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Policy Integration and Fragmentation in Child-Centered Development in the Philippines: A Document and Narrative Analysis of Juvenile Justice, School Feeding, and Basic Education Access

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Abstract

This study examined how selected policy documents on juvenile justice reform, school feeding programs, and basic educational access in the Philippines reflected a child-centered approach to societal transformation. A qualitative document and narrative analysis design was used. A total of 100 policy documents, including laws, government issuances, program guidelines, institutional reports, and cross-sectoral child welfare documents, were analyzed through a PRISMA-guided selection process. Data were organized using a Document and Narrative Analysis Matrix and examined through thematic coding and narrative interpretation. The findings revealed five major themes across the documents: protection, equity, access, governance, and development. The documents framed children as rights holders, developmental investments, vulnerable yet capable actors, beneficiaries of integrated services, and indicators of social equity. The analysis showed strong conceptual alignment across the three policy domains. However, operational fragmentation remained evident in inter-agency coordination, local implementation capacity, service delivery, monitoring systems, and accountability mechanisms. Anchored in Ecological Systems Theory, the findings suggested a gap between the macrosystem, where child-centered policy intentions were clearly articulated, and the mesosystem, where institutional coordination and implementation should occur. The study concluded that child-centered societal transformation in the Philippines requires more than well-written policies. It requires integrated governance, coordinated service delivery, stronger local capacity, shared monitoring systems, and sustained support for vulnerable children. The study contributes to policy scholarship by showing

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how document and narrative analysis can reveal both the coherence and fragmentation of child-centered policy systems.

Keywords: Juvenile Justice Reform, School Feeding Programs, Educational Access, Child-centered Development, Policy Integration, Philippines

1.Introduction

Background

Across the globe, there is increasing recognition that child-centered policies are essential to achieving inclusive and sustainable development. International frameworks such as the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) emphasize the role of children's welfare in societal progress, particularly through SDG 2 (Zero Hunger), SDG 4 (Quality Education), and SDG 16 (Peace, Justice, and Strong Institutions). Empirical evidence shows that integrated interventions addressing children's nutrition, education, and protection improve long-term developmental outcomes and reduce intergenerational poverty (World Bank, 2021; UNICEF, 2022; United Nations, 2023). In the Philippines, key legislative and programmatic efforts have been established to support children's rights and development. Republic Act No. 9344 promotes restorative justice and rehabilitation for children in conflict with the law. The School-Based Feeding Program implemented by the Department of Education addresses malnutrition and supports school participation (DepEd, 2020). The Enhanced Basic Education Act of 2013 (RA 10533) ensures inclusive and quality education. These policies reflect a strong institutional commitment to child development. However, reports indicate persistent challenges such as uneven implementation, limited resources, and restricted access in marginalized and geographically isolated communities (Philippine Statistics Authority, 2022; Save the Children Philippines, 2021).

Rationale

At the local level, issues related to justice, nutrition, and education often converge, particularly among vulnerable children. Poverty exposes children to multiple risks, including malnutrition, disrupted schooling, and potential involvement in the juvenile justice system. Existing studies provide insights into these domains, but they are often examined separately. This limits the understanding of how these factors interact in shaping children's lived experiences. Policy documents suggest that interventions remain fragmented and lack a unified child-centered framework. There is also limited use of document and narrative analysis in examining how policies collectively construct meaning and direction. Most studies focus on quantitative outcomes or sector-specific evaluations, leaving a gap in understanding the integrated and policy-driven nature of child-centered interventions. This indicates the need for an approach that examines policy interconnections, identifies patterns of fragmentation and integration, and explains how these influence societal transformation.

Significance

This study provides a comprehensive analysis of how policies on juvenile justice reform, school feeding programs, and basic education access collectively shape a child-centered framework for societal transformation in the Philippines. The findings offer evidence on gaps in governance, coordination, and service delivery, which can inform policy improvements. The study supports policymakers in strengthening inter-agency collaboration and aligning national and local implementation systems. It contributes to academic research by expanding the use of document and narrative analysis in examining cross-sectoral policy dynamics. It also highlights the importance of integrated approaches in addressing the multidimensional needs of children. Through this, the study supports the development of coherent, inclusive, and sustainable child-centered systems that improve children's lived experiences and long-term outcomes.

Theoretical and Conceptual Framework of the Study

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This study is anchored on Ecological Systems Theory developed by Urie Bronfenbrenner (1979), which explains that a child's development is shaped by multiple interconnected environmental systems. These include the microsystem (family and school), mesosystem (interactions among immediate environments), exosystem (institutional structures), and macrosystem (policies, laws, and societal values). The theory emphasizes that children do not develop in isolation; rather, their well-being is influenced by dynamic interactions across these systems.

In the context of this study, policies and programs related to juvenile justice reform, school feeding programs, and basic educational access represent key systems that shape children's developmental outcomes. These domains operate within broader institutional and policy environments that influence children's protection, nutrition, learning, and social well-being. Ecological Systems Theory provides a lens for understanding how these domains interact, highlighting that effective child development depends not only on the strength of individual systems but also on the coherence and coordination among them.

The conceptual framework builds on this theoretical foundation by proposing that child-centered societal transformation is influenced by the interaction of these three key policy domains. However, these domains often function in fragmented or siloed systems, resulting in weak coordination, inefficiencies, and gaps in service delivery. From an ecological perspective, this fragmentation reflects a disconnection within the mesosystem, where institutional linkages fail to effectively support children's holistic development.

Guided by the principle of interconnectedness, the framework posits that integration among juvenile justice, education, and nutrition systems is essential in creating a cohesive and responsive child-centered development system. The study begins with these policy domains as primary inputs, which are examined through document and narrative analysis to identify recurring themes, dominant narratives, and patterns of fragmentation or integration. This analytical process leads to the development of an integrated child-centered framework that reflects the interconnected nature of child-focused systems.

