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Transformational Educational Leadership in Indonesia and the Philippines: Cultural Contexts and National Strategic Education Plans

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Abstract: This study compares how secondary school principals in Indonesia and the Philippines enact transformational leadership at the intersection of local cultural values and national education policy. National strategic education plans are understood here as the multi-year policy frameworks, and the flagship programmes derived from them, through which central governments direct schools. A qualitative comparative case study was conducted with six purposively selected principals (three per country). Data came from semi-structured interviews, direct observation and school documents, and were analysed thematically. In their own accounts, principals in both countries acted as mediators who interpreted national policy, notably the *Guru Penggerak* programme in Indonesia and School-Based Management in the Philippines, and adapted it to local conditions. They drew on values such as *gotong royong* and *musyawarah* in Indonesia and *pakikisama* in the Philippines to build consensus, involve teachers and share responsibility, although the same values also limited directive action and are not uniform across regions. Principals handled resource constraints through creativity and community partnerships. Differences in learning innovation, project-based learning in Indonesia and digital platforms in the Philippines, appear to reflect policy content and infrastructure at least as much as culture. The study proposes *contextual translation*, the interpretation and re-presentation of national policy through local cultural and material resources, as a concept for understanding transformational leadership in decentralised systems. The findings rest on six cases and should not be generalised to either country.

Keywords: Transformational Educational Leadership; Cultural Contexts; National Strategic Education Plans; Policy Enactment; Comparative Study; Southeast Asia.

INTRODUCTION

Educational leadership shapes institutional vision, organisational culture and, indirectly, student learning (Hallinger, 2011; Leithwood & Jantzi, 2006). In Southeast Asia, the school principal's role has moved beyond administrative management towards that of a change agent, particularly in post-colonial systems that have undergone decentralisation. Indonesia and the Philippines illustrate this shift. Indonesian school leadership moved from the centralised, hierarchical arrangements of the New Order to the *reformasi* period, in which principals are expected to drive quality and innovation in more autonomous schools (Bjork, 2005; Raihani, 2006; Andriani, 2017). Philippine principals work in a system marked by socioeconomic disparity, geographical fragmentation and frequent natural disasters, conditions that call for adaptability and community engagement (Sutherland & Brooks, 2013; Chua Reyes et al., 2022). A comparison of the two settings can show how cultural frameworks and national education policy interact in shaping principals' leadership. This study treats transformational leadership not as a universal template but as a situated practice, shaped where policy mandates and cultural values meet.

Transformational leadership originates in Burns's (1978) distinction between transactional and transforming leaders and was developed by Bass (1985) and Bass and Avolio (1994). In schools, Leithwood and Jantzi (2000, 2006) described it in terms of setting directions, developing people and redesigning the organisation, and reported associations with teacher commitment, organisational conditions and classroom practice; Hallinger (2003) discussed how it relates to instructional leadership. More recent work links it to teacher collaboration for technology integration (Schmitz et al., 2025). This literature, however, was developed largely in Anglo-American settings and tends to assume individual, agentic leaders. Comparative work on culture and leadership argues that leadership concepts and practices vary with cultural context and that Western-derived models should not be assumed to transfer to collectivist or high power-distance societies (Hofstede, 2001; House et al., 2004; Dimmock & Walker, 2005). Research on principals in the region points in the same direction. Raihani (2006) found that successful Indonesian principals' leadership was rooted in durable Islamic and cultural values; Indra et al. (2020) and Afandi et al. (2021) examined principals' leadership and learning leadership in Indonesian schools; and Murniati et al. (2018) argued for localising transformational leadership in Indonesia. For the Philippines, Sutherland and Brooks (2013) trace the historical, cultural and policy dynamics of school leadership, while Chua Reyes et al. (2022) show how reforms and crises can add to principals' burdens in conditions of poverty and disaster. Few studies,

however, compare how principals in two such systems enact transformational leadership in relation to both local culture and national education policy. This study addresses that gap.

