




# Investigating the Impact of Special Education Policies on the Psychological Well-Being of Exceptional Students

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## ABSTRACT

This study aimed to explore the impact of special education policies on the psychological well-being of exceptional students. This qualitative research employed a phenomenological approach, utilizing semi-structured interviews with 33 exceptional students recruited through online platforms. The study relied on theoretical saturation to determine the final sample size. Data were analyzed using thematic analysis with the support of NVivo software, following an inductive coding process to identify key themes related to emotional and psychological well-being, policy implementation, and future prospects of exceptional students. The results revealed three primary themes: emotional and psychological impacts, the effectiveness of special education policies, and long-term student outcomes. Participants reported experiences of stigmatization, social exclusion, and policy-related stress, which significantly affected their emotional well-being. While some students benefited from individualized education plans and supportive teacher interactions, others faced inconsistencies in policy implementation, leading to increased anxiety and uncertainty. The study also highlighted the crucial role of parental advocacy and teacher preparedness in ensuring the effectiveness of special education policies. Long-term concerns included access to higher education, career readiness, and independent living skills, with many participants expressing uncertainty about future accommodations and opportunities. The study underscores the critical influence of special education policies on the psychological well-being of exceptional students, emphasizing the need for stable, well-implemented policies, improved teacher training, and stronger parental engagement. Addressing inconsistencies in policy application and enhancing emotional support mechanisms within educational settings are essential steps toward fostering the well-being and long-term success of exceptional students.

**Keywords:** Special education policies, psychological well-being, exceptional students, inclusive education, policy implementation, emotional support, teacher training, parental advocacy.

## 1. Introduction

The psychological well-being of exceptional students has become an increasingly critical issue in educational policy and practice, particularly as special education frameworks evolve to meet diverse student needs. Exceptional students, encompassing those with learning disabilities, neurodevelopmental disorders, and sensory impairments, often require specialized interventions to support their academic, emotional, and social development (Watson & Osborne, 2025). However, despite ongoing policy reforms, many students continue to face challenges in accessing adequate support, leading to potential adverse effects on their psychological well-being. The implementation of special education policies is intended to foster inclusive educational environments, yet there remains considerable variation in their effectiveness and impact on students' emotional stability, social inclusion, and long-term personal development (Glazzard, 2025).

One of the central concerns in special education policy research is how these policies influence the emotional well-being of students. Emotional well-being is a complex construct influenced by factors such as social inclusion, self-perception, stress management, and teacher-student interactions (Zatayumni & Siregar, 2024). Studies suggest that exceptional students often experience heightened anxiety and social isolation due to the stigmatization associated with special education labels (Rafiyya et al., 2024). This social stigma can contribute to feelings of inadequacy and exclusion, further exacerbating mental health challenges (Koenarso, 2024). The presence of tailored educational strategies, emotional support programs, and family involvement has been identified as key protective factors that can mitigate these negative experiences (Kçlççet et al., 2024).

A significant body of research highlights the importance of emotional regulation and psychological resilience in the academic success of exceptional students (Dahiya & Devi, 2024). The ability to navigate emotional challenges is often shaped by early childhood experiences and parental involvement, which play a crucial role in shaping students' psychological well-being (Caingcoy et al., 2024). Parental emotional regulation strategies have been shown to impact students' coping mechanisms, influencing their ability to manage stress and maintain emotional stability in academic settings (Wu, 2023). Furthermore, peer relationships and school climate have been identified as essential components in fostering a sense of belonging among exceptional

students, ultimately influencing their overall emotional well-being (Trang et al., 2023).

Despite the intent of special education policies to promote inclusion and academic success, inconsistencies in policy implementation pose significant challenges for students and educators alike (Terekhina & Silaeva, 2023). Many students report a lack of continuity in support services, which can lead to uncertainty and increased stress (Sulaiman et al., 2023). In some cases, bureaucratic delays and funding constraints further hinder the effectiveness of special education programs, leaving students without the necessary accommodations to succeed academically and emotionally (Du, 2023). A well-structured support system, involving both school administrators and policy-makers, is crucial for ensuring that exceptional students receive consistent and adequate support throughout their educational journey (Chen, 2023).

