

## **Empowering Parents through Social-Emotional Learning: A Case Study of MindHaven School's Parent Education Program**

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**Abstract:** Transforming parental engagement into parental empowerment is essential for systemic transformation in school programs (Winthrop, 2020). MindHaven School, with a 30-year legacy of promoting parent empowerment, has effectively turned challenges, such as the COVID-19 pandemic, into opportunities to advance its mission. Through its "Every Home a School, Every Parent a Teacher" Learning Model, MindHaven's Parent Education Program (PEP) has emerged as a crucial initiative. During the pandemic, parents transitioned from supporters to direct implementers of their children's education, attending 25-35 two-hour virtual training sessions per school year, compared to the previous 15-25 face-to-face sessions. These PEP sessions have been vital in addressing learning gaps, maintaining academic progress, and mitigating socio-emotional challenges of distance learning. This ethnographic study documents how intensified Social-Emotional Learning (SEL) during PEP sessions empowered parents, reflected in interactions between learners, learners and teachers, learners and parents, spouses, parents and teachers, parents of different learners, and parents and the community. The study found that empowered parents benefit not only learners but the entire school community, especially during the transition from distance learning to face-to-face classes. The effects of parent empowerment through PEP sessions are categorized as follows: a) parents creating and maintaining meaningful, trusting, and productive relationships with school staff, b) parents supporting each other to keep all children engaged in school, c) learners inspired by their empowered parents to help fellow learners address socio-emotional issues, and d) replication, scaling up, and community applications of MindHaven School's Parent Empowerment Program.

**Keywords:** Parent Empowerment Program; Parent Engagement; Social-Emotional Learning; Distance Learning to Face-to-Face Classes; Inclusive Education.

### **INTRODUCTION**

Every community is equally concerned about the education and future of its children. However, caring is not the same as having the power to effect change (Parent Power, 2019). Transforming parental engagement into parental empowerment is a critical leverage point for systemic transformation, particularly in school programs (Winthrop, 2020). MindHaven School, with a 30-year legacy of advocating for parent empowerment, has adeptly turned barriers, such as the COVID-19 pandemic, into opportunities to intensify its mission.

### **Global Context**

Over the past three decades, education entrepreneurs, parents, and students have demonstrated that with the right innovations, ALL children can learn and succeed (parentpowerined.org, 2019). However, the "supply" of these educational innovations cannot reach its full potential without creating "actionable demand" to remove the political and policy barriers that prevent education systems from broadly embracing these innovations. Although data shows that parents play the most important role in children's health, protection, growth, and social-emotional well-being throughout their lives, quality parental support in children's education also makes a substantial difference in their academic performance. This parental role in education has been particularly amplified during the

COVID-19 pandemic when access to in-person schooling was limited, and parents were more expected to support children's learning (UNICEF, 2019).

Unfortunately, most parents in school systems do not possess the economic and political power needed to effect change, and too few know how to activate their personal power to influence change in their current school systems. Generally, school systems often miss an opportunity to engage parents as partners to fully unlock the potential for the students they serve. Thus, turning "latent demand" into "actionable demand" is about power: informing and organizing parents so they can exercise their innate power—individually and collectively—to create and sustain change. A growing number of organizations are committed to creating "actionable demand" by supporting parents to employ a diverse array of empowerment strategies (parentpowerined.org, 2019).

Schools play a significant role in structuring our social lives. Face-to-face interaction permeates not only school but also families, workplaces, communities, and society at large. As Dussel, Ferrante, and Pulfer (2020) note, the pandemic has highlighted the role of schools in the socialization of children and adolescents, particularly in their relations with both adults and peers. There is a growing awareness among parents and communities about the crucial role of teachers and the complex nature of teaching. Parents today presumably understand better than before the pandemic the importance of teachers in guiding, tutoring, and facilitating learning processes.

Reimagining the educational system entails broadening and deepening the roles of students and educators and empowering families as learning coaches who can support their children's learning (Reimers and Schleicher, 2020). This requires reinforcing the understanding and collaboration between schools and families.

