Childism and its Threats to Filipino Children During the Duterte Administration's COVID-19 Response

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Abstract

While the policy responses of President Rodrigo Duterte's administration have been subject to much criticism, little has been said about Filipino children and their families who were directly affected by the COVID-19 pandemic. What is common, however, is the explicit use of the child as a metaphor to criticize Duterte's actions. This metaphor is inherently childist and prejudiced towards children and their well-being. Thus, this paper examines the views of the media and the general public regarding Duterte and his administration, highlighting expressions of childist language. It also uncovers the systemic neglect of children under the Duterte administration, through a desk review of documents, reports, and implemented mandates that directly impact children and their families, specifically in the context of COVID-19. With these, the paper illustrates how childism and the metaphor of Duterte as a child poses a threat of neglect towards the Filipino child, resulting in policies crafted by a government and society that is prejudiced against children. Ultimately, a call to elevate the discourse is presented, urging greater care in how we contextualize children, as they are often overlooked but significantly affected by policy decisions. Reducing the pandemic response of the Duterte administration as "infantile" subverts the imminent threat of further neglecting the needs of children, which has yet to be addressed by robust government action that highlights a more responsive shift towards children's development.

Keywords: COVID-19, Children, Duterte, Childism, Language, SDG10: Reduced Inequalities

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Introduction

Even before the COVID-19 pandemic, Filipino children aged 0-8 (Early Years Act of 2013) were already at risk of not reaching their full potential. This is because of several challenges such as poverty, malnutrition, limited access to education, and other stark disparities among children from varying geographic locations and groups of the population (National Economic and Development Authority [NEDA] & United Nations Children's Fund [UNICEF] Philippines, 2018). The impact of the pandemic on young children is now more evident with data emerging from various research studies, which show that children have not only been affected by the virus itself, but also by the suspension of early childhood development (ECD) and other essential services aimed to address their needs. While governments have acted and mobilized resources to mitigate the health, social, and economic impact of COVID-19, the unique needs of children amidst this crisis must also be considered. Otherwise, children will continue to face the risk of being left behind. This article addresses the research question: How does the use of childist language to describe President Duterte intersect with his administration's policies and their impact on Filipino children during the COVID-19 pandemic? It explores the situation of Filipino children amidst the pandemic by looking into the policies enacted by President Rodrigo Duterte's administration. The article then describes commentary and assessments of the administration and its performance, particularly highlighting how critics have likened President Duterte to a child based on his demeanor and actions. Finally, it discusses how the image of the President as infantile might shape the government's view of children in creating policies and programs for this vulnerable age group during the pandemic.

Method

The article gathered secondary data from reports, policies, and news articles detailing the conditions affecting Filipino children, as well as the public's response to the administration and the policies enacted by them. Parameters were set for each of the data sources such that only reports on the situation of Filipino children from 2018 to 2021 were included to account for the conditions before and during the pandemic. It also included mandates and policies dated between March 2020 to June 2021, the period which encompasses the Philippines' initial response to the pandemic, to account for administrative actions taken

during COVID-19. News articles published during the duration of Duterte's presidency from June 2016 to June 2021 were also included to provide a more detailed description of the public's criticisms of his administration. Searches for the latter set of publications also included the use of keywords such as "Duterte tantrum," "Duterte child," and "*isip bata*" (loosely translates to "child-like thinking") to narrow down the sources to be used. Table 1 details the various sources of data used for this article.

Table 1

Data sources used in the article

Type of Data Source	Parameters	Issuing Agencies / Publishers of Data Sources
Reports	Executive reports and documents issued by government agencies, non-government organizations, and research institutes specifically focusing on the situation, living conditions, and other statistics related to children aged 0-8 years old in the Philippines Published between 2018-2021 to account for the situation before and during the pandemic	• Council for the Welfare of Children • World Health Organization • National Economic and Development Authority • UNICEF Philippines • Philippine Statistics Authority • Department of Science and Technology — Food and Nutrition Research Institute
Policies and Memoranda	Implemented policies and issued mandates dated between March 2020 to June 2021 to account for administrative actions taken during COVID-19 such as school closures, quarantine measures, etc.	• Department of Education • Council for the Welfare of Children • Early Childhood Care and Development Council • Department of the Interior and Local Government

Type of Data Source	Parameters	Issuing Agencies / Publishers of Data Sources

News Articles	• Articles and opinion pieces published in news publications and websites during the duration of Duterte's presidency from June 2016 to June 2021
	• May include articles that do not necessarily discuss/relate to children, but references children and their characteristics to describe Duterte
	• Keyword searches:
	  • Duterte tantrum
	  • Duterte outburst
	  • Duterte *bata* (child)
	  • Duterte child/child-like/childish
	  • Manchild
	  • Duterte *isip bata* (child-like thinking)
	  • Duterte *parang bata* (like a child)
		• Rappler
		• Manila Bulletin
		• Manila Times
		• Bloomberg
		• Washington Post
		• Al Jazeera
		• Presidential Communications Operations Office
		• Philippine Inquirer

