

Playpen

catch-up clubs

Save the Children

Produced by Save the Children Philippines
for Catch-up Clubs Program





Save the Children

About Save the Children Philippines

Save the Children believes every child deserves a future. In the Philippines and around the world, we do whatever it takes – every day and in times of crisis – so children can fulfill their rights to a healthy start in life, the opportunity to learn, and protection from harm. With over 100 years of expertise, we are the world's first and leading independent children's organization – transforming lives and the future we share.

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4th Floor, Sunnymede IT Center
1614 Quezon Avenue, Quezon City 1103, Philippines
Office: +632 8682 7283 (SAVE)

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FOREWORD

Message from the Chief Executive Officer



A space for children to play while learning was our vision. Catch-up Clubs became the answer.

Just in time for our third iteration, we are thrilled to finally release Playpen, the official Catch-up Clubs (CuCs) magazine written in English. This publication captures not only our message, but most importantly, the spirit of what we do.

Catch-up Clubs is a play-based reading remediation program designed for the holistic development of children. The word "Play" reflects the heart of our approach to learning: fun and child-centered. Meanwhile, "Pen" is a symbol of literary, reading, and the written word. Together, they form PLAYPEN – a safe and nurturing space where children's literacy, socio-emotional growth, and protection is the utmost priority.

A CuC session starts with a socio-emotional learning (SEL) activity such as the Circle of Friendship. In that activity, children introduce themselves the same way that in this magazine, CuC introduces its vision and components. After the SEL, children engage in speaking activities such as Catch and Talk where children pass around words and ideas. In parallel, you will see passed around in these pages the evidence of CuC's impact through evaluation reports and milestones collated since the pilot phase.

Next, children are then introduced to reading and writing tasks. We specifically chose five CuC activities that mirror the inspiring stories of our learners – stories of perseverance, inclusivity, progress, confidence, and hope.

Finally, when children are energetic during playful games, a CuC session often ends with a Mindfulness activity such as Seeing Colors. Written in this magazine are colorful narratives of our CuC stakeholders – parents, community learning facilitators, and school heads – whose commitment sustained the program.

And yet, learning reading does not end after a CuC session. Through parent and caregiver support groups called PACamustahan, CuC extends its impact to households. And so, as we flip through the last pages, we end with a call to action: to continue championing play-based approaches to learning not just in schools, but also in homes, in communities, in cities, and in the rest of the Philippines.

This magazine is not just a compilation of our stories. It is also an experience in itself. Each page is designed following the sequence of one session. We invite you not just to read, but to also feel the playful life of CuC.

Atty. Alberto Jesus Muyot
Chief Executive Officer
Save the Children Philippines

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It's CuC time!

Circle of Friendship

A session starts with a SEL activity to lift the mood of the children and prepare them for learning. It encourages them to socialize with other learners and develops their socio-emotional skills.

Steps:

1. While sitting in a circle, everyone bows their head.
2. When you say "1-2-lift!", each person raises their head and chooses someone to look at.
3. If two children make eye contact, they walk to the center of the circle, shake hands, and greet each other using their names. For example: "Good morning, John!" or "How are you, Kristine?"
4. They return to their seats and the game continues.
5. The children must not greet the same person twice. They need to find a new partner each round.
6. The game ends after 10 minutes or when the children get tired.
7. Share the message of the activity: "In this game, we greeted each other using our names. This is a great way to meet new friends!"

Circling Back to the Child

In every classroom, there is a child who longs to learn but struggles to keep pace. Reading can feel like a locked door that seems to open easily for others, but not for them. Catch-up Clubs (CuCs) strongly believes that the sole key to that door has been in children's hands all along.

Children learn best when they are at ease. Circling back to the child means returning to this truth: that the most natural to learn reading is through play.

How did CuC start?

Catch-up Clubs began with a bold hope: that no child should be left behind in learning. Launched in 2021 in Uganda and Colombia, it expanded to nine more countries by 2023. In just two years, CuCs reached over 16,000 children, and today, more than 98,000 globally, showing that learning through play can help close the literacy gap.

CuC in the Philippines

When the pandemic struck the Philippines, education was severely disrupted—classrooms became isolation areas, and learning shifted to radios, modules, and gadgets. As a result, nine out of ten 10-year-old Filipino children could not read and understand a simple text (World Bank, 2023). With limited face-to-face instruction, many fell further behind, leaving Grades 4 to 6 learners still struggling to read at a Grade 2 level when schools reopened.

It was in this gap that Catch-up Clubs found its purpose.

With support from Save the Children, teachers and communities reimagined reading remediation. In December 2022, the CuCs pilot launched in 100 public elementary schools across seven Sarangani municipalities, reaching 2,400 learners.

Each session had 24 learners grouped by reading ability, regardless of age, through Teaching at the Right Level (TaRL), ensuring each child's needs are targeted and prioritized. CuCs cover four levels: Letter, Word, Story, and Story with Comprehension, progressing from learning sounds to reading with full understanding.

What makes Catch-up Clubs unique from other reading remediation programs already implemented in the country is its promise of **holistic development for children.** To achieve this, CuCs programming is anchored on five components.

(1) Play-based remedial reading

Guided by trained Community Learning Facilitators (CLFs) and Community Learning and Inclusion Facilitators (CLIFs), children learned reading through interactive, culturally responsive activities.

CuCs does not rely on rigid tutorials but on games that naturally embed reading and writing. By easing pressure, children are free to engage and learn through play.

(2) Socio-emotional learning

Social and emotional learning (SEL) component is where children learn to express their own emotions and respond to others'. Each session begins with a SEL activity, creating a safe and comfortable learning space.

By encouraging children to share their feelings, SEL builds confidence and links learning with well-being—reducing stress and low self-esteem while fostering empathy, perseverance, and emotional regulation.

This component shifted to a more sustainable solution.

After co-designing sessions, Parent/Caregiver Advocates for CuCs (PAC) were formed. These are organized support groups in schools and barangays where parents and guardians meet for a weekly **PACamustahan Kapehan Sessions** – informal conversations that engage parents in their children's learning through discussions on positive parenting and creating nurturing home environments.

By strengthening learning beyond the classroom, Catch-up Clubs continues to highlight the vital role parents play in shaping their children's growth.

How were learners assessed?

In the Philippines, Catch-up Clubs were implemented in cycles of three rounds, each lasting two to three weeks and followed by a one-week pause for reflection, assessment, and facilitator training.

Within each round, children attended four to five sessions weekly, totaling about 28–35 sessions or 50–60 hours per cycle.

Progress was tracked through four assessments—baseline, after Rounds 1 and 2, and endline—using an ASER-adapted tool. Attendance was closely monitored, with facilitators following up on absences and referring at-risk children to Child Protection services when needed.

But learning does not happen in isolation. Many children faced economic or protection barriers, from the weight of child labor to the risks of unsafe environments. That is why the program also included parent and caregiver support groups and child protection services, so every child had not only the chance to learn but also the safety and space to take part fully.

