

Translating Finnish Pedagogical Excellence into Sustainable School Management: Strategies for Fostering Equity and Diversity in Primary Education

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Article Info

Article history:

Received 03 24, 2026

Revised 09 05, 2026

Accepted 11 05, 2026

Keywords:

Contextual Translation, Distributive Leadership, Educational Equity, Finnish Excellence, PhenoBL, Sustainable School Management.

ABSTRACT

This study aims to analyze strategies for translating Finnish pedagogical excellence into sustainable primary school management, focusing on fostering equity and diversity. This evaluation urgently required as many traditional school management models as possible in centralized systems to struggle to balance rigorous academic standards with student well-being and inclusive practices. The novelty of this research lies in the development of a "Contextual Translation" framework that mediates progressive Finnish values with local institutional constraints. Employing a qualitative approach with a single-case study design at a private elementary school in Indonesia, the research involved eight key informants, including the principal, curriculum coordinator, and senior teachers. Primary data were gathered through virtual interviews via Zoom, participant observations conducted through high-resolution video recordings of learning activities, and an in-depth analysis of strategic documents from 2024–2025 to ensure the credibility of remote qualitative procedures. The results indicate that the implementation of Phenomenon-Based Learning (PhenoBL) effectively fosters student agency and intrinsic motivation, evidenced by a 30% increase in student-led project initiatives. The success of this transformation is supported by a distributive leadership model that disperses authority among teachers, creating organizational resilience. However, adaptation faces challenges such as institutional rigidity and heavy administrative burdens. The study finds that "Digital Literacy" is a critical hurdle; without it, graduates and teachers cannot navigate the digitalized tools necessary for modern interdisciplinary learning. The study recommends the adoption of social justice leadership and the most urgent step: establishing an Industrial Advisory Board or a localized "Innovation Committee" to cut through bureaucratic hurdles by integrating local values like *gotong royong*.

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INTRODUCTION

Basic education worldwide currently faces a major challenge in balancing high academic standards with the urgent need for student well-being and social justice. This phenomenon has drawn the attention of policymakers and school administrators seeking sustainable management models capable of adapting to rapid changes in the times. Sustainable school management is defined as the continuity of educational interventions and practices even after the initial funding phase or formal implementation has ended ([Peng et al., 2024](#)). This demands a paradigm shift from rigid administrative management toward more distributive and collaborative leadership. Social urgency arises because traditional management models are often considered failures in creating a balance between dense curricular demands and students' mental health ([Baloro & Salcedo, 2025](#)).

Educational transformation in Finland is not merely the result of technical policies, but the fruit of a philosophy that places trust as the primary capital within the school ecosystem. The effectiveness of school leadership is now measured by the organization's ability to create an inclusive and supportive climate ([Ketikidou & Saiti, 2022](#)). Finland has long been recognized as a beacon of pedagogical excellence due to its success in creating a system that is not only globally competitive but also places a strong emphasis on equity and teacher autonomy. However, it is important to note that this system also faces global challenges such as digitalization and migration that are starting to affect classroom dynamics.

In the Finnish system, teachers are regarded as pedagogical experts with full autonomy to design curricula and assessment methods without excessive pressure from standardized testing. This trust fosters a calm and stable learning environment where the primary focus is on children's holistic development rather than merely achieving test scores. Finland's pedagogical excellence provides concrete evidence that professional autonomy, supported by rigorous teacher preparation, is the key to sustaining educational quality ([Chung, 2023](#)). This practice is supported by national policies that minimize administrative burdens to enhance focus on instructional quality ([Shamsuddinova & Nisa, 2021](#)).

One of the main pillars of Finland's excellence is the implementation of Phenomenon-Based Learning (PhenoBL), which integrates various disciplines to study real-world phenomena thematically. This interdisciplinary approach challenges traditional subject-based learning models, which are often fragmented and less relevant to students' life experiences. Through PhenoBL, students are encouraged to become active participants capable of critical thinking and solving complex problems in their environment ([Adipat, 2024](#)). The implementation of this curriculum requires close coordination among various departments and managerial skills to allocate resources effectively ([Schaffar & Wolff, 2024](#)).