Two concepts need definition. First, *national strategic education plans* are understood here as the multi-year policy frameworks, and the flagship programmes derived from them, through which central governments set direction for schools. In Indonesia these include the Ministry of Education's strategic plan for 2020–2024 (Ministry of Education and Culture, 2020), the *Merdeka Belajar* agenda and *Kurikulum Merdeka*, and the *Guru Penggerak* and *Sekolah Penggerak* programmes. *Guru Penggerak*, a teacher-development programme, is therefore one instrument within the wider policy and not the plan itself. In the Philippines the relevant frameworks include the Governance of Basic Education Act (Republic Act 9155), the Basic Education Development Plan 2030 and the MATATAG agenda, and the Philippine Professional Standards for School Heads; School-Based Management (SBM) is a governance mechanism through which these plans reach schools. The principals in this study referred mainly to *Guru Penggerak* and SBM, so the analysis concentrates on these two entry points while placing them in the wider frameworks. Policy settings in both countries have been changing, including the restructuring of Indonesia's education ministry in 2024, so the findings describe the policy environment at the time of fieldwork. Second, culture is understood here not as a uniform national trait but as a set of locally situated values and norms that principals both draw on and are constrained by.

Indonesia and the Philippines are archipelagic, post-colonial states that moved from centralised authority towards decentralisation, but they decentralised in different ways, and these structural differences are the basis for the comparison. Following Bray and Thomas's (1995) call for comparison across levels, we distinguish national, sub-national and school levels. In Indonesia, Law 22 of 1999 on regional government (Republic of Indonesia, 1999) devolved most education responsibilities to districts and cities from 2001, and Law 23 of 2014 (Republic of Indonesia, 2014) later moved the management of senior secondary schooling to the provincial level. In the Philippines, the Department of Education remains a comparatively centralised national agency, and SBM is a form of deconcentrated school autonomy established through national policy, under which principals prepare school improvement plans with their communities (Republic of the Philippines, 2001; Department of Education, 2012). Indonesia also has school-based management (*manajemen berbasis sekolah*), so the difference lies less in whether school autonomy exists than in how authority is distributed across levels of government and how national policy reaches principals. The common contrast between a 'top-down'

Indonesia and a 'bottom-up' Philippines is therefore too simple. In both systems principals work under national mandates, and the empirical question is how they translate them locally. Existing evidence is also drawn partly from other school levels, namely primary schools in Indonesia (Andriani, 2017; Khairina et al., 2024) and elementary schools in the Philippines (Perez & Lumaad, 2021), whereas this study concerns secondary principals, so earlier findings serve as context and not as direct comparison.

To theorise how principals respond to these environments, the study draws on policy enactment (Ball et al., 2012) and sensemaking (Spillane et al., 2002), which treat policy as something that actors interpret and recreate and not as something simply implemented. It uses *contextual translation* as a working concept for this process among school principals: the practice of interpreting national policy and re-presenting it in terms that make sense locally, using the cultural and material resources available to the school. The concept is developed from the data and examined critically in the Discussion. Terms from local languages are written in italics and glossed at first use: *gotong royong* (mutual cooperation), *musyawarah* (deliberation to reach consensus), *bayanihan* (communal unity and effort) and *pakikisama* (getting along with others, rendered here as 'smooth interpersonal relations'). These English glosses are approximations. *Pakikisama*, for example, also carries expectations of loyalty and conformity to the group, which is why it is treated here as both a resource and a constraint. The research question is: How do local cultural contexts and the structures of national strategic education plans shape, enable or constrain the enactment of transformational leadership by secondary school principals in Indonesia and the Philippines?

To address this question, the study used a qualitative comparative case study design with purposively selected secondary school principals in both countries who were recognised for innovative practice. Data were gathered through semi-structured interviews, direct observation of meetings, teacher collaboration and community interactions, and analysis of school documents such as school improvement plans and policy memos, which were used to trace how national plans appear in local practice. Thematic analysis was used to identify patterns, contrasts and shared features across the cases.

The study aims to move beyond the application of imported leadership models and to contribute an empirically grounded, context-sensitive understanding of educational leadership in Southeast Asia. It also considers where cultural values and policy demands pull principals in different directions, instead of assuming that they align. The findings are intended to inform leadership development programmes and policy design in both countries.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This study used a qualitative approach with a cross-national comparative case study design (Yin, 2018) to examine transformational leadership in secondary schools in Indonesia and the Philippines. The design made it possible to examine in depth how principals work with national education policy in different cultural settings. Participants were six school principals, three from Indonesia and three from the Philippines, selected purposively on three criteria: at least three years in the role, recognition for leadership innovation, and acknowledgement by the school community for improving educational quality. Selecting principals with proven experience and a local reputation for effective leadership follows practice in earlier qualitative studies of principals (Werang et al., 2023). The sites are not culturally uniform. The two sites named in the findings, for example, are Bogor, a Sundanese-majority area of West Java, and Marawi City, a predominantly Maranao and Muslim city in the Bangsamoro Autonomous Region in Muslim Mindanao, where basic education is administered by the region's own ministry and not by the national Department of Education. Region, religion and ethnicity therefore shape the context of each case, and the limits this place on cross-country comparison are discussed in the Conclusion.