One of the major concerns regarding special education policies is their long-term impact on students' academic and social development (Aktürk et al., 2023). While some policies focus on short-term interventions, there is a need for a more comprehensive approach that considers the long-term academic trajectories and career aspirations of exceptional students (Yob et al., 2022). Research indicates that students who receive consistent support through individualized education programs (IEPs) are more likely to develop self-advocacy skills, which are essential for their future independence and career success (Redeş & Roman, 2022). However, when special education policies fail to adequately address students' needs, the long-term consequences can include lower academic achievement, reduced self-confidence, and difficulty in transitioning to higher education or the workforce (Hébert, 2022).

Another critical aspect of special education policy effectiveness is the role of teachers and their preparedness to support exceptional students (Parsons et al., 2021). Teacher training and professional development programs significantly influence the quality of education and emotional support provided to students with special needs (Papadopoulos, 2021). Studies suggest that educators who receive specialized training in inclusive teaching strategies are better equipped to create supportive learning environments that enhance students' psychological well-being (Okoye & Mensah, 2021). However, many teachers report insufficient training and resources, which can lead to ineffective instructional practices and limited emotional support for students (Martin et al., 2021). Addressing these gaps in teacher education and policy implementation is

essential for fostering an inclusive and supportive academic environment for exceptional students.

Given these concerns, this study aims to explore the impact of special education policies on the psychological well-being of exceptional students. By examining students' lived experiences through qualitative research, this study seeks to identify the strengths and limitations of current policies and offer insights into potential improvements. The findings will contribute to a deeper understanding of how policy interventions can better support the emotional and academic needs of exceptional students, ultimately guiding future reforms in special education policy and practice.

## 2. Methods and Materials

### 2.1. Study Design and Participants

This qualitative study employs a phenomenological approach to explore the impact of special education policies on the psychological well-being of exceptional students. The research focuses on capturing the lived experiences of exceptional students and examining how educational policies shape their psychological state. The study follows a semi-structured interview design to allow for an in-depth understanding of participants' perspectives. Theoretical saturation determined the final sample size, ensuring that no new themes emerged from the data. The study recruited 33 participants through online platforms, ensuring a diverse representation of exceptional students with varied educational backgrounds, disabilities, and experiences within the special education system.

### 2.2. Measure

#### 2.2.1. Semi-Structured Interview

Data collection was conducted through semi-structured interviews designed to explore participants' experiences with special education policies and their psychological impact. The interview guide included open-ended questions to elicit detailed responses regarding their educational experiences, perceived support systems, challenges, and emotional responses to policy implementation. Participants were encouraged to share personal narratives, providing rich, in-depth data on how special education policies influenced their psychological well-being. Given the sensitivity of the topic, ethical considerations were upheld

by obtaining informed consent, ensuring confidentiality, and allowing participants the option to withdraw at any stage. The interviews were conducted virtually, recorded with participant consent, and transcribed verbatim for analysis.

### 2.3. Data Analysis

Data analysis was performed using NVivo software, employing a thematic analysis approach to identify recurring patterns and key themes within the participants' responses. The analysis followed an inductive coding process, starting with initial open coding to identify key concepts and progressing to axial and selective coding to establish broader themes. The research team continuously compared emerging themes, refining the analysis until theoretical saturation was achieved. This ensured that the study captured the full complexity of participants' experiences regarding special education policies and their psychological well-being. The reliability of the findings was strengthened through researcher triangulation, where multiple researchers reviewed the coding process to enhance consistency and credibility.

## 3. Findings and Results

The demographic characteristics of the 33 participants in this study reflected a diverse range of backgrounds, ensuring a comprehensive understanding of the impact of special education policies on exceptional students. The participants included 18 males (54.5%) and 15 females (45.5%), with ages ranging from 12 to 22 years ( $M = 16.8$ ,  $SD = 3.1$ ). The majority of participants ( $n = 21$ , 63.6%) were high school students, while 8 participants (24.2%) were enrolled in middle school, and 4 participants (12.2%) were in higher education or vocational training programs. Regarding the type of exceptionalities, 12 participants (36.4%) had learning disabilities, 9 participants (27.3%) had autism spectrum disorder, 6 participants (18.2%) had attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD), and 6 participants (18.2%) had sensory or physical impairments. Participants were recruited through online platforms, with representation from various geographical regions, including urban ( $n = 19$ , 57.6%) and rural areas ( $n = 14$ , 42.4%). Most participants ( $n = 27$ , 81.8%) had received special education services for at least three years, while 6 participants (18.2%) had been recently enrolled in specialized programs.