(3) Child Protection

Children are protected by the community. This is reinforced through constant nudging of community-based referral systems. School heads and personnel are trained to consistently practice safeguarding; while concerned government institutions are influenced to grant timely and relevant support to children in need of their services.

(4) Parent/Caregiver Support Groups

During the first cycle, selected beneficiaries received cash assistance to support consistent participation, especially for families facing economic hardship. Parents and caregivers also attended a financial literacy orientation to guide the use of this support.

By easing financial pressures, the program helped reduce absences and child labor, giving children the space to simply be learners again.

(5) Nutrition Support for Learners

This component was introduced in the second cycle, providing light snacks after sessions to support learners' energy, focus, and consistent attendance.



It's CuC time!

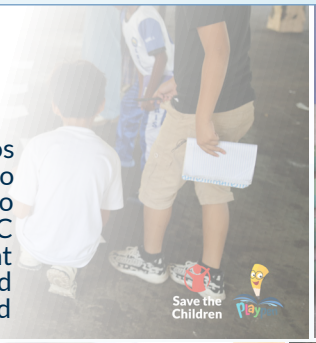
Catch & Talk

After SEL, the children are engaged in a speaking exercise. This help them develop their confidence in oral language practice. It also expands their vocabulary.

Steps:

1. The children sit in a circle.
2. The facilitator will name a category of words (e.g., fruits, animals, feelings, games, colors, vehicles, etc.).
3. The children will toss or pass a ball to one another. Whoever receives or holds the ball will say a word related to the category.
4. The same child will pass the ball to another child who will also do the same task.
5. Remind the children not to repeat words that have already been said. The word must be new.
6. Introduce a new category and continue the game.

CuC Catch and Cycles





Catch-up Clubs in Sarangani and General Santos City were implemented as a targeted response to persistent learning gaps. It was conducted in two phases: pilot and CuC 2.0. From these two cycles, CuC proved its effectivity by providing evidences that children who are behind in reading can progressed when teaching is aligned with their reading levels and delivered in a fun, engaging, and safe mechanisms.





CuCs 2.0 Cycle 1

CuCs 2.0 was designed for scalability and sustainability through participatory co-design with schools, stakeholders, parents, facilitators, and children, ensuring alignment with DepEd goals. Integrated into school hours, it runs daily 45-minute to 1-hour sessions totaling 70 per cycle. The model strengthens community ownership by training parent-leaders in positive parenting and safeguarding, while "coaches" provide support and CLFs gain training credits for teaching applications. Volunteers are equipped with skills in play-based learning, literacy remediation, SEL, facilitation, and child protection. It was piloted in 15 schools across Maasim, Sarangani and General Santos

CuCs 2.0 Cycle 2

Building on early successes, Catch-up Clubs 2.0 aims to anchor CuCs within existing reading remediation efforts, complementing national initiatives like DepEd's Catch-up Fridays, National Learning Recovery, Bawat Bata Makababasa, and the newly enacted Republic Act No. 12028, or the Academic Recovery and Accessible Learning (ARAL) Program Act. Through strong collaboration with partners and stakeholders, it seeks to evolve from Save the Children's flagship program into a scalable, ready-to-adopt model for DepEd. More than improving reading, CuCs opens doors for children—fostering not only literacy but also the confidence to dream.



Pilot Implementation

Literacy Outcome

76%

Children in Catch-up Clubs advanced by at least one reading level compared with only 37% in the control group.

Notably, children were 5.7 times more likely to reach Story with Comprehension, the highest reading level.



GIRLS
Literacy achievement
37%
Socio-Emotional Learning
72%

BOYS
Literacy achievement
30%
Socio-Emotional Learning
67%



Socio-Emotional Learning (SEL) Outcome

59.4% TO **69.3%**

SEL outcomes also showed substantial overall improvement. Across both intervention and control groups, high SEL scores increased from 59.4% at baseline to 69.3% at endline particularly in stress-management, empathy, and problem-solving skills.

70%
Spoke non-Filipino at their homes

Attendance

Attendance emerged as one of the most significant implementation risks. (42% of participants had >20% session absenteeism; boys (46%) missed more than girls (36%). Absenteeism peaked at 80% in some schools. Primary reasons are the distance to school as well as the schedule of sessions.

CuC 2.0

Cycle 1			Cycle 2
331 Enrolled Children	**63%**	Advanced at least one reading level	**65%**
	12%	moved up two levels	**14%**
	13%	moved up three levels	**17%**
	35%	reached Sentence level or higher	**28%**
	62%	Attendance turnout rate	72%
			240 Enrolled Children

These results were closely tied to attendance, with higher participation linked to stronger literacy gains—achieved after only 52.5 hours of CuC sessions. Children also improved in empathy, perseverance, stress management, and social skills. Across two iterations, Catch-up Clubs show that learning recovery is both possible and measurable when programs respond to the realities of children as learners.

It's CuC time!

Think, Pair, Share

Aside from teaching reading, CuC learners are encouraged to go out of their shells and make friends.

Steps:

1. Ask a question or set a topic for discussion, or a problem to solve. This may be a question about a text, a math problem, or a statement that will make the children think.
2. Tell the children to think quietly about the question or topic for a few minutes.
3. Then, ask them to share their ideas with a friend beside them. Give them a few minutes for this.
4. Encourage some pairs to share their ideas with the whole class.



She Who Bloomed

A Catch-up Clubs SEL Story

Along the busy, noisy highway of Maasim, Sarangani Province stands an elementary school comprised mostly of Maguindanaoan learners. Among them is Lisa, 11 years old, who is already in Grade 6 and is about to graduate.

Lisa was once a quiet, shy little girl who preferred to be alone most of the time. Being the eldest, she spends her time helping her mother with chores like cleaning, washing the dishes, and even cooking simple meals. She only expresses herself around people she knew by heart. She loves to play hide-and-seek and alutanay with her younger siblings at home. Alutanay is a traditional Bisaya game, like tag, where kids playfully chase each other and tries to avoid being caught by the "it."