The aforementioned secondary data retrieved through desk and document review were processed using simple text mapping and annotations. The researchers highlighted key messages from the various reports, news articles, opinion pieces, and policies and their implications towards Filipino children as a sector. This parsed data was then analyzed through content and thematic analysis, with preliminary themes based on the literature review conducted regarding childism. In conducting the thematic analysis, the Social Construction Framework (SCF) was also used to ground the arguments based on the reviewed

secondary data. SCF posits that both political power and the social construction of targeted groups as deserving or undeserving affect the distribution of benefits and burdens (Weimer & Vining, 2010). In this context, benefits refer to the advantages, resources, services, or opportunities that a group receives through policy, while burdens refer to the costs, restrictions, or penalties imposed on a group. These are not distributed equally or solely based on objective need but are shaped by how groups are perceived socially and politically. Schneider and Ingram (1993) also identified four target groups that are classified based on their social construction and political power (Table 2).

Table 2

Target groups classified through social construction and political power

	Strong Political Power	**Weak Political Power**
Positive Social Constructions	*Advantaged* (treated positively in public and receiving benefits publicly)	*Dependents* (treated positively in public but unable to mobilize to negotiate benefits)
Negative Social Constructions	*Contenders* (treated negatively in public but negotiating benefits privately)	*Deviants* (treated negatively in public and punished by policy)

Children are classified as *dependents* under the SCF. Policies targeted at dependents tend not to include burdens, but the benefits provided tend to be smaller and less secure than those provided to advantaged groups (Weimer & Vining, 2010). The proponents of SCF further argue that maintaining and changing social constructions depend on framing, in which aspects of perceived reality are made more salient to promote a particular problem definition, causal interpretation, moral evaluation, or policy alternative (Entman, 1993, as cited in Weimer & Vining, 2010). In policy analysis, the SCF then demands that analysts pay attention to how policies are framed in terms of target populations. Through the triangulation of the various key data sources under a desk review, as well as using the SCF as a framework for content and thematic analysis, the article argues that childism in language frames policies that affect children, perpetuating them as secondary citizens whose agency and capacity are often overlooked and excluded in administrative agendas.

This exclusion also suggests poor policy responses in crises, such as the COVID-19 pandemic, directly affecting children.

Childism as a Framework for Analysis

Defined by Young-Bruehl (2013, as cited in Adami & Dineen, 2021), childism is the prejudice and injustice against children in systems and institutions. Today, childism and its connection with inherent viewpoints of society and culture are being examined in childhood studies. According to Adami and Dineen (2021), Young-Bruehl's definition of childism provides a retrospective stance that allows researchers to reflect on current prejudices and negative attitudes towards children. Shin (2023) studied the COVID-19 crisis's impact on children's lives with childism as a perspective. The author emphasized how the pandemic caused significant changes in various aspects of children's lives, such as school closures, social isolation, disrupted routines, and increased domestic stress. This study highlighted how public conversations and concerns did not focus enough on the multifaceted impact on children. Childism is also used as a frame of reference in the field of children's literature studies. Deszcz-Tryhubczak and García-González (2022) have investigated the parallelism between feminist criticism and childism, both of which address exclusion and marginalization. Their work highlights the importance of feminist literary critique in challenging the exclusion of women's literature and advocating for recognizing literature created by children. The authors emphasize the connections between children and adults, as well as their interactions with objects and ideas. They suggest moving away from solely focusing on adults and human-centered views of power, and instead promoting interdependent and positive relationships with children. The current study proposes that a nuanced understanding of childism can improve cultural production for and by children. It emphasizes the need to adopt relational perspectives, challenge exclusionary practices, and explore the complex connections between children, adults, texts, and materialities. The authors emphasize the importance of being responsive to events and connections to gain a deeper understanding of diverse childhood experiences.

Overall, the concept of childism can be used to examine discrimination and injustice against children, similar to how sexism, racism, and ableism help identify structures that disadvantage marginalized groups (Adami, 2023). While some argue that it marks the beginning of a child rights movement, it is important to first address

power structures and adult biases before tackling discrimination against children. Childism helps elucidate unaddressed forms of discrimination, adult ignorance, and adult privilege. By addressing adult prejudice towards children, we can explore the reasons and arguments behind denying children basic rights and freedoms, and in doing so, challenge negative beliefs about children while promoting their agency and equality (Adami, 2023).

Results

The Situation of Filipino Children

Before Duterte's presidency in 2016, the Philippines had gained some advances in championing the rights and welfare of children, beginning with the creation of an enabling policy environment through the institution of the RA 8980, or the Early Childhood Care and Development (ECCD) Act of 2000, followed by the RA 10410 or the Early Years Act (EYA) of 2013. The ECCD Act laid the foundation for a National ECCD System, while the EYA codified the shift of funds and resources to expand the coverage of ECCD services to children up to 8 years of age. These legislations enabled multi-sectoral and inter-agency participation in the planning and implementation of policies, programs, and activities for children.

