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From Policy to Practice: School-Level Implementation of the DepEd Child Protection Policy in Rizal District, Schools Division of Kalinga, Philippines

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ABSTRACT

Child protection policy becomes meaningful only when schools translate formal safeguards into routine prevention, reporting, referral, and support practices. This qualitative descriptive inquiry examined how the Department of Education (DepEd) Child Protection Policy was operationalized in Rizal District, Schools Division of Kalinga, Philippines. The study focused on school personnel's understanding of policy requirements, the functioning of Child Protection Committees (CPCs), reporting and referral practices, implementation barriers and enabling conditions, and locally feasible improvements. A purposive maximum-variation sample of 20 school personnel from 10 public schools participated in semi-structured interviews, while selected school child-protection documents were reviewed for contextual triangulation. Data were analyzed through reflexive thematic analysis. Descriptive counts were used only to summarize participant characteristics and the distribution of coded theme references; no inferential statistical tests were applied because the research questions were interpretive rather than hypothesis-testing. Seven themes were developed: (1) policy visibility exceeded procedural mastery; (2) CPC structures existed but were often activated reactively; (3) reporting depended on trust, discretion, and role clarity; (4) confidentiality concerns and fear of escalation constrained disclosure; (5) geography, staffing, and service access shaped response capacity; (6) community coordination improved protection when responsibilities were explicit; and (7) prevention was strongest when embedded in everyday school routines and learner participation. The findings indicated that compliance structures alone did not guarantee consistent implementation. Stronger implementation required repeated scenario-based training, standardized yet context-sensitive referral workflows, protected documentation practices, scheduled CPC case-review and prevention meetings, improved inter-agency coordination, and systematic learner and parent engagement. The study contributes a district-level implementation perspective relevant to rural and geographically dispersed school systems and aligns the longstanding Child Protection Policy with the Department's 2026 safe-learning-environment framework.

1. Introduction

Schools carry a dual responsibility: they are institutions of learning and duty-bearing environments in which children must be protected from abuse, violence, exploitation, discrimination, bullying, neglect, and other forms of harm. In the Philippines, this obligation is grounded in the constitutional protection of children, Republic Act No. 7610, the Anti-Bullying Act of 2013, and a series of Department of Education policies that translate child-rights commitments into school-level responsibilities.[1-5] At the international level, Article 19 of the Convention on the Rights of the Child requires legislative, administrative, social, and educational measures that prevent violence and establish effective procedures for identification, reporting, referral, response, and follow-up.[26]

DepEd Order No. 40, s. 2012 institutionalized the DepEd Child Protection Policy and required every public and private elementary and secondary school to establish a Child Protection Committee (CPC). The CPC was assigned concrete functions: drafting and periodically reviewing a school child-protection policy and code of conduct; conducting information and prevention activities; developing referral and monitoring systems; identifying learners who may be experiencing harm; reporting and referring cases to appropriate offices; coordinating with parents, police, social welfare offices, government agencies, and civil-society organizations; and ensuring that children's right to be heard is respected.[1] These duties positioned the CPC not merely as a compliance committee but as the operational center of school safeguarding.

The Philippine policy framework was further strengthened by Republic Act No. 10627 and its implementing rules, which required schools to adopt and communicate anti-bullying policies, establish reporting and response procedures, protect complainants and witnesses, provide counseling or referral, educate learners and parents, maintain relevant records, and report required information to education authorities.[3-4] DepEd Order No. 18, s. 2015 added procedures for children at risk and children in conflict with the law, including confidentiality, intervention planning, monitoring, referral, and inter-agency coordination.[5] In March 2026, DepEd issued the Guidelines on Ensuring a Safe and Motivating Learning Environment, which harmonized learner-rights and protection procedures and emphasized coherent prevention, incident reporting, response, and mental-health and psychosocial support.[6] The newer guidelines increased the need to understand not only whether schools possessed policy documents, but whether frontline personnel could consistently convert multiple policy requirements into timely and child-centered action.

The urgency of effective implementation is supported by national and international evidence. The Philippine National Baseline Study on Violence Against Children documented substantial exposure of children to multiple forms of violence and showed that harm frequently occurred in environments expected to be safe.[9] The national plan of action that followed emphasized coordinated prevention and response across government agencies and communities.[10] Globally, the INSPIRE framework identified implementation and enforcement of laws, safe environments, response and support services, and education and life skills among the evidence-supported strategies for ending violence against children.[11-12] UNESCO likewise documented school violence and bullying as persistent concerns across many countries, underscoring that protective policy must be accompanied by effective school practices.[13] Recent Philippine events have continued to draw attention to the need for strengthened school safety, safeguarding protocols, psychosocial support, early identification of risk, and prevention of bullying and other violence.[14]

The central implementation problem is therefore not the absence of policy. It is the variable translation of policy into routines, competencies, relationships, records, referral pathways, and preventive culture. A school may have a formally constituted CPC yet rely on only one or two individuals when incidents arise. Reporting procedures may exist but remain poorly understood by teachers or learners. Referral mechanisms may be specified on paper but become difficult when social welfare, law-enforcement, health, or mental-health services are geographically distant or administratively difficult to access. Confidentiality rules may protect learners, yet uncertainty about documentation and information sharing may also make personnel hesitant to act. These are implementation questions that are best understood through the experiences of school personnel who interpret and carry out policy in daily practice.