Ultimately, the framework demonstrates that when policies and programs are aligned and coordinated across sectors, they create a supportive environment that enhances children's well-being, promotes equity, and supports sustainable development. Conversely, fragmented systems weaken these outcomes by limiting the effectiveness of interventions. Thus, this study underscores that meaningful societal transformation requires strengthening institutional linkages, enhancing governance coordination, and ensuring that integrated approaches are translated into practice across all levels of the system. The relationships among these variables are visually presented in Figure 1, illustrating how policy domains, analytical processes, and system integration collectively contribute to child-centered societal transformation.

Aim of the Study

The study aimed to examine how policy documents on juvenile justice reform, school feeding programs, and basic education access in the Philippines construct and reflect a child-centered approach to societal transformation, with emphasis on patterns of integration and fragmentation across these domains.

Research Questions

a. What key themes and policy directions are evident in documents related to juvenile justice reform, school feeding programs, and basic education access?
b. What dominant narratives about children's rights, needs, and development emerge from these documents?
c. How do these narratives reveal patterns of fragmentation or integration across the three policy domains?
d. In what ways do these documents support or constrain the development of a child-centered framework?
e. What implications do these findings have for advancing integrated, child-centered societal transformation?

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2.Literature Review

Juvenile Justice Reform and Child Protection Systems

Juvenile justice reform has shifted toward child-centered and restorative approaches. Children in conflict with the law are now viewed as individuals who require protection, rehabilitation, and reintegration rather than punishment. Globally, justice systems have aligned with child rights frameworks. Diversion programs, community-based interventions, and restorative justice practices have been emphasized. These approaches address social, economic, and psychological causes of offending instead of focusing only on legal accountability. Evidence shows that restorative models reduce recidivism and improve developmental outcomes among youth offenders (UNICEF, 2021; United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime [UNODC], 2020; Lambie & Randell, 2020).

In the Philippines, the implementation of Republic Act No. 9344 reflects a shift toward a rights-based justice system. The law promotes diversion and multi-sectoral collaboration. It supports rehabilitation and reintegration of children. However, implementation gaps remain. Local government units face limitations in resources, training, and coordination. These challenges result in inconsistent delivery of services and limited rehabilitation outcomes (Dela Cruz, 2021; Save the Children Philippines, 2021; UNODC, 2022).

Recent studies show that juvenile justice outcomes are linked to broader social conditions. Poverty, lack of education, and weak family support increase the likelihood of youth offending. Children who experience school exclusion are more likely to enter the justice system. This indicates that justice issues are connected to education and social protection systems. Empirical findings confirm that school disengagement and economic vulnerability are strong predictors of delinquent behavior (World Bank, 2021; Farrington et al., 2021).

Research also emphasizes the importance of integrated child protection systems. Justice, education, and social welfare sectors are expected to work together. However, fragmentation persists. Institutions often operate independently with limited coordination. This weakens policy effectiveness and creates gaps in support systems (UNICEF, 2022; OECD, 2020).

Overall, juvenile justice reform in the Philippines shows strong policy direction. However, its impact is constrained by fragmentation and uneven implementation. This highlights the need for integrated approaches that connect justice with education and social support systems.

School Feeding Programs and Child Nutrition

School feeding programs are recognized as key interventions for addressing child malnutrition and improving educational outcomes. These programs align with Sustainable Development Goals related to hunger and education. Globally, they function as both nutrition and education support systems. Evidence shows that feeding programs improve cognitive development, attention span, and academic performance, especially among disadvantaged learners (World Food Programme, 2022; UNESCO, 2021).

In the Philippines, the School-Based Feeding Program implemented by the Department of Education targets undernourished learners. DepEd Order No. 39, s. 2017 provides implementation guidelines. The program improves nutritional status, attendance, and participation in school. Policy updates emphasize monitoring, stakeholder collaboration, and alignment with health and nutrition goals (DepEd, 2020; PIDS, 2022).

Empirical evidence shows a strong relationship between nutrition and education. Malnourished children are more likely to miss school and perform poorly. Chronic undernutrition affects cognitive development and long-term

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learning outcomes. School feeding programs reduce hunger and encourage school attendance, which improves engagement in learning (World Bank, 2021; World Food Programme, 2022).

Despite these benefits, implementation challenges persist. Issues include inconsistent food quality, logistical problems, and limited funding. Coordination among stakeholders remains weak. Regional disparities further affect program effectiveness in the Philippines (PIDS, 2022). These gaps reflect differences between policy design and actual implementation.

Studies also show that feeding programs are more effective when integrated with education, health, and social protection systems. However, fragmentation remains a challenge. Programs are often implemented in isolation, which reduces their overall impact (UNICEF, 2022).

Thus, school feeding programs contribute to child development. However, their effectiveness is limited by implementation gaps and weak integration. A more coordinated approach is needed to support holistic development.

Access to Basic Education and Inclusive Learning

Access to education remains a key component of global development. It is strongly linked to Sustainable Development Goal 4. Education is considered a basic human right and a driver of social mobility. It reduces poverty and promotes inclusive growth (United Nations, 2023; UNESCO, 2021). Despite progress, inequalities in access and quality persist, especially among marginalized groups (UNICEF, 2022).

In the Philippines, access to education has improved. Enrollment rates have increased. However, challenges remain. High dropout rates and low learning outcomes continue to affect disadvantaged groups. Inequality in access to early childhood and secondary education persists (Philippine Institute for Development Studies [PIDS], 2023). These findings show that access alone is not sufficient. Quality and equity must also be addressed.

Barriers to education are linked to poverty, geographic isolation, and social inequality. Children in rural areas and low-income families face limited access. Infrastructure gaps and lack of trained teachers worsen the situation. Limited access to inclusive and culturally responsive education also affects learning outcomes (UNICEF, 2022; World Bank, 2021).

Inclusive education requires supportive learning environments. These environments must address diverse needs of learners. However, implementation remains weak. Teachers often lack training. Resources are limited. Institutional support is insufficient (Sadiki, 2024; UNESCO, 2022).