Despite these advancements, however, the situation of children in the Philippines still faces significant challenges. A situation analysis conducted by NEDA and UNICEF in 2018 found that Filipino children remain deprived in key areas such as social protection, health, nutrition, water, sanitation and hygiene, education, and child protection. The report also found that these disparities existed between children belonging to different geographical locations across the country, different economic situations, and gender—with girls and boys from marginalized groups performing significantly worse. This includes significant rates of child poverty with 31.4% of children living below the basic needs poverty line nationally, and poverty rates increasing for children in the Autonomous Region in Muslim Mindanao—an area with armed conflict—from 52.6% in 2006 to 63.1% in 2015 (Philippine Statistics Authority [PSA], 2015).

With regard to health, while child mortality rates have reduced over the past decades, childhood immunization rates continue to remain low, and in some cases, declining from 89% in 2013 to 62% in 2015, which has caused an increase of diseases such as rubella and measles (PSA & Inner City Fund [ICF] International, 2014; World Health Organization

[WHO] & UNICEF, 2015). Childhood stunting among children under 5 years old has increased from 30% in 2013 to 33% in 2015, and 21.5% of children under 5 years old are underweight—an increase from 20% in 2013 (Department of Science and Technology - Food and Nutrition Research Institute, 2015). In 2017, only 80% of the country's poorest households had access to basic drinking water, compared to 99% of the wealthiest households, indicating that the Philippines does not yet have universal access to safe drinking water (NEDA & UNICEF Philippines, 2018). As of 2015, only 75% of the population and 45% of the poorest households were using basic sanitation services (WHO & UNICEF, 2015).

When it comes to education, only 42% of children aged 3-4 were enrolled in daycare centers in 2013. It should be noted, however, that kindergarten enrollment doubled to 74.65% from 2005 to 2015 (NEDA, 2017). The quality of education also remains a concern with limited numbers of qualified educators, and inadequate classrooms and school supplies.

Finally, regarding child protection, the National Baseline Study on Violence Against Children revealed alarming rates of violence against children nationwide. The study found prevalent forms of abuse, including corporal punishment. Three out of five children experienced physical and psychological abuse or bullying, while almost one in five children suffered sexual violation (Council for the Welfare of Children & UNICEF Philippines, 2016).

With these data from multiple sources published collectively in 2018, the Philippine government during the administration of President Duterte is provided with compelling evidence that highlight areas where they must take urgent action. While some gains were made in creating an enabling environment for promoting children's rights and welfare, Filipino children continue to face barriers even prior to the threat of COVID-19. Identifying the plight of the Filipino children presents improvements and challenges related to their overall development and wellbeing. More recent studies on children highlight the importance of understanding children and their development, as well as the role of the adults and society to promote their well-being. Childhood as a social status must be integrated not only into 'adult society' but society as a whole. This is not just because of children's psychological development, but because the child population is a constant presence in society (Qvortrup, 1987). This integration encompasses not only parent-child

relations but also early childhood caregiver-child, teacher-student, and all adult-child relations (Delage, 2020). The succeeding sections present views on children by the media, public, and even Duterte himself that suggest a childist outlook on children and pose a threat to their well-being. It explores the society's perspective on children, particularly how they are perceived and prioritized.

The succeeding sections are structured to examine childism in language, focusing on COVID-19 policy responses and the metaphor of Duterte as a child. It explores issues such as inaccessibility, the treatment of children as secondary citizens, and the shift of responsibility from national to local government units in policy implementation. The article then discusses the derogatory use of 'child' to describe Duterte and his self-presentation as childlike to justify his actions. Finally, it analyzes childism and views on children during Duterte's administration. This structure illustrates how childist language in political discourse relates to the government's approach to children's issues during the pandemic and discusses broader implications for children's welfare in the Philippines. Table 3 summarizes the study's findings.

Childism in COVID-19 policy responses

The concept of childism, as discussed earlier, is not just theoretical but has practical implications in how society treats children, particularly through laws and policies. As Saunders (2018) notes, laws typically mirror the standards of the society they are used in, shaping the treatment of children. A stark example of this systemic and institutionalized prejudice towards children can be seen in policy responses during the COVID-19 pandemic.

In the attempt to contain the spread of COVID-19, programs and services including those that catered to young children were halted, which threatened the health, learning, and development of children nationwide (UNICEF, 2021). One of the initial policy measures taken were to suspend face-to-face activities including classes at all levels beginning in March 2020. Alongside this was an imposition of Community Quarantine and stringent social distancing measures, as well as a presidential proclamation declaring a State of Calamity throughout the Philippines for a period of six months (Inter-Agency Task Force [IATF] 2020a, 2020b, 2020c, 202d, 2020e; Proclamation No. 929 s. 2020, 2020). Following these guidelines, local governments suspended social services, including those that catered specifically

Table 3.

