From Embedded Strand to Core Curriculum: An Ethnographic Case Study of Life Skills Redesign through School–Home Collaboration in a Philippine Inclusive School

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ABSTRACT

The COVID-19 school closures in the Philippines, among the longest worldwide, moved learning from classrooms to homes and exposed the limits of curricula that treat social-emotional and functional competencies as peripheral. This ethnographic case study examines how MindHaven School Inc. (MSI), a small private inclusive school in Roxas City, Capiz, repositioned its long-embedded Life Skills Program as its core curriculum during the pandemic, and how learners, parents, and teachers responded as in-person classes resumed. A research team of school leaders, teachers, and university-based collaborators drew on interviews with 15 learners with disabilities or special educational needs, focus group discussions with 15 parents, on-site observations, staff meeting records, developmental and socio-emotional journals, Parent Empowerment Program (PEP) evaluations, questionnaires, and archival records spanning the pre-pandemic, pandemic, and post-pandemic periods. Data were analyzed through reflexive thematic analysis, and the Annie E. Casey Foundation's *Making Connections* theory of change, which the school had adopted to plan the redesign, served as a sensitizing framework for interpretation. The redesign unfolded in three phases that the school termed value creation, value solution, and value production. These phases involved multi-sector partnership, risk assessment, appreciative inquiry, outcome mapping, and the repositioning of parents as direct implementers of the curriculum, with teachers as coaches. Stakeholder accounts shifted from apprehension and frustration toward acceptance, collaboration, and empathy, a shift that participants associated with PEP sessions and with routines and relationships established before the pandemic. The findings suggest that an explicit theory of change can help a small inclusive school adapt coherently under crisis. They also raise questions about parental burden, equity of access, and outcome evidence that future research should address.

Keywords: life skills education, school–home collaboration, inclusive education, theory of change, COVID-19

INTRODUCTION

The COVID-19 pandemic did more than interrupt schooling; it tested what schools had assumed about where learning happens and who is responsible for it. A meta-analysis of 42 studies across 15 countries found that children lost the equivalent of roughly one-third of a school year's learning during the pandemic, with deficits largest in lower- and middle-income settings and persisting well after schools reopened (Betthäuser et al., 2023). The Philippines experienced one of the longest school closures in the world. Classrooms shut in March 2020, and full in-person instruction was not required of all public and private schools until November 2022 (Al Jazeera, 2022; Department of Education [DepEd], 2022). In the interim, the Basic Education Learning Continuity Plan relied on modular, online, and blended modalities that placed much of the work of instruction on households (DepEd, 2020). Filipino parents described this arrangement as a source of financial strain, role confusion, and emotional exhaustion, even as many came to value closer involvement in their children's

learning (Agaton & Cueto, 2021). Officials also linked the closures to learning loss, psychosocial distress, and heightened risk of dropout (Mateo, 2022).

For learners with disabilities, these pressures were compounded. Remote instruction tended to fail when a child's needs at home differed from their needs at school or when accommodations and related services could not be delivered at a distance (Averett, 2021). Special educators reported that students with significant support needs depended on relationships, modeling, and physical materials that screens could not readily supply, and that meaningful teaching hinged on at-home support (Schuck & Lambert, 2020). In the Philippine context, Toquero (2020) observed that pandemic responses often lacked disability-specific provisions despite existing legal mandates. The right of persons with disabilities to an inclusive education is affirmed in Article 24 of the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (United Nations, 2006), and nationally in DepEd Order No. 44, s. 2021 (DepEd, 2021) and Republic Act No. 11650 (2022), which institutionalizes inclusion and support services for learners with disabilities. These instruments give the pandemic experience of learners with disabilities renewed policy relevance.

Life skills education offers one lens for understanding what schools needed to sustain under such conditions. The World Health Organization (WHO, 1997) defines life skills as abilities for adaptive and positive behavior that enable individuals to deal effectively with the demands and challenges of everyday life, and identifies ten core skills: decision-making, problem-solving, creative thinking, critical thinking, effective communication, interpersonal relationship skills, self-awareness, empathy, coping with emotions, and coping with stress. The concept remains contested. A recent scoping review found no consensual definition across health, education, and psychology, and argued that this conceptual looseness complicates evaluation (Darlington-Bernard et al., 2023). Singh (2003) had earlier cautioned that life skills acquire meaning only within the specific life contexts of learners, an argument that the pandemic made concrete when the home became the primary learning environment.

The empirical record on life skills education is uneven. Systematic reviews report favorable effects on interpersonal skills, health knowledge, and attitudes, but also note weak measurement, short follow-up periods, and a heavy concentration on adolescents (Kirchhoff & Keller, 2021; Nasheeda et al., 2019). Only two of the 18 school-based programs reviewed by Kirchhoff and Keller (2021) began in the early elementary years. The closely related evidence base on social and emotional learning (SEL) is stronger. Universal school-based SEL interventions improve students' skills, attitudes, behavior, peer relationships, and academic achievement, although effects vary with program content and implementation quality (Cipriano et al., 2023; Durlak et al., 2011). Meta-analyses of family–school partnership interventions report meaningful effects on children's social-behavioral competence and mental health, with bidirectional communication and home-based involvement among the active components (Sheridan et al., 2019; Smith et al., 2020). Taken together, these literatures suggest that life skills, SEL, and family partnership reinforce one another. Few studies, however, show how a school reorganizes its curriculum around them under crisis conditions.

Pandemic-era research on life skills has largely examined educators' perceptions. Italian school educators, for example, described adapting life skills activities for distance delivery and identified both new opportunities and losses in relational learning (Velasco et al., 2021). Accounts of whole-school redesign remain scarce, particularly in inclusive settings in the Global South, in programs serving young children, and in cases where parents were formally repositioned as implementers rather than supporters of the curriculum. This study addresses that gap.