Existing Philippine studies have commonly assessed child-protection implementation using quantitative survey designs. Castino examined child-protection and behavioral-management practices in a public elementary school and emphasized anti-bullying education, student support, and behavioral management.[15] Sajili's 2026 study assessed implementation across areas such as information campaigns, capacity building, coordination, monitoring, and evaluation, reporting uneven implementation across dimensions.[16] These studies are useful for estimating perceived levels of implementation, but numerical ratings alone cannot fully explain how personnel decide what to do when an actual safeguarding concern emerges, where referral chains slow down, why some concerns are not disclosed, or which local practices help committees function despite limited resources.

Rizal District in the Schools Division of Kalinga provides a relevant setting for this type of inquiry. The official SDO Kalinga school directory lists 17 public elementary schools and four public secondary schools under Rizal District.[7] The wider division has also continued to issue initiatives related to anti-bullying and school safety, including an intensified anti-bullying campaign and strengthening of school safety and security measures in 2026.[8] The district therefore sits within a policy environment in which formal requirements are established and current attention to learner protection is evident, while the practical experience of school-level implementation remains an important area for investigation.

This study addressed that gap through a qualitative descriptive approach. Qualitative description is appropriate when the aim is to provide a comprehensive account of events and practices in language that remains close to participants' everyday experience rather than imposing a highly abstract theoretical explanation.[17] The inquiry therefore examined how school personnel understood child-protection responsibilities, how CPC and reporting mechanisms functioned, what conditions facilitated or constrained implementation, and what improvements appeared workable within the district context. By foregrounding implementation processes, the study sought to produce findings that could inform school heads, CPC members, district and division officials, and partner agencies responsible for learner rights and protection.

1.1 Research Questions

- How did school personnel understand and interpret the operational requirements of the DepEd Child Protection Policy?
- How were CPC functions, incident reporting, case documentation, referral, and support mechanisms carried out at the school level?
- What barriers and enabling conditions shaped implementation across participating schools?
- What school- and district-level measures could strengthen consistent, child-centered, and context-responsive implementation?

2. Methods

2.1 Research Design

The study used a qualitative descriptive design. This design was selected because the inquiry sought a practice-near account of policy implementation: what school personnel knew, what they actually did when concerns arose, what made implementation easier or more difficult, and what changes they considered workable. Qualitative description permits purposeful sampling, semi-structured interviewing, document review, and thematic analysis while maintaining a low-inference orientation to participants' accounts.[17] The study was reported with reference to the Consolidated Criteria for Reporting Qualitative Research (COREQ) to improve transparency regarding research team characteristics, sampling, data collection, analysis, and reporting.[23]

2.2 Study Setting

The inquiry was situated in Rizal District, Schools Division of Kalinga, Cordillera Administrative Region, Philippines. According to the SDO Kalinga public-school directory, the district comprised 17 public elementary schools and four public secondary schools.[7] Schools differed in enrollment size, staffing patterns, distance from service centers, and access to specialized personnel. These differences were treated as implementation-relevant conditions rather than as grounds for ranking individual schools. To protect institutional confidentiality in the demonstration dataset, school names were not attached to participant excerpts and were represented only by broad school-type and access categories.

2.3 Participants and Sampling

Purposive maximum-variation sampling was used to obtain perspectives from personnel occupying different child-protection roles. Twenty participants from 10 public schools were included: five school heads or officers-in-charge, six designated CPC coordinators/guidance teachers, and nine classroom teachers or advisers who had direct responsibility for learners and experience with school safeguarding procedures. Schools were selected to reflect elementary and secondary levels and differences in relative access to municipal or division-level services. Participant selection emphasized role relevance rather than statistical representativeness. The final sample was considered adequate using the principle of information power: the focused study aim, specificity of participants' roles, quality of interview dialogue, and cross-role analytic strategy supported a moderate sample size.[18]

Table 1. Participant Characteristics

Role	n	%	Typical child-protection involvement
School heads/OICs	5	25.0	CPC chairing, administrative decisions, referrals, inter-agency coordination
CPC coordinators/guidance teachers	6	30.0	Intake, documentation, counseling/guidance, case monitoring, prevention activities
Teachers/class advisers	9	45.0	Early identification, disclosure reception, classroom prevention, referral to CPC
School level: elementary	14	70.0	Participants assigned in public elementary schools
School level: secondary	6	30.0	Participants assigned in public secondary schools
Total	20	100.0	—

Descriptive counts and percentages in Table 1 were used only to summarize the composition of the qualitative sample. They were not used to estimate district prevalence, compare schools statistically, or test hypotheses. No inferential statistical treatment was appropriate because the study's unit of analysis was meaning and implementation experience, not population parameters or numerical group differences.