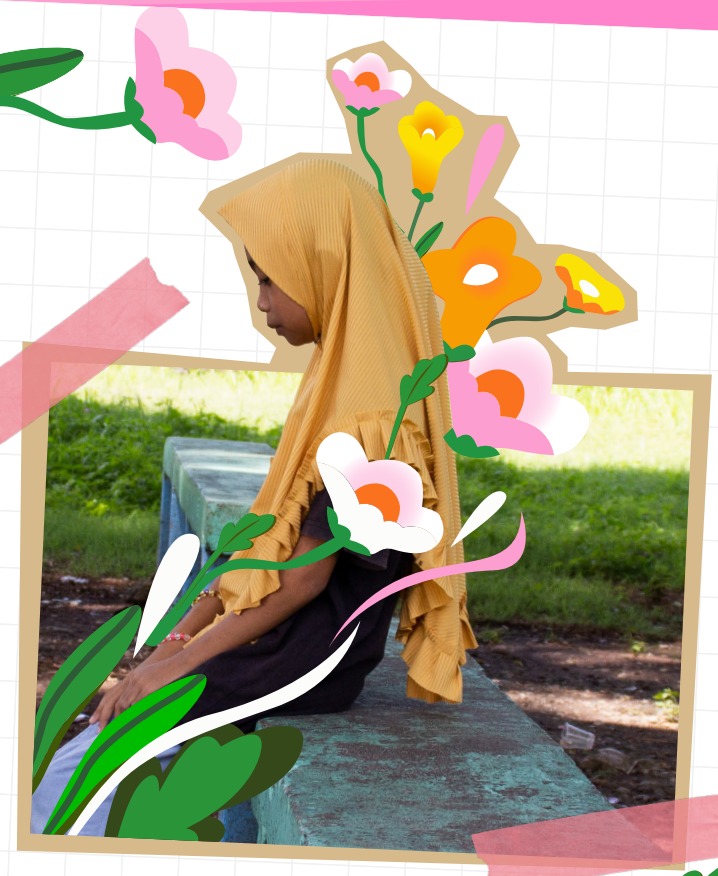
In many public schools in the province, a usual morning scene begins with the rumbles of tricycles unloading children who dash just to be in line for the flag ceremony. In Lisa's case, however, it is different. Her mother always takes her to school, and almost every day, she would cry before her mother would have the chance to even say goodbye. Sometimes, her mother would sit-in in her classes until she gets comfortable. It was her adviser, Ma'am Irene, who would kneel beside her, assuring her that she is safe in school.

According to Ma'am Irene, her class adviser, she seeks companionship and likes having someone familiar. So, every time Lisa's mother leaves, she would kneel beside her and calmly assure her that she is safe in school. Despite this, she still chooses to spend most of her days seated alone, quietly observing.

Things started to change when she was enrolled in Save the Children's Catch-up Clubs (CuCs), a reading remediation program for the holistic development of children.

"It's fun playing with others," she shared, remembering their CuC activities. One of the four components of the program is the Socio-emotional Learning (SEL) designed to encourage children to express themselves and interact with others confidently through fun games, playful storytelling, and mindfulness exercises.





"The one where we touch colors," she said is her favorite game. She recalls how their Community Learning Facilitator, Ma'am Mina, would call out a color and they scatter around, searching for anything that matched it. Community Learning Facilitators are volunteers from the community who know the local language and context and lead the learning sessions.

Little by little, Lisa learned to raise her hand. She started smiling back when smiled at and she enjoyed participating in class.

When asked if she still cries when her mother leaves, she replied, "Not anymore. Since I am already a Grade 6 student." Lisa was also proud to share that she became a little independent, "I can now go to CuCs by myself. I don't have to wait for teacher."

For Ma'am Mina, the key to creating a comfortable learning environment is affirmation. "She's always present in our sessions. She gets positively overwhelmed when appreciated, so when she participates, we encourage her more with praises like "very good" and "you're excellent."

In Catch-up Clubs, Lisa discovered new friendships. She also met Aya who became her favorite partner during activities. Slowly, she began to bloom. Now, Lisa is no longer the girl who clung to her mother's side. She enters the school gates, smiling, and ready to play.

It's CuC time!

Fish for Words

Now, we're off to the main tasks! This time, learners will play while learning through fun reading and writing activities! This first activity helps them practice recognizing the sounds in a word and reading familiar, common words.

Steps:

1. The facilitator will first demonstrate. "Fish" for a word card from the container and read it slowly. Make sure to pronounce each sound and blend them together gradually. Then, read the whole word fluently. Point to each letter in the word as you say it.
2. Choose a few children to do what you just modeled: pronounce each sound, blend the sounds slowly, and then read the whole word fluently.
3. Divide the children into small groups and give each group their own container of word cards so they can do the same activity.
4. Observe the groups and guide any child who needs help.



Rex and His Boat of Dreams

The sea has never been far from the life of Rex, an 11-year-old fisherman's son. As the eldest of three siblings, Rex understands his role as the eldest. Ever since he was younger, he knows his responsibility - to study hard and guide his siblings.

His family lives a simple life in a small coastal community in Maasim, Sarangani Province. On some Saturdays, Rex accompanies his father to fish from four o'clock in the afternoon until nine in the evening aboard their small boat. The two bank on courage and perseverance as they attempt to navigate Sarangani Bay.

On those Saturdays, the sea gifts them with a handful catch of bolinao, a very small fish. Rex helps his father sell enough to buy packs of rice for a family of five. On school days, Rex leaves his father preparing their boat and waits again for him during the late hours of the night.

Once, Rex shared stories of the storms that nearly drowned his dreams. He said there were times he could not go to school or attend the Catch-up Clubs (CuC) sessions because of their living situation. The money his father earns from fishing was never enough. Even when his mother accepted laundry services for their neighbors, their combined income never sufficed to sustain his and his siblings' needs. Most of the times, the pot was empty.

And yet, no crashing waves or howling winds could extinguish the passion for learning that Rex found in Catch-up Clubs.

Before, he struggled to recognize letter sounds. But now, he can confidently read stories with comprehension. He finally graduated from the program in March 2025.

"Gusto nako mag-Engineering pagdako, para makapatindog og balay," he shared with pride as their half-concrete, half-woven bamboo home stood firm behind him. (I want to be an engineer when I grow up, so I can build houses.)

When his parents found out that Rex joined CuCs, they were elated, especially after understanding that because of the program, their eldest child can finally read.

"Magtarong lang gid daw og eskuwela, para makagraduate," Rex recalled his parents' reminders after witnessing him complete the reading remediation program. (I just have to study well, so I can graduate.)

He also shared his experience in CuCs, especially how learning and playing became lighter and happier For Rex, learning to read was more than simply pronouncing words; it meant understanding them.

One thing Rex is certain of is that his dream to finish school will never be washed away, and his boat of dreams will not remain stranded on the shore. It will sail. It will not sink. It will weather the storms.

It's CuC time!

Word Hopscotch

And we have another fun game! At every step, children must read, pronounce, or use the word.



Steps:

1. Draw a hopscotch grid on the floor using chalk or tape (with 6–10 boxes or more).
2. Write one compound word in each box.
3. Have the children line up and take turns playing. The first player tosses a small object or marker (stone, coin, or eraser) into one of the boxes with a word.
4. The player then hops on one foot through the boxes of the grid, avoiding the box where the marker landed.
5. As the player lands on each box, they must read aloud the compound word written inside.
6. The player must hop through all the boxes until they reach the end.
7. On the way back, the player hops again through the boxes until they reach the one nearest to where their marker is. They stop, balance, pick up the marker, and then finish the hop.
8. The next child in line takes a turn, and the game continues until everyone has played.



