeguarding concerns can vary widely between teachers. Some may be proactive and attentive, while others may feel uncertain or unprepared. The lack of structured training further reinforces this inconsistency, as teachers are not always confident in recognising or responding to signs of abuse.

In this sense, safeguarding becomes reactive rather than preventive. Teachers respond to visible issues, but may not have the tools to identify less obvious forms of harm. This reflects a key limitation in policy enactment: when policies are not supported by knowledge, resources, and systems, they cannot be fully realised in practice.

7.4 The Role of Structural Constraints

A major contribution of Stephen J. Ball et al. (2012) is the emphasis on how material and organisational conditions shape policy enactment. The findings strongly support this idea.

Both teachers and administrators repeatedly mentioned lack of time, overlapping responsibilities, and unclear role distribution as barriers to effective safeguarding. Even when support staff such as psychologists and social pedagogues are present, their roles are not always clearly understood or integrated into daily practice. This leads to hesitation, delays, or missed opportunities for intervention.

The statement that “the documents and rules by the Ministry don’t work” is particularly revealing. It suggests that policies are perceived as disconnected from the

realities of schools. This is not necessarily because the policies themselves are flawed, but because they are not adapted to the context in which they are expected to operate.

These structural issues show that safeguarding is not only about awareness or willingness. Teachers may care deeply and want to do the right thing, but without time, clarity, and institutional support, their ability to act is limited. Policy enactment, therefore, is constrained not only by interpretation but by what is realistically possible in everyday school life.

7.5 Bringing It All Together

Looking across all findings, a clear pattern emerges. Safeguarding in schools exists, but it is not functioning as a coherent, systematised policy. Instead, it is loosely defined in policy texts, interpreted through a discourse of care and responsibility, and enacted through informal, individual practices.

Using Stephen J. Ball et al. (2012)'s framework helps to show that this is not simply a failure of enactment. Rather, it is the result of how policy is translated within specific contexts. What we see is a system where responsibility is high, but structure is weak. Teachers are doing their best within the limits they face, but safeguarding remains inconsistent and, at times, fragile. It depends too heavily on individual effort and not enough on collective systems.

7.6 Final Reflection

Ultimately, this study highlights an important tension: safeguarding is recognised as essential, yet it is not fully supported as a professional and institutional practice. Bridging this gap requires attention not only to policy design, but also to how policies are communicated, understood, and supported in schools. As Stephen J. Ball et al. (2012) remind us, policy is not something that simply exists, it is something that people *do and act with*. In this case, what teachers are “doing” with safeguarding reflects both their commitment and the limitations of the system around them.

7.7 Chapter Summary

This chapter has demonstrated that child protection policies in Kazakhstan are enacted through informal, context-dependent practices rather than formal safeguarding systems. Drawing on Stephen J. Ball's theory, the study shows that policy enactment is shaped by limited training, informal individual understanding, institutional constraints, and individual teacher responsibility.

Chapter 8: Conclusion and Recommendations

8.1 Introduction

This chapter concludes the study by bringing together the key findings and reflecting on their broader implications for policy, practice, and future research. The study set out to explore how child protection policies are understood and enacted by school staff in urban state schools in Kazakhstan. While safeguarding has become an increasingly important policy priority globally, its translation into everyday school practice remains uneven and context-dependent.

Drawing on the theoretical framework of Stephen J. Ball et al. (2012), this study approached child protection not as a fixed set of rules, but as a process of policy enactment shaped by how policies are interpreted, negotiated, and applied within specific institutional contexts. This perspective made it possible to move beyond a simple question of whether policies exist, and instead examine how they are actually understood and lived by practitioners.

The findings reveal that child protection in schools is not absent, but rather fragmented, informal, and unevenly enacted, shaped by limited training, dominant professional discourses, and structural constraints. This chapter summarises these insights and considers what they mean for strengthening safeguarding systems in Kazakhstan.

8.2 Summary of Key Findings

This study identified several important and interconnected patterns in the enactment of child protection policies.

First, there is a clear lack of specialised professional training in safeguarding. While teachers regularly participate in safety-related training, these sessions focus primarily on emergency preparedness such as fire drills or earthquake response rather than on recognising, preventing, and responding to abuse or neglect. As a result, safeguarding remains underdeveloped as a professional competency, leaving teachers without the necessary tools to act confidently in complex situations.

Second, safeguarding is understood in broad and informal terms. Participants consistently associated child protection with ensuring safety, maintaining discipline, and supporting students' general well-being. While these interpretations reflect genuine care, they also indicate that safeguarding is not conceptualised as a structured, rights-based policy area with clear procedures and accountability mechanisms.

Third, the study found a strong reliance on general school regulations rather than specific safeguarding frameworks. Teachers referred to rules and documents that emphasise order, behaviour, and compliance, but these were not seen as relevant or useful for addressing child protection concerns. This suggests that while policies formally exist, they are not meaningfully integrated into practice.

Fourth, safeguarding responsibilities are highly individualised, with class teachers positioned as the primary actors responsible for student well-being. Although this reflects a strong sense of professional commitment, it also indicates a lack of institutional support and role differentiation. Safeguarding becomes dependent on individual initiative rather than coordinated systems.

Finally, the study highlights significant structural and institutional constraints, including time pressures, unclear role distribution, and limited collaboration between staff and support professionals. Even when additional roles such as psychologists or social pedagogues are present, their involvement is not always clearly defined or effectively integrated into safeguarding processes.

Taken together, these findings suggest that child protection policies are not implemented as coherent systems, but rather enacted in fragmented and inconsistent ways, shaped by local conditions and professional interpretations.