MindHaven School Inc. (MSI) is a small private school in Roxas City, Capiz, Philippines, that has operated an inclusive progressive model for more than three decades. Its educational approach has incorporated life skills, SEL, and restorative justice practices since 1997 (Delgado et al., 2019b), and it uses age-appropriate multigrade team teaching to include neurotypical and neurodiverse learners together (Delgado et al., 2019a). The Life Skills Program began in 2006 and reached full implementation in 2011, when life skills were embedded across the regular curriculum and linked to the Collaborative School–Home Link Program. The program connected functional daily living skills, such as cooking, gardening, and household routines, with academic learning. When the pandemic moved learning into homes, MSI repositioned Life Skills from an

embedded component to the organizing core of its curriculum, with parents reinforcing these activities at home.

Theoretical Framework

To make sense of this change, the study draws on theory of change, a planning and evaluation approach that makes explicit the pathways, preconditions, and assumptions linking a set of actions to intended outcomes (Organizational Research Services [ORS], 2004). A systematic review of its use in public health found that theory of change is most valuable when developed with stakeholders and revisited as implementation unfolds, although few studies report how it is actually used to adapt programs (Breuer et al., 2016). MSI adopted the Annie E. Casey Foundation's *Making Connections* framework, originally designed for a decade-long neighborhood initiative focused on family economic success, children's school readiness, and strong social networks and services (Fiester, 2011). The framework links a core team and local movement, through strategies of impact, influence, and leverage, to individual, organizational, and systems transformation and, ultimately, to results for children and families (ORS, 2004).

Theory of change plays two related roles in this study. For the school, *Making Connections* was the organizing frame of the redesign: it structured planning, and other models used by the school operated as tools within particular stages of that frame rather than as competing theories. Design thinking and a multi-tiered system of support structured the review of what already existed; appreciative inquiry (Cooperrider & Whitney, 2005), outcome mapping, and a disaster-management logic structured planning; and naturalistic developmental behavioral interventions (NDBI; Schreibman et al., 2015) and the Kübler-Ross model of grief (Kübler-Ross & Kessler, 2005) informed delivery and service pacing. For the researchers, the same framework served as a sensitizing framework, applied after inductive coding to interpret the themes (see Data Analysis). Applying a framework built for neighborhoods to a single school is itself a theoretical move, and the study examines which elements of *Making Connections* were retained, reinterpreted, or set aside.

Research Questions

The study was guided by three research questions:

1. What processes did MSI undertake to reposition its Life Skills Program from an embedded component to the core curriculum in response to the COVID-19 pandemic?

2. How did learners, parents, and teachers experience and respond to the redesign during the pandemic and as in-person classes resumed?

3. How does the *Making Connections* theory of change, as adapted by the school, help explain the role of school–home collaboration in this transformation?

METHODOLOGY

Research Design

The study used a qualitative ethnographic case study design within an interpretivist orientation (Hammersley & Atkinson, 2019; Yin, 2018). The case was MSI's Life Skills Program across three periods: before the pandemic, during the pandemic, and after the return to face-to-face learning. An ethnographic approach suited the research questions because the redesign was enacted through everyday practices, meetings, and relationships rather than through a discrete intervention that could be isolated and measured. The study is ethnographic in its prolonged engagement with a single school community, its attention to everyday practices and the meanings participants gave them, and its use of multiple forms of data across time (Hammersley & Atkinson, 2019). Because data for the pre-pandemic and pandemic periods consisted largely of records produced at the time for program purposes, the study combined retrospective documentary analysis of those records with contemporaneous fieldwork in the post-pandemic period, including on-site observations, interviews, and focus group discussions (FGDs).

The research team included members of the school community, namely the school's leadership, program staff, and classroom teachers, together with two university-based collaborators. All are authors of this article. This insider position afforded long-term access, familiarity with institutional history, and the trust of families. It also introduced risks of role conflict and interpretive bias that insider researchers must actively manage (Fleming, 2018); these are addressed under Trustworthiness and in the Limitations.

Setting and Participants

The study was conducted at MSI, a private school in Roxas City, Capiz, Philippines, implementing a progressive inclusive program. Four stakeholder groups took part as research participants: learners, parents, teachers, and school administrators and staff (Table 2).

Learners. Fifteen learners with disabilities or special educational needs participated, five from each of the school's preschool, primary, and elementary levels. All had identified needs associated with autism spectrum disorder (ASD), learning disabilities, or attention-deficit/hyperactivity disorder (ADHD), and they were purposively selected because of their experience of the Life Skills Program, in line with the study's focus on neurodiverse learners' experiences of the redesign. Individual learner profiles are not reported because, in a small school community, combinations of level, age, and identified need could make children identifiable. Information about learners' experiences and development was also drawn from educational records collected across the study periods, including photographs, videos, portfolios, socio-emotional journals, and developmental journals.

Interview accommodations for learners. Learner interviews were conducted by a teacher-researcher, virtually during the pandemic and face to face after classes resumed. In both periods, each learner's assigned teacher was present to provide support, pictures were used as visual supports for the questions, and the interview language was adapted to the learner's familiar or preferred language. Parents or caregivers were present during some interviews when this helped the learner take part. These accommodations were intended to support learners' understanding of the questions and to recognize differences in their developmental and communication needs. The available documentation of the pandemic-period virtual interviews was analyzed with the other records from that period; the post-pandemic interviews formed part of the contemporaneous fieldwork.

Parents. Fifteen core parents, five representing each level, were purposively invited to post-pandemic FGDs because of their sustained involvement in the Parent Empowerment Program (PEP). Parent information across the three periods was also gathered from PEP post-session evaluations, online questionnaires, PEP meeting records, and regular parent–teacher feedback sessions. Online questionnaires were also distributed to other parents. Because the number of these additional respondents was not recorded, the total number of unique parent respondents cannot be established, and questionnaire findings are reported as patterns rather than counts. PEP evaluation respondents were distinguished analytically from the 15 core parents, although the two groups were not assumed to be mutually exclusive.

