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Designing for financial resilience: Human values, behavioural science and responsible leadership in Philippine public education

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Abstract

Public-school teachers in the Philippines face persistent financial vulnerability, shaped by debt deductions, low net take-home pay, rising living costs and limited access to trusted financial guidance. This paper examines Sun Life Financial-Philippines Foundation, Inc. Sun Life Foundation's Sun Pera-Aralan programme (SPA) as a behaviourally informed and culturally grounded response to this challenge. Drawing on programme evidence, behavioural theory and Southeast Asian sociocultural perspectives, the paper argues that SPA moves beyond financial literacy by redesigning the conditions under which financial decisions are made. Through the *Peso Sobre* envelope system, peer-led teacher Focal networks and ethically bounded volunteer financial guidance, SPA shows how responsible corporate social investment can build financial resilience through behavioural infrastructure, while protecting dignity, trust and cultural context. While rooted in Philippine public education, the case offers wider lessons for organisations seeking to design financial wellbeing, ESG and social impact programmes that move beyond awareness-raising towards trusted, behaviourally grounded systems of support.

Keywords: financial resilience, behavioural science, responsible leadership, social innovation, human values, public education, social impact.

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Introduction

On a humid Monday morning in Manila, a public-school teacher withdraws her monthly salary and carefully organises the cash into labelled yellow envelopes. One envelope reads "Fixed Expenses": rent, bills, loan repayments and family obligations. Four smaller envelopes are marked by week. What remains is not abundant, but it is visible and tangible. The month ahead can be seen, touched and divided before the pressures of the present begin to daunt. This ritual lies at the heart of Sun Life Foundation's Sun Pera-Aralan programme, known as SPA. Translated as "Money School", SPA was developed to support financial education among public-school teachers in the Philippines. Yet the programme is more than a literacy intervention. It reflects a shift from information to behaviour, from one-off training to habit formation, and from individual budgeting to a wider system of trust, peer support and culturally grounded design.

In the Philippines, public-school teachers hold a respected civic role, yet many experience persistent financial pressure. In 2019, Filipino public-school teachers reportedly carried more than ₱319 billion ($5.2 billion) in cumulative debt, reflecting long-standing concerns around loan deductions and low net take-home pay (Reysio-Cruz, 2019). These pressures are not only lived as financial constraints, they are also experienced through family responsibilities, social obligations, school demands and the emotional strain of trying to stretch a salary over an unpredictable month.

The policy response to financial vulnerability has often focused on financial literacy: teaching individuals to budget, save, borrow responsibly and plan for the future. This knowledge is important, but the assumption that better knowledge automatically produces better financial behaviour is increasingly contested. Fernandes, Lynch and Netemeyer's (2014) meta-analysis found that financial education has only a limited effect on downstream financial behaviours, especially when measured over time. This does not make financial education irrelevant. It suggests that education must be embedded in behavioural, social and institutional systems that make adherence easier.

SPA is effective because it shows how financial education can be redesigned as a system of action, trust and local adaptation. It uses the *Peso Sobre* envelope system to structure payday decisions. Teacher Focals provide peer-based social reinforcement, and volunteer Financial Advisors to extend access to guidance under clear ethical guardrails. The programme draws on Filipino cultural values such as *pakikisama*, or harmonious relations, *diskarte*, or everyday resourcefulness, and *hiya*, or shame aversion. In doing so, it works in line with the local culture and context, and not against.

While SPA is rooted in Philippine public education, its wider relevance lies in the design principles it reveals. Many organisations face similar challenges when trying to support financial wellbeing, health, inclusion, sustainability or ethical behaviour: information is available, but effectiveness is fragile; trust is uneven; and interventions often fail when they ignore culture and everyday routines. SPA therefore offers transferable lessons for organisations seeking to move from awareness-raising to behaviourally grounded, trust-based social impact. What makes SPA significant is the infrastructure around it: the envelope, the peer support, the school setting and the safeguards. Its contribution is local in how it works, but relevant elsewhere because many organisations face the same gap between knowledge, intention and action.