### **Philippine Context**

In the Philippines, parents often participate in school activities as members of parent-teacher associations (PTAs) or representatives on school governing councils. However, their primary role is predominantly limited to resource mobilization and volunteer work (UNICEF, 2021). This traditional model of parental involvement has not fully tapped into the potential for parents to play a more significant role in their children's education, especially in terms of providing direct educational support and fostering a more collaborative school community.

Parenting is arguably one of the most important roles a person can undertake. Decades of research indicate that strong parent-family-school relationships are crucial to student success (Epstein, 1995; Jeynes, 2005, 2007). When parents and school staff collaborate effectively, students achieve higher grades, perform better on standardized tests, adapt more successfully to school environments, attend school more regularly, earn more academic credits, exhibit enhanced social skills, and are more likely to graduate and pursue higher education (Henderson & Mapp, 2002). Unfortunately, parenting is a role for which few are adequately prepared, particularly during crises like the COVID-19 pandemic. Despite the profound influence parents can have on shaping future citizens, there are no degrees or formal training programs dedicated to parenting. Effective parenting can significantly mitigate many societal issues, underscoring the essential role parents play in fostering a healthy and successful family life.

Traditional parent involvement and education efforts often seek to "fix parents" by providing them with information and urging them to change their behaviors to better align with the school's agenda and educators' expectations. When educators and policymakers refer to "hard-to-reach" parents, they often overlook how power, race, culture, class, and language shape inequitable contexts for engagement (Hong & Mapp, 2010). Typical

approaches to involving parents, such as PTA meetings, parent-teacher conferences, and open houses, often backfire. The very parents we hope to engage more deeply in education often feel disregarded regarding their experiences with school, their understanding of their own children, and the contributions and perspectives they bring to improving education. This unintentional message that parents have nothing to contribute can deter marginalized parents from engaging with the school.

### MindHaven Context

At MindHaven, we understand the importance of parents and have made it our mission to help parents be better and more effective in their roles. Our Parent Education Program (PEP) sessions, which were typically 15 per school year, increased to as many as 30 during each year of the COVID-19 pandemic. PEP is a continuous training and empowerment program designed to help MSI parents understand their role and develop the self-efficacy skills they need to effectively engage in their child's learning process.

The school has been conducting PEP sessions based on entry data from parents, and for the past five years, it has adopted and contextualized the Framework of The Principles of Equitable Collaboration. This framework describes the six essential elements of equitable collaboration identified by the Equitable Parent-School Collaboration Research Project. The Equitable Collaboration Framework outlines "contrasting rules of engagement" that characterize more traditional approaches to family engagement and evidence-based approaches to developing equitable partnerships between schools and families—or what the Equitable Parent-School Collaboration Research Project sometimes refers to as "next practices" (Organizing Engagement, 2023).

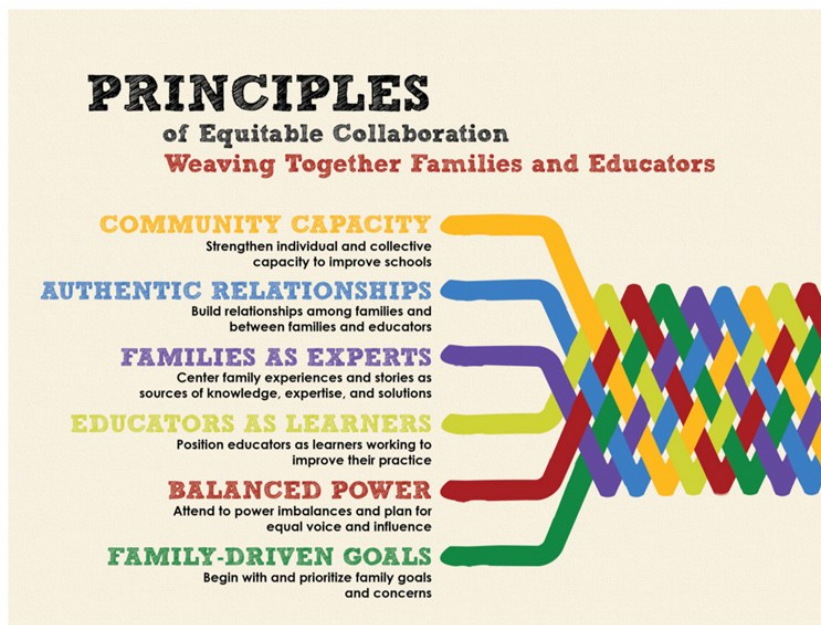


Figure 1. Principles of Equitable Collaboration

Greater family engagement in the teaching and learning processes, beyond merely assisting schools with non-educational tasks, was crucial even before the pandemic. For families, finding the motivation to expand their roles, along with the necessary guidance, will be a key issue moving forward. This is not merely a short-term effect of the pandemic. Education can no longer be confined to teaching, learning, and assessing in an in-person