The primary instruments were semi-structured interviews, direct observation in schools, and documentation of policies and internal school reports. In-depth interviews elicited principals' accounts of their vision, leadership strategies, relationships with teachers, and responses to national education plans and local cultural conditions. Data collection began with formal permission from local education authorities, followed by one-week field visits to each school. Observations focused on teacher meetings, decision-making processes and day-to-day leadership interactions, following standard guidance on qualitative fieldwork (Yin, 2018). Policy documents and school reports were used to identify the national instruments to which principals referred and to trace how these appeared in school improvement plans and internal memos.

Data were analysed thematically through open coding, categorisation and identification of key themes (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Data from the two countries were then compared to identify similarities and differences in leadership practice, particularly in relation to cultural contexts and national strategic education plans. Trustworthiness was supported by source and method triangulation and by member checking, in which findings were confirmed with participants (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Because of the small, purposive sample, the study aims at analytic insight and not statistical generalisation; its limitations are set out in the Conclusion.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Results

Formulating a Contextually Responsive Vision

Principals in both countries demonstrated that a transformative vision serves as the foundational bridge between national strategy and local action. In Indonesia, principals framed their school's vision as an operational tool for character development and systemic change, ensuring it was co-created to foster collective ownership. As one principal from Bogor noted, "Our vision is not just a slogan; it must be embedded in every practice. We involved teachers and the school committee in its formulation to foster a sense of ownership" (Principal A, Indonesia). This reflects a deliberate strategy to align the school's direction with broader national goals while rooting it in local commitment. In the Philippines, the visioning process was explicitly adaptive to socioeconomic realities. A principal from Marawi City explained, "We revisit our vision annually, especially after the pandemic. We must align it with the social realities of our students" (Principal D, Philippines). This practice highlights a strategic response to community-specific challenges, ensuring the vision remains a living document that guides the school's adaptation to both policy mandates and contextual needs.

Strategic Empowerment within Policy Frameworks

Teacher empowerment emerged as a critical strategy for enacting transformational goals, tailored to each country's policy environment. Indonesian principals often leveraged informal, relationship-based systems, such as peer mentoring, to emphasize sustainability within existing resource constraints. "We have a peer mentoring program. Senior teachers routinely guide junior teachers. This is essential for maintaining instructional quality" (Principal B, Indonesia). In contrast, Philippine principals employed more structured, system-driven approaches aligned with School-Based Management (SBM) accountability. "I encourage teachers to conduct small-group lesson studies. We present the results to the entire staff each month" (Principal E, Philippines). This difference is consistent with the two policy environments: relationship-based collegiality in Indonesia and formalised collaboration under SBM accountability in the Philippines. With three principals per country, however, it cannot be attributed to policy alone.

Table 1. Strategies for Teacher Empowerment Aligned with National Context

Country	Key Strategy	Implementation Frequency
Indonesia	Peer mentoring, local training workshops	Aligns with quality improvement goals; implemented routinely per semester
Philippines	Collaborative lesson study, performance-led professional learning communities	Embedded in School-Based Management (SBM) requirements; conducted monthly

Adaptive Navigation of National Strategic Plans

Principals' responsiveness to national policy ranged from enthusiastic adoption to creative work-arounds for constraints. In Indonesia, the national teacher-development programme *Guru Penggerak* was welcomed as a means of developing instructional leaders, yet implementation faced cultural inertia. "Conceptually, we support '*Guru Penggerak*', but not all teachers are mentally ready for change" (Principal C, Indonesia). Principals thus described acting as translators of policy for their staff. In the Philippines, the decentralisation mandated through SBM granted autonomy but also created resource gaps, which demanded entrepreneurial leadership. "We are given autonomy, but resources do not always accompany it. So, we must be creative in seeking sponsorships and local support" (Principal F, Philippines). The same policy direction, decentralisation, was thus experienced differently depending on the resources available to each school.