8.3 Answering the Research Questions

This study aimed to examine how child protection policies are understood and enacted by school staff. The findings clearly indicate that policies are not enacted as

formal safeguarding frameworks, but are instead interpreted through the lens of everyday teaching practice.

In line with Stephen J. Ball et al. (2012), policy enactment is shaped not only by policy design, but also by context, resources, and professional culture. In this study, teachers rely heavily on personal judgement, informal practices, and general regulations when responding to safeguarding issues. This reflects a form of enactment that is localised, adaptive, and often improvised.

Importantly, this does not suggest that teachers are neglecting safeguarding responsibilities. On the contrary, participants expressed a strong sense of care and responsibility toward students. However, without clear guidance, training, and institutional support, their ability to translate this commitment into effective safeguarding practice is limited.

The findings therefore demonstrate that the gap between policy and practice is not simply a matter of implementation failure, but rather a reflection of how policies are interpreted and reshaped within specific school environments.

8.4 Implications for Policy

The findings of this study highlight several important implications for child protection policy in Kazakhstan.

First, there is a need for greater clarity and specificity in safeguarding policies. Current policy frameworks appear to emphasise general safety and compliance, but do not provide detailed guidance on identifying abuse, responding to concerns, or coordinating with other professionals. Policies should move beyond broad principles and offer clear, actionable procedures that can be realistically applied in school settings.

Second, policy development should focus on usability and accessibility, not just formal compliance. As the findings suggest, policies that exist only as documents are unlikely to influence practice. Instead, they need to be communicated in ways that are

meaningful for teachers, supported by practical examples, case scenarios, and clear reporting pathways.

Third, there is a need to promote a systemic and coordinated approach to safeguarding. Policies should clearly define the roles and responsibilities of different actors within the school system, including teachers, administrators, psychologists, and external agencies. This would help shift safeguarding from an individual responsibility to a shared institutional process.

Finally, policymakers should consider the contextual realities of schools, including workload, time constraints, and resource limitations. As Stephen J. Ball et al. (2012) emphasise, policies are always enacted within specific material and organisational conditions. Without aligning policy expectations with these realities, even well-designed policies may fail in practice.

8.5 Implications for Practice

At the level of school practice, the findings point to several key areas for improvement.

First, there is a critical need for targeted professional training in child protection. Such training should go beyond general safety and focus specifically on recognising signs of abuse, understanding safeguarding procedures, and responding appropriately to different types of concerns. Importantly, training should be ongoing and embedded within professional development, rather than delivered as one-off sessions.

Second, schools should work toward clearer role distribution and accountability structures. Safeguarding should not rely solely on class teachers, but should involve a coordinated team approach. Clearly defined roles for psychologists, social pedagogues, and administrators would help ensure that responsibilities are shared and that cases are handled appropriately.

Third, there is a need to strengthen collaboration and communication within schools. Regular meetings, case discussions, and information-sharing mechanisms could

support more consistent and informed responses to safeguarding concerns. In addition, stronger links with external agencies, such as child protection services, would help create a more integrated support system.

Fourth, schools should aim to shift from a reactive to a preventive approach to safeguarding. This involves not only responding to incidents, but also creating environments where risks are identified early and addressed proactively. This may include awareness programs, student support systems, and mechanisms for reporting concerns safely.

8.6 Limitations of the Study

This study has several limitations that should be considered when interpreting the findings.

First, the research was conducted in only two urban state schools, which may not fully represent practices in rural or differently resourced contexts. Safeguarding practices may vary significantly depending on location, school size, and available resources.

Second, the study relied primarily on self-reported data from participants. While interviews provide valuable insights into perceptions and experiences, they may not fully capture actual practices. Participants may also present their responses in socially desirable ways.

Third, access to official policy documents and implementation records was limited, which restricted the ability to conduct a detailed analysis of policy design and alignment with practice.

Despite these limitations, the study provides important insights into how safeguarding is understood and enacted at the school level, highlighting areas for further investigation.

8.7 Recommendations for Future Research

Future research could build on this study in several important ways.

First, there is a need to explore child protection practices in rural and diverse school contexts, where resources and institutional structures may differ significantly from urban settings.

Second, incorporating students' perspectives would provide a more comprehensive understanding of how safety and protection are experienced within schools. This would help move beyond adult-centred perspectives and highlight gaps between policy intentions and student realities.

Third, further research could examine interagency collaboration, particularly the relationships between schools and external child protection services. Understanding how different actors coordinate or fail to coordinate would provide valuable insights into system-level challenges.

Fourth, a more detailed policy analysis at the national level could help identify gaps between policy design and implementation, as well as opportunities for reform.

Such research would contribute to a more holistic understanding of safeguarding systems in Kazakhstan and support evidence-based policy development.

8.8 Final Reflection

This study highlights a central insight: child protection in schools is not determined solely by the existence of policies, but by how those policies are understood, interpreted, and enacted in practice.

Using the framework of Stephen J. Ball et al. (2012), the findings show that safeguarding is shaped by a complex interaction between policy texts, professional discourses, and everyday practices. In this context, safeguarding is not absent but it is informal, inconsistent, and heavily dependent on individual actors.

Teachers demonstrate a strong commitment to student well-being, yet they operate within systems that do not fully support effective safeguarding. Without adequate training, clear procedures, and institutional coordination, their efforts remain limited.

Ultimately, strengthening child protection in Kazakhstan requires more than policy reform. It requires attention to the conditions of policy enactment including professional capacity, organisational structures, and shared understandings of safeguarding. Only by addressing these dimensions together can safeguarding move from being an individual responsibility to a coherent and effective system.

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