Summary of Findings

Type of Data Source	Sample Documents		Recurring Theme/ Content	Description of the Recurring Theme/ Content
	Title of Document	Issuing Agency		
Reports	3rd National Action Plan for Children	Council for the Welfare of Children	Situation of Filipino Children	Discussion of the national policies, plans, and actions related to the health and nutrition, early learning, safety and security for early childhood development in the Philippines in day-to-day and emergency situations, particularly during the term of President Duterte
	Child Friendly Spaces in Emergencies	UNICEF		
	ECD in the Philippines	Nurturing-care.org		
Policies and Memoranda	Reiteration of Protocols on Reaching Out to Children, Including Those in Street Situations, In Need of Special Protection, Children at Risk, and children In Conflict with the Law During the Enhanced Community Quarantine	Department of Interior and Local Government, and Council for the Welfare of Children	1. Childism in COVID-19 policy responses • Inaccessibility of ECD Services • Children as Secondary Citizens • Shift of Responsibility from National Government to Local Government Units and other agencies	Childism and its practical implications; COVID-19 policy responses to children in relation to the availability of services during the pandemic, non-prioritization as citizens, and transfer of responsibility from national to local government units

Type of Data Source	Sample Documents		Recurring Theme/ Content	Description of the Recurring Theme/ Content
	Title of Document	Issuing Agency		
Policies and Memoranda	Ensuring that all children aged 0 – 4 years most especially those belonging to the more vulnerable sectors are provided access to Quality Early Childhood Care and Development (Q-ECCD) Program in the time of COVID-19	ECCD Council		
	Preparation for the Opening of National Child Development Centers (NCDCs), Child Development Centers (CDCs)/ Day Care Centers (DCCs) and Private Learning Centers (PLCs) Offering Programs for 0 to 4 Years Old Children	ECCD Council		
News Articles	De Lima scores DOH for allowing mixed-use of vaccines after Duterte 'tantrum'	Manila Bulletin	2. Childism in Language • Derogatory use of 'child' to describe Duterte • Duterte's self-presentation as childlike to justify actions • Childism in the Duterte Administration's Political Agenda 3. Childism and Views on Children in the Time of Duterte's Administration	Childism in language observed with the derogatory use of the word "child" and negative connotations of "childlike" behaviors to justify actions Childism parallel to the political agenda for children of the Duterte Administration Use of childist language by President Duterte and its implications on views on children
	Rodrigo Duterte's next target: 9-year-old children	The Washington Post		
	Solon slams Duterte's 'childish acts' against Robredo	The Inquirer		

to children such as daycare, supplemental feeding, and health and nutrition monitoring.

Inaccessibility of ECD services due to school and daycare closures

At the onset of the pandemic, Duterte announced that schools will not be opened for children unless a coronavirus vaccine is available. While classes were supposed to begin in August 2020, Duterte firmly believed that it would be a disaster to allow students to physically attend school as children's safety was not yet assured, even though their academics might suffer (Al Jazeera, 2020). It was only in September to October 2020 that alternative modes of service delivery for early childhood education, health and nutritional interventions, and other social services resumed following the issuance of safety protocols from the Department of Health (DOH) and other related agencies (DOH, 2020; ECCD, 2020a, 2020b, 2020c, 2020d). With unopened schools, teachers and children resorted to remote teaching and learning using various modalities that included the use of modules, online synchronous sessions, and other strategies for blended learning. This suspension of services left Filipino children and their needs unattended for a period of at least six months, which was the most immediate period of the national and local governments' COVID-19 response.

1. This neglect towards children's needs can be likened to the alienation of groups of citizens, which Cairney and Pierce (2017) discuss in their article on Social Construction and Policy Design. Using the SCF, the authors described how the democratic politics in the United States have caused "degenerative" policy, much like the alienation of children as a social or civic group. Cairney and Pierce contend that three practices that have led to this:
2. "Powerful political actors demonize or otherwise exclude powerless groups;"
3. "This action has a 'feed-forward' effect on policy designs," i.e., judgments on certain groups are reproduced in regulations, resources, etc. that turn policy intent into outcomes; and

This "policy design has an impact on target populations," wherein people more or less participate in the democratic process depending on how they are characterized and the extent to which they feel rewarded and motivated to protect those rewards, or if their engagement will be unrewarding. (p. 1).

Drawing from this, the disregard for children and childism in the Duterte administration's political agenda mirrors that "feed-forward" effect. Policy choices are designed and reproduced based on values that perpetuate the view of children as powerless, dependent, and ultimately, not a priority. As a result, policy designs as observed in the administrative statutes and guidelines that served as temporary solutions maintained the status quo of children as recipients of policy burdens. These burdens include the suspension of services, with minimal benefits that only aimed to address what was deemed valuable, such as the mere continuation of services in a remote manner rather than an innovative design that truly addresses children's needs.