The City's Humidity Speaks to Ana

From the community of Moros dwelling by the shore, to the roadside where car horns blare, to the clamoring voices of the market crowds – none of these discouraged Ana to attend Catch-up Clubs (CuCs).

from the community of Moros dwelling by the shore:

At 10 years old, Ana found solace in the gentle waves of her community with the sea and her childhood friends. When schools closed during the COVID-19 pandemic, she experienced another form of silence. She struggled to keep up with modular learning. Her parents had no time to teach her, and it was as if a door was slammed against her – one that cannot be easily opened in that new educational system. She no longer wanted to read as though the pages grew heavier beneath her small fingers.

When schools reopened, she was already enrolled in Grade 4. She found it hard to adjust to Catch-up Clubs. There were times she cried. She was unsure of what would happen in the program.

Now, as she played with other kids and CuCs-mates, education shapes her into a child who dares to dream higher for her own future.

by the roadside where the horns of cars blare:

Ana's home stands near the rumble of engines and the bustle of the busy streets of General Santos City. Her father, a tricycle driver with no greater wish than for her daughter to study well, rejoiced when she joined Catch-up Clubs. Ana is about to graduate, but on top of that, she leapt two levels progressing from Letter level to Story level with Comprehension.

Before, reading was a struggle. Now, Ana is fluent in both Filipino and English in all aspects of these languages: writing, spelling, reading, and finding meaning. After just a year, Ana graduated from Catch-up Clubs.

in the clamor of the market:

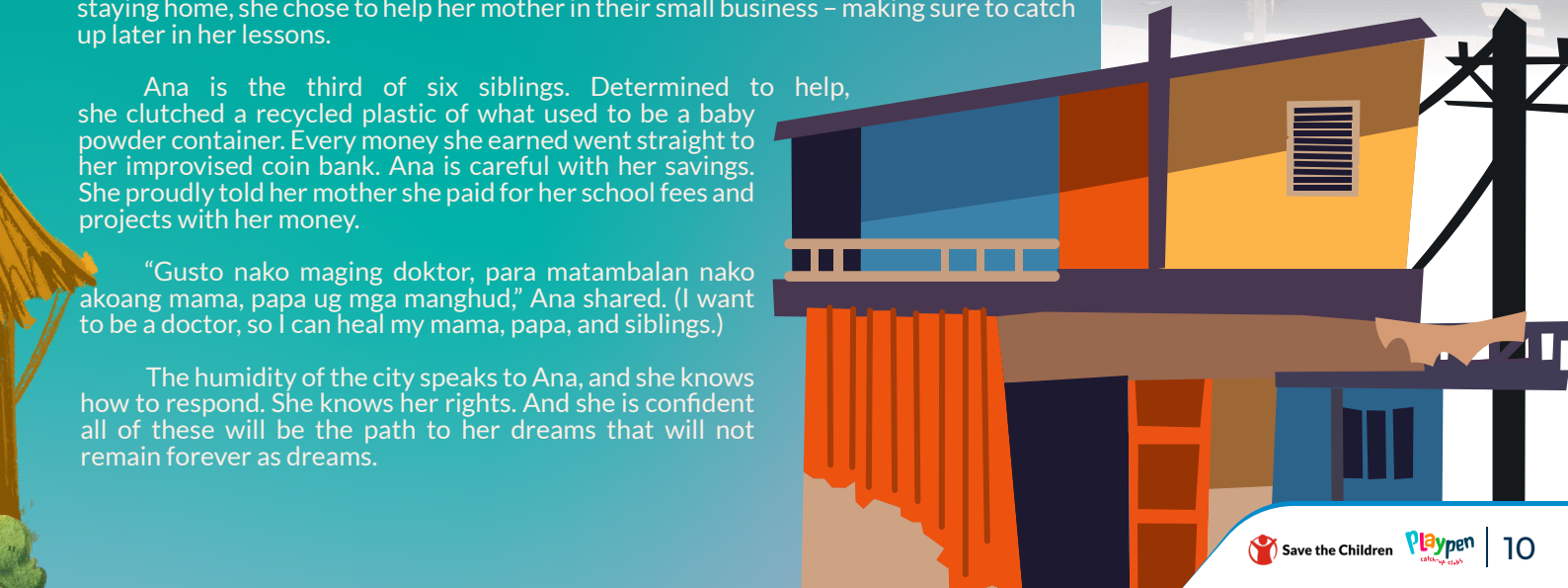
On days without class, she never failed to be at her mother's stall, arranging cotton socks in neat rows, hoping they could make enough to meet the needs of the family for the day. Sometimes, financial troubles forced her to be absent from school. But instead of staying home, she chose to help her mother in their small business – making sure to catch up later in her lessons.



Ana is the third of six siblings. Determined to help, she clutched a recycled plastic of what used to be a baby powder container. Every money she earned went straight to her improvised coin bank. Ana is careful with her savings. She proudly told her mother she paid for her school fees and projects with her money.

"Gusto nako maging doktor, para matambalan nako akoang mama, papa ug mga manghud," Ana shared. (I want to be a doctor, so I can heal my mama, papa, and siblings.)

The humidity of the city speaks to Ana, and she knows how to respond. She knows her rights. And she is confident all of these will be the path to her dreams that will not remain forever as dreams.



It's CuC time!

Synonym Race

The fun continues with our next game! In groups, children will race to find synonyms of a word given by the facilitator or another child. The goal of this activity is to expand the children's vocabulary.



Steps:

1. Explain what a synonym is (a word that has the same meaning).
2. Give examples to the whole class. For this activity, words with similar or close meanings may also be accepted (e.g., big, gigantic, enormous, huge, etc.).
3. For example, write the word "big" on the board and ask the children for synonyms.
4. Use this example to clarify which words will be accepted and which will not. For instance, wide is not a synonym for big, but it may be accepted because its meaning is somewhat related.
5. Divide the children into groups.
6. Each group will write a list of synonyms for the word on the board. Set a time limit for answering.
8. The group with the longest list of synonyms wins.
9. Ask the other groups if they have additional words to add to the winning group's list.
10. Post the longest list on the wall.
11. Ensure that all children can read and understand the words in the list.

Yana's Determination Beyond Circumstances

A Catch-up Clubs Learner's Story of Perseverance

"We used to cross rivers just to get to school" is a familiar line etched in the collective memory of many Filipinos, which are all narratives of their parents and grandparents' sacrifice just to go to school. For some, these can already be considered as stories of the past, a bygone struggle.

But not for Yana.

Yana, 12, is a Grade 6 pupil of an integrated school in Maasim, Sarangani Province. She is also one of the 24 learners of Catch-up Clubs (CuCs), a play-based reading remediation program adapted by their school from Save the Children. At first, her reading ability was at the Letter Level.





Yana begins her day simply. She prepares for school, takes a quick bath, grabs her pink backpack her mother gifted her, then quickly wears her slippers. She cannot wear shoes for fear that it may get soaked as she crosses a river downhill from their family house. On some mornings, her uncle would offer her a ride to school. But most days though, it was those same worn slippers that would take her to her first class, as she walks approximately 3.1 kilometers alone from one barangay to another. That walk takes nearly an hour along the national highway until she reaches the school gates joining the stream of children spilling out of sikads (cycle rickshaws), tricycles, and cars often accompanied by their families.