Student and teacher well-being are fundamental indicators of the success of the Finnish education system that must be translated into global school management. This holistic approach acknowledges that academic achievement is intrinsically linked to the physical, mental, and social health of all members of the school community. Sustainable school management integrates well-being into daily practices, including balanced scheduling and easily accessible psychological support. Management strategies prioritizing well-being have proven effective in reducing teacher burnout and enhancing students' intrinsic motivation to learn ([Koh et al., 2023](#)).

Equity in Finland's basic education is realized through the provision of support tailored to each student's unique needs without discrimination. The three-

tiered support system ensures early interventions for students facing learning difficulties or social challenges. Sustainable school management must adopt a similar framework to ensure that students' diverse backgrounds do not become barriers to academic success. This involves social justice leadership that dares to deconstruct the knowledge frameworks that perpetuate injustice in schools ([Leithwood, 2021](#)).

In the context of sustainable school management, the role of transformational leadership is crucial for inspiring profound cultural change. School leaders must be able to articulate a compelling vision of the future and motivate the entire staff to work toward shared goals. This leadership is characterized by ideal influence, inspirational motivation, intellectual stimulation, and individual consideration of each teacher's needs. Through this approach, school managers can foster strong relationships and create space for productive collaboration among educators ([Han, 2025](#)). Sustainable leadership also encourages innovation and adaptability in facing future educational challenges ([Karakose et al., 2024](#)). Research also highlights that transformational leadership strengthens organizational resilience in managing increasingly complex school systems ([Zadok et al., 2024](#)).

Diversity in elementary schools encompasses differences in academic ability, cultural, ethnic, and socioeconomic backgrounds that must be managed wisely. Sustainable school management employs an intersectional perspective to understand how students' various identities intersect in creating experiences of discrimination or privilege. Management strategies must include culturally responsive curriculum design and inclusive policies that value the uniqueness of each individual ([Azizah et al., 2025](#)). Inclusive education has been shown to provide significant social benefits for all students, including increased empathy and collaboration skills ([Pradhan & Naik, 2024](#)). Furthermore, culturally responsive school climates strengthen students' sense of belonging and participation in learning communities ([Lingenfelter, 2025](#)).

Sustainable infrastructure management is also an integral part of efforts to adapt Finnish excellence to local contexts. The school's physical environment, including buildings and grounds, holds great potential to influence students' emotional regulation and the quality of their learning. Management strategies must focus on preventive maintenance to ensure school facilities remain safe, energy-efficient, and environmentally friendly ([Ansori et al., 2025](#)). Green Schools integrate environmental sustainability principles into operational management and pedagogy ([Tantranont & Sawatdeenarunat, 2023](#)). This creates "neuroarchitecture" that supports brain function and students' mental well-being. Collaborative green infrastructure projects in schools have also demonstrated environmental, social, and educational benefits simultaneously ([Abhijith et al., 2024](#)).

Community engagement is another key element in sustainable school management strategies to support diversity and equity. Schools cannot stand alone in facing complex educational challenges; they require strong partnerships with parents and local organizations. School management must create mechanisms that enable active community participation in decision-making processes and program planning. This collaboration allows schools to incorporate local knowledge into their environmental and social management strategies. School-based management practices in Indonesia also emphasize participatory governance and collaborative decision-making as important foundations for educational sustainability ([Bandur et al., 2021](#)).

The primary theoretical foundation underpinning this research is Lev Vygotsky's Social Constructivism, which emphasizes that learning occurs through social interaction. Additionally, Transformational Leadership Theory and Social Justice Leadership Theory provide a framework for managing institutional change oriented toward equity. Transformational leadership focuses on staff motivation and empowerment, while social justice leadership focuses on eliminating practices of marginalization. Social justice leadership requires school principals to consciously challenge the status quo that marginalizes certain groups ([Shields & Hesbol, 2020](#)). Studies on transformative leadership further show its role in promoting social mobility and inclusive school cultures ([Elmalak-Watad, 2025](#)).

The sustainability of school improvement must also be viewed through the lens of Complex Adaptive Systems (CAS), where the school is regarded as a continuous learning system. Within this system, agents such as students, teachers, and parents provide mutual feedback that drives continuous, emergent change. Management strategies must be flexible and adaptive to changes in the external environment, such as digital transformation and economic crises. Distributive leadership is particularly relevant within this CAS framework as it distributes agency across the entire network of stakeholders. Collaborative and regenerative school leadership models are increasingly considered essential in navigating educational complexity in the twenty-first century ([Pinheiro et al., 2025](#)).

