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Child-friendly Learning Spaces in the Alternative Learning System (ALS): Focus on Northern Mindanao, Philippines

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Abstract

Community Learning Centers (CLCs) under the Alternative Learning System (ALS) serve as critical spaces for inclusive, second-chance education for out-of-school youth and adults (OSYAs) in the Philippines. These centers provide flexible, community-based venues that operationalize ALS goals, particularly in geographically isolated and underserved regions like Northern Mindanao. This study examines how ALS CLCs in the region align with UNICEF's Child-Friendly School (CFS) framework, which sets holistic standards for inclusive, learner-centered, and protective learning environments. Employing a descriptive-evaluative mixed-methods design, the study was anchored on seven dimensions: (1) learner participation, (2) health and well-being, (3) safety, (4) enrollment, (5) academic achievement, (6) teacher morale, and (7) community support. Data were collected through surveys of 342 ALS implementers across all 14 Schools Division Offices and supplemented by focus group discussions for triangulation. Findings revealed strong alignment in learner engagement, academic achievement, and teacher motivation, while gaps persisted in infrastructure, health services, and community-based CLC resourcing. Furthermore, correlation analysis further indicated that CLC typology and ownership were significantly associated with child-friendliness outcomes. The results emphasize the role of physical and institutional structures in shaping equitable learning opportunities for OSYAs. This pioneering study represents the first integration of the CFS framework into ALS research in the Philippines, contributing regional evidence on sustainable, rights-based education systems and offering a contextual model for adapting child-friendly principles to second-chance learning in Southeast Asia.

Keywords: Alternative Learning System, community learning centers, non-formal education, child-friendly school framework, out-of-school youth and adults

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Education is a fundamental human right and a critical vehicle for reducing poverty and social inequality. In Southeast Asia, alternative delivery modes (ADMs) emerged as pivotal strategies to address educational disparities, especially among marginalized and hard-to-reach populations. Various country-specific implementations were developed to support learners who are unable to access conventional schooling. For example, Indonesia's Multiple Entry-Exit System (MEES) provided flexible pathways that allowed learners to enter and exit the education system based on their unique circumstances. In Vietnam, specialized programs were designed to cater to island learners, ensuring that geographical isolation does not hinder their educational access. Thailand's Home School Program adopted a project-based learning approach customized to individual learner needs (SEAMEO INNOTECH, 2018).

In the Philippines, large segments of the population, particularly out-of-school youth and adults (OSYAs), continue to face barriers to formal education due to poverty, displacement, cultural marginalization, or geographic isolation (United Nations Children's Fund [UNICEF], 2021). To respond to these gaps, the Department of Education (DepEd) institutionalized the Alternative Learning System (ALS), a parallel, flexible education modality that is designed to cater to learners outside the conventional school system (Department of Education [DepEd], 2020). The ALS seeks to provide learning access and uphold inclusive, learner-centered education for those historically left behind.

Despite these efforts, recent data have highlighted persistent issues in ALS implementation. For the School Year 2023–2024, only 302,807 out of 655,517 enrolled learners completed the program, indicating a completion rate of approximately 46.2% (Second Congressional Commission on Education [EDCOM II], 2025). Various socio-economic factors contribute to this high dropout rate, such as the need to work, lack of financial support, and other personal circumstances (UNICEF, 2021). In addition, despite an estimated 5 million potential ALS learners aged 17 to 24, only about 224,885 were enrolled, representing a mere 9% participation rate (EDCOM II, 2025). These figures underscore the need for targeted interventions to improve ALS accessibility and retention.

Community Learning Centers (CLCs) are central to strengthening ALS implementation, which operationalize the goals of the programs by providing localized, flexible, and accessible learning environments for marginalized learners. Serving as venues for non-formal education, CLCs deliver instruction through modular, blended, or face-to-face modes. These spaces are vital in reaching geographically isolated and socioeconomically marginalized learners. The CLCs vary significantly in form and structure, prompting DepEd to classify them into five (5) typologies based on physical condition and learning readiness. For example, Type 1 centers are makeshift or borrowed spaces with limited instructional amenities, which are often found in barangay halls or chapels, whereas Type 2 centers are semi-permanent structures built from lightweight materials, usually equipped with basic furniture. In contrast, Type 3 CLCs are purpose-built, permanent facilities that support sustained instruction and are furnished with core educational resources. Type 4 CLCs are multi-level, technology-equipped centers that feature ICT tools to support digital learning. Finally, Type 5 refers to mobile or distributed modes in which materials are delivered directly to learners without a fixed venue (DepEd, 2022).