Teachers. The teaching staff numbered 12 before the pandemic and 13 during and after it. Teachers contributed through staff meetings, observations, SODAS records, developmental journals, questionnaires, FGDs, and interviews where conducted. SODAS (Situation, Options, Disadvantages, Advantages, and Solutions) is a structured problem-solving routine that the school uses in staff deliberation (Jude, 2011).

School administrators and staff. The school principal and five administrators or staff members contributed information about implementation, organizational adjustments, and support provided to learners, families, and teachers. Because members of the school's leadership were also part of the research team, their accounts were treated as both data and insider interpretation and were triangulated against other sources.

Data Sources and Collection

Multiple sources were used to reconstruct the program's development across the three periods, with attention to the timing and nature of each source (Table 1).

Before the pandemic. Available data included school records, photographs and photo journals, teacher developmental journals, and SODAS records. These materials provided background on existing educational practices, learners' routines and development, and the integration of life skills into the inclusive curriculum. Information about parents' participation in pre-pandemic PEP meetings was retrieved from school records.

During the pandemic. Data sources included records of virtual and face-to-face staff meetings, teacher documentation, developmental journals, learner videos and portfolios, documentation of learners' virtual interviews, records of remote learning activities, and documentation of PEP sessions and other school–home communication. Parents shared photographs and videos of children's home-based academic and functional activities through closed Facebook parent groups, while ClassDojo was used to post learning materials, activity instructions, and guidance for parents. Activities documented included food preparation, household chores, gardening and plant care, academic worksheets, and simple learning experiments. All data from this period, including records of parent participation and feedback, were examined retrospectively as records; no research interviews or FGDs with parents were conducted during the pandemic.

After the return to face-to-face learning. Data collection included on-site observations, online questionnaires, face-to-face interviews, FGDs with the 15 core parents, school records, and documentation of learners' experiences. Teachers also conducted routine parent feedback sessions twice a year, in which parents and teachers discussed learners' academic development, behavior, socio-emotional functioning, independence, and life skills. The school also kept records of routine exit interviews with parents who withdrew their children or did not re-enroll them. These records were used only in aggregated form, as contextual information on reasons for leaving; no exit-interview material is quoted.

PEP post-session evaluations. PEP evaluations served both program-monitoring and research purposes. Available online evaluation responses from the three periods were retrieved, and their open-ended responses were analyzed. The number of respondents varied across school years according to enrollment and actual participation.

Interview languages. The questionnaire was prepared in English, and interviews and FGDs were conducted primarily in English. When necessary, interviewers also used Filipino or Hiligaynon to support participants' understanding, particularly when accommodating learners' individual needs. All participant excerpts reported in this article were expressed in English and are reproduced verbatim. The only non-English expression reported, the school's local-language slogan *Bata mo, bata naton tanan*, is taken from school documents, and its English rendering was provided by the authors.

Table 1: Data sources across stakeholders and study periods

Stakeholder	Pre-pandemic	During the pandemic	Post-pandemic
Parents	PEP meeting records and post-session evaluations, where available; parent–teacher feedback records	PEP meeting records and evaluations; online questionnaires and feedback sessions; records of online interviews, where documented	Face-to-face interviews; FGDs with 15 core parents; online questionnaires; feedback sessions; PEP records and evaluations; exit-interview records (aggregated)
Teachers	SODAS records; teacher developmental journals	Virtual and face-to-face staff meeting records; teacher documentation; SODAS records	Interviews; questionnaires; on-site observations; FGDs, where conducted
Learners	School records and photographic documentation	Videos; learning portfolios; documentation of virtual interviews, where available; socio-emotional and	Interviews; on-site observations; socio-emotional and developmental journals; educational records

		developmental journals	
Administrators and staff	School records	Staff meeting records; planning documents	Interviews; school records

Note. PEP = Parent Empowerment Program; SODAS = Situation, Options, Disadvantages, Advantages, and Solutions; FGD = focus group discussion. All pre-pandemic and pandemic-period data are records analyzed retrospectively; interviews and FGDs with the 15 core parents were conducted only in the post-pandemic period.

Table 2: Research participants and school context by study period

Category	**Pre-pandemic**	**During the pandemic**	**Post-pandemic**
Research participants			
Learners with disabilities or SEN followed through records	15	15 (same learners)	15 (same learners)
Learners interviewed	—	Virtual interviews (documentation analyzed retrospectively)	15
Core parents in FGDs	—	—	15
PEP evaluation respondents	Varied by school year	Varied by school year	Varied by school year
Teachers (teaching staff contributing records, meeting contributions, and responses)	12	13	13
Principal and administrators/staff	6 (across the study periods)		
School context (not counts of research participants)			
Parents associated with school enrollment (school records)	130	125	112

Note. SEN = special educational needs; FGD = focus group discussion; PEP = Parent Empowerment Program. Enrollment-linked parent figures are as recorded by the school; they describe the school population and are not counts of research participants or of enrolled learners.

Data Analysis

Analysis followed the six phases of reflexive thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006, 2021), consistent with the qualitative analysis process outlined by Creswell and Creswell (2018). In the first phase, familiarization, data from interviews, questionnaires, observations, FGDs, meeting records, journals, SODAS records, and archival materials were organized by source and by the period to which they related, and the researchers read the materials repeatedly. In the second phase, relevant statements, observations, and records were coded inductively; open-ended PEP evaluation responses were coded in the same way. In the third phase, codes were grouped into categories and candidate themes related to the research questions, including changes in curriculum delivery, school–home collaboration, parent and teacher roles, learners' life skills and socio-emotional development, and challenges in transitions between learning arrangements. In the fourth phase, candidate themes were reviewed by comparing them across stakeholder groups, data sources, and periods to

identify convergence, divergence, and change over time. In the fifth phase, themes were defined and named; for the second research question, this produced the stakeholder trajectories reported in the Results. The sixth phase, writing up, involved selecting excerpts that illustrate each theme. Coding was carried out collaboratively by the research team, and interpretations were scrutinized through team discussion and peer debriefing.