The digital divide has also become a major concern. Many learners lack access to technology and internet services. This further increases inequality in education (World Bank, 2022; UNICEF, 2023).

Overall, progress in access to education has been achieved. However, systemic barriers remain. These issues highlight the need for integrated approaches that address access, quality, and inclusion together.

Policy Fragmentation vs Integrated Child-Centered Approaches

Child development is influenced by interconnected systems. These include education, health, social protection, and justice. Global frameworks emphasize the need for integrated policy approaches. However, many systems remain fragmented. Programs are often implemented separately without coordination (UNICEF, 2022; OECD, 2020).

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Fragmentation results in gaps in service delivery. Institutions operate independently with limited collaboration. This leads to duplication of efforts and inconsistent support. Vulnerable children are most affected. Fragmented systems reduce policy effectiveness and limit long-term outcomes (World Bank, 2021; UNICEF, 2023).

In the Philippines, policies across sectors are well established. However, implementation remains siloed. Different agencies manage separate programs. Coordination is limited. This weakens the overall impact of interventions (PIDS, 2022; Save the Children Philippines, 2021).

Integrated approaches are now being promoted. These approaches involve coordination among agencies and stakeholders. They emphasize shared accountability and collaborative service delivery. Evidence shows that integrated systems improve child outcomes (OECD, 2020; UNICEF, 2022).

Child-centered development places children at the core of policies. It emphasizes understanding their lived experiences and addressing their needs across systems. This aligns with global development goals (United Nations, 2023).

Despite these efforts, integration remains a challenge. Institutional barriers and weak coordination persist. As a result, policies often fail to address complex child development issues fully. This highlights the need for studies that examine policy integration and system alignment.

Child-Centered Development and Societal Transformation

Recent studies highlight the importance of integrated child-centered systems. Children who experience coordinated support show better cognitive, emotional, and social outcomes. Multi-sectoral collaboration is essential for sustainable development.

Research shows that children exposed to multiple forms of deprivation face higher developmental risks. Poor nutrition, limited education, and weak social protection affect long-term outcomes. Integrated interventions are required to address these challenges (Richter, 2020).

Youth participation also plays an important role. Programs that involve children in decision-making improve self-efficacy and leadership skills. Participation strengthens both individual and community development (Wong et al., 2020).

Global evidence shows that integrated child protection systems improve outcomes. These systems reduce vulnerability and increase access to services. However, fragmentation remains a major barrier (UNICEF, 2023).
In the Philippines, multiple programs exist. However, their impact is limited by weak coordination. Studies recommend stronger collaboration and unified frameworks (PIDS, 2022).
Overall, child-centered societal transformation requires integration across sectors. Policies must move beyond isolated interventions. Coordinated systems are needed to support long-term and sustainable outcomes for children.

3.Methodology

3.1 Research Design

This study adopted a qualitative research approach using an interpretive design to examine policy documents related to juvenile justice reform, school feeding programs, and access to basic education in the Philippines. A qualitative approach was selected because it enables an in-depth exploration of meanings, patterns, and underlying assumptions embedded within textual data. This approach is appropriate for analyzing how policies construct and reflect child-centered perspectives across different domains.

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The study specifically employed document analysis and narrative analysis as its primary research designs. Document analysis facilitated the systematic examination of official records, including laws, policy issuances, program guidelines, and institutional reports. This allowed the identification of key themes, policy directions, and structural patterns. Narrative analysis was used to interpret how policies frame children's welfare, focusing on discourses, representations, and underlying perspectives that shape policy meaning. Through these complementary methods, the study examined patterns of integration and fragmentation across policy domains and generated a deeper understanding of how policies collectively contribute to child-centered societal transformation.

3.2 Data Sources

The study did not involve human participants. Instead, it relied on documentary sources as the primary units of analysis. The data consisted of selected policy documents, including national laws, government issuances, memoranda, program guidelines, and institutional reports related to juvenile justice reform, school feeding programs, and basic education access in the Philippines.

These documents were selected based on their relevance to the study objectives and their capacity to provide insights into policy themes, narratives, and implementation patterns. The use of documentary sources ensured that the analysis was grounded in authoritative and publicly available materials, enhancing the credibility and reliability of the findings.

3.3 Research Instrument

A structured Document and Narrative Analysis Matrix was developed as the primary research instrument. This matrix served as a systematic tool for extracting, organizing, and analyzing relevant information from each selected document. The instrument was designed to capture both explicit content and underlying meanings related to child-centered policy construction.

The matrix included the following components: document profile (title, year, source, and type), policy domain classification, key themes (e.g., protection, equity, governance, access, and development), narrative framing (e.g., children as rights holders or developmental investments), indicators of integration (evidence of coordination and policy alignment), indicators of fragmentation (gaps, overlaps, or inconsistencies), and emerging insights related to societal transformation.

To ensure systematic document selection and transparency, the study applied the Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses (PRISMA) framework. A total of 100 policy documents were included after undergoing identification, screening, eligibility, and inclusion procedures. This structured instrument enhanced analytical rigor, consistency, and depth of interpretation.

The Document and Narrative Analysis Matrix in Table 1 was used to ensure consistency in extracting and interpreting data from the selected policy documents. Each document was reviewed using the same analytical categories. This allowed the researcher to identify explicit policy content, recurring themes, dominant narratives, and indicators of integration or fragmentation across the three policy domains.