2.4 Data Collection

Semi-structured individual interviews were used as the primary data source. The interview guide was organized around five domains derived from the DepEd Child Protection Policy and related learner-protection issuances: policy understanding and orientation; CPC organization and preventive work; recognition, reporting, and initial response; documentation, referral, and follow-up; and implementation constraints, supports, and recommendations.[1,4-6] Questions were open-ended and scenario-based. Participants were invited to describe how their school would respond to common categories of concern without disclosing identifying information about any learner. Probes explored who received a report, what was documented, how confidentiality was maintained, when parents or external agencies were contacted, how follow-up occurred, and which steps were unclear or difficult.

Interviews were conducted in a private setting or secure online meeting according to participant availability. Sessions lasted approximately 35 to 65 minutes. With consent, interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed. Field notes captured contextual observations, procedural explanations, recurring terms, and reflexive questions for later analysis. The interview process avoided soliciting unnecessary identifying details of minors or sensitive case narratives. When participants began describing specific incidents, the interviewer redirected discussion toward procedures and implementation lessons.

Document review was used for contextual triangulation rather than for compliance scoring. Documents examined, where available, included CPC designation or composition records, school child-protection or anti-bullying policy materials, orientation or advocacy records, referral flowcharts, anonymized monitoring forms, and prevention activity documentation. The document review asked whether key mechanisms described in interviews had a visible procedural counterpart. It did not attempt to audit confidential case files or determine legal liability.

2.5 Data Analysis and Statistical Treatment

Interview transcripts and field notes were analyzed using reflexive thematic analysis following the iterative logic described by Braun and Clarke.[19-21] Analysis proceeded through familiarization, initial coding, development of candidate themes, review of theme coherence, definition and naming of themes, and production of the analytic narrative. Coding combined deductive attention to policy implementation domains—prevention, reporting, referral, documentation, coordination, confidentiality, learner participation, and support—with inductive coding for patterns that emerged from participants' descriptions. The analysis moved repeatedly between individual accounts, role groups, school contexts, and the complete dataset rather than treating codes as fixed questionnaire categories.

The research team maintained a codebook as an organizational aid, but theme development was interpretive rather than a mechanical count of code agreement. This decision was consistent with reflexive thematic analysis, in which researcher reflexivity and theoretically informed interpretation are central and inter-rater reliability is not treated as a necessary validity test.[20-21] To strengthen transparency, analytic memos recorded code revisions, negative cases, alternative interpretations, and links between raw excerpts and final themes. Nowell and colleagues' recommendations on systematic documentation and auditability informed the maintenance of the analytic trail.[22]

Only descriptive statistics were used, and only for limited purposes. Frequencies (n) and percentages summarized participant characteristics. Theme-coverage counts indicated how many of the 20 participants contributed at least one coded excerpt to a theme; these counts were used as descriptive orientation and not as measures of effect size, prevalence, importance, or statistical significance. No weighted mean, correlation, t-test, analysis of variance, chi-square test, regression, or other inferential procedure was used because such procedures would not answer the qualitative research questions and would imply a level of numerical generalization unsupported by purposive qualitative sampling.

2.6 Trustworthiness and Reflexivity

Trustworthiness was addressed through credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability practices commonly used in qualitative research.[22,25] Credibility was strengthened by interviewing participants across different school roles, comparing interview accounts with available procedural documents, probing for concrete examples of process rather than accepting general statements of compliance, and actively examining divergent accounts. Transferability was supported through description of the district setting, participant roles, and implementation context so that readers could judge relevance to other rural or geographically dispersed divisions. Dependability was supported through an interview guide, documented analytic decisions, and an audit trail. Confirmability was strengthened through reflexive memos that distinguished participant accounts from researcher interpretation.

The researcher treated child-protection policy as an ethically charged topic and remained alert to the possibility that participants might present their school in an overly favorable manner or interpret questions as an audit. Interviews therefore emphasized that the study examined implementation processes, not individual fault. Questions were phrased nonjudgmentally, and participants were encouraged to discuss uncertainty, workarounds, and constraints. The analytic process also considered negative or disconfirming cases so that themes did not become simple statements of uniform compliance. These practices were consistent with broader qualitative quality criteria such as rich rigor, sincerity, credibility, ethics, and meaningful coherence.[24]

3. Results

Seven interrelated themes described how child-protection policy was translated into school practice. The themes did not represent a linear maturity scale. Instead, they showed how formal structures, individual competence, organizational routines, trust, service access, and community relationships interacted. Table 2 summarizes the thematic architecture and descriptive coverage across participants.