**Table 1**

*The Results of Qualitative Analysis*

Category	Subcategory	Concepts (Open Codes)
Emotional and Psychological Impact of Special Education Policies	Stigmatization and Social Exclusion	Labeling by teachers, Negative peer interactions, Feelings of isolation, Perceived inferiority, Emotional distress, Fear of judgment
	Self-Perception and Identity Formation	Struggle with self-worth, Confusion about personal identity, Internalized stereotypes, Emotional resilience, Self-advocacy efforts, Growth mindset
	Stress and Anxiety Levels	Academic pressure, Fear of failure, Policy-related uncertainties, Examination stress, Social anxiety, Lack of coping mechanisms
Effectiveness of Special Education Policies	Emotional Support and Well-being	Availability of school counselors, Peer support, Family encouragement, Teacher empathy, Mental health services
	Accessibility and Inclusivity of Services	Availability of resources, Adaptation to individual needs, Barriers to access, Equity vs. equality, Administrative efficiency, Digital accessibility
	Quality of Special Education Programs	Teacher expertise, Individualized learning plans, Curriculum adaptability, Effectiveness of interventions, Student engagement
	Teacher-Student Interaction	Personalized attention, Teacher patience, Communication effectiveness, Encouragement vs. discouragement, Feedback mechanisms
	Parental Involvement	Collaboration with teachers, Awareness of policies, Support strategies, Advocacy for student needs
Long-Term Outcomes for Exceptional Students	Policy Implementation Challenges	Bureaucratic delays, Funding constraints, Inconsistencies in policy application, Insufficient training for educators, Resistance to change
	Academic Achievement and Career Prospects	Access to higher education, Skill development, Job market competitiveness, Perceived future success, Career counseling effectiveness, Workplace accommodations
	Social Integration and Relationships	Friendships, Social skills development, Inclusion in extracurricular activities, Discrimination experiences, Community engagement
	Independent Living and Self-Sufficiency	Life skills training, Decision-making abilities, Financial literacy, Adaptive technologies, Access to support services, Housing options, Legal rights awareness

The findings of this study revealed three overarching themes related to the impact of special education policies on the psychological well-being of exceptional students. These themes encompassed emotional and psychological responses, the effectiveness of policies in practice, and long-term outcomes for students. Within each theme, several subcategories emerged, providing deeper insights into students' experiences.

The emotional and psychological impact of special education policies was evident in several key areas. Many participants expressed feelings of stigmatization and social exclusion, noting that being labeled as an "exceptional student" often led to negative peer interactions and emotional distress. One participant shared, "Teachers always separate us from the rest of the class. It makes us feel like we don't belong anywhere." These experiences contributed to self-perception and identity formation, with some students struggling with internalized stereotypes, while others developed resilience and self-advocacy strategies. As one interviewee explained, "At first, I felt like I was just a problem to be managed, but over time, I realized I had to fight for my own success." Another major concern was stress and anxiety levels, which were exacerbated by academic pressure, policy-related uncertainties, and social

anxiety. One student reflected, "I never know if the support I get this year will still be there next year. It's always changing, and that scares me." However, those with access to emotional support and well-being resources, such as school counselors and peer support systems, reported a greater sense of security. A participant noted, "Having a teacher who listens and understands my struggles has made all the difference in how I feel about school."