While school closures and the suspension of various ECD were necessary to mitigate the spread of the coronavirus, these deprived children of access to basic services, support, and opportunities. Childism is prominent and explicit in such government COVID-19 responses (Adami & Dineen, 2021; Autzen et al., 2021). Because daycare centers serve as a hub for services such as supplemental feeding programs and daycare learner allowances for some local governments, the suspension of their operations left children who would otherwise depend on these programs at a disadvantage. Henrietta Fore, the Executive Director of UNICEF (2021), cited in a statement:

> Without school meals, children are left hungry and their nutrition is worsening. Without daily interactions with their peers and a reduction in mobility, they are losing physical fitness and showing signs of mental distress. Without the safety net that school often provides, they are more vulnerable to abuse, child marriage and child labor. (para. 7)

Children as Secondary Citizens to Adults

Adami and Dineen (2021) have cited how policy decisions on school closures in the UK and Ireland similarly prioritize adults at the cost of child hunger and violence against children. They assert that, while the closure was reasonable and necessary, "the upward trajectory of R numbers was a predictable outcome of government policies" (p. 362), so much so that the reopening of the economy through restaurants and other businesses would increase transmission rates. Furthermore, the authors pose the question of whether it is "reasonable to assume that opening businesses for the important Christmas trade period trumped

children's rights to education" (pp. 362-363), given that the policy decision of reopening businesses entailed school closures in January. Whether policymakers see children as a priority or not, they shape the policies enacted by the government in response to the pandemic.

Likewise, an opinion piece by Alwan (2021) argued that while children must be spared from mass infection as detrimental and unknown effects are still present, school closure or further lockdowns must not be the only response to help the children during the pandemic. A more informed stance is expected from the adults to protect the children from contracting the virus as education, social lives, mental health, and safety are already compromised because of the pandemic. Deprioritization of children as a vulnerable group can also be observed in vaccination plans to combat COVID-19. Autzen et al. (2021) posited that childism can be observed in these policies and mitigation plans as children "depend on others to exercise their rights" (p. 1354). A specific example would be of a parent preventing the child from getting vaccinated, while a more general manifestation would be of an adult having an "unsympathetic role" when access to these vaccines was denied from children.

Aside from the blatant neglect of the needs of children and the lack of prioritization for services that aided their sector, Duterte also explicitly stated that he wanted children aged 10-14 years old to stay at home. This is despite the general easing of restrictions, with Duterte stating that children can just "glue their attention to TV the whole day" (Parrocha, 2021, para. 7) when a new strain caused a surge of cases in the country. This prevented families and children from visiting shopping malls which, in the Philippines, are also the centers of community life since other spaces like parks and schools remained closed (AFP News, 2021). While this statement was perhaps said in good faith with the desire to keep children safe from COVID-19, the language used once again overlooked the agency and capacity of children and the youth. In policy analysis, the SCF demands that analysts pay attention to how policies are framed in terms of target populations. The framing of children as passive recipients of benefits, whose need for community life is easily disregarded and shelved, is evidenced by Duterte's harmful language. Framing should then be done with caution, ensuring policies are portrayed in such a way that mobilizes segments of a population in a favorable light, or possibly even recrafting existing social constructions (Weimer & Vining, 2010).

Shift of national government responsibilities to local governments and other agencies

President Duterte's COVID-19 response remained consistent with his brand of leadership, firmly ordering Filipinos to obey the government's pandemic protocols and punishing community quarantine violators. Critics have highlighted the failure of this militant and authoritarian approach to the pandemic. The national government was also criticized for their lack of initiative to strengthen public health infrastructures to address the deeper pressing issues of COVID-19 (Borja et al., 2020).

Local governments, on the other hand, have been taking measures of their own to provide assistance and services to their constituents (Constantino, 2022). While the national government put forth policies such as the suspension of ECD services (e.g., daycare, supplemental feeding, and health and nutrition monitoring), the policy responses of local governments included the provision of financial assistance and food relief packs to augment the loss of income brought about by the closure of businesses and other industries. Mayors and other local chief executives also forwarded initiatives such as localized mass testing programs, markets on wheels, inclusion of LGBTQ+ parents in financial aid, and the like (Peralta, 2020). Because these initiatives were at the level of local governments, the COVID-19 response varied from one locality to another.

It should also be noted that these policy responses were implemented to address what the government deemed as issues of utmost importance, such as unemployment and loss of income. As a result, the need for services specific to children as a unique sector was overlooked. Once ECD services did resume, cities and municipalities across the country sought ways to allow the remote delivery of early childhood education. These included the use of printed modules or online learning, as well as the distribution of food packs and/or raw ingredients in place of supplemental feeding.

A report by UNICEF, the United Nations Development Programme, and the Economic Policy Research Institute (UNICEF, UNDP, & EPRI, 2020) titled *The Impact of the COVID-19 Crisis on Households in the National Capital Region of the Philippines* detailed the experiences of Filipinos with these government interventions. The most common form of aid provided by local governments was food assistance, with 96% of households reported having received such to augment the

financial and nutritional needs of their children and families. The study also found that due to the attempts of local governments to continue early education, enrolment remained high despite the concerns about remote learning. Some concerns included the lack of gadgets, money for internet data, and time to support children in learning at home. Some local governments sought to address these by providing material support in the form of online learning kits that included prepaid Wi-Fi, school supplies, and at times, tablets/gadgets for remote learning. Other local governments opted for a modular approach to remote learning instead of online classes, moving to distribute printed modules with activities for children to do at home. Local government budgets were also realigned to support these provisions (UNICEF, UNDP, & EPRI, 2020).