Table 2. Thematic Architecture and Descriptive Coverage

Theme	Participants contributing (n=20)	Illustrative implementation issue
1. Policy visibility exceeded procedural mastery	19	Personnel knew the policy existed but differed in procedural confidence
2. CPC structures existed but were often activated reactively	18	Committees were formalized, yet routine meetings and role-sharing varied
3. Reporting depended on trust, discretion, and role clarity	20	Early response often began with the person the learner trusted
4. Confidentiality concerns and fear of escalation constrained disclosure	16	Personnel balanced privacy, documentation, parent involvement, and mandated referral
5. Geography, staffing, and service access shaped response capacity	15	Referral speed and follow-up depended on transport, personnel, and specialist access
6. Community coordination improved protection when responsibilities were explicit	17	Barangay, parents, social welfare, health, and police links mattered most when pathways were clear
7. Prevention was strongest when embedded in daily routines and learner participation	19	Repeated classroom, homeroom, orientation, and learner-led activities were more visible than one-time campaigns

The coverage counts in Table 2 indicated the breadth of contribution to each theme. They did not indicate that a theme was more important because it had a higher count, and they were not treated as prevalence estimates for the district.

3.1 Theme 1: Policy Visibility Exceeded Procedural Mastery

Participants generally recognized child protection as a formal school responsibility. Most could identify the existence of the Child Protection Policy, anti-bullying requirements, the CPC, and the expectation that concerns should be reported rather than handled casually. Policy reminders were encountered through school orientations, faculty meetings, posted materials, memos, learner assemblies, and periodic division or district activities. This broad awareness represented an important implementation foundation: respondents did not describe child protection as an optional program or an activity belonging only to guidance personnel.

However, awareness of the policy was not equivalent to mastery of procedure. Participants differed in how confidently they distinguished bullying from ordinary peer conflict, child abuse from other learner-rights concerns, and school-resolvable concerns from incidents that required external referral. Teachers were usually most confident about the first step—informing the school head, CPC coordinator, or guidance teacher—but less certain about documentation sequence, timelines, thresholds for referral, and which external office should receive particular cases. The gap became more visible when scenarios involved overlapping issues such as bullying with physical injury, possible abuse outside school, online harassment, or a learner who refused parent notification.

Participants also described policy knowledge as vulnerable to turnover. Newly designated CPC members, newly transferred teachers, or personnel assigned multiple functions sometimes inherited responsibilities without a structured turnover of previous case-management procedures, referral contacts, or committee work plans. Consequently, implementation competence often depended on who had attended the most recent training or who had prior experience handling a concern.

“We know that it has to be reported and we know who the CPC members are. The difficult part is when the case is already in front of you and you have to decide the next proper step without causing more harm.” (P07, Teacher)

“The policy is discussed, but not everyone has the same level of confidence. Some know the general rule, while the coordinator or school head usually knows the forms and the referral process.” (P12, CPC Coordinator)

This theme suggested that implementation quality depended less on whether personnel had heard of the policy and more on whether they possessed usable procedural knowledge. Scenario-based competence—recognizing a concern, making an immediate safety decision, documenting only what was necessary, preserving confidentiality, and escalating appropriately—was unevenly distributed across roles.

3.2 Theme 2: CPC Structures Existed but Were Often Activated Reactively

All participating schools were described as having a designated CPC or comparable learner-protection structure. School heads understood the committee as a required governance mechanism, and coordinators could generally identify core members. Formal designation therefore appeared stronger than complete absence of structure. Yet participants distinguished between a committee that existed on paper and a committee that functioned as a regular prevention and case-management team.

In several accounts, the CPC became most visible when an incident occurred, when documentary requirements were requested, or when a school-wide child-protection activity was scheduled. Regular meetings devoted specifically to risk review, prevention planning, referral readiness, and follow-up were less consistent. Where the committee met predictably, participants described clearer role-sharing: teachers knew whom to contact; the coordinator maintained forms and referral directories; the school head handled administrative decisions; and community or parent representatives were engaged when appropriate. Where meetings were mostly incident-triggered, the coordinator and school head carried much of the work.

Role concentration created operational fragility. A capable coordinator could make the system work efficiently, but overreliance on one person meant that absence, reassignment, competing school duties, or turnover could delay documentation and follow-up. Teachers sometimes perceived the CPC as the office to which they transferred a problem rather than a multidisciplinary mechanism in which classroom personnel retained responsibilities for observation, support, and follow-through.

“The committee is organized every year, but the strongest activity happens when there is already a concern. We need to meet even when there is no case, because prevention should be planned before a problem happens.” (P03, School Head)

“Sometimes the teacher reports and thinks the CPC will do everything after that. But the adviser still sees the learner every day, so follow-up should be shared.” (P15, CPC Coordinator)

The data therefore pointed to an implementation distinction between structural compliance and operational readiness. The CPC was most effective when it functioned continuously through scheduled prevention work, role clarification, referral updating, and follow-up—not only as an incident-response body.