setting; it now includes an expanding range of opportunities for schools and families to collaborate and support each other in the pursuit of shared goals (UNESCO, Ten Clues for Rethinking Curriculum).

The benefits of parental involvement in schools extend significantly to a student's social-emotional development. Research shows that when parents engage in the classroom, students tend to exhibit greater self-confidence and motivation to learn. On a schoolwide level, students with actively engaged families are less likely to require disciplinary actions or redirection during class. Hargreaves (2020) emphasizes that children's well-being is not an alternative to academic success but a prerequisite for learning, especially for the most vulnerable groups. This perspective highlights the importance of a holistic approach to education, acknowledging the interplay between the emotional aspects of cognition and the cognitive aspects of emotions (Pons, de Rosnay, & Cuisinier, 2010).

The ability of educational institutions to view education as a catalyst for reimagining the future will be a crucial test of their willingness to redesign learning systems for resilience. This study focuses on how MindHaven School implemented this framework, particularly during the pandemic, by intensifying its Social and Emotional Learning Program.

### ***MindHaven School's Inclusive Progressive Program***

Greater family engagement in the teaching and learning processes, beyond merely assisting with non-educational tasks, was crucial even before the pandemic. Moving forward, motivating families to expand their roles and providing them with the necessary guidance will be essential. This shift is not just a short-term response to the pandemic but a fundamental change in educational practice. Education can no longer be confined to in-person teaching, learning, and assessing; it now includes a growing range of opportunities for schools and families to collaborate and support each other in achieving shared goals (UNESCO, 2020).

MindHaven School, with a 30-year legacy of advocating for parent empowerment, adeptly turned barriers like the COVID-19 pandemic into opportunities to intensify its mission. Through its "Every Home a School, Every Parent a Teacher" Learning Model, MindHaven's Parent Education Program (PEP) became a timely and essential initiative. During the pandemic, parents transitioned from supporters to direct implementers of their children's education, attending 25-35 two-hour virtual training sessions per school year, up from the previous 15-25 face-to-face sessions.

These PEP sessions were instrumental in addressing student learning gaps, helping students achieve and maintain academic progress, and mitigating the socio-emotional challenges of distance learning. This ethnographic study documents how empowering parents through intensified Social-Emotional Learning during PEP sessions manifested in various interactions: a) between learners, b) between learners and teachers, c) between learners and their parents, d) between spouses (parents of one learner), e) between parents and teachers, f) between parents of different learners, and g) between parents and the community.

The study found that empowered parents significantly benefit not only learners but the entire school community, particularly during the transition from distance learning back to face-to-face classes. The effects of parent empowerment through PEP sessions are categorized as follows: a) Parents creating and maintaining meaningful, trusting, and productive relationships with school staff, b) Parents supporting each other to keep all children engaged in school, c) Learners being inspired by their empowered parents to help fellow learners address socio-emotional issues, and d) The replication, scaling up, and community applications of MindHaven School's Parent Empowerment Program.

### **Importance of Parenting**

Parenting is arguably one of the most important roles a person can undertake. Decades of research indicate that strong parent-family-school relationships are crucial to student success (Epstein, 1995; Jeynes, 2005, 2007). When parents and school staff collaborate effectively, students achieve higher grades, perform better on standardized tests, adapt more successfully to school environments, attend school more regularly, earn more academic credits, exhibit enhanced social skills, and are more likely to graduate and pursue higher education (Henderson & Mapp, 2002). Unfortunately, parenting is a role for which few are adequately prepared, particularly during crises like the COVID-19 pandemic. Despite the profound influence parents can have on shaping future citizens, there are no degrees or formal training programs dedicated to parenting. Effective parenting can significantly mitigate many societal issues, underscoring the essential role parents play in fostering a healthy and successful family life.