Financial resilience as a human values challenge

Financial vulnerability among teachers should not be reduced to poor budgeting. Debt, low take-home pay, emergency expenses and family obligations shape decision-making in ways that information alone cannot solve. For teachers, whose work carries public and civic importance, these pressures affect dignity, autonomy, family security and professional wellbeing.

Financial resilience is therefore not only about money. It is also about agency, trust, care and fairness. In many Filipino households, money is relational: connected to family support, shared responsibilities, emergency help, school expenses and social expectations.

Behavioural science helps explain why knowledge alone is often insufficient. Scarcity can narrow attention to immediate pressures and reduce the cognitive bandwidth available for long-term planning (Mullainathan & Shafir, 2013). A teacher may know the importance of saving, but still struggle to protect savings when faced with a family emergency, debt deduction, school expense or social obligation. The issue is not ignorance, but the mismatch between rational advice and the real conditions in which decisions are made.

This shifts the responsibility of leadership. Rather than asking only how teachers can be taught to manage money better, SPA asks how systems can make financially healthier behaviour easier, more socially supported and more trustworthy. Its tools are visible, voluntary and practical; they support teachers' own goals rather than imposing external definitions of success. This same inefficiency appears in many organisational settings, when it is assumed that information will do the work of behaviour change. SPA shows that interventions need to fit how people actually make decisions: under pressure, within relationships and with competing obligations.

From financial literacy to behavioural design

Traditional financial literacy programmes often assume that people will remember, translate and apply knowledge consistently over time. Yet financial decisions are rarely made in neutral conditions. They are shaped by timing, stress, habits, emotions, social norms and the physical form in which money is held.

SPA's central innovation is the *Peso Sobre*, a simple envelope-based budgeting system. On payday, teachers divide cash into labelled envelopes for fixed expenses and weekly spending. The method works because it relocates decision-making to the moment when teachers still have the most control over the month ahead. Instead of making repeated spending decisions under pressure, teachers make a structured allocation at the beginning. Behaviourally, the *Peso Sobre* combines mental accounting, pre-commitment and implementation intentions. Money is assigned to visible categories, future spending becomes psychologically bounded, and the abstract goal of "managing my salary better" becomes a concrete payday routine before other demands intervene (Shefrin & Thaler, 1988; Gollwitzer, 1999).

The tool is intentionally low-tech. Its low-tech quality is not a limitation, but part of why it works. The envelope becomes a behavioural object: tactile, visible and familiar. It slows down spending, creates friction around unplanned use and makes the consequences of decisions more visible. The sophistication lies in the timing, visibility and fit with everyday routines. Programme evidence suggests meaningful change. In SPA trials across multiple schools, 2019 pre- and post-test results showed that the proportion of teachers who extended their budgets until month-end rose from 53.3% to 67.2% after three months of *Peso Sobre* use (Sun Life Foundation Philippines, 2019). More than 80% of participants began saving, while 82% reported saving at least once within six months. These results should be interpreted as programme-level evidence rather than causal proof from a randomised controlled trial.

Perhaps more important is the way teachers describe the tool. One teacher explained: "*I am no longer afraid of due dates. The Peso Sobre has been a great help. It's easier to understand budgeting, and I no longer need to take out loans.*" The envelope does not merely organise money. It reduces fear and turns financial planning into a manageable routine rather than a source of shame. For organisations, the lesson is practical: behaviour change often begins not with more information, but with a better-designed moment of choice.

Making change social: Teacher Focals and peer reinforcement

Behaviour change rarely sustains through tools alone. Financial practices are socially embedded, especially in relational cultures such as the Philippines, where financial decisions are shaped by family, colleagues and community.

SPA addresses this through Teacher Focals: respected teachers and school administrators who support implementation within their own school communities. Rather than relying only on external trainers, SPA builds internal social reinforcement. Focals remind colleagues of the *Peso Sobre* practice, share experiences, create informal accountability and help normalise conversations about money. The model reflects social learning theory, which emphasises that people learn not only through instruction but by observing and identifying with others (Bandura, 1977). When a respected colleague shares budgeting struggles and progress, the behaviour becomes more credible. Teachers can see that change is possible for someone like them, under similar pressures.