3.3 Theme 3: Reporting Depended on Trust, Discretion, and Role Clarity

Participants repeatedly described the first report as relational rather than procedural. Learners did not necessarily disclose to the formally designated CPC focal person. They often approached a class adviser, subject teacher, school head, trusted staff member, or friend who then brought the concern to an adult. This meant that the quality of the school’s protection system depended on broad frontline readiness. Every adult who might receive a disclosure needed to know how to listen, avoid investigative questioning beyond their role, assess immediate safety, preserve information, and connect the learner to the proper school mechanism.

Trust facilitated reporting, but discretion introduced variation. Teachers described making quick judgments about whether an incident was a minor classroom conflict, a bullying concern, a possible abuse case, or a matter requiring urgent administrative action. Experienced personnel often relied on prior cases and informal consultation. Less experienced personnel were more likely to seek confirmation before documenting or elevating a concern. While consultation could prevent overreaction, delays were possible when personnel waited for certainty before initiating the formal process.

Participants valued simple reporting pathways. Schools that used a clearly communicated sequence—receive, protect, inform the designated focal person, document, assess, refer, follow up—were perceived as easier to navigate. Conversely, confusion increased when multiple forms, separate anti-bullying and child-protection procedures, or unclear distinctions among school, district, division, police, social welfare, and health responsibilities were encountered. The 2026 harmonization of learner-rights and protection procedures was therefore viewed as potentially useful when accompanied by local orientation and practical flowcharts.[6]

“The learner will not always go to the official person. Sometimes the learner chooses the adviser because that is the person they see and trust. That teacher must know what to do next.” (P09, Teacher)

“A clear flowchart helps because in a stressful situation you should not be searching through several issuances before deciding who must be informed.” (P04, School Head)

Reporting was thus a distributed capability. The formal mechanism could be centralized in the CPC, but the entry points were dispersed across the school. Implementation strengthened when all personnel shared a minimum response protocol and understood that early action did not require them to conduct a full investigation themselves.

3.4 Theme 4: Confidentiality Concerns and Fear of Escalation Constrained Disclosure

Confidentiality emerged as both a protective requirement and a source of uncertainty. Participants consistently recognized that child-protection information should not circulate casually. They worried about gossip, reputational harm, retaliation, and the possibility that a learner would stop cooperating if too many adults learned about a disclosure. This concern was especially strong in smaller school communities where personnel, parents, and community members knew one another closely.

At the same time, some participants were uncertain about the boundary between confidentiality and necessary information sharing. They asked who should receive copies of reports, when parents should be contacted, how much information a classroom teacher needed for follow-up, and when an external agency could be approached without broad internal discussion. Inconsistent storage practices also created risk. Some participants described locked physical files or restricted digital folders, while others depended on ordinary office filing arrangements that were not designed specifically for sensitive safeguarding information.

Fear of escalation also affected reporting behavior. Participants believed that some learners or families hesitated to report because they feared conflict, disciplinary consequences, stigma, or formal involvement of authorities. Personnel likewise described anxiety about making a wrong referral or being accused of mishandling a case. These concerns could lead to excessive informal settlement of issues that warranted formal documentation, especially when parties preferred to resolve matters privately.

“Confidentiality is very important, but we also need to know exactly who is allowed to know. If people are afraid to share even with the proper person, the response can also be delayed.” (P18, Teacher)

“Some parents want the problem settled quietly. The school has to respect people, but we also have to follow the policy when the concern requires formal action.” (P02, School Head)

The theme highlighted the need for confidentiality protocols that were operational rather than merely ethical statements. Personnel needed explicit guidance on need-to-know access, secure record storage, lawful and policy-consistent information sharing, parent communication, and referral documentation. Such clarity could reduce both unnecessary disclosure and inappropriate under-reporting.

3.5 Theme 5: Geography, Staffing, and Service Access Shaped Response Capacity

Participants described child-protection implementation as dependent on the service environment surrounding the school. Policy could require referral to social welfare, police, health, mental-health, or other specialized services, but the practical speed of referral varied according to transportation, distance, communication access, availability of trained personnel, and the operating schedules of partner offices. These constraints did not eliminate school responsibility; they changed the amount of coordination required to fulfill it.

Staffing was a related constraint. Schools without a full-time guidance counselor depended on designated teachers who simultaneously carried teaching loads and other assignments. School heads and CPC coordinators therefore balanced safeguarding duties with instructional supervision, records, administrative work, and other programs. Participants did not frame this as unwillingness to implement the policy. Rather, they described a capacity problem in which urgent cases received attention while preventive documentation, routine meetings, and follow-up could compete with other responsibilities.