The second major theme focused on the effectiveness of special education policies in addressing students' needs. Many students highlighted disparities in accessibility and inclusivity of services, with some benefiting from individualized accommodations while others faced barriers to necessary resources. One participant stated, "I had to fight for every bit of support. It's not automatic—you have to prove you need it over and over." The quality of special education programs varied widely, with students emphasizing the role of teacher expertise and curriculum adaptability. A student remarked, "Some teachers are amazing, but others just don't know how to handle our needs. It makes a huge difference." The teacher-student interaction was also a critical factor in students' experiences, with some reporting encouragement and understanding, while others encountered dismissive attitudes. One student



shared, “My teacher always tells me I can do it, even when I doubt myself. That kind of support keeps me going.” Another challenge was parental involvement, as some parents actively collaborated with educators while others lacked awareness of policies. One interviewee explained, “My parents had no idea what services I was entitled to until I showed them. Schools don’t always explain these things.” Additionally, students faced policy implementation challenges, such as bureaucratic delays and inconsistent policy applications. A frustrated participant stated, “One year, I got extra time on tests, the next year they took it away. No one could explain why!”

The final theme centered on the long-term outcomes for exceptional students as shaped by their educational experiences. Many students were concerned about academic achievement and career prospects, as they feared limited access to higher education and future employment opportunities. One participant expressed, “I want to go to college, but I don’t know if universities will accommodate my needs the same way my school does.” Others spoke about social integration and relationships, where participation in extracurricular activities and peer interactions played a crucial role in their emotional development. One student shared, “I just want to be part of things like everyone else. But sometimes, I feel like I have to work twice as hard to be included.” Another significant area was independent living and self-sufficiency, with students recognizing the importance of life skills training, adaptive technologies, and financial literacy. A participant noted, “Learning how to manage my own finances and make decisions for myself is just as important as my academic skills.”

#### 4. Discussion and Conclusion

The findings of this study highlight the profound impact of special education policies on the psychological well-being of exceptional students. The analysis revealed three key themes: the emotional and psychological impact of policies, the effectiveness of special education programs, and the long-term outcomes for exceptional students. Participants’ experiences underscored the crucial role of policy implementation in shaping their emotional resilience, academic engagement, and future prospects. While some students benefited from structured support and inclusive environments, others reported significant challenges, including social stigma, inconsistent accommodations, and stress related to policy uncertainties. These findings align

with previous research indicating that educational policies can be both a source of empowerment and a barrier to psychological well-being among students with exceptionalities (Glazzard, 2025; Watson & Osborne, 2025).

One of the most significant findings was the role of stigmatization and social exclusion in shaping students’ psychological well-being. Participants frequently described experiences of being labeled or separated from their peers, leading to feelings of inferiority and isolation. This supports prior research showing that exceptional students often experience social marginalization, which can negatively impact their self-esteem and emotional stability (Zatayumni & Siregar, 2024). Studies have also indicated that students with disabilities are more likely to experience bullying and exclusion, further exacerbating their emotional distress (Rafiyya et al., 2024). Conversely, some participants reported that strong emotional support from teachers and peers played a protective role, helping them navigate these challenges. This aligns with findings that emotional support networks, including peer relationships and teacher encouragement, can buffer the negative effects of social stigma (Koenarso, 2024).

The study also found that self-perception and identity formation were significantly influenced by students’ experiences with special education policies. Many participants struggled with internalized stereotypes, while others demonstrated resilience and self-advocacy. This finding resonates with research emphasizing the importance of identity development in exceptional students, as self-perception influences motivation, self-confidence, and long-term success (Kılççet al., 2024). Some students reported that school environments that actively foster self-advocacy helped them build a stronger sense of self, consistent with studies that highlight the role of advocacy training in empowering students with disabilities (Dahiya & Devi, 2024).

Another major theme was the stress and anxiety associated with special education policies. Many participants expressed concern over the inconsistency of accommodations and the unpredictability of policy changes. This aligns with previous research indicating that bureaucratic inconsistencies and frequent modifications in special education programs create uncertainty for students and their families, leading to increased anxiety and decreased academic motivation (Caingcoy et al., 2024). Research further suggests that high stress levels among exceptional students often stem from unclear policy guidelines and insufficient communication between schools

and families (Wu, 2023). These findings highlight the need for stable, well-implemented policies that provide consistent support across educational levels.