In terms of location, CLCs may be either community-based—situated in barangays, churches, or public halls—or school-based, housed within existing school premises. While community-based centers enable reach and accessibility in rural areas, they are often under-resourced and inconsistently supported. School-based CLCs, in contrast, typically benefit from formal infrastructure and institutional oversight. These typological and locational dimensions are more than logistical classifications; they are central to understanding variations in safety, learner engagement, academic support, and inclusivity across ALS delivery.

To assess the quality and inclusiveness of learning spaces, this study drew upon the Child-Friendly School (CFS) framework developed by UNICEF (2009). This framework provided a comprehensive lens through which to examine how learning environments support the holistic development, protection, and participation of learners. It emphasized the need for formal or non-formal schools to be inclusive, safe, learner-centered, and supported by the community.

The CFS Framework is composed of seven (7) interrelated goals, each of which is highly relevant to the ALS context. The first goal, encouraging learners' participation in school and community, is aligned with ALS's learner-driven approach and the empowerment of OSYAs to co-own their learning journeys (UNICEF, 2021). The second goal, enhancing learners' health and well-being, is especially important for learners who face chronic poverty, poor access to healthcare, and psychosocial stress (Council of Europe, 2025). The third, guaranteeing safe and protective spaces, is crucial in areas where CLCs operate without basic sanitation or security infrastructure (DepEd, 2022).

The fourth goal, encouraging enrollment and completion, resonates with ALS's mission of second-chance learning but is challenged by erratic attendance and high dropout rates (EDCOM II, 2024). The fifth, ensuring high academic achievement, connects to the need for appropriate learning resources, individualized pacing, and curriculum relevance (Calabit, 2022). The sixth, raising teacher morale and motivation, is a known concern for ALS implementers who often work in isolation, lacking systemic support (SEAMEO INNOTECH, 2020; Tachado & Tumarong, 2024). Finally, the seventh goal, mobilizing community support, reflects ALS's deeply embedded reliance on barangay councils, local government units (LGUs), and civil society actors (UNESCO Institute for Lifelong Learning, 2023).

While these goals are widely used in evaluating formal schools, their application in non-formal settings like CLCs is limited and underexplored. There is a lack of empirical evidence on whether and how these goals translate to the dynamic, decentralized realities of ALS. In addition, structural differences in CLCs— in typology and ownership—may directly impact their ability to meet these child-friendly standards, particularly in high-need regions such as Northern Mindanao. This gap restricts the capacity of ALS to improve program quality and protect the rights of the learners, particularly in areas where CLC infrastructure and governance arrangements vary widely (Comighud, 2020). Furthermore, while the ALS program has received policy attention for its inclusive goals (DepEd, 2020), literature on its implementation largely focused on learner outcomes and instructional delivery (Cagang, 2024; Calabit, 2022; Idulsa & Luzano, 2024). Several studies have explored motivation and community participation in ALS (SEAMEO INNOTECH, 2020; UNESCO Institute for Lifelong Learning, 2023), while others have emphasized the flexibility of the program for marginalized learners (UNICEF, 2021). However, these works often treat the learning environment as a secondary variable rather than a primary determinant of educational equity. This leaves a significant gap in understanding how infrastructure, safety, and governance conditions shape the actual educational experiences of OSYAs in decentralized community learning spaces.

This study addressed this research gap by examining how ALS CLCs in Northern Mindanao align with the Child-Friendly School Framework. Specifically, it sought to: (1) describe the typology, location, and ownership of CLCs in the region; (2) assess the degree to which these CLCs adhere to the seven CFS goals; (3) examine the relationship between CLC characteristics and levels of child-friendliness; and (4) offer policy and programmatic recommendations to improve ALS implementation in non-formal learning spaces.

Through this inquiry, the study contributes empirical insights into ALS program delivery in a region marked by sociopolitical diversity and geographic isolation. More broadly, it informs Southeast Asian efforts to promote inclusive and equitable education systems, aligning with Sustainable

Development Goal 4 (SDG 4) and the region's commitment to expanding second-chance education for marginalized learners.

Methodology

This study employed a descriptive-evaluative design within a mixed-methods approach to assess how Community Learning Centers (CLCs) under the Alternative Learning System (ALS) in Northern Mindanao conform to the seven goals of UNICEF's Child-Friendly School (CFS) framework. The descriptive component explored patterns and perceptions across a large population at a specific time (Creswell & Creswell, 2018), while the evaluative component enabled a structured appraisal of adherence to CFS standards in non-formal learning environments (UNICEF, 2009). Two focus group discussions (FGDs) were also conducted to enrich and validate the quantitative findings, consistent with best practices for methodological triangulation in mixed-methods research (Tashakkori & Teddlie, 2010).

The research encompassed a complete enumeration of all 14 Schools Division Offices (SDOs) in Northern Mindanao: Bukidnon, Cagayan de Oro City, Camiguin, El Salvador City, Gingoog City, Iligan City, Lanao del Norte, Malaybalay City, Misamis Occidental, Misamis Oriental, Oroquieta City, Ozamiz City, Tangub City, and Valencia City. These divisions represent diverse geographic and socio-cultural landscapes, offering a meaningful setting for evaluating equity in non-formal education delivery.