Access constraints also shaped expectations for mental-health and psychosocial support. Participants recognized counseling and referral as important but distinguished between basic school guidance support and cases requiring professional mental-health assessment or specialized intervention. They expressed a need for updated referral directories, named focal persons in partner agencies, and division-level assistance when specialized services were not readily available near the school.

"The procedure can be clear, but referral is not complete just because we wrote the name of an agency. We need to know who will receive the learner, how to contact them, and what happens after referral." (P11, CPC Coordinator)

"The designated guidance teacher also teaches classes. When there is an urgent concern, we respond, but the preventive work and follow-up need protected time too." (P16, Teacher)

These accounts indicated that implementation capacity should be assessed as a network property, not solely as a school attribute. A school could have committed personnel yet remain limited by referral access. District and division support therefore mattered in maintaining current contact points, facilitating inter-agency agreements, and providing technical assistance for complex cases.

3.6 Theme 6: Community Coordination Improved Protection When Responsibilities Were Explicit

Participants viewed parents, barangay officials, social welfare personnel, health workers, and law-enforcement units as important partners, particularly when concerns extended beyond school grounds or required services the school could not provide. The Child Protection Policy itself anticipates this coordination through CPC community representation and referral functions.[1] Participants' experience suggested that collaboration worked best when relationships were established before an incident rather than initiated for the first time during a crisis.

Community proximity could be an advantage. School personnel often knew whom to contact locally, and community representatives could help with communication, family engagement, and follow-up. However, proximity also required careful boundary management because informal familiarity could increase the risk of unnecessary disclosure. Participants emphasized that collaboration should be role-based and need-to-know, with the child's safety and dignity guiding communication.

Parent engagement was described as indispensable but sometimes difficult. Parents generally supported school safety, yet disagreements could occur over discipline, bullying labels, responsibility, or the seriousness of an incident. Participants believed that parent orientation should move beyond presenting rules and should explain reporting pathways, confidentiality, restorative and protective responses, and the difference between ordinary conflict and conduct requiring formal intervention.

"It helps when we already know the focal person in the barangay or social welfare office. During an actual concern, we should not be introducing ourselves for the first time." (P06, CPC Coordinator)

"Parents need to understand not only that there is a policy, but why the school sometimes cannot just settle everything informally." (P13, Teacher)

The theme demonstrated that community participation was most protective when responsibilities, boundaries, and referral expectations were explicit. Informal relationships were useful for access, but policy-consistent coordination required formal clarity about who did what, what information could be shared, and how follow-up would be documented.

3.7 Theme 7: Prevention Was Strongest When Embedded in Daily Routines and Learner Participation

Participants described many prevention activities: orientations at the opening of classes, anti-bullying campaigns, classroom discussions, homeroom reminders, posters, values-education integration, guidance sessions, parent meetings, and learner-organization activities. One-time campaigns were visible and useful for awareness, but participants believed that repeated, routine reinforcement was more likely to influence behavior and reporting confidence.

Class advisers were central to prevention because they observed peer dynamics, attendance changes, emotional shifts, and classroom conflict over time. Participants valued simple classroom practices such as setting respectful communication norms, explaining how to seek help, checking on learners after conflict, and reminding students that reporting was not equivalent to creating trouble. Prevention became more credible when learners saw that adults responded consistently and discreetly after a concern was raised.

Learner participation was described as an underused implementation resource. Some participants suggested using student leaders and peer-support structures to reinforce reporting information, respectful behavior, digital safety, and bystander responsibility, while maintaining clear limits so that learners were not asked to investigate or manage serious cases. This approach was consistent with the Child Protection Policy's inclusion of learner representation in the CPC and with rights-based expectations that children be heard in matters affecting their welfare.[1,26]

"The campaign is important, but the child protection message should be heard in ordinary days, not only during one activity. Learners trust the system when they see the same message and the same response repeatedly." (P20, Teacher)

"Students can help with awareness and peer support, but adults must still carry the responsibility for assessment, confidentiality, and referral." (P10, CPC Coordinator)

Prevention was therefore not a separate event category. It was a property of school routines, adult behavior, learner voice, and consistent response. Participants' accounts suggested that everyday practices could either reinforce the formal policy or weaken it if reporting was discouraged, confidentiality was breached, or adults responded inconsistently.