Translating the Finnish model into the context of other countries, such as Indonesia, faces various structural and cultural barriers that require "Contextual Translation." Institutional rigidity, heavy administrative burdens on teachers, and reliance on test-based evaluations often serve as major barriers to adapting Finnish values. In Indonesia, teacher administrative burdens and centralized reporting often contrast sharply with the Finnish model of autonomy. Successful implementation depends heavily on continuous teacher professional development and a shift in school culture that values the learning process. Sustainable leadership approaches are therefore needed to bridge policy expectations with local educational realities ([Malik, 2021](#)).

Sustainable school management also involves leveraging digital technology to personalize learning and improve operational efficiency. However, school managers must be vigilant against the risks of the digital divide and ensure equal access for all students, especially given the diverse infrastructure challenges in Indonesia. Technology should be viewed as a tool to empower the agency of students and teachers within a sustainable educational ecosystem. This is important so that the "Contextual Translation" strategy remains realistic and does not blindly adopt technology. Innovative management practices such as digital inventory systems and preventive maintenance have also proven effective in improving the sustainability of school facilities management ([Makmun & Marif, 2025](#)).

To conclude this introduction, translating Finland's strengths into sustainable school management requires a comprehensive vision of equity, diversity, and well-being. Effective strategies must combine transformational leadership with student-centered, socially constructivist pedagogical practices. The primary theoretical contribution of this article is the "Contextual Translation" concept as a new framework offered to bridge centralized education systems with progressive Finnish values. Through wise contextual adaptation, every institution can transform into a center of sustainable educational innovation.

METHOD

This research employed a qualitative evaluative approach using a single-case study design to explore the strategies for adapting Finnish pedagogical excellence within the Indonesian primary education context. The case study was conducted at a private elementary school in Indonesia that has formally initiated a “Finnish-Way” transformation pilot project. The qualitative descriptive method was selected to capture the intricate cultural and structural nuances involved in the “Contextual Translation” of educational values across different national systems. This approach allowed for a deep investigation of how abstract concepts like trust and autonomy are operationalized within a centralized administrative framework ([Steiner-Khamsi, 2014](#)). Previous comparative studies have also emphasized that the adaptation of the Finnish education model in Indonesia requires sensitivity to local institutional culture and governance structures ([Adiputri, 2021](#)).

The research was conducted over a 12-month period from 2024 to 2025. Data collection utilized a remote research protocol to ensure safety and efficiency without compromising data depth. Primary data were gathered through semi-structured virtual interviews conducted via Zoom with eight key informants, purposively selected for their central roles in the school's management and instructional delivery. The informants included the school principal (1), the curriculum coordinator (1), senior teachers (4), and representatives from the school board (2). Each interview lasted approximately 60–90 minutes and was recorded and transcribed for thematic analysis. Semi-structured interviews are particularly effective in qualitative educational inquiry because they allow researchers to explore participants' experiences and interpretations in depth while maintaining analytical flexibility ([Peel, 2020](#)).

To complement the interviews and ensure data triangulation, participant observations were conducted through a “Virtual Walkthrough” method. This involved analyzing high-resolution video recordings of classroom activities, specifically focusing on Phenomenon-Based Learning (PhenoBL) sessions. Researchers also performed a comprehensive document analysis of the school's strategic plans, revised curricula, and teacher administrative logs to identify discrepancies between Finnish-inspired policies and local implementation realities. The inclusion of administrative logs was particularly vital to measure the actual “administrative burden” cited by reviewers as a primary barrier. Previous studies on teacher autonomy in Indonesia similarly identified administrative demands and centralized reporting as significant constraints on pedagogical flexibility ([Nihayah et al., 2023](#)).

The implementation of PhenoBL was specifically examined because it represents one of the core pedagogical features associated with Finnish educational excellence. Phenomenon-Based Learning encourages interdisciplinary problem-solving and contextual learning experiences that are highly relevant to elementary education reform ([Schaffar & Wolff, 2024](#)). Empirical reviews have also shown that PhenoBL enhances critical thinking, collaboration, and student engagement in primary school contexts ([Walker & Nouri, 2025](#)). The integration of this model into Indonesian classrooms therefore provided an important lens for evaluating how innovative pedagogical concepts can be contextually translated into local educational environments.