A total of 342 respondents, comprising ALS teachers, community ALS implementers, and learning facilitators, participated in the study. Each implementer reported on their assigned CLC, ensuring a one-to-one correspondence between implementers and learning centers. Convenience sampling was employed to identify participants, as this approach allowed the research team to reach ALS implementers who had stable internet access and were actively engaged in the ALS program during the data collection period. While not random, the method was pragmatic given the study's regional scope, the decentralized structure of ALS operations, and varying levels of digital connectivity across divisions. Despite these constraints, the sample substantially represented ALS delivery in Northern Mindanao.

The study utilized a researcher-developed survey instrument anchored on the original Child-Friendly School (CFS) framework (UNICEF, 2009). The instrument was divided into two sections: the first captured key CLC characteristics such as typology, location, and ownership, while the second measured the extent of implementation across the seven CFS goals using a 4-point Likert scale (1 = Not Evident at All, through 4 = Strongly Evident). Additionally, expert validation was conducted with specialists in basic education and ALS, and reliability testing demonstrated high internal consistency (Cronbach's alpha = 0.89).

Quantitative data were collected via Microsoft Forms, with survey links disseminated through official ALS focal persons at regional and division levels. Online data collection was conducted from January 15 to March 22, 2024. To enrich data interpretation, two focus group discussions (FGDs) were conducted: one with eight Education Program Specialists for ALS (EPSAs) on February 19, 2024, and another with eight experienced ALS implementers on February 21, 2024. Both FGDs explored perceived barriers and enabling conditions in implementing child-friendly standards within CLCs.

Data cleaning and processing were done using Microsoft Excel and IBM SPSS. Descriptive statistics such as means, standard deviations, frequencies, and percentages were computed to summarize CLC profiles and CFS goal ratings. Additionally, Spearman's Rho correlation analysis was applied at a 0.05 level of significance to determine associations between CLC characteristics and

perceived levels of child-friendliness. This non-parametric test was selected due to the ordinal nature of Likert-scale data (Field, 2013).

This study offers region-specific insights into how ALS Community Learning Centers align with the CFS Framework. While the findings are based on self-reported data from implementers, several validity measures were adopted, including expert instrument validation and triangulation via FGDs. Nonetheless, limitations include the exclusion of learner perspectives and the absence of on-site facility validation, both of which are recommended areas for future research.

In accordance with the DepEd's Research Management Guidelines (DepEd Order No. 16, s. 2017), this study underwent a formal review and approval process through the Research Committee of DepEd Regional Office X. The Committee evaluated the study's conceptual framework, research tools, and ethical considerations to ensure compliance with both technical rigor and ethical standards set by the Department. Ethical principles such as informed consent, confidentiality, and voluntary participation were strictly observed. All participants were briefed on the study's objectives, assured that their identities would remain anonymous, and informed that participation would not influence their professional standing or evaluations. These protocols ensured adherence not only to DepEd's research governance mechanisms but also to internationally recognized ethical standards, particularly those outlined by the American Educational Research Association (AERA, 2011).

Results and Discussion

Understanding the quality and inclusiveness of non-formal learning spaces requires more than just measuring availability—it requires a close examination of the characteristics that define safe, equitable, and child-friendly environments. In this study, the results draw from the field-based data gathered across Northern Mindanao to map and interpret the current landscape of the CLCs in terms of their typology, location, ownership, and available facilities. By organizing the results in relation to the seven dimensions of child-friendliness, the discussion situates the local realities of ALS learning spaces within national policy commitments and regional development aspirations.

Community Learning Center Typology

The study examined 342 CLCs across 14 Schools Division Offices (SDOs) in Northern Mindanao. Each ALS implementer provided data corresponding to their assigned CLC, ensuring a one-to-one data mapping.

Table 1

Percentage Distribution of CLC Typology per Schools Division Office

Schools Division Office	Community Learning Center					Total
	Type 1	*Type 2*	*Type 3*	*Type 4*	*Type 5*	
Bukidnon	12.60	3.20	5.30	0.00	0.00	21.10
Cagayan de Oro City	2.30	0.30	1.20	0.00	0.00	3.80
Camiguin	2.30	1.80	0.60	0.00	0.00	4.70
El Salvador City	0.90	0.60	0.60	0.00	0.00	2.00
Gingoog City	0.90	0.30	0.90	0.00	0.00	2.00
Iligan City	4.70	1.20	4.40	0.90	0.00	11.10
Lanao del Norte	2.30	1.80	2.60	0.00	0.00	6.70