The cultural dimension is equally important. In many Filipino contexts, *hiya* can inhibit open discussion of debt or financial struggle. SPA reduces this barrier by shifting financial behaviour change from a private confession to a shared practice. Teachers are not asked to expose failure; they are invited into a collective routine. At Mapulang Lupa Elementary, one teacher's budgeting faltered until a SPA Focal shared his own setbacks and helped co-create a carpooling arrangement to reduce transport costs. The teacher succeeded the following month and was applauded by colleagues. The point is not only the saving made, but the social reward attached to recovery.

SPA also uses hierarchy carefully. In Southeast Asian school systems, respect for seniority and institutional authority can provide legitimacy. Yet SPA is not only top-down. Its strength lies in combining institutional endorsement with horizontal peer support: authority opens the door, while peer trust keeps the practice alive. The programme's digital layer extends this social architecture. A large Facebook community (the country's most used social media platform) allows teachers to share budgeting tips, small wins and encouragement. Its legitimacy, however, remains anchored in the offline trust created through school-based implementation.

This is where the case becomes useful beyond the Philippines. Sensitive behaviours such as debt management, mental health, inclusion, ethics and sustainability are rarely changed by information campaigns alone. People need settings where setbacks can be discussed without embarrassment and where trying again is socially possible.

Trusted access, ethical boundaries and cultural fit

Once teachers begin to stabilise their monthly budgeting, many seek more advanced guidance on insurance, emergency funds, debt consolidation, investments and long-term planning. SPA responds through a Volunteer Engagement Programme involving licensed Financial Advisors from Sun Life. This addresses an access problem. Trusted financial advice is often unavailable, unaffordable or viewed with suspicion, particularly where financial services are associated with sales pressure, product complexity or unequal information. For teachers already managing debt and vulnerability, trust is essential.

The volunteer advisor model therefore requires careful ethical design. Financial education could otherwise be perceived as product promotion. SPA addresses this risk through clear guardrails: volunteer advisors provide educational support only, with no sales quotas or promotional materials. These standards are reinforced through onboarding, training, mock sessions, performance evaluation forms and validation mechanisms. Advisors also align with teachers' schedules to avoid disrupting school responsibilities. These safeguards are essential because they protect the programme's legitimacy. Corporate involvement in social impact can generate value, but it can also create conflicts of interest. In a trust-sensitive public-sector environment, financial empowerment must not become disguised customer acquisition. At its best, the advisor model creates reciprocity: teachers receive guidance that builds on their budgeting habits, while advisors gain deeper insight into teachers' realities. As one volunteer advisor reflected: *"I get to teach the teachers, and in the process, I learn from them too."*

SPA also works because it feels familiar rather than imported. The *Peso Sobre* reflects informal household budgeting practices; Teacher Focals reflect the importance of known relationships; *pakikisama* supports group encouragement; *diskarte* speaks to everyday resourcefulness; and sensitivity to *hiya* helps reduce the shame that can prevent help-seeking. This cultural fit is not uncritical. Hierarchy can silence people, shame can inhibit disclosure, and social obligations can increase financial pressure. SPA does not ignore these tensions. It redirects them: authority becomes legitimacy rather than coercion, peer influence becomes support rather than judgement, and resourcefulness is strengthened through structure.

For corporate foundations and ESG leaders, this is a critical lesson. Social investment cannot rely only on good intentions, reach or technical expertise. Where commercial expertise overlaps with beneficiary needs, ethical boundaries become part of the intervention itself. In this kind of programme, safeguards are not separate from impact, they make impact credible

The SPA transferable Design Framework: five principles for responsible behaviour change

The point is not to copy the envelope, but to understand why it works. SPA is rooted in Philippine public education, yet the problems it addresses appear in many organisations: people know what they should do but struggle under pressure, including shame as it hides sensitive issues, and scaling can weaken trust.

