

Effective School Leaders in the Pacific: A *Bai* Experience Masa-Aki Emesiochl

Leadership plays a pivotal role in a school's ability to establish and maintain a successful program of learning for each student. In the Pacific, calls for school reform continue to be urgent and recurring. Achievement gaps persist, even though focused efforts directed toward teachers are slowly seeing improvement in the quality of teaching and learning that happens in classrooms. It is clear that school leaders, integral to successful school reform, need the same kind of attention. Effective school leaders visualize successful student learning, understand the work necessary to achieve it, and have the skills to engage with others to make it happen (Elmore, 2000; Glickman, 2002).

Great schools have great leaders. Corroborated by two decades of research on effective schools (McEwan, 2003), this also rings true of Pacific school experiences. Yet, finding effective leaders is not easy, especially in the Pacific. Often we take excellent teachers out of the classrooms and assume they will make excellent principals, without preparing them with the different skill set needed for the challenges of school leadership. As state education agencies (SEAs) struggle to deal with the escalating demands of the *No Child Left Behind Act of 2001* (NCLB), or similar Compact imperatives in the Pacific, the job of a principal is becoming even more challenging and complex. How can we support the current leaders in our schools, as well as prepare future leaders? In this paper, I share how one Pacific nation, the Republic of Palau (Palau), addressed this situation by creating professional development modules for school leaders that immerse them in authentic

units of work and integrated field experiences that prepare and support them for success in all school settings.

Contextualizing and sustaining best educational practices, as identified by NCLB, is a noble idea. Taking globally-research-based practices and rethinking them in terms of *place* so that learning can be meaningful and relevant to Pacific island school settings—taking into account the values, attitudes, ways of learning, and understanding of the context where learning takes place—requires careful planning, development, integration, and continued support. I use the *bai*, a traditional Palauan house built on a stone foundation and made of thatched leaves and wood, as a symbol of how we can interweave “best leadership practices and place” for several reasons. The *bai* represents a gathering place—a place of learning and planning—and because it is traditionally divided into two sides, it is also a place for debate. The *bai* symbolizes a learning environment in which we believe Pacific school leaders can effectively discuss and reflect on the successes and challenges they experience everyday. When principals have the opportunity to share in diverse thinking and opinions, the resulting rich discussions will lead to positive impacts on their schools and, ultimately, their students.

Context Considerations

There are a number of factors that need to be identified, defined, understood, and aligned in order to effectively contextualize, integrate, and sustain researched-based best practices to benefit a greater number of principals in Pacific schools. The contexts of each learning environment need to be articulated clearly. In other words, there are a number of

contextual issues that are critical in order to develop a plan for professional development for school principals that would effectively address their local needs. These factors include, but are not limited to: (a) the level of education and leadership training of each principal; (b) quality, relevance, and usefulness of leadership standards in the entity; (c) easily accessible leadership resources; (d) a certification plan for principals; and (e) the school learning environment itself—physical structure of schools; budget; quality of teaching and learning, including materials and resources, curriculum, special programs, and the amount and kind of control over the environment (Newmann, Smith, Allensworth, & Bryk (2001).

Once the local contexts are clearly defined and understood, contextualizing and sustaining research-based practices for developing strong educational leadership becomes more meaningful and relevant. Using authentic local issues as case studies and simulation for training contextualizes the learning process. School leaders reflect on new, proven ideas from their standpoint and their context—adjusting the ideas in ways that “fit” their school.

Designing Leadership Learning in Context

As one possible solution to addressing contextualized leadership training, I describe recently developed modules for the Palau Leadership Institute that contextualizes learning for leaders. The institute is the bai, and the modules are the stone foundation upon which the bai is built. The professional development described in the modules is designed to align with current ongoing development efforts. The whole process takes into account the unique situation of the learning environment;

values; and the ever-changing social, economic, and political conditions in Palau.

Leadership Standards

The scaffold of the bai includes core leadership standards. Palau identified 15 that guide leadership development in their island nation (see Table 1). The standards are organized into four categories: organization for student learning, curriculum and instruction, support for student personal and academic growth, and resource management and development. They provide a foundation for a comprehensive leadership system that effectively recruits, supports, retains, and rewards high-quality school leaders. They also organize leadership functions that are research-based and define strong leadership under themes that promote high achievement for all students. And, they help principals prioritize how they spend their time on the essential tasks. They have been written to allow for flexibility in how they are actualized. For example, “essential tasks” may be different in different contexts. What is important is that principals learn to prioritize the tasks necessary for their school’s success and determine the time they will allot to each task.