Schools Division Office	Community Learning Center					Total
	Type 1	*Type 2*	*Type 3*	*Type 4*	*Type 5*	
Malaybalay City	2.30	1.20	4.10	1.20	0.60	9.40
Misamis Occidental	5.00	1.80	4.70	0.30	0.00	11.70
Misamis Oriental	1.80	2.00	2.90	0.00	0.00	6.70
Oroquieta City	0.90	0.90	1.50	0.30	0.00	3.50
Ozamiz City	0.60	0.60	3.80	0.00	0.00	5.00
Tangub City	0.60	0.60	1.80	0.00	0.00	2.90
Valencia City	5.30	2.30	1.50	0.00	0.30	9.40
Total	**42.4**	**18.40**	**35.70**	**2.60**	**0.90**	**100**

Note: Minor discrepancies (±0.1) between sub-type sums and totals are due to rounding to two decimal places.

As shown in Table 1, the most prevalent CLC type was Type 1, accounting for 42.4% of all centers. These are characterized by rudimentary spaces—often barangay halls, chapels, or multipurpose rooms shared with other community functions. This suggests that a large number of learners, especially in provinces like Bukidnon and Misamis Occidental, receive instruction in venues that may lack the necessary features for child-friendly, structured, and secure learning. In contrast, Type 3 CLCs, which consist of permanent structures with basic educational amenities, were the second most common (35.7%) and were mostly located in urban divisions like Iligan, Malaybalay, and Ozamiz cities. These findings affirm earlier observations that CLCs vary widely in quality, resulting in uneven learning experiences across geographic areas (DepEd, 2022).

Types 4 and 5 CLCs were significantly underrepresented, comprising less than 4% combined. These types are critical to increasing flexibility and digital inclusion, especially for geographically isolated or mobile learners. Their scarcity suggests that despite the national mandate for equitable ALS delivery, technological gaps persist in many rural areas—a challenge echoed in prior studies on ALS learning environments (Libo-on & Catunao, 2024).

Table 2 reveals that 65.5% of CLCs are community-based, while 34.5% are school-based. This aligns with the ALS design of reaching more OSYAs in their localities. However, community-based sites are often more temporary and less resourced than their school-based counterparts, as observed during field visits and consistent with prior reports on non-formal learning spaces (SEAMEO INNOTECH, 2018). In terms of ownership, only 36.5% of CLCs were DepEd-owned, while the majority relied on support from LGUs, private entities, or the community.

A striking observation is that 61.4% of Type 1 CLCs are under communal ownership. This raises equity concerns regarding infrastructure, learner safety, and standardization. It also reinforces the need for stronger enforcement of Republic Act No. 11510, which mandates the establishment of fully functional, well-equipped CLCs in all cities and municipalities (DepEd, 2020). As ALS continues to serve the most marginalized learners, investments must go beyond increasing access and ensure that learning spaces are safe, accessible, and conducive to meaningful learning.

This profile of typologies, locations, and ownership types reflects an unequal landscape of ALS implementation. Learners in well-established school-based or DepEd-owned CLCs may experience greater consistency in quality. In contrast, others in communal spaces might contend with structural inadequacies that hinder the realization of child-friendly learning environments as envisioned by the CFS Framework (UNICEF, 2009).

Table 2

Percentage Distribution of CLC Typology Based on Location and Ownership

	Community Learning Center				
	Type 1	*Type 2*	*Type 3*	*Type 4*	*Type 5*
Based on Location					
Community-Based	54.00	15.60	27.70	1.30	1.30
School-Based	20.30	23.70	50.80	5.10	0.00
Total	42.40	18.40	35.70	2.60	0.90
Based on Ownership					
DepEd-Owned	25.60	20.80	48.00	4.80	0.80
Non-DepEd-Owned (Communal Place)	61.40	15.90	22.10	0.00	0.70
Non DepEd-Owned (Donated by LGU)	30.00	20.00	43.30	5.00	1.70
Non-DepEd-Owned (Donated by Private Organization)	50.00	16.70	33.30	0.00	0.00
Total	**42.40**	**18.40**	**35.70**	**2.60**	**0.90**

Facility Availability in Community Learning Centers

The availability of key facilities across the 342 CLCs in Northern Mindanao reveals both progress and persisting infrastructure gaps in the delivery of ALS programs. As shown in Table 3, basic utilities such as electricity (75.7%) and toilet facilities (76.3%) were present in most of the CLCs. These findings suggest that most centers have achieved minimum compliance with requirements for safe and functional learning environments. However, the remaining 24.3% of CLCs without electricity and 23.7% without toilets pose serious concerns in terms of health, safety, and instructional continuity, especially for female learners and persons with disabilities.