At 10:30 in the morning, just a few minutes after their recess time, she heads to their CuC venue, their school gym. She recalls their very first session, where they took turns passing a ball and whoever gets caught with it on their hand will introduce themselves. Everyone was cheering for each other and laughing about it. That first session changed her perspective on learning – it can also be fun.

It was through CuC that she finally learned to read.

When the rain pours in the afternoon, she leaves her school bag behind in their classroom to keep it dry. She braves the highway alone with no umbrella. Her clothes cling to her skin, drenched but determined to get home.

Despite this, Yana would never miss a CuCs session.

She is the only one still in school among four siblings. Her older sister and brother both stopped attending school after they graduated from junior high school. Even when their class adviser would announce that there are no classes for the day, she still traverses the same road just to attend CuCs. At a young age, she knows how valuable education is. This is why she spends her weekends teaching her younger sister, a toddler, everything she learned in CuCs. "Pag muuli ko gikan eskwelahan, tudluan nako siyag A,B,C,D." When asked why she decided to do this, she answered with quiet pride, "Para kabalo na siya. Para pagdako niya, dili na siya magpatudlo." (When I get home from school, I teach her A, B, C, D so she can learn. That way, when she grows up, she won't need someone else to teach her.)

Last school year, she graduated both from elementary and CuCs now reading at a Story Level with Comprehension. Today, she is a Grade 7 student enrolled in the same school. She holds onto a bigger dream: to become a police officer someday.

It may take her longer, harder roads to walk on, but her legs are used to the journey. She will get there.









It's CuC time!

Cloze Activity

And we're down to our last reading and writing game! Our goal now is to encourage children to think about and discuss vocabulary and grammar while also making sense of the reading passage.

Steps:

1. Choose a text that is at the children's level but slightly challenging. It can be new or one the children have read once before.
2. Remove every 7th or 8th word. This way, some vocabulary words and some grammar words will be removed. You may also remove specific types of words.
3. DO NOT remove a word from the first sentence, since children need to understand the topic of the text.
4. Make all blanks the same length so the children don't just guess the missing words based on blank size.
6. Provide a list of the removed words at the end of the text for discussion. To make the activity a bit more challenging, add extra words that are not part of the text.
7. Explain the activity and divide the children into small groups or pairs.
8. Ask each group to complete the missing words, discuss their answers, and read the text while focusing on vocabulary and grammar.
9. Move around and observe as the groups work.
10. Review the children's answers. Discuss the suggested and correct words for each blank.
11. If the children choose an incorrect word but it still makes sense in the sentence, explain that sometimes more than one answer can be correct.

This Ability

A Catch-up Clubs Story of Inclusivity

For 11-year-old Anisa, missing a day of school is enough to bring her to tears.

Anisa (not her real name) is a Grade 5 pupil at an Indigenous People school situated in a quiet, close-knit community in one of the farthest and mountainous barangays in Maasim, Sarangani Province. She is also one of the 24 learners enrolled in Catch-up Clubs (CuCs), a play-based reading remediation program implemented by Save the Children. But not only her bright eyes and warm smile make her remarkable. Without a wheelchair or a crutch, each school day begins with the embrace of her parents, who carry her to their classroom in their arms.





At first, she struggled with her reading skills. When she was enrolled in Catch-up Clubs, everything began to change. As someone who loves to play, learning to read became easy with the CuCs approach. "Mas maayo ang CuCs kesa sa classroom kay nagabasa mi ug nagadula (CuCs is better than our classroom because we read and play)," she said.







When it is time for CuCs, her classmates would gather around her and carry her along the hilly road, gently to the school gym – where Teacher Irene and Teacher Sweeney await. She thanks her classmates for helping her, and teaches them how to read, too.

After school, she waits quietly by the hut near the gate, patiently waiting for her father who will bring her safely home. On weekends, her older sister who is already in college teaches her and their Grade 4 sibling to read. Other times, she plays with their neighbors who are also her CuCs classmates. Their favorite CuCs game is called "Triangle" where a ball is thrown around and whoever catches the ball must read the letters and words posted on the board.

In almost three months of playful CuCs sessions, Anisa made a remarkable leap. From barely knowing her letters, she reached reading a story with comprehension, a four-level step. Now, her favorite subjects are English and Filipino. For her, it is now "sayon (easy)" because "nakatabang ang CuCs para sayon na lang magtuon (CuCs made it easy for me to learn)."

Most kids would rather stay at home. But for Anisa, missing a day of school is enough to bring her to tears. When there's no extra money for fare, their barangay kagawad (councilor) offers her a ride just so she can attend their CuCs session. She deeply believes reading can help her graduate. She dreams of becoming a teacher, someday – one that will allow children like her to have fun by playing while learning.

Anisa was the only child in her Catch-up Clubs batch to graduate after just one cycle. With stronger reading skills, she showed how far her ability can take her and the possibilities she holds.






Teaching
WORK
HEART
pa
pa
sa

It's CuC time!

Seeing Colors

Each CuCs session includes time for a mindfulness activity. If the children are overly excited, facilitators are encouraged to replace an energizer activity with a mindfulness activity - an additional support to the Social and Emotional Learning.



Steps:

1. Have the children sit upright. If they are comfortable, they may close their eyes; if not, they should look at the top of the facilitator's head and allow their eyes to rest.
2. Tell the children to think of their favorite color but not to say it out loud.
3. Ask them to take a deep breath, and as they breathe, imagine their favorite color. Ask: Can you picture your favorite color flowing into your nose and down to your lungs? When you close your eyes, do you see the color in your lungs? In your heart? Is the color big or small? Is it moving, or is it staying still inside you?
4. Tell them to imagine their color spreading to all parts of their body down to their legs, toes, arms and fingers, up to their neck, ears, and eyes.
5. Tell them to become their favorite color as you count from one to 10.
6. Ask them to take another deep breath and hold it while you count to three. Tell the children to silently say their color as they exhale.







The Colors of the Community

In every Catch-up Clubs session, there is a still moment before the laughter begins or when too much energy fills the space. The children are asked to sit upright. The room quiets. And the facilitator gently invites them: "Think of your favorite color."

As they play the game, Seeing Colors, they are guided to breathe in a hue that comforts them. The children will imagine colors filling their lungs, flowing their hearts, and spreading to the very tips of their fingers. With every inhale, they grow brighter. With every exhale, they release their color into the room.

These colors represent their facilitators, their school heads, their parent-leaders, and their very own parents and guardians. In Catch-up Clubs, the community is a palette of people who breathe life into the learning environment of children every day.

PURPLE

Purple is the color of resilience that grows quietly, often unseen, but blooms when finally recognized.

For 40-year-old Roger, a CuC Community Learning Facilitator, purple is the shade of a dream once interrupted but never lost. Without a teaching license or an education diploma, he often doubted whether he belonged among other facilitators or if he is worthy of teaching kids to read. Yet, in Catch-up Clubs, he understood that his heart for children mattered more than papers.