Provisionally, MSI has long been implementing an Inclusive Progressive school with a Social Emotional Learning Program for the past 31 years. It was during this pandemic time that Mindhaven's Program had the precise opportunity to intensify its execution of the Social-Emotional Program under the Life Skills Program as its Core curriculum. Its relevance was emphasized during the pandemic because while COVID-19 is a disease with primarily physical implications, the pandemic and the related government-imposed lockdowns have had a profound impact on mental health and psychosocial well-being across the globe (Godara et al., 2021).

Before and during the pandemic, the key to the sustainability of Socio-Emotional Learning in MSI is the team of teachers, staff, administration, and parents whose mental health condition is directly affected by these new conditions.

Bottom line: Teachers and parents cannot help stabilize their children and learners nor their classroom environments unless they are healthy themselves (Walker, 2020).

### **THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK**

The aim of this ethnographic study is to document how the empowerment of parents, facilitated by intensified Social-Emotional Learning (SEL) during Parent Education Program (PEP) sessions, has manifested in various interactions: a) between learners, b) between learners and teachers, c) between learners and their parents, d) between spouses (parents of one learner), e) between parents and teachers, f) between parents of different learners, and g) between parents and the community. The study examines how these empowered parents have navigated the challenges of transitioning from distance learning back to face-to-face classes, revealing significant benefits not only for the learners but also for the entire school community.

The effects of parent empowerment through PEP sessions can be categorized as follows: a) parents creating and maintaining meaningful, trusting, and productive relationships with school staff, b) parents supporting each other in helping all their children stay engaged in school, c) learners inspired by their empowered parents to help fellow learners address socio-emotional issues, and d) the replication, scaling up, and community applications of MindHaven School's Parent Empowerment Program. This study highlights the crucial role of empowered parents in fostering a supportive and collaborative school environment, enhancing both academic and socio-emotional outcomes for students.

Social and emotional learning (SEL) is recognized as a critical component of both education and human development. According to CASEL (2020), SEL encompasses the processes by which young people and adults acquire and apply the knowledge, skills, and attitudes needed to develop healthy identities, manage emotions, achieve personal and collective goals, demonstrate empathy, establish and maintain supportive relationships, and make responsible, caring decisions.

SEL is integral to promoting educational equity and excellence. It does so by fostering authentic partnerships between schools, families, and communities, thereby creating learning environments characterized by trusting and collaborative relationships, rigorous and meaningful curriculum and instruction, and continuous evaluation. Through these efforts, SEL addresses various forms of inequity and empowers individuals to contribute to safe, healthy, and just communities.

The benefits of SEL are maximized when school leaders and educators focus on enhancing the competencies of both young people and adults, as well as the systems that support these competencies. CASEL emphasizes the importance of environments, relationships, and broader contexts in shaping learning and development (CASEL, 2020).

## **METHOD**

### **Research Design and Data Collection Procedure and Analysis**

This qualitative research utilized a combination of in-depth and semi-structured interviews with participants, on-site observations, focus group discussions, staff meetings and development sessions, journal documentation, and archival explorations of weekly virtual Zoom and in-person meetings. The data were analyzed using Creswell's ethnographic analysis method, which involves moving in analytic circles (Creswell, 2013).

### **Setting**

The study was conducted at MindHaven School Inc., a small, not-for-profit, inclusive private school that offers "Whole Child, Whole School, Whole Community" preschool and grade school education services. The school received government recognition in 1997. MindHaven's Inclusive Program features a brain-based, research-based, evidence-based, practice-based, activity-based, and play-based curriculum that integrates principles from the latest education research. The program aims to address both academic and socio-emotional learning needs, fostering a holistic and inclusive educational environment.

## **FINDING AND DISCUSSION**

### **Finding(s)**

#### ***Parental Empowerment and Its Impact***

The results of this study indicated that empowering parents significantly benefits not only the learners but also the entire school community, particularly during the transition from distance learning back to face-to-face classes. The intensified Social-Emotional Learning (SEL) during Parent Education Program (PEP) sessions facilitated positive interactions in various domains: a) between learners, b) between learners and teachers, c) between learners and their parents, d) between spouses (parents of one learner), e) between parents and teachers, f) between parents of different learners, and g) between parents and the community.