The framework below translates the case into five principles that can inform financial wellbeing, employee support, community investment, ESG and social impact programmes in other contexts.

Table 1.
The SPA Financial Resilience Design Framework:
Five transferable principles for responsible behaviour change

SPA design principle	What SPA shows	Transferable lesson for organisations
Design at the moment of decision	The Peso Sobre structures salary decisions at payday, when teachers still have control over the month ahead.	Behaviour change interventions should be placed where decisions actually happen, not only where information is taught.
Make behaviour visible and tangible	Envelopes turn abstract budgeting into a physical routine that can be seen, touched and repeated.	Simple artefacts, prompts and routines can reduce cognitive burden more effectively than complex advice.
Use trusted peers to reduce shame	Teacher Focals normalise financial conversations and make setbacks recoverable rather than embarrassing.	Sensitive issues such as debt, wellbeing, inclusion or ethics often require peer trust, not only expert instruction.
Protect trust through ethical boundaries	Volunteer Financial Advisors provide education under no-sales guardrails.	Corporate social investment must manage conflicts of interest transparently, especially when commercial expertise overlaps with beneficiary needs.
Scale through relationships, not around them	Digital tools and online communities extend support but do not replace school-based trust.	Technology should strengthen trusted relationships, consent and local ownership, rather than automate away the relationships that make change credible.

This framework responds to the central managerial question raised by the case: How can organisations design support that people are willing and able to use? SPA's value lies in the envelope, the training session, the Facebook group and the volunteer advisor model, as well as its value from the fit between problem and design. A payday tool for a payday decision; peer support for a shame-sensitive issue; ethical guardrails where commercial trust could be fragile; and school-based legitimacy where external programmes often struggle to last.

Implications for policy, ESG and responsible organisational innovation

SPA has implications beyond Philippine public education. It offers lessons for policymakers, corporate foundations, employers and social impact practitioners designing programmes where knowledge alone is unlikely to change behaviour.

For policymakers, the case suggests that financial capability programmes should move beyond content delivery. Seminars may raise awareness, but lasting change requires tools that structure action. Policy design should therefore focus not only on what people need to know, but on when, where and with whom they are expected to act. For corporate foundations and ESG leaders, SPA shows that social investment is strongest when it builds capability and protects trust. The involvement of financial advisors creates value only because clear ethical guardrails protect teachers from sales pressure. Responsible leadership depends on transparent motives, boundaries, accountability and dialogue with the people the programme is designed to serve. For employers, SPA offers lessons for employee financial wellbeing and wider workforce support. Many organisations provide information on pensions, benefits, mental health, inclusion or sustainability, but struggle to convert awareness into sustained behaviour. SPA suggests that support should be aligned with moments of decision, reinforced through trusted social structures and designed to reduce shame rather than expose failure.

For organisations using technology, SPA cautions against treating digital tools as the main intervention. Reminders, matching tools, prompts or AI-enabled feedback may help programmes scale, but only when they strengthen trusted relationships, consent and local ownership. Digital tools should extend trust, not replace it.

Overall, SPA challenges a narrow view of CSR and ESG as funding, reporting or visibility. Its transferability lies in the effective intervention, and support provided when it fits the moment of decision, protects dignity and earns trust.

Conclusion

Financial resilience cannot be built through information alone. In the hands of Filipino public-school teachers, the *Peso Sobre* becomes more than an envelope system: it makes the future visible, protects family needs and helps restore confidence under financial pressure.`

For responsible leaders, the lesson is broader than financial education. Compliance and efficiency still matter, but they do not answer the harder question of how organisations affect dignity, trust and future choices. SPA shows one way corporate engagement can be useful without becoming extractive or promotional. The envelope is deceptively simple. It creates a pause at the moment when decisions matter most and gives dignity a practical form. As SPA continues to reach teachers and schools, it offers a model for building financial resilience from the grassroots. People do not need to be designed around systems, systems need to be designed around people.

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