Culturally Grounded Leadership as Resource and Constraint

Principals' accounts of their leadership were infused with local cultural vocabulary. Indonesian principals referred to '*gotong royong*' (mutual cooperation) and '*musyawarah*' (deliberation to reach consensus) when describing governance. "We use the school community deliberation forum to resolve issues. It is our way of maintaining harmony, involving all school members and parents" (Principal B, Indonesia). In the Philippines, a principal presented '*pakikisama*' (smooth interpersonal relationships) as central to securing collective buy in. "We cannot impose decisions as leaders. Everyone must feel appreciated and included. In our culture, we value *pakikisama*" (Principal D, Philippines). Principals used these values to explain and justify their practice, and the same values also shaped what they felt able to do. Principal D's remark that decisions cannot be imposed, and Principal C's comment that not all teachers were mentally ready for change, suggest that consensus-oriented norms can limit directive action as well as support collective commitment. The data show these

values mainly as principals' own explanations of their practice; the study does not test whether a particular forum or practice produced buy-in.

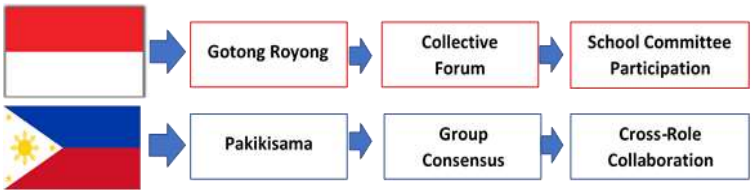


Figure 1. The Mediating Role of Cultural Values in Implementing Strategic Plans (Enabling Pathways Reported by Principals)

Innovation in Learning and Its Policy Context

Innovation in learning management was a visible outcome of how principals translated national policy into classroom practice. In Indonesia, principals described pedagogical shifts towards thematic and project-based learning after the pandemic. "We transformed our learning system to be more thematic and project-based so students can engage more actively" (Principal A, Indonesia). This corresponds with the project-based component of *Kurikulum Merdeka* and may therefore reflect policy compliance as much as principal-led innovation. In the Philippines, innovation was technology-driven, a response to the practical needs of blended learning. "We formed 'digital class teams' to support blended learning. All teachers were trained in Google Classroom" (Principal E, Philippines). The two examples answer different problems, one a curriculum requirement and the other a problem of delivery, so the data do not allow the difference to be attributed to culture; differences in policy content and in the infrastructure available to schools, such as connectivity and devices, are equally plausible explanations. Figure 2 shows how many of the six schools reported each area of innovation.

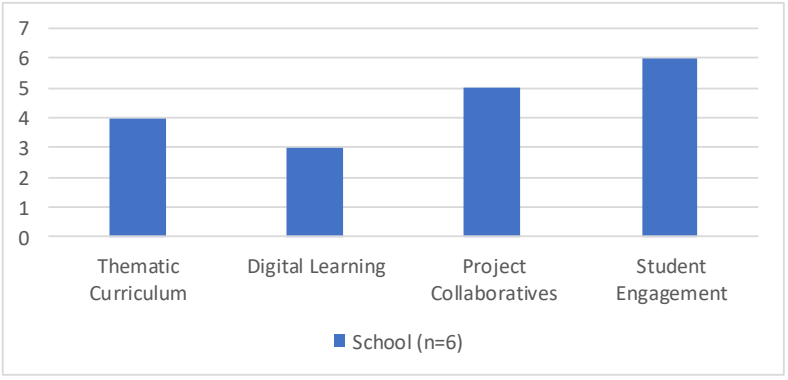


Figure 2. Primary Areas of Innovation Reported by Principals

Synthesis: The Interplay of Culture, Strategy, and Leadership

The findings suggest that transformational leadership in these cases involved mediation between national policy and local conditions. Principals neither simply executed national plans nor simply embodied cultural values; in their own accounts they interpreted policy and adapted it for their schools, using relational resources available locally. The national plan supplied direction and a formal framework, while local cultural norms and material conditions shaped the methods of implementation and also set limits on them. Across vision-setting, teacher empowerment and innovation, this process of contextual translation took different forms in the two countries. The evidence, however, comes from six principals and describes how they understood their work; it does not demonstrate cause and effect.