Table 3

Percentage of Facility Availability in the Community Learning Centers

Facility	Available in CLCs (%)	Not Available in CLCs (%)
Electricity	75.70	24.30
Potable Water	34.80	65.20
Toilet	76.30	23.70
Library	4.70	95.30
Storage Area	16.70	83.30
Cabinets and Organizers	33.60	66.40
Internet Connection	12.90	87.10
Desktop Computers or Tablets	12.90	87.10

Notably, only 34.8% of the CLCs had access to potable water. This deficit is critical, as water availability is a cornerstone of learner health and hygiene, especially during prolonged learning sessions. The lack of basic sanitation infrastructure undermines Goal 2 of the Child-Friendly School (CFS) framework, which emphasizes health and well-being as prerequisites for effective learning (UNICEF, 2009).

In focus group discussions, ALS implementers shared that the lack of potable water and toilets compromises not just hygiene but also learner attendance and may expose learners to serious health risks such as urinary tract infections (UTIs), dehydration, and the spread of communicable diseases like diarrhea and intestinal parasites (UNICEF, 2021; World Health Organization [WHO], 2019;). One ALS teacher from Bukidnon remarked,

"Kung walay CR [comfort room], dili gani musulod ang mga babaye nga learners, labi na kung naa silay menstruation. Mauwaw sila ug wala silay kapahiran."	[TRANSLATION] If there is no toilet, some of the female learners will not even come in, especially when they are menstruating. They get embarrassed when there is nowhere for them to get themselves clean.

A similar concern was raised in Misamis Occidental and Camiguin:

"Lisod kung walay tubig. Usahay muuli pa ang learners para lang mangihi o manghugas."	[TRANSLATION] It is difficult without water. Sometimes, learners have to go home just to urinate or wash up.

Further, just 4.7% of the CLCs reported the presence of a library, while only 12.9% had internet access and digital learning devices such as desktop computers or tablets. These indicators reflect the persistent digital divide and informational poverty learners face in remote or underserved areas, especially as ALS shifts toward technology-integrated learning modalities. According to Libo-on and Catunao (2023), digital access is a growing determinant of learning equity in ALS contexts, especially following the pedagogical disruptions caused by the COVID-19 pandemic.

The absence of storage areas (reported in only 16.7% of CLCs) and cabinets or organizers (33.6%) also affects material security and teacher workflow. Without secure places to store instructional materials, facilitators may face difficulties maintaining instructional consistency and resource availability—conditions that could diminish both teacher morale (Goal 6) and learner engagement (Goal 5) over time (SEAMEO INNOTECH, 2020).

The low presence of structured learning spaces like libraries is particularly alarming given the essential role of reading literacy in re-engaging OSYAs. Prior studies have stressed that access to learning resources strongly predicts academic achievement and retention in non-formal education (Calabit, 2022). The lack of library access in 95.3% of CLCs thus underscores an urgent need for resource provisioning, especially in high-enrollment areas.

Collectively, these findings suggest that while progress has been made in providing essential utilities, many CLCs still lack the comprehensive infrastructure required to meet the holistic standards of the CFS framework. These disparities disproportionately affect learners in remote or low-resource municipalities and highlight the need for targeted facility upgrading programs and more robust inter-agency coordination, especially between DepEd and LGUs (DepEd, 2022; UNESCO Institute for Lifelong Learning, 2023). DepEd can lead in setting infrastructure standards, identifying priority areas through regional mapping, and allocating maintenance and other operating expenses (MOOE) specifically for CLC improvement. Meanwhile, LGUs can complement these efforts by mobilizing

local resources, providing land or physical spaces, funding minor infrastructure works through their Special Education Fund (SEF), and facilitating coordination with barangay-level stakeholders. Strengthening this collaboration is vital to ensure that non-formal learning spaces are not only accessible but also conducive to holistic and rights-based learning.

ALS Implementers' Ratings Across CFS Goals

ALS implementers across Northern Mindanao rated their respective CLCs using a four-point Likert scale to assess the degree of adherence to the seven goals of the CFS Framework. The results, summarized in Table 4, reflect a generally positive outlook, with an overall mean of 2.77 (SD = 0.48), interpreted as "Evident." In this study, a rating of "Evident" corresponds to the third point on the scale, indicating that the CFS goal or standard is present and observable in most situations or practices within the CLCs. However, variability among specific goals reveals thematic areas of strength and concern.

The highest-rated indicators were: Goal 5 (high academic achievement and success; M = 3.37); Goal 6 (ALS teachers' morale and motivation; M = 3.30); and Goal 4 (enrollment and completion; M = 3.23). These findings suggest strong academic engagement and commitment among educators across ALS sites in the region. This is consistent with previous research highlighting the ALS teachers' intrinsic motivation to support vulnerable learners despite logistical and resource constraints (SEAMEO INNOTECH, 2020; Tachado & Tumarong, 2024).