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Table 1. Document and Narrative Analysis Matrix

Component	Description	Purpose in the Study
Document Profile	Title, year, issuing agency, source, and document type	Established the identity and credibility of each document
Policy Domain	Juvenile justice reform, school feeding program, basic education access, or cross-sectoral child welfare	Organized the documents according to the study's main policy areas
Key Policy Content	Major provisions, program directions, mandates, or institutional priorities	Identified the explicit policy focus of each document
Emerging Codes	Repeated words, phrases, provisions, or ideas related to children's welfare	Served as the first level of thematic coding
Themes	Protection, equity, access, governance, development, integration, or fragmentation	Grouped related codes into broader analytical patterns
Narrative Framing	How children were represented in the document	Identified whether children were framed as rights holders, developmental investments, vulnerable groups, or active participants
Indicators of Integration	Evidence of inter-agency coordination, policy alignment, shared responsibility, or cross-sectoral mechanisms	Determined how documents supported integrated child-centered systems
Indicators of Fragmentation	Evidence of policy gaps, overlapping mandates, weak coordination, resource limitations, or implementation barriers	Determined how documents constrained child-centered transformation
Ecological System Link	Microsystem, mesosystem, exosystem, macrosystem, or chronosystem	Connected the findings to Ecological Systems Theory
Analytical Memo	Researcher's interpretation of the document's relevance to child-centered societal transformation	Supported deeper interpretation and synthesis across documents

The matrix in Table 1 supported both thematic and narrative analysis. The thematic component helped identify recurring policy concerns, while the narrative component helped interpret how children were positioned within policy discourse. The inclusion of ecological system links also ensured alignment between the data analysis procedure and the theoretical framework of the study.

3.4 Data Collection Procedure

The selection of documents followed predefined inclusion and exclusion criteria. Documents were included if they were directly related to juvenile justice reform, school feeding programs, and basic education access; were official policies or government-issued materials; were published by credible institutions; were written in English; and were issued within a relevant timeframe (2015 to the present). Documents were excluded if they were not directly related to the identified domains, were non-scholarly or opinion-based sources, were duplicated, or lacked sufficient detail for analysis.

Data collection followed a systematic PRISMA-guided process. Relevant documents were first identified using keyword searches such as "juvenile justice reform," "school feeding programs," "basic education access," and "child-centered policies." The documents were then screened to remove duplicates and irrelevant materials. Eligible documents were assessed based on the established criteria, and only those meeting the requirements were included in the final dataset.

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All selected documents were organized and cataloged systematically. Relevant data were extracted and prepared for coding and analysis. This process ensured transparency, consistency, and replicability in the collection of data.

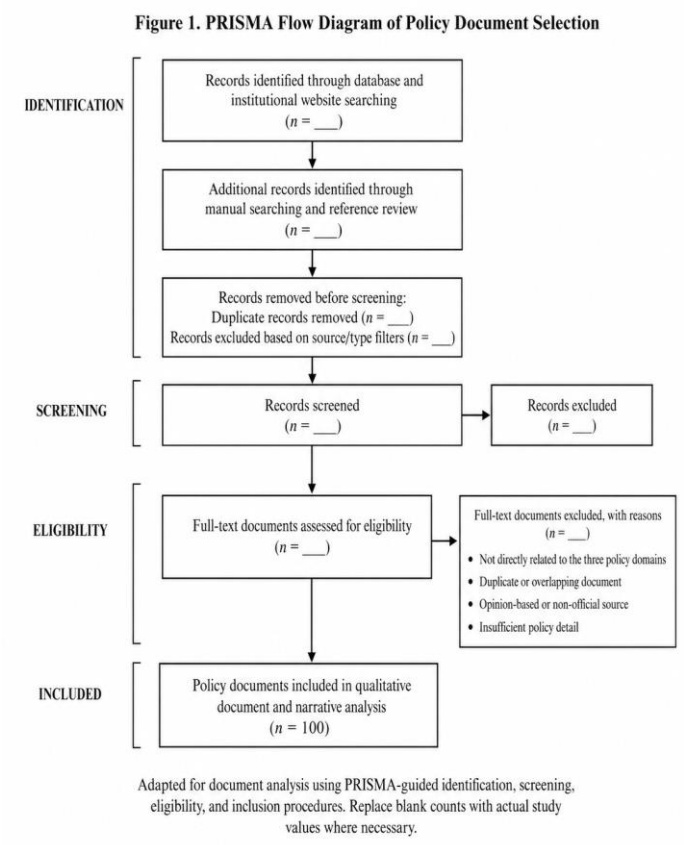

Figure 1. PRISMA Flow Diagram of Policy Document Selection

Figure 1 presents the PRISMA-guided flow used in selecting the policy documents for analysis. The process involved identification through database and institutional website searching, manual searching, removal of duplicate and irrelevant records, screening, eligibility assessment, and final inclusion. A total of 100 policy documents were included in the qualitative document and narrative analysis.

3.5 Data Analysis

Data analysis followed a systematic and iterative process combining thematic and narrative techniques. Initially, all documents were read thoroughly to establish familiarity with the content. This was followed by open coding, where relevant statements and sections were identified and labeled based on emerging concepts. These codes were then grouped into broader categories and themes related to policy directions, child-centered narratives, and implementation patterns.

Thematic analysis was employed to identify recurring patterns across the three policy domains. Particular attention was given to themes related to integration and fragmentation. Narrative analysis was subsequently applied to examine how policies framed children's rights, needs, and development. This included analyzing language use, perspectives, and implicit assumptions that shape policy discourse.

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The results of both analyses were synthesized to develop an integrated understanding of how policies interact and contribute to child-centered societal transformation. This combined analytical approach allowed for a comprehensive interpretation of both structural and discursive elements within the policy documents.

Table 2. Classification of Policy Documents Included in the Analysis

Policy Domain	Document Type	Sample Documents/Sources	Number of Documents
Juvenile Justice Reform	Laws, implementing rules, policy guidelines, government reports, child protection reports	Republic Act No. 9344, Republic Act No. 10630, Juvenile Justice and Welfare Council issuances, DSWD reports, UNICEF child justice reports	30
School Feeding Programs	DepEd orders, program guidelines, implementation reports, nutrition-related policy documents	DepEd School-Based Feeding Program guidelines, DepEd Orders, WFP school feeding reports, PIDS assessments, nutrition and learner welfare reports	30
Basic Educational Access	Education laws, policy issuances, access and inclusion reports, education sector assessments	Republic Act No. 10533, DepEd access and inclusion policies, EDCOM II reports, UNESCO education reports, World Bank education reports	30
Cross-sectoral Child Welfare and Development	SDG reports, child welfare reports, governance reports, integrated development policy documents	UNICEF child welfare reports, Philippine Statistics Authority reports, NEDA documents, SDG reports, Save the Children Philippines reports	10
Total			**100**

Table 2 shows the classification of the 100 policy documents included in the analysis. The documents were grouped according to the three major policy domains of the study: juvenile justice reform, school feeding programs, and basic educational access. Cross-sectoral child welfare and development documents were also included because they provided broader policy context on governance, equity, protection, and child-centered development. This classification ensured that the analysis was balanced across the major policy areas and supported the identification of both domain-specific and cross-cutting themes.