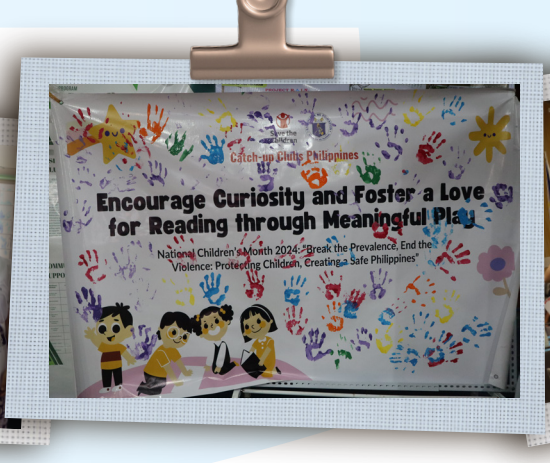
Children ran to him whenever they see him arrive at the school gymnasium. Even the shyest learners finally learned to speak up their thoughts. Purple is the strength to stay even on days when we had to go to school hungry. Purple is the unwavering commitment of someone who believes in the ability of children to excel.

TEAL

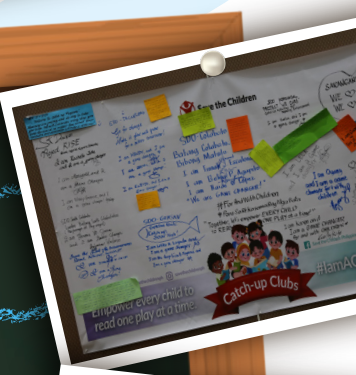
Teal mirrors Femar whose childhood love for play became the foundation of his dream to become a teacher.

As a former CuC facilitator and now an elementary teacher working in public schools, he carried with him the essential truth he learned in Catch-up Clubs: that children learn better when they are comfortable playing.















ORANGE

Orange carries the warmth of community that gathers people in a circle and makes them feel valued. This is the color of Glen, one of the two male CuC parent leaders in the entire municipality. In sessions filled mostly with mothers, he stepped in with humility and humor. He proved that nurturing is not defined by gender, but by heart for children.

Together with Arthur, he led parenting sessions, visited far-flung homes, and helped reshape the relationship between parents and their children.

Orange is the warmth of fathers breaking stereotypes by learning gentle discipline and positive parenting.

PLUM

Plum is the color that bridges differences. As a barangay kagawad, mother, and a member of the Blaan indigenous community, Nancy carried with her the wisdom of a tri-people community. She listened to the voices of Muslims, Christians, and Blaans of their barangay. She brought together parents despite different beliefs. In PACamustahan sessions, she saw how simple acts of warmth could heal gaps between parents and children.

MUSTARD

Mustard is a color of a service that refuses to let children be left behind. School Head, Grace, saw Catch-up Clubs not only as a program, but most importantly, as a promise.

In her nearly 15 years working in the Department of Education, she witnessed children bow their heads out of shame because they struggled to read. In CuC, she watched these same children raise their heads again confidently.

She pushed to scale CuC beyond the funding of Save the Children Philippines. Mustard is the color of a leader who chooses to see every child as her own – and fights for their future just as the same.

Each person and each color: Roger's purple, Femar's teal, Glen's orange, Nancy's plum, and Grace's mustard shape children's learning journey in Catch-up Clubs.

In CuC, a world is painted where parents rediscover tenderness, volunteers find purpose, teachers embrace play as a teaching strategy, school heads champion equity, and children are able to breathe easier because they are supported from all sides.



No Teaching License Required

A Catch-up Clubs Story of a Community Learning Facilitator

At 40 years old, Roger stands out among the Catch-up Clubs (CuCs) facilitators. While most of them are young professionals, some even licensed teachers, he is the oldest in the group. He was once a fourth-year Education student at the Mindanao State University, close to finishing his degree, but life had other plans.

"I lived alone from elementary until college," he recalled. Without anyone to support him, requirements piled up until he could no longer keep up. When he tried again, schools would not accept him anymore because of the new K-12 curriculum. He attempted enrolling in other schools in hopes of a scholarship, but these attempts were unsuccessful.

Yet, what he lacked in paper credentials, he found in purpose. He became a Community Learning Facilitator (CLF) in CuCs since its pilot cycle in 2024. "I am still not a teacher," Roger admitted but he said he believes that his faith guided his aspirations.

He witnessed first-hand the value of playing in learning. "Through the activities, I saw the children's interest during sessions. This is how we encouraged them [to read] through the games. Children were participative," Roger said.

Sometimes, he would be asked to act as substitute teacher in their local school. Being called "Sir Roger" or even "teacher" once made him uncomfortable, especially when school teachers themselves addressed him that way.

"Sometimes, I feel out of place when I am with other facilitators, especially during seminars and workshops. I would choose to remain silent. That is how I felt with myself. But they [other facilitators] made me feel I belong."

Still, he pressed on. He felt that this was intentionally made for him. He said, "Because if I think about it, I don't deserve it, because there are those who graduated with degrees. But, why me? This is a lingering question in my mind."

Little by little, he also found his confidence. "CuCs helped a lot. In my socio-emotional skills, CuCs helped me gain confidence. It developed how I see myself," he shared, "It's in my heart to help children."

For Roger, teaching is not just about speaking in front of the learners, but also in balancing the unique characters in the room. In Catch-up Clubs, learners are not grouped by their grade level, but by their reading levels. There were also different identities and personalities.





Roger recalled, "I learned how to understand different characteristics, different behaviors. Because even though they came from different grade levels, in CuCs, they feel that they are one." Even when there are shy learners, he constantly reminds them that facilitators are there to help them so they should not be shy.

He said there are days when volunteering feels heavy. Last year, he almost quit. Volunteering meant having no income, and most mornings he went to school hungry. He only relied on his income from gathering sticks in the mountains. Each bundle of sticks would be sold for only P10, and that was not enough to survive.

"Last year, I really admitted how tiring it is to be a volunteer. I don't have any source of income. Sometimes, I would go to school hungry. Now, I am grateful for the small allowance given. Before, if not for Sir Redin, my fellow CLF, I don't think I would have survived," Roger said.



But what pulls him back every time are the children.

Children would run to him whenever he prepared for their session, sometimes even sweeping the floor themselves to prepare. One learner, too shy to speak during reading activities, slowly began to join group games in their second year.

"I've been thinking that the children really need me. The children need volunteers who can teach them. Some of them don't even recognize letters...This is my motivation, that maybe I can be one of the reasons they learn how to read, even if it's just from letter to word."



Teaching is not measured by what the teacher receives but by what the children gain. "Teaching children is a commitment, even if you get nothing in return," Roger said.

Roger reflects on his students' ability to learn. He says no child is "dumb." Some simply learn at a different pace. "When it comes to reading, they're not like the others who are quick, who can easily catch up with what the teacher is teaching. But I have high expectations for these children because they are willing to learn. Children who are truly willing to read will surely be able to achieve something."