Discussion

The findings suggest that principals in both countries acted as mediators between national policy and local conditions, interpreting and adapting policy through locally available cultural and material resources. This discussion places the five themes in the existing literature, considers competing explanations and counter-evidence, and states the study's theoretical contribution.

Cultural Values as Resource and Constraint

Principals' accounts show cultural values as active elements of their leadership repertoire and not as passive background. In Indonesia, *musyawarah* forums and the spirit of *gotong royong* were described as ways of building consensus and mobilising collective action toward nationally mandated goals such as school improvement and teacher development. This is consistent with Raihani's (2006) finding that Indonesian principals' leadership is rooted in durable Islamic and cultural values, and with Hodriani et al.'s (2019) account of *gotong royong* as a shared value in multiethnic Indonesian society. In the Philippines, *pakikisama* was presented as part of how SBM is carried out collaboratively, which fits Sutherland and Brooks's (2013) argument that Philippine school leadership is shaped by historical, cultural and policy dynamics. These findings challenge purely individualistic models of transformational leadership and support calls for localising them (Murniati et al., 2018; Dimmock & Walker, 2005).

The same values also have a less favourable side, which the data hint at but the study did not set out to examine. Consensus norms can suppress dissent, slow decisions, reinforce hierarchical deference and make open disagreement difficult (Hofstede, 2001; Dimmock & Walker, 2005). Principal

D's remark that decisions cannot be imposed and Principal C's observation that teachers were not ready for change suggest that principals are shaped and constrained by these values as well as using them, so describing the values as 'tools' would overstate principals' control over them. Nor are the cultural frames uniform. Bogor is a Sundanese-majority setting, and Marawi City is predominantly Maranao and Muslim, in a region with its own education ministry, where *pakikisama*, a value more often discussed in relation to lowland Filipino society, may not be the primary cultural frame. Studies from other parts of Mindanao, such as Abdurahman and Omar's (2021) study of school heads in Sulu, would be useful comparators. Region, religion and ethnicity probably matter, and the findings should be read as context-specific and not as national patterns.

Strategic Plans as Frameworks for Adaptive Leadership

National plans set the formal arena for leadership, and implementation involved principal-led adaptation, consistent with policy-enactment accounts in which schools interpret and recreate policy and do not simply implement it (Ball et al., 2012; Spillane et al., 2002). Indonesian principals supported national initiatives such as *Guru Penggerak* but described having to manage 'teacher readiness', which may reflect culture (reluctance to depart from established practice), capacity (workload and training), or both. These are competing explanations that the data cannot separate. In the Philippines, SBM granted autonomy without consistently matching resources, which pushed principals into entrepreneurial roles of seeking sponsorships and local support. Chua Reyes et al. (2022) show how reforms and crises can add to principals' burdens in such conditions, a reminder that the entrepreneurial response signals under-resourcing as well as leadership strength. Resource mobilisation and community partnership are well documented in the school leadership literature (for example Hallinger, 2011), so they are better described as familiar practices appearing under particular decentralisation arrangements than as new to transformational theory. In both cases the plan set the 'what', while cultural and resource conditions shaped the 'how'.

Synthesizing Culture and Strategy in Empowerment and Innovation

Empowerment strategies matched policy goals (quality improvement and SBM accountability) but took different forms: relational peer mentoring in Indonesia and more structured lesson study in the Philippines. This is consistent with Afandi et al. (2021) and Ramos and Bauyot (2024) on how principals support professional learning. One possible reading is that relational support is what makes technical empowerment work, as the Indonesian principal's account of senior teachers routinely guiding junior colleagues suggests. This reading is

tentative. The results do not isolate relational support as a separate theme, and the difference between the two countries could equally reflect the formal requirements of SBM, as noted above.

The innovation examples should be read cautiously. Project-based learning in Indonesia probably reflects the project-based component of *Kurikulum Merdeka*, so it is better understood as policy compliance, with principals organising implementation, than as innovation that originated with principals. The Philippine use of Google Classroom and 'digital class teams' was a response to pandemic-era blended learning and depended on connectivity and devices. Because the two examples respond to different problems, the data do not support the claim that culture explains the difference in innovation; policy content and infrastructure are at least as likely explanations. Studies of principals' leadership during the pandemic (Cahapay, 2021; Werang et al., 2023) show that school leaders adapt to circumstances in many ways, which is consistent with this reading.