Nonetheless, the COVID-19 response was generally not tailored to children's needs. Child-specific efforts mainly focused on continuing services remotely, overlooking new issues such as increased isolation, digital inequalities, heightened anxiety, and potential exposure to domestic violence. In emergencies like the COVID-19 pandemic, children may not be necessarily seen as a distinct sector requiring specialized attention. Consequently, they remain marginalized due to the absence of more inclusive and intersectional policy measures. Likewise, Adami and Dineen (2021) cite that "political (and societal) rhetoric used to justify failure to provide such [free school meals] and substandard provision is the lack of focus on children" (p. 364). The government then pushed the burden of nutrition of children and child hunger towards the realm of the family, making it a personal responsibility of parents rather than an issue that is systemic and societal.

It should be noted however that, at the national level, the Early Childhood Care and Development Council, the local national arm that supports the programs and initiatives for young Filipino children, delivered efforts and services even during the pandemic. The ECCD Council stated in their Starting Right online forum that there was a continuous establishment of the National Child Development Center, together with the implementation of the National Early Learning Curriculum, Parent Education and Involvement, Advocacy and Mobilization of Communities, Training and Capacity-building of teachers and administrators. Besides these accomplishments, other notable initiatives included the development of programs such as the Home-Based ECCD program; the Infant-Toddler Education program;

the System for Prevention; and Early Identification, Referral and Intervention (ECCD Council, personal communication, November 29, 2021). The training module on Early Childhood Care and Development in Emergencies is also an initiative by the Council in "integrating concrete plans for 0- to 4-year-old children and their families into the Local Disaster Risk Reduction Management plan" (ECCD Council, 2021) even before the COVID-19 pandemic. This module can be used by local government units in integrating plans for younger children and even the lactating mothers.

We cannot discount the efforts of national government agencies such as the Council for the Welfare of Children and the ECCD Council which provided policy direction for local governments to act upon. The aforementioned institutions paved the way for a conducive policy environment that enabled local mayors, barangay captains, and other chief executives to act accordingly, and reintroduce alternative methods of ECCD service delivery to their constituents. The threat of child neglect however, still remains not only because the national government overlooks children as a separate sector with its own distinct needs, but also because of the existing barriers, namely the prioritization for other sectors such as the reopening of businesses. Moreover, initiatives (e.g. food assistance) became a primary means of support from the government, which remain non-specific to children. The resumption of ECCD services, on the other hand, appeared to be a response to the continued need for government provision, and the need for adults to work as these programs no longer conducted new assessments to map out the needs of children during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Childism in Language

Wall (2019) emphasized that our history, social understandings, and practices are commonly dominated by adults who build a society confounded on adults' points of view, including its cultures, rights, laws, relationships, and even the language. A distinct finding of this study is how "child" and other related words are used with negative connotations in either describing the country's president or even justifying his own actions. The researchers argue how semblances of childism can be observed in society's language, be it intentionally or not. The following content analyses provide examples and discussions that support the argument of the authors. These are derived from the news articles as part of data collection.

Derogatory use of "child" to describe Duterte

In their chapter on problematizing childism and related language, Saunders (2018) discussed how adults' expressions and language choices often reflect the perception that children are inferior to adults. Saunders noted how adults behaving poorly are often derided as "behaving like a child" or told to "grow up." Similarly, President Rodrigo Duterte has been labeled as a "child" or described as "child-like" by the media, political individuals, and even by himself in various personal or political situations. For example, during one international event in 2019, Duterte had difficulty putting a star-shaped block into the space provided. The public and media noted how Duterte's actions were "child-like" as he was not able to achieve the task easily, prompting another political leader to help him in the end ("Parang bata!", 2019).

The so-called similarities to a child are not limited to the personal characteristics or traits of Duterte. His response, for example, to a national issue of sovereignty relating to the West Philippine Sea has been described as "childish bravery." A former Philippine Ambassador to the USA also described the President's actions as "childish especially when he has a tantrum" (Tomacruz, 2021, para. 32), evidenced by his relations with other country leaders. Another act of Duterte that is likened to a child or termed as "childish" is how he communicates. In the middle of the COVID-19 pandemic in November 2020, a news article indicated that a lawmaker expressed how Duterte needs to "stop his blabbering and childish acts" and make up for the inaction instead of being insecure of other political leaders who are helping (Lozada, 2020, para. 3). In 2021, his own press secretary also mentioned that there is nothing that can be done as these actions are simply Duterte's "childish" antics (Geducos, 2021).

Duterte's presentation of himself as "child" to justify actions

The comparison of Duterte to a child was not only noted in the media, public, or even by other key political players. Duterte himself also verbalized in different situations how his actions or reactions are "similar to that of a child's." In a 2016 interview, he mentioned that just like a child, he can taunt his political rivals by sharing mutual negative feelings with his opponents and those who are angry at him (Politiko Live, 2016). Another instance wherein Duterte expressed his own assumed childishness was during a period of absence in the middle of the COVID-19 pandemic. He stated that he intentionally did not make an appearance during those times and, like a child being taunted, he

was more interested in keeping people questioning his whereabouts (Mercado, 2021). Duterte also explained he was not afraid to face legal cases even after he steps down as president as he was only being threatened like a child (Pascual, 2021). These examples illustrate that the President himself uses the metaphor of a child to justify his absence and shortcomings, which ultimately paints children in a derogatory light as their developmental characteristics are interwoven with negative connotations and administrative decisions.