Every start of the session, he asks them about their dreams, reminding them that one step toward achieving those is learning how to read. "I can see that the children truly have a bright future," he said with quiet conviction.

Roger may have no diploma to hang on a wall. But to the children of Catch-up Clubs, he has always been more than enough.



"I always say that when it comes to teaching in the field, I believe I don't have any shortcomings. But if the basis is paper [credentials], then I really don't have any," Roger said. "I was inspired because through Catch-up Clubs, I was able to fulfill my dream of teaching children. I truly felt what it's like to be a teacher."

And indeed, to the children, he is their teacher – no teaching license required.

The Child I Was is the Child of Today

A Catch-up Clubs Story of a Community Learning Facilitator



"When I was a child, I really loved playing. Even until now, when [I] was introduced to CuCs, I applied play into educating, because children learn better when it is done through play."

This is how Femar, 35, a former Community Learning Facilitator (CLF) captured his life before, during, and after his unforgettable experience with Catch-up Clubs (CuCs), and how it shaped him both as a volunteer and teacher.

His Life as a Volunteer

Volunteerism has always been a mission engraved in Femar's heart. He started out as part of the community relations staff in the office of the former vice governor of their province. For him, engaging in volunteer work for the community came naturally. Who would have thought that his love for children and for helping others would become the cure for his dreams of teaching?

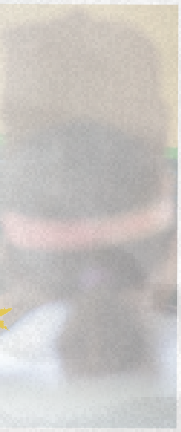
His opportunity with Save the Children's Catch-up Clubs program came when he was invited to serve as a parent-volunteer in their elementary school in Maasim, Sarangani Province. "Save the Children and the Department of Education (DepEd) have an agreement that volunteers can earn points toward obtaining a plantilla (a permanent, regular government job) item for teaching. However, this was never my primary motivation, as I am already fulfilled by volunteer work. For me, helping comes first; everything else follows," Femar shared.

His Fire in Catch-up Clubs

Femar served as a Catch-up Clubs volunteer for both the first and second cycles from 2022 to 2024. When he began teaching, his desire to help children who mirrored his own playful childhood grew stronger. He said what set CuCs apart from all his other experiences as a volunteer was its play-based approach, where children not only learned but were also protected and developed holistically.







He would often struggle with teaching children with diverse needs and learning styles. Other children would be absent from sessions because of distance and financial constraints. At times, teachers themselves would shoulder costs just to ensure that children could attend. The school even initiated to provide meals for the learners and allowances for the facilitators.

Keeping the Advocacy

When Femar finally earned a teaching item in DepEd, he knew his advocacy should not end with CuCs. He believed he must carry the principles of Catch-up Clubs onto a bigger platform.

So, he carried the power of play into his classroom. He observed child and adult safeguarding at all times. And he utilized socio-emotional learning techniques in encouraging a more interactive teaching environment.

"When CuCs was introduced to me, I really saw the effectiveness of combining play and education. I can confidently say that learning becomes easier that way, especially in handling children's emotions. If a child is too active, I apply socio-emotional learning [methods.] If another is too quiet, I spark motivation. I apply SEL (Social and Emotional Learning) before starting classes," he shared. Femar said he firmly believes that the success of one child is the success of an entire community.

"It takes a village to raise a child. The same goes for helping learners to read. Volunteers, program teams, sponsors, schools, and parents must work together so that no child will be left unable to read. I hope Save the Children's work won't stop here; it should continue to address reading gaps and sustain CuCs," he said.

There are experiences in life one could never imagine would be relevant in the present, or even in the future. For Femar, these very experiences became the fire that fuels his advocacy and sustains the dreams of the children he once taught to read.



A PILLAR OF PARENTS'

Parent support groups, including the Catch-up Clubs' PACamustahan, are usually led by mothers, who are often more involved in their children's day-to-day care.

In Maasim, however, two fathers from Barangay Amsipit emerged as parent-leaders, supporting both parents and children in their community.

Beyond the walls of the gymnasium stood a pillar of promises: Glen and Arthur.

"Why not women?" the community once asked them. But Glenn, 44, a man of humor, simply laughed and explained that men, too, can be nurturing leaders especially if it is for the welfare of children.

When he and Arthur, 45, who is a barangay councilor, volunteered to handle the PACamustahan sessions, they also faced challenges in winning the hearts of the parents – 18 of whom were mothers. In the society, a father's stereotypical responsibility is often centered on providing the needs of the family which is why mothers are tasked to attend school-related activities. As a father of five, Glenn fully understands the challenges of raising children. Glenn remains grateful for how these mothers gradually began listening to them shed light on the importance of positive parenting.

The impact of the PACamustahan became evident when parents brought their children enrolled in Catch-up Clubs with them to the open gymnasium, where the usual sessions are held. Right after the sessions, parents were encouraged to put into practice what they learned: guiding their children in reading, writing, and more importantly, in building a more nurturing relationship.

"Naa gid gap ang relasyon sa mga bata ug ilang parents. Dil normal ang pagdisiplina sa una, pero tung naa na ang program, gipasabot ang pagdisiplina, gicorrect ang attitude sa parents ug karun, makita gid nimo ang pinagbag-o. Okay na sila, tama na ang pamaagi sa pagpadako," Glenn shared.



PROMISES

A Catch-up Club's Parent-Leader Story



(There really was a gap in the relationship between children and their parents. Discipline used to be harsh and unhealthy. But when the program came, parents learned about positive discipline. Their attitudes changed, and now you can truly see the difference. Parents are okay now—the way they raise their children has improved.)

Beyond the weekly sessions, Glenn and Arthur went the extra mile. Households were scattered in far-flung sitios of their community, but they still conducted home visits to ensure that mothers shared with their husbands what they learned. They found out how these lessons were reshaping the principles of their homes especially as to how children should be raised.

What Glenn and Arthur build as parent-leaders was a strong foundation. Glenn reflected on their sessions: the presence of both parents, the support of the community, and the dialogues shaped by compassion for children. He is confident that they planted a promise in every CuC parents' heart – that no child should be deprived of the nurturing love that they deserve while learning and growing.

The gymnasium of their barangay stands as a testament – a living memory of the dreams of the parents for their children's future. PACamustahan already ended. Parents already went home.

But the promises remain.



KASTABENG

Nancy's Story of Community Service beyond Diversity





In Maasim, Sarangani Province, diverse cultures live side by side: Christians, Indigenous Peoples, and Muslim communities with different languages, stories, and beliefs. Yet amidst these differences, unity breathes.

Nancy is the Vice-Chairperson of the Committee for Education of their barangay. But before then, she has been a volunteer for causes that can't be measured by money. When Save the Children invited her to become one of the parent-leaders of their school, she did not think twice about embracing the opportunity.

She used both her volunteer role and her barangay position to serve. She knew that the learning she gained and could offer to the parents of the Catch-up Clubs is worth it.