To support analytical transparency, the study used a thematic coding structure (see Table 3). Initial codes were generated from repeated policy terms, provisions, and statements found in the selected documents. These codes were grouped into categories and then synthesized into broader themes. The coding process allowed the researcher to trace how policy content was transformed into interpretive findings.

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Table 3. Thematic Coding Structure Used in the Analysis

Initial Codes	Categories	Final Themes	Policy Domain/s
diversion, rehabilitation, restorative justice, child protection, reintegration, safeguarding	Justice-based child welfare	Protection	Juvenile Justice Reform
feeding support, nutrition intervention, learner health, undernourished learners, school participation	Nutrition and learner welfare	Development	School Feeding Programs
enrollment, retention, inclusive education, school access, dropout prevention, learning continuity	Educational participation and inclusion	Access	Basic Educational Access
vulnerable learners, marginalized children, poverty, geographic isolation, social exclusion	Inclusion of disadvantaged groups	Equity	All domains
agency mandates, local implementation, accountability, program monitoring, institutional responsibility	Policy management and implementation	Governance	All domains
inter-agency coordination, shared responsibility, cross-sector partnership, program alignment	Connected policy systems	Integration	All domains
weak coordination, overlapping mandates, resource gaps, uneven implementation, siloed delivery	Implementation barriers	Fragmentation	All domains
child rights, best interests of the child, participation, welfare entitlement	Rights-based representation of children	Child as Rights Holder	Juvenile Justice Reform; Basic Education Access
human capital, future productivity, long-term development, national progress	Development-oriented policy framing	Child as Developmental Investment	School Feeding Programs; Basic Education Access
at-risk children, children in conflict with the law, undernourished learners, out-of-school youth	Vulnerability and support needs	Child as Vulnerable but Capable Actor	All domains

Table 3 presents the coding structure used to organize and interpret the selected policy documents. The initial codes were drawn from recurring policy terms and statements. These were clustered into analytical categories and then developed into final themes. The table also shows the policy domains where each theme was most evident. This process strengthened the consistency of the thematic analysis and supported the interpretation of integration and fragmentation across the documents.

3.6 Trustworthiness and Validation

To ensure the rigor of the study, four criteria were applied: credibility, dependability, confirmability, and transferability. Credibility was established through the use of authoritative sources and systematic analysis procedures. Prolonged engagement with the documents ensured accurate representation of content.

Dependability was achieved through clear documentation of the research process, including data collection, coding, and analysis procedures. Confirmability was ensured by grounding interpretations in the actual data and maintaining an audit trail of analytical decisions. Transferability was addressed by providing detailed descriptions

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of the research context and procedures, allowing readers to assess the applicability of the findings to other settings.

3.7 Ethical Considerations

The study adhered to ethical standards in the use and interpretation of documentary data. All analyses were based strictly on the content of selected documents to avoid misrepresentation. Proper citation practices were followed to maintain academic integrity. Only credible and publicly available sources from recognized institutions were utilized.

Objectivity was maintained throughout the analysis to minimize bias. The findings were derived from the data rather than personal assumptions. Since the study did not involve human participants, issues related to consent and confidentiality were not applicable. However, ethical responsibility in data handling and interpretation was strictly observed.

4. Findings & Discussions

Research Question 1: What key themes and policy directions are evident in the documents?

The analysis of 100 policy documents on juvenile justice reform, school feeding programs, and basic education access revealed a consistent cluster of dominant themes: protection, governance, equity, access, and development. These themes collectively define the direction of child-centered policy in the Philippines. Protection emerged as the most prominent theme, particularly in juvenile justice policies, emphasizing rehabilitation, diversion, and safeguarding children in conflict with the law. Governance, equity, and access were strongly reflected across all domains, indicating a policy focus on inclusive participation and institutional responsibility. Development served as a cross-cutting theme, highlighting the long-term objective of improving children's cognitive, social, and emotional well-being.

The thematic patterns were reinforced through the word cloud and frequency analysis, where protection ranked highest, followed by governance, equity, and access. While these findings confirm strong alignment toward child-centered priorities, the relatively lower prominence of integration and coordination suggests that system-level cohesion remains underdeveloped. This indicates that although policy frameworks are conceptually aligned, the operationalization of integrated approaches is still emerging.

Research Question 2: What dominant narratives about children's rights, needs, and development emerge from the documents?

The narrative analysis revealed three dominant and interrelated constructions of children within policy discourse. First, children are framed as rights holders, emphasizing protection, participation, and the best interests of the child. Second, children are positioned as developmental investments, where access to education, nutrition, and social services is linked to long-term national development. Third, children are portrayed as vulnerable yet capable individuals, recognizing their exposure to socio-economic risks while highlighting their capacity for resilience and reintegration when supported by appropriate systems.

These narratives reflect a shift from viewing children as passive recipients of services toward recognizing them as active contributors to societal development. They also demonstrate alignment with global development frameworks, where child well-being is understood as a multidimensional construct integrating protection, education, and welfare.

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The narrative analysis in table 4 revealed that children were represented in different but related ways across the selected policy documents. These representations reflected how policies understood children's rights, needs, risks, and developmental roles. Table 4 presents the dominant narrative framings identified in the documents.