After inductive coding, the *Making Connections* theory of change was used as a sensitizing framework to interpret relationships among the strategies adopted, stakeholder participation, program adjustments, and the outcomes described in the data. The three phases reported under the first research question (value creation, value solution, and value production) are the school's own planning categories and are reported as such; findings for this question draw primarily on school planning documents and meeting records. The stakeholder trajectories reported under the second research question were derived by the researchers from the coded data. Participant excerpts are identified by stakeholder codes (P = parent, T = teacher, S = student) to protect identities, and they illustrate each theme rather than exhaust it.

Trustworthiness

Trustworthiness was addressed through strategies associated with naturalistic inquiry (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). **Triangulation** was achieved by comparing interviews, observations, FGDs, questionnaires, meeting records, developmental journals, SODAS records, and school archives across sources, stakeholder groups, and periods; because the types of data available differed across periods, comparisons were interpreted in light of those differences. **Member checking** involved inviting participants to review and confirm the accuracy of the information collected from them and of the researchers' interpretations. **Thick description** of the school's inclusive context, the Life Skills Program, and changes in delivery and school–home collaboration allows readers to judge the relevance of the findings to comparable settings. **Peer debriefing** with colleagues was used to scrutinize the researchers' reasoning and consider alternative interpretations.

Reflexivity. The research team combined three positions: school leaders who designed and oversaw the redesign, classroom teachers who implemented it, and university-based collaborators who had prior research involvement with the school (Delgado et al., 2019a, 2019b). The school-based researchers' familiarity with families and routines enabled access and contextual interpretation but also created a risk that the redesign would be presented favorably and that participants would give socially desirable responses. For this reason, the school's planning narrative is distinguished from participant accounts in reporting, accounts given by school leaders are identified as insider interpretation, and variation within stakeholder groups is noted where the data show it. The university-based collaborators took part in analysis and peer debriefing from a position outside the school's daily operations.

Ethical Considerations

The study was not reviewed by a formally constituted research ethics committee. It was conducted with the approval of the MSI administration and in line with the principles of informed consent, voluntary participation, confidentiality, and data protection, including the requirements of the Data Privacy Act of 2012 (Republic Act No. 10173, 2012). The absence of committee review is acknowledged among the study's limitations.

During enrollment, parents were informed verbally and in writing that information about their children and their participation in school activities could be used for research, and the school's signed permission form covered the use of children's educational records and identifiable photographs and videos in research publications. The research use of school records relied on this enrollment-time permission. Parents and teachers invited to interviews and FGDs were informed about the study and the intended use of the information, were told they could decline, and gave consent to participate. Parents also consented to their children's interviews. Children were informed about participation in an age-appropriate manner and indicated their willingness to take part; assent was verbal, and no written assent forms were used. Each learner's assigned teacher was present during interviews, providing a familiar adult who could support the child throughout. The introduction to the PEP post-session evaluation form informed respondents that results would be used for research, program monitoring, and program improvement.

PEP meetings were recorded through Zoom. Recordings and other research records were stored on an external drive and in Google Drive, with access restricted to the school administration and the researchers. Stakeholder codes are used in place of names, and quotations, case descriptions, and visual materials were reviewed for the risk of indirect identification within the school community. Because the researchers held roles in the school, parents, learners, and staff may have felt pressure to cooperate; participants were explicitly informed that they could decline, and these relationships were considered when interpreting the data.

RESULTS

Findings are presented in three parts corresponding to the research questions. The first describes the processes of the redesign across three phases (Table 3). The second presents stakeholder responses and experiences as in-person classes resumed (Table 4). The third examines how the school adapted the *Making Connections* framework (Table 5). Interpretation in relation to existing literature is reserved for the Discussion.

Processes in Repositioning the Life Skills Program as Core Curriculum

School planning documents organize the redesign around three guiding questions, what, how, and why, which the school mapped onto three phases of innovation: value creation, value solution, and value production. Table 3 summarizes the activities and theory-of-change elements associated with each phase.

Table 3: Phases of the Life Skills Program redesign

Phase and guiding question	**Activities documented**	**Theory-of-change element**
Value creation: What existed?	Review of the embedded Life Skills, SEL, and restorative justice components; design-thinking cycle (understand, define, create, prototype, test); multi-tiered supports spanning school-based, home-based (PEP), and community-based delivery	Clarifying starting conditions, assets, and the problem space
Value solution: How would change happen?	Partnership-building with government agencies, NGOs, and community members; data gathering and risk assessment; appreciative inquiry with parents, teachers, students, and staff; goal setting and outcome mapping; service prioritization informed by attention to grief; system building; implementation with parents as direct implementers and teachers as coaches; continuous monitoring, documentation, and feedback	"The Team" and local movement; strategies of impact, influence, and leverage; data and learning
Value production: Why, and toward what results?	Home-based learning drawing on NDBI principles; continuous PEP sessions; integrated monitoring of academic and socio-emotional learning, teacher performance, mental health, and parental competencies; targeted interventions; personalized learning for neurotypical learners and least restrictive environment for neurodiverse learners	Individual, organizational, and systems transformation; results for children and families

Note. NDBI = naturalistic developmental behavioral interventions; NGO = nongovernmental organization; PEP = Parent Empowerment Program; SEL = social and emotional learning.

Value creation: The existing program

Before the pandemic, the Life Skills Program sat within an inclusive model built on SEL and restorative justice practices, and it was delivered through integrated subject teaching. Mathematics was taught through English and home economics, English through mathematics and physical education, and the mother tongue through music. Teachers explicitly encouraged children to connect lessons to their lives. School documents describe a

multi-tiered system of support serving all children under a whole-child, inclusive orientation, operating in three arenas: the school (life skills taught by teachers), the home (parents prepared through PEP), and the community.