Because of the PACamustahan sessions, she realized that many parents still lacked expressions of love for their children. One parent once came to her in tears, sharing how because of their sessions, she began practicing what she learned with her children. For the very first time, she hugged her children before sending them to school. And with that embrace came the warm touch of tears on her cheek.

"Children need warmth," Nancy reflected as a mother. Discipline alone is not enough. They also need nurturing and love. Nancy's love grew, not only for her family, but for their entire community.

At first, PACamustahan was difficult given the diverse beliefs parents carried from their homes. Some parents practice physical force in discipling children. But Nancy made sure that no child's right would be compromised. Discipline should be rooted on what is right and respectful. Slowly, she earned the trust of the parents creating a space where everyone is comfortable to share and listen.

As a barangay councilor, a mother, and a member of the indigenous people community, her perspective widened as she immersed herself in the realities of the parents in their community. She made sure her reach extended to all – in the Sama and Muslim communities by the shore, in the Blaans by the steep mountains, or in the Bisaya and Ilonggo homes tucked along the roadside.

"Respect, that's all. We may have different names and identities, but we are brothers and sisters," Nancy shared.

Love is anchored on respect for culture. It is in this love that their community found the unity that bounded people together. Beyond the sea, plains, and mountains, they have built a world where every person, especially children, feels safe. A world reshaped and is still being reshaped by Catch-up Clubs and those who are part of it.





A Principal's Promise through Catch-up Clubs

For Grace, a school principal with nearly 15 years of experience in the Department of Education (DepEd), Catch-up Clubs (CuCs) is more than a reading program. She has become one of its champions, determined to scale it beyond Save the Children's efforts and into a sustainable activity of her school's improvement plan.

"I'm really into scaling up the CuCs, and I'm one of the school heads who is truly pushing for it – not just for our school to implement, but for others as well. I've seen that in the CuCs, it's not only the academic aspect of the children that develops," Grace said.

During her instructional supervision of the sessions, she noticed children who were quiet, the ones who did not know how to speak up or share their ideas are now doing better through CuCs. Now, they can express themselves, share, and even perform, especially in reading. Grace further shared, "They've really improved. I can see that their emotional and social skills have also grown, along with their overall performance."

She recalled walking into classrooms before CuCs was implemented. Some children would shyly bow their heads because they were unable to read, but over time, with the help of CuCs, they slowly gained confidence. "You can really see that this proves no child is naturally born with an aversion to reading. Reading is a skill that can be developed. And now, you can see that they are the kids who enjoy life and at the same time, enjoy their learning," Grace said.

Beyond academic progress, she treasured the small moments that showed how much their learners appreciated Catch-up Clubs. Once, a Grade 6 learner asked her after their last CuCs session cycle, "Ma'am, are we not having a session today?" To her, this is proof that children weren't just learning. They were also looking forward to every session.

"And you won't see them skipping sessions. It's clear that they're eager to keep coming back again." she added, smiling.

The impact of the program also reached the parents of the CuCs learners. One of the four components of the program is a weekly PACamustahan kapehan (coffee gathering) sessions. PAC which means Parent/caregivers Advocates for CuCs is a group composed of two parent-leaders and 24 parent-participants who convene every Saturday to share about their children's learning progress. They also learn about positive parenting over a cup of coffee. But through Grace's initiative, this knowledge does not end only on the 26 parents.

The sessions on positive parenting inspired Grace, as the school head, to design a training where parents share their experiences during parent mentoring sessions, allowing them to pass on their learnings to other parents.

"One of the reasons why we encounter problems in education is the lack of proper parenting support. Now, through parent mentoring, thanks to the help of a parent leader, other parents were also taught. There were meaningful conversations among parents during school meetings, and they were responding to each other, showing that real learning was happening," Grace shared.

One of the parents, even when the program's cycle already ended, still insisted to volunteer for school events, especially in preparing hot meals for the children. "You can see that this is one way of connecting the school with the community. At least now, with the help of CuCs, we can say that we are not alone in this battle of championing quality education, especially in reading. Since DepEd is now focused on increasing the literacy level of our children, this has been very helpful."

Grace also saw how Catch-up Clubs strengthened the child protection policy in their school. She clarified that there were already policies in place but it was strengthened because of the trainings provided by Save the Children. They learned to fully utilize the Child Protection Committee as well as to implement proper referral mechanisms. They also have a book they use as guide for this process.

For Grace, institutionalizing Catch-up Clubs is no longer just an advocacy – it is now her duty. When they drafted their School Improvement Plan for 2026-2028, both the children and their parents championed for the continued implementation of CuCs in their campus.

"Our children really spoke up about what they experienced. Even our Supreme Elementary Learners Government officers said other students should also have the chance to experience CuCs. It feels just like playing. You don't even realize that you're already learning," Grace said.

To accomplish this, their school signed a Memorandum of Agreement with Save the Children Philippines to duplicate the program by using the program design of CuCs as their school's reading program.

"With that, it was not only the 24 students who were able to experience what CuCs is all about," she said.

Yet, as the school head, she is not blind to the existing challenges. She observed that there were some children who even though they finished the cycle, did not show progress in their reading level.

"This means there's a lack in further assessment…Hopefully there will also be training on conducting deeper assessments. Some children might need psychological attention, because we can't deny that such cases really exist. We really need to coordinate with psychologists and child psychiatrists who can diagnose children with special needs," she said.

This is why she advocates for tools like the Multi-Factor Assessment Tool, an educational assessment developed by DepEd to understand a child's learning development and identify the required support they need. Grace appreciated that Catch-up Clubs has a systematic program design, especially its evaluation and assessment methods.

Despite these challenges, what fuels her fight is deeply personal. Her voice broke as she explained why she sees CuCs as a promise:

"Well, actually, I only have one desire. I could cry just thinking about it. I look at these children as if they were my own. I also imagine myself back when I was still in school. That's why my only dream for them is to also achieve success."

She said many of the children in the Catch-up Clubs still struggle to read and face challenges at home, including hunger or caring for younger siblings. She hopes that in 10 years, they will be successful and able to pursue the quality education every child deserves.

For Grace, Catch-up Clubs is not just a reading remediation program. Now, it is a promise she intends to keep.



It has been a meaningful and fun session!

Now, as you go home, you can continue learning in your homes with your parents, ates, and kuyas!



For more information and inquiries, you may contact us at:

Landline: 083 500 8377 (GSCO), 02 852 7283 (QCO)
Mobile: +63 995 437 3708 (GSCO), +63 917 806 3048 (QCO)
Email: adapt.ph@savethechildren.org

Save the Children Philippines
Quezon City Office
4th Floor, Sunnymede IT Center, 1614 Quezon Avenue, Quezon City 1103

Save the Children Philippines
General Santos City Office
2/F SBDC Obrero Building, J.P. Laurel Ave Dadiangas North, General Santos City 9500
Telephone: 083-500-8377

Facebook and Instagram: savethechildrenph
X: savechildrenph





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