The data analysis process followed a thematic framework, progressing through data condensation, data display, and conclusion drawing/verification. Thematic analysis was selected because it provides systematic procedures for identifying recurring patterns and meanings across qualitative datasets ([Castleberry](#)

[& Nolen, 2018](#)). In practice, the researchers adopted a hybrid thematic strategy that combined deductive coding derived from the “Contextual Translation” framework with inductive coding emerging from participants’ lived experiences ([Xu & Zammit, 2020](#)). This analytical process enabled the identification of themes related to institutional rigidity, social justice leadership, teacher autonomy, and cultural adaptation.

To ensure the credibility and trustworthiness of the findings in a remote setting, member checking was performed by sharing the **transcribed** data and preliminary findings back with the informants for validation. Furthermore, triangulation across interviews, observations, and document analysis strengthened the reliability of the interpretation process. Ethical considerations were strictly maintained, with all participants providing informed consent and the school’s identity being anonymized to protect institutional integrity. This procedure aligns with qualitative educational research standards that emphasize participant validation and ethical transparency as essential components of trustworthy inquiry ([Coates et al., 2021](#)).

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The Effectiveness of Phenomenon-Based Learning (PhenoBL) in Enhancing Student Agency

Research findings indicate that the implementation of Phenomenon-Based Learning (PhenoBL) has brought about significant changes in classroom dynamics in elementary schools. Students are no longer merely passive recipients of information; instead, they actively formulate research questions and seek solutions to real-world phenomena they observe in their surroundings, such as analyzing local waste management systems in Samarinda to understand environmental sustainability. These findings reinforce the argument that learning grounded in real-world phenomena helps students construct deeper explanations rather than merely memorizing academic facts ([Adipat, 2024](#)). Through this interdisciplinary approach, rigid boundaries between subjects become fluid, enabling students to build a holistic, systemic understanding ([Walker & Nouri, 2025](#)).

School management strategies in this context focus on providing a flexible learning environment to support students’ active engagement. The success of this model heavily depends on teachers’ ability to provide appropriate scaffolding without dominating students’ independent exploration process. The freedom granted in PhenoBL has been shown to enhance students’ intrinsic motivation because the material studied has direct relevance to their life experiences ([Meulenbroeks et al., 2023](#)). An adaptive learning environment enables students’ active participation in planning their own learning processes. Inquiry-based and phenomenon-centered learning approaches have also demonstrated strong impacts on creativity, collaboration, and student agency in interdisciplinary learning settings ([Conradty & Bogner, 2019](#)).

School administrators play a key role by designing schedules that allow for regular and structured interdisciplinary collaboration. Without strong managerial support, this pedagogical innovation risks becoming a fragmented activity with limited long-term impact on student competencies. Therefore, school administrators must ensure continuous methodological support for educators to prevent a return to traditional teaching methods. The integration of digital technology further strengthens this model by providing tools that expand access to information and personalize student learning ([Kennedy & Fields, 2023](#)). Studies on inquiry-based

and project-based learning further indicate that sustainable implementation requires organizational support systems and collaborative teacher networks ([Sam, 2024](#)).

The implementation of PhenoBL demands a fundamental shift in how evaluation is conducted, moving from standardized tests toward authentic process-based assessment. Sustainable school management adopts a formative assessment model that provides continuous feedback on students' competency development. In this case study, teachers navigated the tension between Finnish-style authentic assessment and Indonesian national requirements by utilizing "Reflection Portfolios" that satisfy administrative standards while capturing the qualitative depth of the PhenoBL process. By minimizing the pressure of competitive exams, schools can create a calmer learning atmosphere focused on character development. This supports the creation of a more humanistic educational ecosystem centered on the holistic well-being of children. Overall, student autonomy grows in parallel with the trust granted by the school's managerial system. Meta-analytic findings also confirm that problem-based and project-based learning approaches significantly enhance students' motivation and engagement compared to conventional instructional methods ([Wijnia et al., 2024](#)).

Table 1: Management Strategies and Pedagogical Transformation

Aspect	Finnish Management Strategies	Contextual Application
Leadership	Distributive & Collective	Delegation of responsibility to subject-matter experts.
Pedagogy	PhenoBL & Inquiry	Integration of local phenomena into the curriculum.
Assessment	Formative & Non-Standardized Testing	Emphasis on reflection and portfolios.
School Culture	Trust-Based	High professional autonomy for teachers.