When the pandemic began, school leaders treated this existing architecture as the foundation for the response rather than something to be suspended. The school's records frame the problem in design-thinking terms: understanding the new situation, defining what learners and families needed, and creating, prototyping, and testing responses. The program's existing emphasis on emotional regulation, relationships, and functional routines was judged to be the part of the curriculum most needed when children were confined at home and families were under strain.

Value solution: How the redesign was enacted

The second phase translated intent into a sequence of linked actions, which the school organized around the *Making Connections* theory of change.

Planning and partnership. The school did not treat the shift as an internal matter. Planning began with outreach to government bodies, nongovernmental organizations (NGOs), and community members, with the stated aims of building relationships, identifying opportunities, and strengthening local capacity.

Data gathering and risk assessment. MSI collected data on how the pandemic was affecting learners, families, and staff. This risk assessment identified where needs were most acute and set priorities for the response. According to the school's planning records, the sequence followed the logic of a disaster management cycle, moving from preparedness and risk assessment through response and recovery.

Appreciative inquiry. A team of parents, teachers, students, and staff used appreciative inquiry, which builds change from what is already working rather than from deficits (Cooperrider & Whitney, 2005), to analyze the emergency phase together with government and NGO partners. This process produced agreement on a responsive management cycle and a schedule for designing and testing new program elements, oriented toward family empowerment and community alliances.

Goal setting and outcome mapping. The team developed an outcome map focused on advancing school–home collaboration during the move from face-to-face to remote learning. The *Making Connections* framework was adopted because its intended results for children, families, and neighborhoods were judged to match the school's own aims.

Service prioritization. Recognizing that families and staff were experiencing loss and grief, the team drew on the Kübler-Ross model of grief stages as a heuristic for anticipating emotional reactions. It treated these stages as non-linear and used them to sequence and pace services.

Building the new system. Rather than adjusting existing arrangements piecemeal, the school sought to align culture, structures, and systems so that changes in one area would reinforce changes in others.

Implementation and evaluation. The most consequential change was a shift in who delivered the curriculum. Parents became its direct implementers, and teachers moved into a supporting and coaching role. This required continuous training, experimentation, monitoring, and feedback, with progress documented and strategies adjusted as needed. Parents had to adapt to new learning arrangements, revisit academic content, and work alongside their children. One parent of a Grade 6 learner described the experience:

"It was difficult for the first 2 months. But, we all need to adapt and adjust how we learn. I have to study together with my child. I need to recap my old lessons. I am the teacher of the house, it is tough. But, for the sake of Love, I will do anything." (P1)

Her account illustrates the practical and emotional demands of taking on a teaching role at home. Studying alongside her child and reviewing previously learned material reflect a shift from supporting school-based

learning to participating directly in its implementation, while her description of the experience as "tough" highlights the cost of the new role.

Value production: Why the redesign took the shape it did

The third phase concerned the outcomes the school sought to produce and the mechanisms it relied on. Long-term outcomes were framed as benchmarks for the school community's change efforts, and the school stated that these benchmarks were meant to reflect the voices and agency of students and parents. The redesign aimed to preserve two existing commitments: the Core Four of Personalized Learning (flexible content and tools, targeted instruction, student reflection and ownership, and data-driven decisions) for neurotypical learners, and the least restrictive environment for neurodiverse learners. The local-language slogan *Bata mo, bata naton tanan*, roughly "your child is a child of us all," expressed the shared responsibility the program sought to build between home and school.

With learning now home-based, MSI drew on NDBI, which combines behavioral teaching strategies with natural contexts, child-initiated activity, and natural reinforcers (Schreibman et al., 2015). Daily routines, chores, and play became the contexts in which life skills were practiced. Continuous PEP sessions sought to keep parents committed and equipped to sustain this work. The school also established an integrated monitoring system that tracked academic and socio-emotional learning, teacher performance, mental health, and parental competencies, and used identified gaps to target interventions. Technical assistance and communication with all stakeholder groups were intensified during this period.

Stakeholder Responses as In-Person Classes Resumed

Across data sources, stakeholder responses followed a broadly similar trajectory. Early apprehension, frustration, and resistance gave way to acceptance, collaboration, and empathy (Table 4). The pace and texture of this shift differed among groups, and responses also varied within groups: learners' initial reactions ranged from sadness to enjoyment, and some families left the school during the period for economic reasons. The excerpts that follow illustrate these patterns; they do not indicate how widely each was shared.

Table 4: Trajectory of stakeholder responses across the transition

Stakeholder	**Early responses (shift to remote learning)**	**Later responses (return to in-person classes)**	**Supports associated with the shift**
Students	Missed physical interaction with peers and teachers; difficulty with online learning	Adapted to and in some cases enjoyed online learning; returned smoothly to in-person classes	Structured guidance; established routines; help with technology problems; pre-existing relationships
Parents	Substantial emotional strain; apprehension and resistance to new roles	Greater confidence and engagement; participatory stance toward the school	PEP sessions; open communication; regular updates; opportunities to give feedback
Teachers	Apprehension and resistance; workload concerns	Acceptance; greater empathy; stronger collaboration; attention to learners' socio-emotional needs	Training and professional development; sharing of practice; attention to their own well-being
Organizational level	Need for rapid information on learners and families	Integrated monitoring enabled timely, targeted interventions	Feedback loops; regular assessment

Note. PEP = Parent Empowerment Program. Responses are summarized from interviews, focus group discussions, questionnaires, observations, and meeting records.