Table 4. Narrative Framing of Children Across Policy Domains

Dominant Narrative	Description	Policy Domain Where Evident	Sample Policy Meaning
Children as Rights Holders	Children were framed as individuals with legal, educational, and welfare rights that must be protected by the state.	Juvenile Justice Reform; Basic Educational Access	Policies emphasized protection, participation, access to education, and the best interests of the child.
Children as Developmental Investments	Children were presented as central to long-term social and national development.	School Feeding Programs; Basic Educational Access	Education, nutrition, and welfare support were linked to future productivity, learning outcomes, and poverty reduction.
Children as Vulnerable but Capable Actors	Children were recognized as exposed to poverty, malnutrition, exclusion, and justice-related risks, but still capable of rehabilitation, learning, and participation.	All three domains	Policies acknowledged risk and vulnerability while promoting reintegration, inclusion, and developmental support.
Children as Beneficiaries of Integrated Services	Children were positioned as needing coordinated support from justice, education, health, nutrition, and social welfare systems.	Cross-sectoral Child Welfare and Development	Documents emphasized multi-sectoral collaboration, shared responsibility, and coordinated service delivery.
Children as Indicators of Social Equity	Children's welfare was treated as a measure of whether social systems were inclusive and responsive.	Basic Educational Access; School Feeding Programs; Cross-sectoral Documents	Policies linked child welfare outcomes with equity, inclusion, and social justice.

Table 4 shows that the documents did not frame children only as recipients of assistance. They were also represented as rights-bearing individuals, future contributors to development, and active participants in social systems. This finding supports the child-centered orientation of the policy documents. However, it also suggests that these narratives require stronger institutional coordination so that rights, welfare, and development commitments are translated into actual services.

Research Question 3: How do these narratives reveal patterns of fragmentation or integration across the three domains?

The findings reveal a clear pattern of conceptual integration and operational fragmentation. At the conceptual level, policies across juvenile justice, education, and nutrition demonstrate strong alignment in recognizing children's needs as interconnected. This reflects an integrated policy vision where protection, learning, and well-being are treated as mutually reinforcing domains.

However, at the implementation level, fragmentation persists. Policy documents indicate weak inter-agency coordination, inconsistencies in resource allocation, and gaps in service delivery systems. Although collaboration is frequently articulated in policy language, institutional mechanisms for coordination remain limited. This results in parallel implementation rather than fully integrated systems. From an ecological perspective, this reflects a

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disconnect between the macrosystem, where integration is emphasized, and the mesosystem, where coordination among institutions occurs.

The documents in table 5 showed that integration was strongly expressed in policy language, but fragmentation remained evident in implementation structures. Table 5 summarizes the main indicators of integration and fragmentation identified across juvenile justice reform, school feeding programs, and basic educational access.

Table 5. Evidence of Policy Integration and Fragmentation Across the Three Domains

Policy Domain	Evidence of Integration	Evidence of Fragmentation	Interpretation
Juvenile Justice Reform	Policies emphasized diversion, rehabilitation, reintegration, and coordination among justice, welfare, education, and local government actors.	Implementation was affected by uneven local capacity, limited rehabilitation facilities, weak follow-through, and inconsistent inter-agency coordination.	The domain showed strong rights-based policy intent, but service delivery depended heavily on local institutional capacity.
School Feeding Programs	Feeding policies linked nutrition, school participation, learner welfare, and health-related support.	Implementation was constrained by logistical issues, resource gaps, food quality concerns, and uneven monitoring across schools and regions.	The domain connected nutrition and education conceptually, but operational delivery remained uneven.
Basic Educational Access	Education policies emphasized inclusion, learner participation, equity, and access for disadvantaged groups.	Barriers remained in geographically isolated areas, poor households, digital access, infrastructure, and teacher support.	The domain promoted inclusive education, but structural inequalities limited full access and quality.
Cross-sectoral Child Welfare	Documents recognized the need for shared accountability, multi-sectoral support, and alignment with child rights and SDG commitments.	Agencies often worked through separate mandates, reporting systems, budgets, and implementation procedures.	The overall policy system showed conceptual coherence but remained operationally fragmented.

Table 5 indicates that the three policy domains shared a common child-centered direction. However, integration was more visible in policy statements than in operational mechanisms. This suggests that the main challenge was not the absence of policy commitment. Rather, the challenge was the weak translation of policy alignment into coordinated implementation. From the perspective of Ecological Systems Theory, this reflects a gap between the macrosystem, where national policy intentions are expressed, and the mesosystem, where institutional coordination should occur.

Research Question 4: In what ways do these documents support or constrain the development of a child-centered framework?

The documents strongly support the development of a child-centered framework through consistent emphasis on protection, equity, inclusion, and holistic development. Policies provide a clear normative and institutional foundation, positioning children at the center of governance and aligning legal, educational, and welfare interventions. This reflects a high level of policy commitment to child-centered development.

At the same time, the documents reveal significant constraints. Fragmented governance structures, weak inter-agency coordination, and uneven local implementation limit the effectiveness of these policies. Resource disparities and limited institutional capacity further constrain the delivery of integrated services. As a result, while

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policies enable the conceptual development of a child-centered framework, systemic and operational gaps hinder its full realization.

The documents in Table 6 provided both enabling and limiting conditions for the development of a child-centered policy framework. While they showed strong policy support for children's rights, welfare, and development, they also revealed institutional and operational constraints. Table 6 presents these supports and constraints across the major analytical areas.