Contribution to Theory

The study offers four propositions about contextual translation, grounded in the cases and linked to Figure 1, which shows the pathways from cultural values to collective forums and consensus mechanisms to participation. First, contextual translation is the work of interpreting national policy and re-presenting it in locally meaningful terms, using cultural values and material resources. Second, cultural values act as both resource and constraint, offering routes to consensus and legitimacy while limiting directive action; Figure 1 shows only the enabling pathways reported by principals, and the constraining pathways described above should be added to it in future work. Third, the form translation takes depends on the structure of the policy as well as on culture, for example whether a policy is a programme to be adopted, as with *Guru Penggerak*, or a governance mechanism to be operated, as with SBM. Fourth, differences between countries in visible practice cannot be attributed to culture without first considering policy content and infrastructure. These propositions refine and do not replace transformational leadership theory: they add a layer of policy and cultural mediation to the dimensions of setting directions, developing people and redesigning the organisation (Leithwood & Jantzi, 2006), and they need to be tested with larger and more varied samples.

CONCLUSION

This study concludes that, in the six cases examined, transformational educational leadership in secondary schools in Indonesia and the Philippines was a contextualised practice enacted at the intersection of local cultural

frameworks and national strategic education plans. Principals acted as mediators who did not simply implement policy but interpreted, adapted and localised national directives through culturally embedded approaches. Their leadership was characterised not by the uniform application of a global model but by a deliberate effort to combine external policy mandates with local cultural and material resources, an effort that was also limited by those same conditions.

Principals in both countries operationalise their role by first formulating a transformative vision that aligns national strategic goals, such as quality improvement, decentralisation, or digital transformation, with local community realities and values. This vision functions as a guiding framework, translating abstract policy into actionable school-level missions. Teacher empowerment emerges as a critical strategy, implemented through culturally congruent mechanisms: relational peer mentoring and *musyawarah*-based collaboration in Indonesia, and structured professional learning communities within the School-Based Management framework in the Philippines. These practices highlight that empowerment is both a technical requirement of strategic plans and a relational process sustained by local cultural norms.

A central finding is the principals' adaptive and creative responsiveness to national policies. In Indonesia, initiatives such as *Guru Penggerak* were welcomed, yet principals moderated implementation in light of teacher readiness and local capacity. In the Philippines, the autonomy granted by decentralisation came with resource gaps that principals bridged through entrepreneurial leadership, community partnerships and local solutions. Transformational leadership in these contexts therefore required managerial agility and political skill as well as inspirational vision.

Local cultural values such as *gotong royong* (cooperation) and *pakikisama* (smooth interpersonal relations) were important resources for participatory decision-making, shared responsibility and collaboration, but they also set limits on what principals felt able to do. Innovation in learning, whether through digital tools, thematic instruction or project-based learning, responded to national requirements and local needs, although in Indonesia it largely tracked curriculum policy.

In summary, this study contributes a more nuanced understanding of educational leadership in Southeast Asia by proposing contextual translation as a way of describing how principals combine the 'what' of national strategic plans with the 'how' of local cultural practice, while recognising the limits of both.

This study has several limitations. It rests on six principals, three per country, selected for their reputation for innovation, so the findings are not representative and should not be generalised to either country, and the selection

of recognised principals may favour positive accounts. The cases are not culturally uniform, and region, religion and ethnicity, notably in Bogor and Marawi City, were not analysed systematically. Much of the evidence comes from principals' own accounts, supported by observation and documents, so claims about cause, for example that a deliberation forum produced buy-in, cannot be established. Policy settings in both countries have been changing, and the findings describe the environment at the time of fieldwork.

The findings have implications for practice and policy. For principal preparation, programmes could teach principals to read policy critically, to work with local cultural norms while recognising their limits, and to handle the tension between consensus and decisive action, in other words to be culturally intelligent leaders. For policy, national frameworks in both countries should provide resources along with autonomy, since the entrepreneurial responses of Philippine principals reflect gaps in funding, and should allow for regional and cultural variation in implementation, including in Mindanao and in the diverse regions of Indonesia. Policy evaluations should also distinguish policy compliance from principal-led innovation.

Future research could extend the comparison to more principals and regions; examine variation within each country by ethnicity and religion; add teacher and community perspectives to test principals' accounts; study the less favourable sides of consensus norms, such as deference, patronage and avoidance of conflict; and use designs that can test the propositions on contextual translation, for example by comparing principals who work with the same policy in different cultural settings.■

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