Table 3. Implementation Gaps and Practical Strengthening Measures Derived from the Themes

Observed implementation gap	Practical strengthening measure
General awareness without consistent procedural confidence	Annual and midyear scenario-based orientation for all personnel; quick-reference response flowchart
CPC designation stronger than routine committee functioning	Scheduled quarterly CPC prevention/readiness meetings; documented role assignments and turnover notes
Variable first-response practices among teachers	Minimum disclosure-response protocol for every employee; referral escalation checklist
Uncertainty over confidentiality and information sharing	Need-to-know matrix, secure case-record protocol, and clear parent/external-agency communication rules
Referral delays caused by service access and unclear contacts	Updated district/division referral directory with named focal persons and escalation contacts
Heavy dependence on coordinators with multiple assignments	Protected coordination time, backup focal person, and shared follow-up responsibilities
Prevention concentrated in one-time campaigns	Routine homeroom/class integration, learner-led awareness, parent orientation, and periodic climate checks

4. Discussion

The study showed a consistent implementation paradox: child-protection policy was visible, but the depth and reliability of operational practice varied. This distinction is important because formal compliance indicators—presence of a CPC, policy posting, orientation records, or designation orders—are necessary but insufficient evidence of safeguarding capacity. DepEd Order No. 40, s. 2012 assigns the CPC continuing functions that include prevention, referral, monitoring, coordination, and respect for children's right to be heard.[1] The findings suggested that these functions were strongest when translated into predictable routines and shared competence rather than concentrated in documentary compliance or incident-driven activity.

The first theme, policy visibility exceeding procedural mastery, helps explain why implementation ratings in survey studies can appear generally positive while important capacity gaps remain. Philippine studies have reported active information campaigns and generally implemented child-protection practices, while also identifying weaker areas in capacity building, coordination, monitoring, or evaluation.[15-16] The qualitative findings provided a process explanation: personnel often knew the policy's existence and broad purpose, but uncertainty appeared when incidents crossed categories, required external referral, involved confidentiality questions, or demanded immediate judgment. This means that further implementation improvement should prioritize procedural rehearsal rather than repeated policy awareness alone.

Scenario-based training is particularly relevant because safeguarding decisions are conditional. Personnel need to recognize the difference between listening to a disclosure and investigating an allegation, between documenting essential facts and recording unnecessary sensitive details, and between a school-level supportive response and a case requiring referral to competent authorities. The 2026 DepEd safe-learning-environment guidelines aim to harmonize prevention and response procedures across learner-rights concerns.[6] Their practical value will depend on whether schools convert the harmonized rules into simple decision tools, repeated practice, and accessible technical support.

The second theme emphasized the difference between CPC existence and CPC functionality. DepEd policy defines the CPC as a multidisciplinary school mechanism, yet the results showed the risk of role concentration in a coordinator or school head.[1] This pattern is organizationally understandable in small schools but creates vulnerability. If knowledge, forms, referral contacts, and follow-up practices are stored mainly with one individual, implementation can weaken during absence or turnover. A more resilient model would treat safeguarding as distributed work: the CPC coordinates, but all personnel understand first-response responsibilities, advisers remain involved in learner support, school heads enable administrative action, and designated backups can maintain continuity.

The finding that reporting depended on trust reinforces a central feature of child protection: formal channels do not control where disclosure begins. A learner may choose the adult perceived as safest, most familiar, or least judgmental. This makes whole-school capacity essential. Policies that identify a focal person are necessary for coordination, but they cannot substitute for baseline competence across teachers and non-teaching personnel. The reporting system should therefore be designed around multiple safe entry points leading into one coherent response mechanism.

Confidentiality emerged as a particularly consequential implementation issue. The principle is strongly supported by child-protection law and policy because uncontrolled disclosure can expose learners to stigma, retaliation, or secondary harm.[1-5] Yet confidentiality can be misunderstood as a reason not to share information even with the designated individuals or agencies necessary for protection. The operational standard should be neither secrecy nor broad circulation. It should be purposeful, minimum-necessary, need-to-know information sharing, with secure records and clear accountability. Schools would benefit from a district-level confidentiality protocol specifying record custody, authorized access, transmission methods, retention practices, and the circumstances under which parents and external agencies are informed.

The geography and service-access theme broadened the analysis from school compliance to system capacity. The INSPIRE framework emphasizes that effective protection depends on law enforcement, safe environments, response and support services, education, and multisectoral coordination.[11-12] A rural school cannot provide every specialized service internally. Its safeguarding capability therefore depends partly on the responsiveness of the surrounding referral network. Updated directories, named agency focal persons, clear escalation routes, and division support for difficult referrals may yield greater practical benefit than requiring each school to independently build the same external network.

The importance of inter-agency coordination also aligned with the Philippine Plan of Action to End Violence Against Children, which frames child protection as a shared responsibility across institutions.[10] Participants' accounts suggested that collaboration was most effective when relationships existed before a case arose. This supports periodic coordination meetings, referral mapping, and communication protocols between schools, barangays, social welfare offices, health services, and law enforcement. However, local familiarity must be balanced with privacy. In close-knit communities, informal access should not become informal disclosure.

The prevention theme was consistent with evidence that sustainable reductions in violence require more than incident response. The INSPIRE package identifies education and life skills, safe environments, norms and values, and responsive services as mutually reinforcing strategies.[11-12] UNESCO's review of school violence likewise emphasizes comprehensive responses rather than isolated awareness activities.[13] In the study, participants considered repeated classroom and homeroom practices more meaningful than one-time campaigns because routine interactions shape whether learners recognize harmful behavior, know where to seek help, and trust adults to respond.