The impact of parental empowerment through PEP sessions and the enhanced SEL program can be categorized using the Equitable Collaboration framework:

### ***Parent's Knowledge and Community Capacity***

Strengthening individual and collective capacity to improve schools involved assessing both students and parents. For parents, this assessment included evaluating their Present Level of Performance, their profile as caregivers, and their general and individualized family needs and concerns. Topics covered included parents' level of competency and the integration of SEL and Restorative Justice Practices in the school setting. This approach aligns with recommendations from UNICEF (2019), which highlight the importance of parent-to-parent support and the role of schools in facilitating this interaction.

Parents reported significant benefits:

*"... I can share my knowledge and experience to discuss and assist other families in finding options when they need support. ..."*

*"... MSI teaching and non-teaching staff are trained to help children know and manage their emotions, regulate inappropriate behavior, counter bullying, and resolve their own conflicts. There is collaboration among teaching, non-teaching staff, and parents/carers. ..."*

### ***Parent's Values and Attitudes***

#### ***Authentic Relationships***

Parents learned to establish relationships among families and between families and educators. Topics included "Roots of Empathy" and "Non-violent Communication," fostering a culture of mutual support and empathy within the school community. Parents appreciated the inclusive environment:

*"... I know that MSI practices inclusive values so everyone is made to feel welcome. I feel comfortable talking to people like teachers, other parents, and admin staff about my children's needs. I know my children feel secure in the MSI community because students help each other. ..."*

### ***Parenting Skills***

#### ***Families as Experts***

This principle focuses on recognizing family experiences and stories as valuable sources of knowledge and expertise. Topics covered included functional competencies such as responsiveness, holistic approaches to child development, and nurturing. This approach empowers parents to actively participate in shaping their learning and parenting strategies, supported by evidence-based positive parenting interventions (UNICEF, 2019). Parents shared their experiences:

*"...From the PEP sessions, I gained the skill in understanding the specific characteristics of my child's disability/disorder; basic skills to manage my children's behavior and help him/her develop problem-solving skills both in academics and the social-emotional area; skills to implement clear rules and routines in my family; skills to self-regulate like staying calm and managing life even when it's stressful at home, in school, and at work. ..."*

### ***Educators and Parents as Learners***

By positioning educators as learners, the program helped parents support each other and engage all children in school. PEP sessions developed parenting, teaching, and nurturing skills, empowering parents to educate both neurotypical and neurodiverse children. Topics included brain-based parenting principles, foundational competencies, balanced power dynamics, parent agency, student agency, teacher agency, and conflict resolution. Parents noted:

*"... Special educational needs policies are inclusion policies. ..."*

*"... Curriculum development activities address the needs of my child/children through accommodations and modifications so they can participate in the learning process. ..."*

### ***Learners Inspired by Empowered Parents***

Parents observed that their involvement had a positive impact on their children:

*"... I know my children feel secure in the MSI community because students help each other. ..."*

*"... I am aware that staff and students treat one another with respect. ..."*

### ***Replication, Scaling Up, and Community Applications***

The principle of "Family-Driven Goals" guided the expansion of the program. Topics included implementing the academic program at home, personalized learning, the role of fathers, and spiritual growth. Parents applied self-assessment rubrics and checklists for responsive parenting, extending their influence beyond their families to support other community members. Parents expressed confidence in their roles:

*"... I feel confident about myself as a parent/caregiver. I feel that I'm doing a remarkable job as a parent. I feel comfortable talking to people like teachers, other parents, and admin staff about my children's needs. I can share my knowledge and experience, discuss, and help other families find options to help them when they need it. I feel part of a community in everyday routines and highlight events. ..."*

These elements facilitated effective planning and implementation of home-based learning environments, helping parents set up learning spaces, monitor their children's engagement, and address socio-emotional needs. This collaborative approach, including feedback and feedforward sessions, ensured holistic development and respected the student's voice. By leveraging their relationships with the school and community, parents played a crucial role in addressing their children's academic and social needs, thereby enhancing the overall educational experience.