Students: Adaptation supported by routine

Students initially described missing physical interaction and struggling with the online format. One student expressed concern about losing face-to-face contact with peers during the transition to online learning: "I'll miss my classmates; it might be boring" (S1). The same student shared sadness about being unable to talk with classmates about their experiences at home and to play with them physically. Another student described a more positive experience: "I enjoy our online class because I like to learn with friends," adding, "I can learn better when teachers guide us online or with videos" (S2). These excerpts illustrate students' varied initial reactions and the importance of peer connection and teacher guidance in their adaptation. Learners' accounts and teachers' documentation describe adaptation over time with structured support, and some learners came to find online learning effective and enjoyable. Predictable routines and timely help with technology problems appeared to reduce stress. When classes resumed in person, teachers observed a relatively smooth transition, which participants attributed to relationships formed before the pandemic and to routines carried across modalities.

Parents: From strain to participation

Parents reported considerable emotional challenges, especially early in the closures, as P1's account illustrates. PEP sessions were repeatedly identified as the setting in which parents gained the understanding, tools, and confidence to support their children's learning. Open communication channels, regular updates, and opportunities to raise concerns contributed to what parents and teachers described as a more collaborative relationship. As one parent explained:

"PEP Orientation, open communication and feedback, accomplishment monitoring cycle as well as easy access to the teachers through chat; all of this helps us a lot. This is moral support from the school that gives us the strength to move from one stage to the next." (P2)

These accounts trace a movement from apprehension and increased caregiving demands toward active participation, supported by communication, PEP sessions, and collaboration with teachers. This trajectory describes the families who remained engaged with the school; the experiences of families who left are represented in the data only through aggregated exit-interview records.

Teachers: From resistance to empathy

Teachers' accounts traced a similar arc. Initial apprehension, including about ceding direct instruction to parents, gave way to closer collaboration with colleagues and families. Teachers also faced emotional and professional strain: "We are afraid not only of the virus but also of the workload. There is so much to do in such a short time" (T1). Training supported new strategies for remote teaching and, later, for reintegrating learners into the classroom. Teachers reported greater empathy and a stronger disposition to attend to learners' socio-emotional needs, and they linked this capacity to attention to their own well-being. One teacher reflected on a personal change in perspective: "I used to be the type of person who didn't care about those around me; sympathy and empathy weren't part of my vocabulary" (T2). Another conveyed concern for learners alongside relief: "I feel sad and relieved at the same time 'cause there are so many factors including the negative ones that could affect the learning of our students but I'm grateful that they're safe and the school is well prepared for the online class setup" (T3).

Organizational level: Monitoring, connection, and enrollment

At the organizational level, the integrated monitoring system and regular feedback loops allowed the school to identify gaps and respond with targeted interventions during each transition. School leaders described the redesign as having sustained service connections and social connectedness, and they linked it to continued enrollment. Because school leaders are also members of the research team, this account is an insider interpretation. Parents' references to ongoing communication and easy access to teachers (P2) are consistent with it, but the enrollment data qualify it. The number of parents associated with school enrollment declined from 130 before the pandemic to 112 afterward, a decrease of about 14% (Table 2). The school's exit-

interview records indicate that pandemic-related economic difficulties, including job loss and reduced capacity to pay tuition, contributed to some families' decisions to discontinue enrollment. The available records do not establish the relative contribution of economic circumstances, program perceptions, or other factors to the overall decline.

Adaptation of the Making Connections Framework

Table 5 summarizes how the school used the elements of the *Making Connections* theory of change, as reflected in the processes and responses reported above. Most elements were retained in reinterpreted form: the neighborhood-level "team" and local movement became a school-led coalition of parents, teachers, staff, and external partners; family engagement became the formal repositioning of parents as curriculum implementers; and data and learning became the school's integrated monitoring and feedback cycles. The framework's intended results for families and neighborhoods were narrowed to results for learners and their households, and family economic success, a core aim of the original initiative (Fiester, 2011), does not appear among the school's documented actions. School–home collaboration thus functioned as the main pathway through which the framework's strategies reached children.

Table 5: Adaptation of the *Making Connections* theory of change at the school

Making Connections **element**	**How the element was used in the redesign**	**Adaptation**
"The Team" and local movement	School-led coalition of parents, teachers, students, staff, government agencies, NGOs, and community members; appreciative inquiry team	Retained; rescaled from neighborhood to school community
Strategies of impact, influence, and leverage	Partnership-building, outcome mapping, and service prioritization	Retained
Family engagement	Parents repositioned as direct implementers of the curriculum, supported by continuous PEP sessions	Retained; reinterpreted and intensified
Broad alliances	Outreach to government bodies, NGOs, and community members	Retained
Data and learning	Risk assessment; integrated monitoring of learning, well-being, teaching, and parenting; feedback loops	Retained
Transforming systems and capacity to sustain	Alignment of culture, structures, and systems; continuous training and coaching	Retained
Social and service connections	Leaders described sustained service connections and social connectedness (insider account)	Retained
Economic connections (family economic success)	No school action addressing family economic success is documented in the data; economic hardship appears in exit-interview records	Not documented
Results for families and neighborhoods; children healthy and ready to learn	Results for learners and households: personalized learning, least restrictive environment, and benchmarks reflecting student and parent voice	Reinterpreted; narrowed to learners and households

Note. Elements are based on the *Making Connections* theory of change (Fiester, 2011; ORS, 2004). NGO = nongovernmental organization; PEP = Parent Empowerment Program.

DISCUSSION

This study set out to document how a small inclusive school repositioned life skills at the center of its curriculum during the pandemic and how its community responded. Four interpretive threads emerge, each with implications for theory and practice and each carrying qualifications.