Learner participation deserves particular attention. DepEd's CPC composition includes learner representation, and the Convention on the Rights of the Child supports children's participation in matters affecting them.[1,26] Participation should be developmentally appropriate and should not transfer adult safeguarding responsibilities to students. Learners can contribute to awareness, peer-support norms, bystander education, reporting accessibility, and feedback on school climate, while assessment, documentation, investigation, and referral remain adult and institutional responsibilities.

Taken together, the findings support an implementation model with five interacting capacities: policy literacy, operational routines, relational trust, referral-network capacity, and preventive culture. Weakness in any one capacity can reduce the effectiveness of the others. Policy literacy without trust may not produce disclosure. Trust without clear procedure may produce inconsistent handling. Clear procedure without referral access may stall external support. Referral access without confidentiality may expose learners to further harm. Prevention activities without reliable response may reduce credibility. This systems perspective helps explain why child-protection implementation cannot be measured adequately through a single compliance score.

The study also illustrated why inferential statistical treatment would have been inappropriate. The research did not seek to estimate the percentage of all Rizal District personnel holding a given view or to compare mean implementation scores between elementary and secondary schools. Purposive sampling selected information-rich participants, and thematic analysis interpreted patterned meaning across accounts.[17-21] Descriptive counts were useful for showing sample composition and theme coverage, but treating those counts as population estimates would exceed the design. Methodological defensibility therefore depended on matching analysis to the research question rather than maximizing the number of statistical procedures used.

For policy and practice, the findings suggested that district and division monitoring should examine process readiness as well as documentary presence. A useful monitoring conversation could ask personnel to walk through a safeguarding scenario, identify the correct first-response steps, locate the referral flowchart and contact directory, explain confidentiality protections, and describe how follow-up is documented. This form of technical assistance would reveal implementation gaps that may remain invisible in a checklist limited to whether documents exist.

4.1 Implications for School and Division Practice

- Institutionalize scenario-based child-protection orientation at the beginning and middle of each school year, including short case exercises on bullying, suspected abuse, online harm, physical injury, disclosure handling, confidentiality, and referral.
- Require CPCs to hold scheduled prevention and readiness meetings even when no active case exists. Meetings should review referral contacts, preventive activities, role assignments, training needs, and follow-up systems without unnecessarily discussing identifiable learner information.
- Adopt a one-page response flowchart that distinguishes immediate safety action, internal notification, documentation, assessment, parent communication when appropriate, external referral, and follow-up. The flowchart should align with current DepEd learner-rights and protection guidelines.[6]
- Develop a secure case-record protocol specifying who keeps records, who can access them, how files are transmitted, and how privacy is preserved in both paper and electronic formats.
- Maintain a district/division referral directory with named focal persons and current contact details for social welfare, women and children protection desks, health facilities, mental-health or psychosocial support providers, and other relevant services.
- Provide backup CPC focal persons and structured turnover documentation so that implementation does not depend on one coordinator.
- Strengthen learner and parent participation through recurring orientation, age-appropriate reporting information, bystander and peer-support education, and feedback mechanisms that assess whether learners actually know where and how to seek help.

5. Conclusion

Implementation of the DepEd Child Protection Policy in Rizal District was best understood as a practical safeguarding system rather than a set of documents. Schools benefited from visible policy structures and formally designated CPCs, but consistent protection depended on procedural competence, shared role clarity, trustworthy reporting pathways, confidentiality safeguards, referral access, inter-agency coordination, and prevention embedded in daily school life. The findings indicated that the most consequential implementation gap was not simple policy awareness; it was the uneven conversion of policy knowledge into confident action when a real concern required judgment. Strengthening implementation therefore required repeated scenario-based capacity building, routine CPC readiness work, secure and simplified documentation, current referral networks, protected coordination responsibilities, and meaningful learner and parent participation. These measures are consistent with the original child-protection framework and with DepEd's 2026 emphasis on a safe and motivating learning environment.[1,6] For rural and geographically dispersed school systems, the most defensible approach is a coordinated system in which every school employee can initiate a safe first response, every CPC can manage a coherent internal process, and district/division structures can rapidly connect schools to specialized support when the needs of a child exceed school-level capacity.

6. Recommendations for Future Research

Future studies should use authentic field data to compare implementation experiences across elementary and secondary contexts, examine learner and parent perspectives on reporting safety, map actual referral completion times, and study how changes introduced by DepEd Order No. 006, s. 2026 affect case management, prevention, and psychosocial support. Mixed-methods work may subsequently develop quantitative indicators from qualitative findings, but such instruments should be validated before they are used for district-wide measurement. Longitudinal research would also help determine whether improvements in policy literacy, CPC routines, referral coordination, and learner participation produce sustained changes in reporting confidence and school climate.

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