The limitations of this study are multifaceted. First, the research was conducted after the pandemic, a period during which many schools had to adapt rapidly to new educational models. This timing means the findings are influenced by the unique and unprecedented context of the post-pandemic educational landscape. Additionally, few schools were implementing parent education programs and social-emotional learning (SEL) initiatives even before the pandemic, which may limit the applicability of the findings to schools without a similar pre-pandemic foundation in these areas.

Moreover, the scope of this research was constrained by a limitation on the number of citations, restricted to 16 sources. This limitation may have affected the comprehensiveness of the literature review and the contextual grounding of the findings. Future research should consider a broader range of sources to provide a more extensive overview of existing literature. It is also strongly recommended that similar studies be conducted in schools offering life skills programs and involving a larger population to enhance the generalizability of the findings.

## **Discussion**

In contemporary education, an inter-institutional and inter-sectoral approach that integrates educational institutions and society is essential for understanding people's development and well-being. Reimagining our futures together requires a new social contract for education. At MSI, the data demonstrates that the school has already addressed the question posed by Hargreaves and Fullan (2012): "How do we move beyond our tired checklist of events and 'best practices' to 'next practices'?" MindHaven School is leading innovative approaches that redefine how parents, families, educators, and schools collaborate to create a more equitable educational system for all students

Problem-solving for an individual child, class, or whole school becomes more effective when parents are partners in designing and implementing innovative solutions. MSI's experience shows that parent empowerment involves investing time and resources in connecting, listening, informing, equipping, and organizing parents so they can fully exercise "Parent Voice" in the school and wider community. This means embracing the belief that all voices and perspectives are welcome—from the students' voices in the classroom to the intentional provision of space for parents' and teachers' voices to be heard on campus.

Parents and families want their children to succeed academically, yet the pandemic has shown that academic achievement is only one part of a more holistic approach to their children's learning, development, and education. MSI's Parent Empowerment Program (PEP) enables parents and family members to engage with social-emotional topics relevant to their children's success and develop the capacity to take action, support their children, and work with other parents to improve the school. By developing and practicing skills and strategies for creating change, parents become active rather than passive advocates.

Living out these values and principles leads to families becoming committed, consistent, and passionate not just about their child's education but also about societal concerns in general. They feel confident that their voices are being heard and that their contributions matter. These empowerment lessons are a starting point for engaging parents and families with schools, but the process through which they were developed could be applied to any domain as a strategy for building more equitable family-school collaboration. The insights, perspectives, and contributions that result are invaluable and essential for creating more equitable schools and educational systems.

This experience confirms the power of bringing together parents, families, teachers, and school leaders to build relationships and capacity. When schools undertake equitable collaboration with parents and families, not only do individual students perform better, but schools and systems begin to transform. They become more responsive, evidence-focused, and capable of providing high-quality learning environments for every student (Organizing Engagement, 2023).

When schools prioritize parent empowerment, families are seen as equal partners and key contributors to the school community. This approach helps create the best possible learning environment for students (Waterford.org, 2020). It also involves actively removing barriers to authentic parent-teacher-learner relationships by modeling inclusion, embracing diversity, and ensuring that everyone experiences belonging—from schools to communities.

## CONCLUSION

The findings from MSI demonstrate that equitable, inter-institutional collaboration between schools, families, and communities is not only possible but transformative. By empowering parents through intentional listening, capacity-building, and shared decision-making, MSI moves beyond traditional “best practices” toward innovative “next practices” that cultivate holistic student development. The Parent Empowerment Program shows that when families are equipped with knowledge, skills, and confidence, they shift from passive supporters to active advocates who strengthen both individual student outcomes and broader school improvement efforts.

Although the study is shaped by the unique post-pandemic context and limited by the small number of citations and sample scope, its insights highlight the profound potential of authentic family-school partnerships. Future research involving larger populations and schools with life-skills programs is needed to deepen understanding and expand applicability. Nonetheless, this study affirms that centering parent voice and inclusive collaboration can drive more equitable, responsive, and high-quality educational systems for all learners.

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