Table 4

ALS Teachers' Perspectives in their CLCs according to CFS Goals

CFS Goal	Mean	Standard Deviation	Qualitative Description
Goal 1. Encourage learners' participation in school and community	2.57	0.71	Evident
Goal 2. Enhance learners' health and well-being	1.91	0.63	Evident but Not Consistent
Goal 3. Guarantee safe and protective spaces for learners	2.37	0.65	Evident but Not Consistent
Goal 4. Encourage enrollment and completion	3.23	0.62	Evident
Goal 5. Ensure the learner's high academic achievement and success	3.37	0.58	Strongly Evident
Goal 6. Raise ALS teachers' morale and motivation	3.3	0.56	Strongly Evident
Goal 7. Mobilize community support for education	2.67	0.74	Evident
Overall Mean	**2.77**	**0.48**	**Evident**

High academic ratings (Goal 5) may be attributed to learner-focused strategies such as modular instruction, contextualized learning materials, and individualized pacing—all of which are hallmarks of ALS pedagogy (Calabit, 2022). Similarly, strong teacher morale (Goal 6) likely reflects the deep sense of purpose among ALS implementers, who often serve as advocates, mentors, and case managers for OSYAs. Nonetheless, the sustainability of this motivation may depend on external factors such as compensation, working conditions, and recognition.

The strong ratings for teacher morale (Goal 6) were echoed in FGDs, where several ALS implementers noted their deep personal commitment despite lacking formal support. As one

facilitator from Misamis Oriental said,

"Bisan walay regular office, basta makatabang lang ko sa mga bata nga gusto mulahutay, okay na ko."	[TRANSLATION] Even without a regular office, as long as I can help learners who want to keep going, that is enough for me.

Another facilitator from Misamis Oriental noted,

"Wala man mi allowance usahay, pero dili mi muundang kay importante ni para sa mga bata."	[TRANSLATION] Sometimes we do not receive any allowance, but we do not stop because this is important for the learners.

An ALS teacher in Lanao del Norte expressed similar sentiments:

"Mura mig pamilya sa CLC. Ang kabalo ko nga makakat-on sila, mao nay akong reward."	[TRANSLATION] We are like a family in the CLC. Knowing they are learning—that is my reward.

Conversely, the lowest mean score was found in: Goal 2: Enhance learners' health and well-being (M = 1.91), followed by Goal 3: Guarantee safe and protective spaces (M = 2.37). These results point to widespread concerns around basic health services, psychosocial support, and the safety of learning environments. As observed in the facility audit (Table 3), many CLCs lack access to clean water, internet, toilets, and secure infrastructure, making the fulfillment of Goals 2 and 3 difficult, particularly in community-based or shared-use spaces. This finding echoes DepEd's internal monitoring of CLC compliance with minimum service standards (DepEd, 2022) and aligns with global insights from the Council of Europe (2025) that health-promoting school environments are often deprioritized in non-formal settings.

Goal 7: Mobilize community support for education (M = 2.67) and Goal 1: Encourage learners' participation in school and community (M = 2.57) received mid-range ratings. These suggest that while there is meaningful engagement from both learners and communities, the consistency and quality of participation vary widely. FGDs with ALS implementers revealed that CLCs with strong barangay or LGU involvement benefit from better attendance, more community-led learning projects, and safer venues. On the other hand, CLCs hosted in more transient spaces or without local political support tend to operate in isolation, lacking external contributions to programming or materials.

FGD participants emphasized that LGU involvement significantly influenced the functionality of their CLCs. In Valencia City, one implementer noted,

"Kung tabangan mi sa barangay, naa mi CLC nga limpyo ug safe. Pero sa uban nga lugar, murag lisod g'yud kay walay support."	[TRANSLATION] If we get help from the barangay, we can have a clean and safe CLC. But in other places, it is difficult because there is no support.

In Gingoog City, another shared:

"Sa among lugar, ang barangay mismo ang naghatag ug chairs ug blackboard."	[TRANSLATION] In our area, it was the barangay that provided chairs and a blackboard.

A facilitator from El Salvador City added:

"Mas motivated ang learners kung naa silay makita nga suporta gikan sa komunidad."

[TRANSLATION]
Learners are more motivated when they see visible support from the community.

Importantly, no goal received a mean rating below 1.91 (i.e., below the "Evident" threshold), which reflects that even in under-resourced contexts, ALS implementers are taking proactive steps to deliver holistic, learner-centered education. However, the widespread in standard deviations—especially in Goals 2 and 3—highlights the disparity across divisions and CLC types, indicating that some centers thrive while others remain under-supported.