The contradiction in adult's attitudes and interactions with children is evident in how adults perceive children as inferior, autonomous, independent, and mature (Rosen, 2007, as cited in Saunders, 2018). Childism is also reflected in the derogatory language adults use, such as using the term "child" to describe Duterte or his actions. Saunders and Goddard (2010) cited a similar example of language that exploits, objectifies, or degrades children, referred to as "textual abuse." Saunders (2018) explained that words such as "smacking," "spanking," and "reasonable physical chastisement" are used to minimize parents' violent physical practices, disguising it as "discipline." Else and Sanford (1987, as cited in Saunders, 2018) argued that the use of deceptive language can be used to demean, exclude, stereotype, and misrepresent people especially children.

Childism in the Duterte administration's political agenda

Delage (2020) argued that "reclaiming children's full humanity must be the cornerstone of any emancipatory political agenda" (p. 6). This perspective emphasizes recognizing children's humanity specifically *as children,* not merely as future adults or incomplete humans. Delage stresses the importance of acknowledging children's inherent worth and rights as full human beings, while simultaneously recognizing their unique status and needs.

The concept of childism, however, has varying interpretations in academic discourse. Wall (2019) presents a definition that contrasts sharply with Adami et al. (2021) and Young-Bruehl's (2013) use of the term, which this article adopts. While Adami and Dineen (2021) and Young-Bruehl (2013) employ childism to denote prejudice and discrimination against children (akin to racism), Wall (2019) conceptualizes it as equivalent to feminism, emphasizing child-agency and children as social actors. This discrepancy in definition highlights the complexity of addressing children's rights and roles in society.

The findings of this study demonstrate how childism, in its discriminatory sense, can be observed in policy-making processes. Similar to childism in language, this research reveals instances of childism in policies that hinder children from being prioritized in an administration's political agenda. This raises a crucial question: How can children become active participants if political agendas do not prioritize them? The contrast between Wall's empowering vision of childism and the discriminatory practices observed in policy-making underscores the need for a more nuanced and child-centric approach in both academic discourse and practical governance.

In the Philippines, public perception of Duterte's characteristics, including his self-description as "child-like," aligns with his administration's view of children's needs as secondary to adults'. At the height of his self-proclaimed war on drugs, Duterte vowed to "kill all" criminals in the country. Tragically, children as young as 4 and 5 years old became casualties in this conflict (Rauhala, 2017). This grim reality contradicts Duterte's stated plans to combat illegal drugs, criminality, corruption, and terrorism, which his administration presented as a commitment to fostering a "better and brighter future for Filipino children" (Philippine Communications Operations Office, 2019, para. 3).

In addition, Duterte together with political allies also had plans to lower the age of criminal responsibility from 15 to 9 years old to "stop a generation of criminals in its tracks" so that "they may be taught responsibility" and to avoid "pampering of young offenders" (Rauhala, 2017, para. 6). Duterte's Draconian views on child-rearing was also evident when he vetoed a ban on corporal punishment that could have potentially outlawed physical, humiliating, or degrading acts of punishment or discipline by parents and teachers on children. In explaining why he did not sign this bill into law, Duterte stated that the trend in Western countries of seeing forms of corporal punishment as an outdated way of disciplining children must be resisted (AFP, 2019, para. 11). He also promoted the discipline strategy of mothers hitting their children "with whatever she could grab" or by letting the child kneel in front of the altar with open arms like how Jesus Christ was nailed to the cross.

Contrarily, it should also be noted that several significant laws protecting children's rights have been passed during Duterte's administration, such as the institutionalization of a national council

against child labor. This instituted council reinforces the government's efforts in combating child labor and protects the youth from illegal employment, with other functions such as monitoring cases of child labor and disseminating information and advocacy campaigns regarding the issue (Hulog, 2019).

Childism and views on children in the time of Duterte's administration

Public criticism of Duterte's personality and actions using words related to children is a manifestation of childism in society's language. Describing Duterte as "child-like," "childish," or simply a "child" in a derogatory manner reveals how cultural views and practices are biased against children. These linguistic manifestations of childism, whether intentional or not, demonstrate prejudice (Adami & Dineen, 2021). The portrayal of Duterte as a child fails to account for children's agency and their inherent characteristics as active participants in society. This metaphor also magnifies what are otherwise natural phases of child development (e.g., tantrums in toddlerhood) and reduces legitimate criticism of government actions to personal attacks. It is also worth noting that even Duterte used childist language to characterize himself as a "child" but in a negative or non-agentic manner. These characterizations connected to children were merely used as justifications for his acts including unresponsiveness and inaction. This childism in language further widens the gap to achieve positive and constructive development for children's welfare.