The study also examined the effectiveness of special education policies, revealing both strengths and weaknesses in policy implementation. While some students benefited from individualized education plans (IEPs) and inclusive learning environments, others faced significant barriers to access. This is consistent with prior research showing that well-structured IEPs and tailored learning strategies enhance academic performance and emotional well-being (Trang et al., 2023). However, disparities in policy implementation were also evident, with some students reporting difficulties in obtaining accommodations. These findings support research indicating that accessibility remains a major challenge in special education, particularly when resources are scarce or policy enforcement is inconsistent (Terekhina & Silaeva, 2023).

Participants also discussed the role of teacher-student interactions, emphasizing the impact of teachers' attitudes and preparedness in supporting exceptional students. Many students reported positive experiences with teachers who were empathetic, patient, and well-trained in special education strategies. This finding aligns with research demonstrating that teachers who receive specialized training in inclusive education are better equipped to support students' psychological and academic development (Sulaiman et al., 2023). However, other participants described instances where teachers lacked understanding or engagement, reinforcing previous studies that highlight gaps in teacher training as a major barrier to effective special education (Du, 2023).

Another critical finding was the importance of parental involvement in shaping students' emotional and academic outcomes. Some participants noted that their parents played an active role in advocating for their educational needs, while others reported limited parental awareness of special education policies. These findings align with previous research indicating that parental advocacy and engagement are critical factors in ensuring that exceptional students receive adequate support (Chen, 2023). Studies have shown that parents who are well-informed about educational policies can help bridge gaps in policy implementation, leading to better outcomes for their children (Aktürk et al., 2023).

The final major theme was the long-term outcomes for exceptional students, including their academic and career prospects, social integration, and independent living skills.

Many participants expressed concerns about transitioning to higher education or employment, highlighting uncertainties about continued accommodations and support. This is consistent with research indicating that while special education programs can provide short-term academic benefits, long-term success is often contingent on sustained policy support (Yob et al., 2022). Some students also described difficulties in developing social relationships, supporting previous findings that exceptional students often struggle with social integration in mainstream settings (Redeş & Roman, 2022).

While this study provides valuable insights into the impact of special education policies on the psychological well-being of exceptional students, several limitations must be acknowledged. First, the study relied solely on qualitative data from semi-structured interviews, which, while rich in depth, may limit generalizability. A mixed-methods approach incorporating quantitative measures could provide a more comprehensive understanding of these issues. Second, participants were recruited through online platforms, which may have excluded students without internet access or those who were less comfortable sharing their experiences in a virtual setting. Third, the study focused on students' perspectives, while the views of parents, educators, and policymakers were not directly examined. Future research should incorporate multiple stakeholders to obtain a more holistic view of special education policy effectiveness.

Future research should expand on these findings by exploring the long-term impact of special education policies on exceptional students' transitions into higher education and the workforce. Longitudinal studies tracking students over time could provide valuable insights into how policies shape their personal and professional trajectories. Additionally, comparative studies across different educational systems and policy frameworks would help identify best practices in special education. Research should also focus on the perspectives of parents and educators to better understand the challenges of policy implementation from multiple angles. Further, investigating the effectiveness of teacher training programs and their impact on students' psychological well-being could provide actionable recommendations for improving professional development in inclusive education.

To enhance the psychological well-being of exceptional students, educational institutions should prioritize stable and well-implemented policies that ensure consistency in accommodations across academic years. Schools must also

invest in comprehensive teacher training programs to equip educators with the necessary skills to support exceptional students effectively. Additionally, fostering strong communication channels between schools, parents, and policymakers can help address gaps in policy implementation and ensure that students receive the support they need. Creating inclusive learning environments that actively promote social integration and reduce stigmatization should be a key priority in policy development. Schools should also implement structured advocacy programs that empower students to understand and exercise their educational rights, ultimately fostering self-confidence and long-term success.

### Authors' Contributions

Authors contributed equally to this article.

### Declaration

In order to correct and improve the academic writing of our paper, we have used the language model ChatGPT.

### Transparency Statement

Data are available for research purposes upon reasonable request to the corresponding author.

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### Declaration of Interest

The authors report no conflict of interest.

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### Ethics Considerations

The study protocol adhered to the principles outlined in the Helsinki Declaration, which provides guidelines for ethical research involving human participants.

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