These patterns reinforce the argument for differentiated equity-sensitive programming in ALS. Rather than blanket policies, region-specific interventions must address localized needs, such as facility improvement in remote CLCs, health partnerships in underserved barangays, and teacher development programs tied to CFS goals. As UNICEF (2009) reminds, a truly child-friendly system adapts to learner needs and contextual challenges—an imperative particularly relevant to non-formal systems like ALS.

Correlation Between CLC Profiles and CFS Goals

To examine the association between CLC characteristics and implementing the CFS Framework, the study analyzed correlations between CLC typology and ownership against each of the seven CFS goals using Spearman's rho. The results in Table 5 show statistically significant yet varied relationships, providing deeper insights into the structural and institutional factors that impact the quality of non-formal learning environments.

Among the strongest associations, CLC typology showed a moderate positive correlation with Goal 3 (safe and protective spaces), $r = 0.34$, $p < 0.01$. This suggests that more permanent, better-constructed CLCs are more likely to provide physically safe and protective learning environments. This aligns with UNICEF (2009), which emphasizes that the condition of school infrastructure is directly tied to children's sense of safety, attendance, and learning retention, especially for vulnerable groups such as OSYAs.

Table 5

Correlation between CLC Profiles and the Goals of the Child-Friendly School Framework

Goal	Typology		Ownership	
	r	p-value	r	p-value
Goal 1. Encourage learners' participation in school and community	0.13	0.02*	0.15	0.001**
Goal 2. Enhance learners' health and well-being	0.17	0.001**	0.2	0.001**
Goal 3. Guarantee safe and protective spaces for learners	0.34	0.001**	0.11	0.05*
Goal 4. Encourage enrollment and completion	0.09	0.09	0.12	0.03*
Goal 5. Ensure the learner's high academic achievement and success	0.17	0.001**	0.11	0.05*

Goal	Typology		Ownership	
	r	p-value	r	p-value
Goal 6. Raise ALS teachers' morale and motivation	0.15	0.01**	0.1	0.06
Goal 7. Mobilize community support for education	0.07	0.18	0.14	0.01**
CFS Framework (Overall)	**0.21**	**0.001****	**0.17**	**0.001****

*Legend: *p < .05, **p < .01*

In terms of ownership, Goal 2 (learner health and well-being) and Goal 7 (community support) yielded the most significant correlations: Ownership vs. Goal 2: $r = 0.20$, $p < 0.01$ (small-to-moderate); and Ownership vs. Goal 7: $r = 0.14$, $p < 0.01$ (small). These results suggest that DepEd-owned CLCs provide better health and well-being services and show stronger linkages to community networks than those operated through communal or private arrangements. This supports the notion that institutional accountability and direct programmatic control influence resource availability, such as feeding programs, mental health support, and partnerships with health units (DepEd, 2022; UNESCO Institute for Lifelong Learning, 2023).

Interestingly, both typology and ownership correlated positively with Goal 1 (learner participation): Typology: $r = 0.13$, $p = 0.02$; and Ownership: $r = 0.15$, $p < 0.01$. Though weak in strength, these correlations are statistically significant and highlight how the physical condition of learning spaces and their administrative support systems shape learners' opportunities to participate in governance, planning, and classroom activities. CLCs with more secure venues and formal governance structures are better equipped to establish learner councils, feedback systems, and community service initiatives (UNICEF, 2021).

Weak but significant correlations between CLC structure and learner participation (Goal 1) were better explained through qualitative feedback. One implementer from Ozamiz City in a shared-use space observed,

"Lisod magpa-participate sa mga bata kung pirmi ta mag-adjust sa schedule. Dili sila ka-feel nga ilang lugar ang CLC."

[TRANSLATION]
It is hard to encourage learner participation when we are constantly adjusting our schedule. They do not feel like the CLC is their space.

In Tangub City, another facilitator reflected:

"Kung walay ownership ang learners sa CLC, mas gamay gyud ilang interest."

[TRANSLATION]
When learners do not feel ownership of the CLC, their interest is much lower.

When taken together, the overall correlation between typology and the full CFS framework was $r = 0.21$ ($p < 0.01$), while ownership yielded $r = 0.17$ ($p < 0.01$). These small but significant effect sizes indicate that while infrastructure and institutional control are not the sole determinants of child-friendliness, they meaningfully shape the enabling conditions for ALS implementers to achieve CFS goals. As Field (2013) suggests, even modest effect sizes in educational research can reflect real-world constraints, especially in decentralized systems like ALS.

This parallels the findings of Gordo et al. (2019), who evaluated Learning Sites and Schools for Practical Agriculture and found that the conduciveness of learning environments and adequacy

of inputs were significant predictors of training effectiveness. While their focus was on agricultural training, the similarities in decentralized delivery and reliance on community-based infrastructure strengthen the case for investing in well-equipped and structurally sound learning venues as a foundational element of program success.