Life Skills as an Organizing Core Rather Than an Add-On

The most distinctive feature of the MSI case is structural. Life skills were not added to a disrupted academic program; they became the frame through which the rest of the curriculum was organized. This inverts the usual arrangement documented in the life skills literature, where programs are typically discrete, time-limited, and aimed at adolescents (Kirchhoff & Keller, 2021; Nasheeda et al., 2019). The case suggests that for young children, and especially in inclusive settings, life skills may be better understood as a curricular logic than as a subject. Household routines, play, and emotional regulation offered contexts in which academic content could be practiced, and they remained available when classrooms did not. The school's judgment that relational and emotional competencies were most needed during confinement is consistent with meta-analytic evidence of elevated depressive and anxiety symptoms among children and adolescents during the pandemic (Racine et al., 2021).

This reading is also consistent with meta-analytic evidence that SEL, when well implemented, supports academic as well as social-emotional outcomes (Cipriano et al., 2023; Durlak et al., 2011). It should not be read as evidence that MSI's redesign produced such outcomes. The study did not measure learning or skill acquisition, and the reports of adaptation and resilience reflect stakeholder perceptions and practitioner observation. Darlington-Bernard et al.'s (2023) observation that the conceptual vagueness of life skills hampers evaluation applies here. A next step would be to specify which of the WHO (1997) skills, or which elements of the school's own life skills framework, the redesign was expected to strengthen, and how progress would be recognized.

Parents as Implementers: Promise and Burden

The decision to reposition parents as direct implementers of the curriculum, with teachers as coaches, is the redesign's most consequential and most double-edged feature. It aligns with evidence that family–school partnership interventions improve children's social-behavioral competence and mental health, particularly when communication is bidirectional and involvement is home-based (Sheridan et al., 2019; Smith et al., 2020). The emphasis on facilitation within PEP also echoes findings that the facilitator's role is pivotal in parenting education programs (Arlinkasari et al., 2024). The trajectory reported here, from strain and resistance to confidence and participation, resembles that described by Filipino parents in public schools during distance learning, who reported both exhaustion and a newfound appreciation for their role in their children's education (Agaton & Cueto, 2021). Parents elsewhere reported a similar mixture (Garbe et al., 2020).

The same literature counsels caution. Parents' capacity to teach depends on time, literacy, digital access, and emotional reserves that are unevenly distributed (Agaton & Cueto, 2021; Garbe et al., 2020). For families of children with disabilities, the gap between home and school support can be especially wide (Averett, 2021). MSI is a private school whose families were already familiar with PEP. Its experience therefore cannot be generalized to public schools serving families under greater economic pressure, and the redesign's success may partly reflect pre-existing social capital. The exit-interview evidence that some families left because of job loss and reduced capacity to pay tuition is a reminder that the parent-as-implementer model presupposes household resources that the pandemic itself eroded. Equity-oriented partnership models stress that trust must be cultivated deliberately, especially across differences in culture and resources (Herrera et al., 2020). Future iterations would benefit from documenting which families struggled to take on the implementer role and what differentiated support they received.

NDBI, Grief, and the Emotional Work of Change

Two frameworks borrowed from outside education shaped the redesign. The first, NDBI, has a strong evidence base for young autistic children, particularly through parent-mediated delivery in everyday routines (Schreibman et al., 2015). Its principles, which emphasize natural contexts, child-initiated learning, and natural reinforcers, are well suited to home-based learning. The evidence reviewed by Schreibman et al. (2015) concerns young autistic children; it does not establish that NDBI is equally effective for typically developing learners, and this study did not measure such effects. It is more defensible to say that NDBI principles offered a coherent approach that teachers and parents could apply across a diverse group of learners.

The second framework, the Kübler-Ross grief model, gave the school a shared language for anticipating emotional responses to loss. Its use during the pandemic is not unique; analyses of public discourse have mapped pandemic reactions onto the same stages (Abebe et al., 2023). Bereavement researchers have nonetheless cautioned that the stage model lacks empirical support and may mislead people into expecting a fixed sequence (Stroebe et al., 2017). MSI's explicit treatment of the stages as non-linear goes some way toward meeting this concern. The more substantive lesson may be the school's recognition that caregivers act as key facilitators of children's grief (Alvis et al., 2023), which links the emotional and instructional dimensions of the parent-as-implementer model.

The emotional dimension extended to teachers. Teachers' movement from resistance to empathy is notable given the documented strain on teachers' mental health during the pandemic (Kim et al., 2022), special educators' doubts about whether they were doing enough for their students at a distance (Schuck & Lambert, 2020), and the experiences of Philippine special education teachers teaching through emergencies (Salonzo et al., 2023). That MSI teachers associated their capacity to support learners with attention to their own well-being supports the case for treating teacher well-being as a precondition for SEL rather than a by-product of it.

Theory of Change as Adaptive Management in a Single School

Theory of change appears in this case less as an evaluation tool than as a means of coordinating action under uncertainty. MSI used it to make assumptions explicit, align stakeholders around shared outcomes, and structure cycles of data, learning, and adjustment. These are the functions emphasized by its proponents (ORS, 2004) and by researchers who argue that theory of change is most useful when it is co-developed and revisited (Breuer et al., 2016). The school's emphasis on aligning culture, structures, and systems also parallels the internal coherence perspective, which holds that continuous improvement depends on organizational conditions that allow collective learning (Forman et al., 2017). More recent applications of theory of change to the coordination and individualization of family support services show a similar orientation (Maier, 2023).

The adaptation analysis (Table 5) shows what transferring a neighborhood framework to a single school involved. *Making Connections* was designed for multi-year, place-based change, and even in that setting a formal theory of change emerged only several years into the initiative, while its evaluation struggled with the tension between learning and judging success (Fiester, 2011). At MSI, the framework's collective and systemic elements were retained but rescaled to the school community, and its results were narrowed from neighborhoods to learners and households. In this rescaling, school–home collaboration became the principal pathway linking strategy to results, which helps explain why the redesign concentrated its resources on PEP and on parents' implementing role. Fiester (2011) also noted that in-house evaluation brought evaluators close to the work but weakened perceived objectivity. A similar tension applies here, because members of the research team designed, implemented, and studied the redesign.