The Role of Distributive Leadership in Organizational Sustainability

Distributive leadership has been identified as a key factor in ensuring the sustainability of innovation at the elementary school level. In this model, the principal no longer acts as a sole authority but rather as a facilitator who distributes agency across all members of the school community. Authority is distributed through formal "Innovation Teams" and "Subject Leads," allowing teachers to lead pedagogical shifts while the principal maintains administrative control through weekly collective reflection meetings. Distributive leadership has been collectively proven to significantly improve school climate, student engagement, and academic achievement ([Hulsbos et al., 2025](#)). This enables schools to remain resilient in the face of policy changes because leadership capacity is deeply embedded at the staff level.

This management strategy effectively reduces the principal's administrative workload and enhances teachers' sense of ownership regarding the school's vision. Collaboration among educators forms the core of an inclusive and transparent decision-making process. Teachers feel more valued and motivated when they are actively involved in strategic planning and curriculum development. There is a strong positive correlation between distributive leadership practices and higher staff organizational commitment ([Alhassan & Alhassan, 2022](#)). Similar findings also indicate that distributed leadership strengthens teacher collaboration, job satisfaction, and commitment to institutional change ([Xiu et al., 2022](#)).

Sustainable school management builds accountable professional networks through the open sharing of data and feedback. This creates an organizational learning culture where every operational challenge is viewed as an opportunity for collective improvement. This distributed leadership also ensures that social justice is not merely a concept but is practiced through the equitable distribution of power. The effectiveness of this strategy is evident in increased workplace stability and reduced levels of professional burnout among teachers. Research further demonstrates that distributive leadership contributes directly to teacher innovation through collaborative professional cultures and stronger organizational commitment ([Zhao et al., 2025](#)).

Additionally, distributive leadership facilitates better integration between special education teachers and general education teachers in designing inclusive interventions. Collaboration among educators is crucial for implementing differentiated instruction in classrooms with diverse backgrounds. With supportive leadership, school support teams can align strategies to meet the unique needs of each student. School administrators must consciously create space for reflective dialogue involving all stakeholders, including parents. Studies also confirm that teacher organizational commitment mediates the relationship between distributive leadership and student engagement, highlighting the importance of collaborative leadership structures in sustaining inclusive learning environments ([Emiru & Berhanu, 2025](#)).

Strategies for Promoting Equity and Diversity through Inclusion

The success of sustainable school management is measured by its ability to provide equitable access to education for all students without exception. Research findings indicate that schools that prioritize inclusivity in their organizational practices achieve better academic outcomes. Metacognitive and individualized teaching strategies implemented by teachers in inclusive classrooms have been shown to improve the overall performance of all students, not just those with special needs ([Krämer et al., 2021](#)). School administrators must ensure systemic support is available at every level to identify learning challenges early on. Differentiated instruction and individualized learning approaches are also recognized as essential strategies for strengthening inclusive educational environments ([Lindner & Schwab, 2020](#)).

The implementation of Social Justice Leadership is crucial for managing school resources proportionally for marginalized groups. In this case study, the school defines “marginalized groups” based on a combination of socioeconomic background and special learning needs, ensuring that financial and pedagogical resources are allocated where they are needed most. This leadership involves concrete actions to dismantle discriminatory norms that may hinder the participation of certain students. School administrators must be bold in allocating budgets and placing top staff in areas with the greatest socio-economic challenges. This transformative strategy demands that school principals become activists who consciously challenge the status quo that marginalizes certain groups ([Theoharis, 2007](#)). Empirical studies further show that social justice leadership promotes equitable access, democratic participation, and inclusive school cultures ([Ayanoğlu & Arastaman, 2023](#)).

Through an intersectional lens, school administrators can understand how students’ various identities intersect to create educational barriers. Inclusion embedded throughout the school’s operational plans will create a safe and comfortable environment for all children. The social benefits of inclusive education

are significant, particularly in fostering empathy and prosocial behavior in students from an early age ([Miller et al., 2025](#)). During Phenomenon-Based Learning (PhenoBL) projects, regular students and students with special needs collaborate directly in research teams, which was observed to significantly reduce peer prejudice. Inclusive collaborative environments also strengthen social participation and meaningful engagement among diverse student groups ([Morningstar et al., 2015](#)).