Table 6. Support and Constraints in Developing a Child-Centered Policy Framework

Analytical Area	Support Found in the Documents	Constraint Found in the Documents	Implication for the Framework
Child Rights and Protection	Policies emphasized the best interests of the child, protection, rehabilitation, inclusion, and access to basic services.	Rights-based provisions were not always matched with consistent implementation mechanisms.	The framework should place child rights at the center but include clear operational pathways.
Equity and Inclusion	Documents recognized vulnerable children, including children in conflict with the law, undernourished learners, out-of-school youth, and learners in disadvantaged communities.	Marginalized groups continued to experience barriers linked to poverty, geography, limited services, and weak local capacity.	The framework should include targeted support for children facing multiple forms of disadvantage.
Governance and Accountability	Policies identified institutional mandates and responsibilities across government agencies and local actors.	Agency roles were often separated by sector, leading to overlaps, gaps, and weak accountability.	The framework should clarify shared responsibilities and coordination structures.
Service Delivery	Programs were designed to address justice, nutrition, education, welfare, and participation needs.	Delivery systems were often fragmented, uneven, and dependent on local resources.	The framework should promote integrated service delivery at school, community, and local government levels.
Monitoring and Evaluation	Some documents emphasized reporting, program monitoring, and assessment of outcomes.	Data systems were not fully integrated across justice, education, nutrition, and welfare sectors.	The framework should include shared indicators and cross-sector monitoring.
Sustainability	The documents aligned with national development goals and global commitments such as the SDGs.	Policy continuity could be affected by resource limitations, changing priorities, and uneven institutional capacity.	The framework should include sustainability measures such as funding, capacity building, and long-term policy alignment.

Table 6 shows that the selected documents provided a strong normative foundation for a child-centered policy framework. However, the same documents also showed that policy ideals were weakened by fragmented systems, uneven implementation, and limited coordination. These findings suggest that the proposed framework should not only describe child-centered values. It should also specify how institutions, programs, and service delivery mechanisms can work together to support children across justice, nutrition, and education systems.

Research Question 5: What implications do these findings have for advancing integrated, child-centered societal transformation?

The findings suggest that advancing child-centered societal transformation requires moving beyond policy

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articulation toward system-level integration. Strengthening governance mechanisms and institutional coordination is essential to bridge the gap between policy intent and implementation. Integrated service delivery models, supported by data-sharing systems and collaborative frameworks, are needed to address children's multidimensional needs effectively.

The results also highlight the importance of adopting a holistic and lifecycle approach to child development, ensuring that interventions support both immediate needs and long-term outcomes. Particular attention must be given to vulnerable populations to ensure equity and inclusion.

The findings in Table 7 suggest that child-centered societal transformation requires stronger coordination between policy design and implementation. The implications are not limited to one sector. They involve governance, service delivery, monitoring, equity, and sustainability. Table 7 presents the major policy and governance implications drawn from the analysis.

Table 7. Policy and Governance Implications for Child-Centered Societal Transformation

Area of Implication	Finding from the Analysis	Policy or Governance Implication	Recommended Direction
Inter-agency Coordination	The documents showed conceptual alignment across justice, nutrition, and education, but weak operational coordination.	Agencies need stronger mechanisms for joint planning, implementation, and evaluation.	Establish formal inter-agency coordination platforms at national and local levels.
Integrated Service Delivery	Programs were designed to address children's needs, but services were often implemented separately.	Child-focused services should be connected across schools, communities, local governments, and welfare agencies.	Develop integrated referral and support systems for children at risk.
Local Implementation Capacity	National policies were clear, but implementation depended heavily on local resources and capacity.	Local government units and frontline institutions need training, technical support, and funding.	Strengthen LGU and school-level capacity for policy implementation.
Equity and Inclusion	Vulnerable children were recognized in the documents, but access barriers remained.	Policies should prioritize children affected by poverty, geographic isolation, malnutrition, school exclusion, and justice-related risks.	Adopt targeted interventions for children with multiple disadvantages.
Data Sharing and Monitoring	Monitoring systems were present but remained sector-specific.	Shared data systems are needed to track child outcomes across policy domains.	Create cross-sector indicators for child protection, nutrition, education access, and welfare.
Accountability	Mandates were distributed across agencies, but accountability was fragmented.	Shared accountability should be clarified across DepEd, DSWD, JJWC, LGUs, and partner agencies.	Define clear roles, reporting channels, and accountability measures.
Sustainability	Policy directions aligned with national and global development goals, but continuity depended on resources and governance commitment.	Long-term child-centered transformation requires sustained funding and institutional support.	Align child-centered programs with medium- and long-term development plans.

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Table 7 shows that the implications of the study are mainly governance-oriented. The findings suggest that child-centered societal transformation requires more than the presence of sectoral policies. It requires coordinated systems that connect justice, nutrition, education, health, social welfare, and local governance. This means that policy success should be measured not only through program existence but also through the extent to which services are connected, accessible, equitable, and sustained.

5. Discussion

The findings of this study indicate that policy documents on juvenile justice reform, school feeding programs, and access to basic education in the Philippines collectively construct a strong child-centered orientation toward societal transformation. Across the three domains, consistent emphasis was observed on protection, equity, access, governance, and development. These themes reflect a shared policy direction that aligns with global frameworks, particularly those advanced by the United Nations, where child welfare is positioned as a central driver of sustainable development. The identification of children as rights holders, developmental investments, and vulnerable yet capable individuals confirms a shift toward a more holistic and rights-based understanding of child development.

The discussion reveals that policy coherence is evident at the conceptual level. The integration of justice, education, and nutrition within policy narratives suggests that children's needs are increasingly recognized as interconnected and multidimensional. This supports existing scholarship which argues that effective child development systems require coordinated approaches that link social protection, education, and health services (UNICEF, 2022; World Bank, 2021). The thematic convergence identified in this study reinforces the view that Philippine policy frameworks are aligned with international standards promoting inclusive and child-centered development.

However, the study also highlights a persistent gap between policy intent and implementation. While policies articulate integration, fragmentation remains evident in governance structures, inter-agency coordination, and service delivery mechanisms. This finding reflects a broader challenge observed in developing contexts, where institutional silos and limited coordination weaken the effectiveness of otherwise comprehensive policy frameworks. The relatively lower prominence of integration and coordination in thematic analysis further suggests that these elements, although recognized, are not yet fully operationalized in practice.