The enrollment pattern illustrates why this matters. School leaders linked the redesign to continued enrollment, yet the parent population associated with enrollment fell by about 14% between the pre- and post-pandemic periods. Some families may have stayed because of the program, and exit interviews point to economic hardship among those who left. Enrollment decisions, however, are shaped by many considerations beyond program quality (Cantu et al., 2021), and the data cannot isolate the redesign's contribution.

Implications for Philippine Inclusive Education

For Philippine policy and practice, the case offers a grounded illustration of what inclusive learning continuity might look like at the school level. Republic Act No. 11650 (2022) envisions inclusive education supported by learning resource centers, individualized supports, and family involvement, and DepEd Order No. 44, s. 2021 sets out the educational programs and services to which learners with disabilities are entitled in the K to 12 program (DepEd, 2021). The MSI experience suggests that such provisions are most resilient when family capacity-building is continuous rather than activated only during emergencies, and when SEL and restorative practices are already embedded in school culture (Delgado et al., 2019b). It also suggests that future iterations of learning continuity planning (DepEd, 2020) could give explicit attention to the psychosocial preparation of parents and teachers, not only to the logistics of modality.

Contribution and Limitations

The study contributes a practitioner-led ethnographic case study of whole-curriculum redesign in an inclusive school serving young children in a provincial Philippine city, a setting underrepresented in the international literature. It documents a specific mechanism, the repositioning of parents as curriculum implementers supported by continuous empowerment sessions, and shows how a theory of change was adapted from a neighborhood initiative to a single school. Conceptually, it suggests treating life skills as an organizing curricular logic for young and diverse learners rather than as a discrete program.

Several limitations apply. First, the study was conducted in a single private school with a long-established inclusive culture, which limits transferability to public schools and less-resourced settings. Second, most members of the research team held leadership or teaching roles in the school; these insider positions provided sustained access but may have influenced data collection, interpretation, and participants' responses, and social desirability may have been a particular concern for parents interacting with their children's teachers. Third, much of the pre-pandemic and pandemic data came from archival records analyzed retrospectively, including the documentation of learners' virtual interviews, and the findings on the redesign's phases rely primarily on the school's own planning documents. Fourth, no standardized instruments were used to measure learning outcomes, life skills acquisition, or well-being, so conclusions rest on stakeholder accounts and documented experiences. Fifth, the perspectives of young learners, particularly neurodiverse learners, were less directly represented than those of adults; more generally, a small number of excerpts is reported for each stakeholder group, the prevalence of each pattern within groups is not quantified, and the number and duration of on-site observations are not reported. Sixth, the study was not reviewed by a research ethics committee, and the research use of school records relied on permission given at enrollment rather than study-specific consent. Finally, the design does not support causal conclusions about the effects of the redesign, including its effects on enrollment.

CONCLUSION

The pandemic required MSI's school leaders, teachers, parents, learners, and partner organizations to rethink their roles at once, and to manage personal, household, organizational, and community pressures together. This study documents how the school responded by making its Life Skills Program the core of its curriculum. The redesign was organized through an explicit theory of change, carried out through partnership, data, appreciative inquiry, and outcome mapping, and centered on repositioning parents as implementers supported by continuous empowerment. Stakeholders' accounts describe a movement from apprehension and resistance toward acceptance, collaboration, and empathy, which participants attributed to sustained communication, routines and relationships established before the crisis, and attention to the emotional dimensions of change. In adapting a neighborhood framework to a single school, school–home collaboration became the main pathway linking the school's strategies to results for learners. The study's contribution lies less in demonstrating effectiveness than in making visible the processes by which a small inclusive school adapted coherently under crisis, and the conditions that participants regarded as decisive.

RECOMMENDATIONS

- **School leaders**, particularly in inclusive schools serving young children, may treat life skills and SEL as an organizing framework that remains usable across modalities, rather than as content that can be set aside during disruption.

- **Schools and parent programs** should make parent capacity-building continuous rather than activated only in emergencies, and differentiate it to account for families' time, resources, economic circumstances, and the needs of children with disabilities.

- **School leaders and teacher-development units** should plan explicitly for teacher well-being as a condition for supporting learners' socio-emotional development.

- **Schools adopting a theory of change** should document their assumptions, indicators, and adaptations from the outset, so that the framework can serve evaluation as well as coordination.

- **DepEd and Schools Division Offices**, in implementing Republic Act No. 11650 and future learning continuity plans, may include the psychosocial preparation of families and teachers in continuity planning and in the family-involvement services provided for learners with disabilities.

- **Researchers** could follow learners prospectively using validated measures of life skills, socio-emotional competence, and academic progress; compare schools with different resource levels, including public schools; examine which families thrive or struggle in the parent-as-implementer role; engage directly with young and neurodiverse learners' own accounts of learning at home; and pair practitioner inquiry with independent evaluation and research ethics committee review.

Declarations

Ethics statement. This study was not reviewed by a formally constituted research ethics committee. It was conducted with the approval of the MindHaven School Inc. administration. Parents and teachers who took part in interviews and FGDs gave informed consent, parents consented to their children's interviews, and children gave verbal assent. The research use of school records relied on permission given by parents at enrollment. Data were handled in accordance with the Data Privacy Act of 2012 (see Ethical Considerations).

Conflict of interest. Nilda B. Delgado, is affiliated with MindHaven School Inc., where the Life Skills Program was designed, implemented, and studied. Frank S. Emboltura has co-authored previous studies of the school (Delgado et al., 2019a, 2019b). The authors declare no other conflicts of interest.

Data availability. The data are not publicly available because they contain information that could identify children with disabilities and their families. De-identified excerpts are available from the corresponding author on reasonable request, subject to approval by the MindHaven School Inc. administration and compliance with the Data Privacy Act of 2012.

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