Children as a sector then continue to remain marginalized as a result of this systemic prejudice. Childism is institutionalized not only in culture, but also in enacted laws and policies that maintain the status quo of age-related inequalities and a lack of priority for children. Just as society's views on children manifest in language, childism can also translate into an administration's political agenda. Prioritization of children's well-being is not reflected in the actions and policies of the administration. Using childist language to negatively refer to political leaders is also similar to treating children as secondary to adults in the political agenda. It emphasizes childism not just in viewpoint, but also in its policies that directly affect children. This is supported by the SCF, wherein its proponents highlight the role of framing in maintaining or changing social constructions. The organization of concepts and issues in public discourse through the use of language and metaphors that resonate with meaning structures and schema of groups of individuals

promote or impede certain policy alternatives (Weimer & Vining, 2010). The use of childist language and the metaphor of Duterte as a child then reflects an inherently prejudiced administration, society, and culture. These entities constantly overlook children's unique needs, resulting in policies that regard Filipino children as dependents who are only secondary to adults.

Findings in this study highlight how society's view on children, be it in language or actions, has direct and indirect effects on children. These effects could also be traced back to how adult and children's relationship is perceived. Godwin (2011) highlights how these "state-enforced relationships" between children and adults may be constantly harmful for children. The current study posits that a society that fails to account for children in its considerations and practice is a clear manifestation of childism, limiting the social and political responses that should have benefitted children and their status.

Conclusion and Discussion

The metaphor of Duterte as a child coupled with his administration's own view of children is reflective of a negative and ultimately childist perspective that detracts policymakers and the public from truly addressing the needs of children. This reductionist approach towards children as a sector has caused actors in the government to overlook the reality of an imminent threat of neglect towards the Filipino child, depriving them of opportunities and support that they rightfully deserve. While critique and assessment of the government is necessary, we must heed that the language used to negatively describe Duterte and his administration does not connote inherent prejudice and ambivalence towards children. While unintentional, this seemingly common metaphor that likens derogatory behavior to that of a child reflects a childist perspective that perpetuates a culture of "othering" children. Expressions of childism from a national leader is also a reflection of innate biased and discriminatory views towards children.

Ultimately, this systemic discrimination against children shapes the policies and programs put forth by governments that tend to overlook their needs. Policy responses to COVID-19 such as school closures, suspension of childcare and other ECCD services, and prohibiting children from leaving their homes have marginalized this vulnerable population simply based on their age. Adami and Dineen (2021) stated that school closures during the COVID-19 pandemic perpetuate

the "silent pandemic" (p. 357) wherein communication between the children and the state is removed, resulting in the inaccessibility of other child-focused services. Seeing children as "vectors of diseases" in countries and hence keeping them inside homes for their "safety" is also an expression of childism (p. 360).

Similarly, Shin (2023) cites how the media overlooked COVID-19-related risks to children, focusing primarily on the impact on adults. This adult-centric view resulted in decisions and discussions that prioritized adults' needs over children's rights. The closure of early childhood education and care (ECEC) centers during the pandemic highlighted the undervalued work of early childhood professionals and raised questions about the prioritization of children's rights versus economic considerations. COVID-19 policies must be examined for its implicit childist view and must be revisited with an active stance to avoid further prejudices towards children. These policy decisions had detrimental effects on children's development and well-being as the suspension of services deprived children of needs and opportunities that would have somehow alleviated their already existing poor socioeconomic conditions. Instead, COVID-19 response prioritized adult workers and the economy at the cost of overlooking children which maintained, if not exacerbated, the structural injustice towards these vulnerable members of society. If adults fail to acknowledge their role in a discriminatory system that limits children's rights, these structures and beliefs go unchallenged. This can result in children being denied access to healthcare, highlighting the need to address age-based discrimination (Adami, 2023).

The parallelism of prejudiced views on children in both language and policy is actively observed throughout the discussions in this paper. Childism manifesting through the language used in policy perpetuates discriminatory attitudes and beliefs towards children. Childism can be viewed as a manifestation of adultcentrism, which prioritizes adult perspectives and interests over those of children. With the view of children as "dependents," this bias influences policy language by portraying children as passive recipients of care and protection, rather than active participants in decision-making processes. It reinforces power imbalances and limits children's agency and autonomy. Furthermore, this study shows a potential example of childism in policy language that often reflects societal assumptions and stereotypes about children, reinforcing the perception of children as incompetent,

dependent, and in need of being controlled. Such childist biases in social policy perpetuate oppressive practices and deny children their rights to participation, expression, and self-determination.

By critically examining language and policy, we can identify and challenge childist biases. This involves advocating for inclusive and child-centered policy frameworks that acknowledge children as active agents in their own lives and respect their rights and dignity. Though COVID-19 is no longer a global health emergency in 2025, this paper calls to act on the need to elevate the discourse, and to be cautious of how we contextualize children to ensure that we, adults, take a more inclusive and intersectional approach in future policy decisions.

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