Sustainable school management facilitates meaningful social interaction through collaborative activities and cross-group project-based learning. A greater understanding of diversity in inclusive classrooms fosters better cognitive development, such as the ability to understand others' perspectives. This strategy ensures that educational goals encompass the holistic development of individuals as tolerant global citizens. Investing in diversity management is a tangible expression of the school's commitment to a more equitable future. Research also confirms that cooperation-based inclusive practices can transform school culture into a more supportive and participatory learning ecosystem ([Muñoz-Martínez et al., 2021](#)).

Challenges and Adaptation to the Local Context in Indonesia

Although the Finnish model offers many advantages, this study identifies significant barriers to its adaptation within the local Indonesian context. Institutional rigidity, characterized by a dense curriculum and heavy administrative burdens on teachers, serves as the primary obstacle to innovation. A learning culture heavily oriented toward exams and rankings often conflicts with the value of autonomy championed by the Finnish model. Differences in educational philosophy and the quality of human resources require a gradual and sustainable adaptation approach. Research on leadership for social justice in traditional and centralized societies similarly highlights that imported educational models often face resistance when they do not align with local institutional cultures ([Oplatka & Arar, 2016](#)).

Sustainable school management in Indonesia requires a "contextual translation" strategy that aligns universal values with local wisdom. This strategy "penetrates" administrative barriers by establishing internal school policies that streamline bureaucratic reporting into monthly digital summaries, thereby freeing up time for PhenoBL preparation. The most effective adaptation strategies are found through the implementation of interest-based projects relevant to the practical needs of local students. A flexible curriculum and a more humanistic approach are key to bridging existing pedagogical gaps. Local wisdom, such as the value of *gotong royong* (mutual cooperation), is integrated into school management through collaborative teaching teams and shared responsibility for student well-being. This culturally responsive leadership approach is essential for sustaining inclusive and equitable educational transformation ([Khalifa et al., 2016](#)).

The use of digital technology can help reduce teachers' administrative workload, giving them more time to focus on student mentoring. The success of this adaptation heavily depends on policy support from educational authorities that allow for flexibility at the operational level. Without systemic support, innovation efforts at the school level will be difficult to sustain in the long term and tend to be temporary. Therefore, collaboration between schools and policymakers is an absolute prerequisite for the success of this reform. Reviews of social justice educational leadership further emphasize that sustainable reform requires institutional support structures beyond individual school initiatives ([Chaaban et al., 2025](#)).

Teacher capacity building through professional learning communities (PLCs) is a vital tool for widely disseminating best practices. Within these PLCs, teachers overcome the fear of failure through “safe-fail” peer testing of new pedagogical ideas and collective debriefing sessions. School improvement must be viewed as a long-term process that is continuously evaluated through data and honest, reflective dialogue. Thoughtful adaptation will transform structural challenges into meaningful opportunities for innovation for future generations. Extended PLCs have also been proven effective in strengthening inclusive school cultures, collaborative professionalism, and sustainable teacher development ([Johansson & Herrebrøden, 2025](#)).

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATION

This study concludes that translating Finnish pedagogical excellence into the Indonesian context is not merely a technical replication, but a profound cultural transformation rooted in an ecosystem of trust and professional autonomy. The "Contextual Translation" strategy serves as a vital bridge to mediate progressive Finnish values with the rigidities of a centralized education system. The findings suggest that the success of this transformation in Indonesia depends heavily on the school's ability to navigate national bureaucratic rules while maintaining local autonomy through distributive leadership. Furthermore, failing to align management with student well-being represents an economic inefficiency in human capital development, highlighting that sustainable school management is a strategic necessity for long-term societal benefits.

Based on these findings, it is recommended that schools transition from centralized leadership to collective practices by adopting distributive leadership to build organizational resilience. School administrators should prioritize holistic well-being by implementing "neuroarchitecture" elements, such as natural lighting and improved acoustics, which should be introduced gradually to remain financially feasible for schools with limited funding. Additionally, continuous methodological support for teachers is essential to ensure Phenomenon-Based Learning (PhenoBL) effectively fosters student agency. Policymakers are encouraged to grant greater curriculum flexibility and invest in research-based teacher professional development. Finally, future research should include longitudinal studies to observe the long-term impact of this "Contextual Translation" model on student achievement and teacher well-being in Indonesia

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