Anchored in Ecological Systems Theory, the findings can be interpreted as a disconnect between the macrosystem and the mesosystem. At the macrosystem level, policies clearly promote integrated and child-centered ideals. At the mesosystem level, however, the interaction among institutions responsible for implementation remains weak. This misalignment limits the capacity of systems to provide continuous and coordinated support to children. As a result, children, particularly those in vulnerable contexts, may not fully benefit from the intended integration of services.

The dual role of policy documents is also evident in the findings. On one hand, policies provide a strong normative and strategic foundation for child-centered development. On the other hand, they reveal systemic limitations that constrain implementation. This tension suggests that policy development alone is insufficient to achieve meaningful societal transformation. Effective implementation requires strengthened governance, clear coordination mechanisms, and adequate resource allocation across sectors.

The study further emphasizes the importance of adopting a systems-oriented perspective in addressing child development. Fragmented approaches that treat justice, education, and nutrition as separate domains are insufficient to address the complex realities faced by children. Integrated frameworks are needed to ensure that interventions are mutually reinforcing and responsive to children's holistic needs. This aligns with contemporary approaches that advocate for lifecycle and equity-focused strategies in child development.

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Ethical rigor was maintained throughout the study. Interpretations were grounded strictly on the content of policy documents to avoid misrepresentation. Credible and publicly available sources were used, and objectivity was preserved during analysis. This ensured that the discussion reflects the data rather than subjective assumptions.

6. Conclusion and Recommendations

Conclusion

The study established that policy documents on juvenile justice reform, school feeding programs, and basic education access in the Philippines collectively construct a child-centered orientation toward societal transformation. Children were consistently positioned as rights holders, developmental investments, and vulnerable yet capable individuals. Core themes of protection, equity, access, governance, and development were evident across domains, indicating strong conceptual alignment with global child-focused frameworks advanced by the United Nations.

However, the findings showed that this alignment remains largely conceptual. A gap persists between policy intent and implementation. Fragmentation was observed in governance structures, inter-agency coordination, and service delivery systems. From an ecological perspective, integration was strong at the macrosystem level but weak at the mesosystem level where institutional interactions occur. As a result, the potential of policies to deliver sustained and holistic outcomes for children remains partially realized.

The study concludes that child-centered societal transformation in the Philippines depends not only on well-articulated policies but also on effective system integration. Coherent implementation, strengthened coordination, and sustained institutional collaboration are required to translate policy commitments into meaningful improvements in children's lived experiences.

Recommendations

Government agencies should strengthen inter-agency coordination mechanisms. Formal collaboration platforms should be established to connect sectors responsible for justice, education, health, and social welfare. Clear roles, shared accountability, and regular coordination processes should be institutionalized to reduce fragmentation and improve service delivery.

Integrated child-centered frameworks should be developed and operationalized. Policies should move beyond sectoral approaches and adopt unified models that link protection, education, and nutrition systems. This will ensure that interventions address the multidimensional needs of children in a coherent manner.

Capacity at the local level should be enhanced. Local government units and implementing agencies should be provided with technical support, training, and adequate resources. This will improve the translation of national policies into effective and context-responsive programs at the community level.

Monitoring and evaluation systems should be strengthened. Integrated data systems should be developed to track child outcomes across sectors. Evidence-based assessment mechanisms should be used to inform policy adjustments and improve program effectiveness.

Inclusive and equity-focused interventions should be prioritized. Programs should target vulnerable groups, including children in conflict with the law, undernourished learners, and out-of-school youth. Policies should ensure that no child is excluded from essential services and opportunities.

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Multi-sectoral and community participation should be encouraged. Partnerships with civil society organizations, communities, and other stakeholders should be strengthened. This will support collaborative implementation and ensure that programs are responsive to local needs.

Policies should continue to align with global development frameworks. National initiatives should remain consistent with Sustainable Development Goals related to education, health, nutrition, and justice. This alignment will support long-term sustainability and global relevance of child-centered development efforts.

Declarations

This manuscript is an original work and has not been published or submitted for publication elsewhere. All sources of information were properly cited and acknowledged in accordance with academic and ethical standards. The authors declare that there are no conflicts of interest, financial or otherwise, that could have influenced the conduct, findings, or interpretation of the study. No external funding was received. The research process was conducted with integrity, transparency, and adherence to established scholarly and ethical guidelines. All data presented are accurate and were obtained through responsible and ethical research practices. Any assistance received in the preparation of the manuscript has been duly acknowledged.

Credit Authorship Contribution Statement

All authors made substantial contributions to the conception and design of the study, data collection, analysis, interpretation, and manuscript preparation. Each author participated in drafting, reviewing, and revising the manuscript to ensure accuracy and intellectual rigor. All authors approved the final version of the manuscript and agreed to be accountable for all aspects of the work.

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Anna Sheila Crisostomo: Data Analysis, Writing – Review and Editing
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Michael Legion: Supervision, Project Administration

Ethical Statement

This study utilized publicly available policy documents and did not involve direct human participants. Ethical standards in research and data handling were strictly observed. All data were obtained from credible and publicly accessible sources. Proper citation practices were followed to ensure academic integrity. The study complied with relevant data protection regulations, including Republic Act 10173 (Data Privacy Act of 2012) and ISO/IEC 27001 standards. Objectivity was maintained throughout the analysis to ensure that interpretations were grounded in the data and free from bias.

Declaration of Competing Interest

The authors declare that there are no known competing financial, personal, or professional interests that could have influenced the work reported in this study. The research was conducted independently, and all findings and interpretations are presented objectively.

Data Availability Statement

The data supporting the findings of this study are derived from publicly available policy documents. Additional compiled datasets and analytical materials are available from the corresponding author upon reasonable request. Access may be subject to ethical considerations and data protection regulations.

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AI Usage Declaration

Artificial intelligence (AI) tools were used solely to assist in language refinement, grammar checking, and improvement of clarity in the manuscript. No AI tools were used in the generation, analysis, or interpretation of data. All intellectual content, including research design, data analysis, and conclusions, was developed and verified by the authors. The authors take full responsibility for the accuracy, integrity, and originality of the work.

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