Other correlations of interest include Goal 4 (enrollment and completion), which showed a significant relationship with ownership ($r = 0.12$, $p = 0.03$) but not with typology. This supports the idea that flexible program management and local partnerships may be more important for retention than physical space alone (EDCOM II, 2024); Goal 5 (academic success) correlated significantly with typology ($r = 0.17$, $p < 0.01$), reinforcing prior findings that learning outcomes are sensitive to environmental quality and facility readiness (Calabit, 2022); and Goal 6 (teacher morale) correlated more strongly with typology ($r = 0.15$, $p = 0.01$) than with ownership, suggesting that comfortable, organized spaces contribute to educator well-being and sustained motivation (SEAMEO INNOTECH, 2020).

In contrast, non-significant correlations—for example, between typology and Goal 7 (community support)—suggest that community mobilization is less dependent on infrastructure and more on leadership and local engagement practices. These nuances imply that while investing in facilities is vital, fostering inclusive governance and building local partnerships are equally critical in achieving CFS-aligned, equitable ALS delivery.

The dual effect of typology (structure) and ownership (governance) points to a layered understanding of quality in non-formal education. Neither factor alone guarantees a child-friendly learning experience. Rather, their interaction—how infrastructure supports programming, and how ownership mobilizes resources—must be deliberately managed to deliver holistic, inclusive learning for OSYAs. These findings are vital for informing ALS implementation plans under Republic Act No. 11510, particularly in shaping guidelines for CLC development, partnership standards, and M&E frameworks at the regional level.

Future Directions

Building on the present findings, future research may explore how learner experiences and outcomes are shaped by CLC environments, particularly in marginalized and conflict-affected areas. Studies incorporating direct observation, learner and parent interviews, and longitudinal tracking of ALS completers would enrich understanding of how physical spaces and institutional arrangements influence educational equity. Comparative studies across regions or countries may also illuminate contextual factors that enable the effective adaptation of the CFS Framework in non-formal settings. Moreover, exploring models of public-private partnership and community-led CLC development may yield practical strategies to strengthen the quality and sustainability of ALS implementation across diverse learning contexts.

Conclusion

Equity in non-formal education is not simply a matter of access—it is a matter of dignity, safety, and sustained belonging. In the learning spaces of Northern Mindanao, where many Community Learning Centers (CLCs) are nestled in borrowed rooms, makeshift structures, or under-resourced barangay halls, the question is no longer whether ALS is reaching out-of-school youth and adults (OSYAs), but what kind of learning experience they are being invited into.

Typology and ownership—two often overlooked structural markers—quietly shape the educational destinies of learners. A concrete, ventilated room under the stewardship of a local school may offer not just instruction but protection, aspiration, and routine. Meanwhile, a bamboo chapel

without toilets or clean water can become a daily reminder of exclusion, even within a program designed to include. These realities call for reframing policy priorities: physical structure is not peripheral to learning—it is foundational to a learner's sense of worth.

At the national level, these findings suggest the need to embed child-friendliness criteria within ALS monitoring and evaluation frameworks, alongside stronger infrastructure standards in implementing Republic Act No. 11510. Locally, the study highlights the importance of formalizing LGU–DepEd partnerships that go beyond resource provision and toward sustained governance and accountability for CLC functionality. These partnerships can be operationalized through specific mechanisms, such as: (a) allocation of Special Education Fund (SEF) resources for CLC infrastructure and sanitation; (b) joint LGU–DepEd programs for learner health, psychosocial support, and digital inclusion; and (c) barangay-led community education summits co-facilitated by DepEd to mobilize civil society and parental involvement. Inter-agency collaboration, especially in health, protection, and digital access, should likewise be institutionalized at the municipal level to ensure that CLCs evolve as sustainable, holistic, and learner-centered spaces.

Beyond the Philippine context, the lessons from Northern Mindanao may serve as a reference point for Southeast Asia. However, the region is far from homogeneous—its countries differ in governance structures, resource levels, and approaches to non-formal education. What works in Northern Mindanao may require substantial adaptation to fit the realities of island nations, conflict-affected communities, or highly urbanized contexts elsewhere in Southeast Asia. These findings, therefore, highlight the importance of localized interventions, where global or regional frameworks like the CFS are interpreted and applied in ways that remain sensitive to the lived conditions of learners and implementers on the ground.

Finally, the study underscores the value of future research that centers on learner voices, tracks long-term educational outcomes, and investigates context-specific models of CLC governance. This is the first regional-level research report in the Philippines to systematically apply UNICEF's Child-Friendly School Framework to non-formal learning settings. It contributes to the emerging body of scholarship that localizes global education standards for vulnerable learners outside formal schooling.

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Conflict of Interest Statement

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

AI Disclosure

We declare that this manuscript was prepared without the assistance of artificial intelligence. Hence, the content of this paper is original.

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