Table 1. Palau Ministry of Education Leadership Standards

Organization for Student Learning <i>School purpose, governance, school leadership, staff, school environment, reporting student progress, school improvement process</i>	
Standard 1	Leadership
Standard 2	Setting Goals and Acting Decisively
Standard 4	Problem Analysis
Standard 5	Decision Making
Standard 6	Interpersonal Relations
Standard 7	Stress Tolerance
Standard 8	Oral and Written Communication
Standard 10	Laws and Regulations
Standard 12	Educational Values
Standard 16	Accountability
Curriculum and Instruction <i>What students learn, how students learn, how assessment is used</i>	
Standard 9	Curriculum Development
Support for Student Personal and Academic Growth <i>Student connectedness, parent/community involvement</i>	
Standard 13	Student Behavior Management
Resource Management and Development <i>Resources, resource planning</i>	
Standard 3	Organizational Management
Standard 11	Personnel Supervision
Standard 14	Personnel Development
Standard 15	Partnerships

Source: Palau Leadership Institute, Palau Ministry of Education and Pacific Resources for Education and Learning (2008)

In Palau, leaders who enact the standards are demonstrating the ability to know what needs to be done, how to do it, and why it should be done—in their school right now. What kind of professional development or training promotes and supports this approach to leadership?

Training Modules

Training modules make up the Palau Leadership Institute and are designed around these standards: leadership, interpersonal relations, decision-making, problem analysis and goal setting, and applying the tools to leadership and organizational management. Each module contains new knowledge and takes a constructivist approach to ensure new ideas are integrated with other successful practices.

The activities promote self-assessment and reflective practice by school leaders. Learning conditions establish a bai experience where each leader learns to assess the way in which he or she thinks about and reacts to complex and challenging situations, learns from others, and learns to leverage the lessons of past experience to inform and energize new leadership practices. During the institute, leaders think deeply about the impact of their actions on student achievement and how to adjust their practices to increase achievement. At the same time, they develop a personal action plan for changes in their leadership practices. This highly contextualized approach uses

self-assessment, self-reflection, and case studies to ensure it is useful and relevant for each principal and his or her school.

Case Studies

Case studies are stories with an educational message. They have been used as parables and cautionary tales for centuries, yet their formal use for teaching and learning is recent. For a long time, most educational environments did not use case studies. This began to change, as more and more educators realized the inadequacies of the lecture method and began to seek novel methods of instruction. Case studies essentially put theory into practice by presenting a scenario. They are effective in provoking active reasoning to resolve the situation or address what is occurring within the scenario, resulting in a deeper understanding of the topic.

A Sample Case Study from the Palau Leadership Institute

The task and timeframe:

You have been asked by the Palau MOE to present a talk to Koror business leaders on the balance of leadership and management skills from a principal's perspective. You will have just a few minutes to present your speech before opening the meeting to a few key questions. It is the end of a typical busy day in your school, and you are reflecting on how you spent your day. Use the information below to develop a 2-minute talk on this topic. The table on leadership and management is given to stimulate your thinking, and not all items need to be addressed.

Leadership	Management
◆ People	◆ Things
◆ Spontaneity, Serendipity	◆ Structure
◆ Release, Empowerment	◆ Control
◆ Effectiveness	◆ Efficiency
◆ Programmer	◆ Program
◆ Investment	◆ Expense
◆ Principles	◆ Techniques
◆ Transformation	◆ Transaction
◆ Principle-Centered Power	◆ Unity
◆ Discernment	◆ Measurement
◆ Doing the Right Things	◆ Doing Things Right
◆ Direction	◆ Speed
◆ Top Line	◆ Bottom Line
◆ Purposes	◆ Methods
◆ Principles	◆ Practices
◆ On the Systems	◆ In the System
◆ "Is the Ladder Against the Right Wall?"	◆ Climbing the Ladder Fast

The case study:

Background Information

You are a 4th-year Palauan principal at Pacific Elementary School with 300 students. You have an experienced staff with the majority of the teachers having achieved an AA degree. Three teachers in the upper grades have bachelor's degrees. Student achievement in reading has increased, but you are still very concerned about the transition from native Palauan to English. Math scores are increasing, but very slowly.

Your Schedule for the Day

You arrive early to check on the repairs to the windows in the 3rd grade classroom. After checking on the repairs, you spend 30 minutes catching up on email and greeting your school secretary. You spend the next 45 minutes greeting staff and students. Part of this time, you need to call a teacher's home because he has been absent for 3 days for a funeral and has not yet returned. The primary teacher stops to talk to you about whether or not the recently ordered materials have arrived.

Once classes start, you spend a few minutes walking around and observing what is going on in classrooms. You have a scheduled observation in the 4th grade and spend 20 minutes observing the classroom. You spend the next 10 minutes organizing your notes, so that you can meet with the teacher after school.

At this point, the director of education arrives to discuss your school improvement plan, and you spend the remainder of the morning working on what needs to be done and how the plan can be strengthened for next year. Just as you get ready to supervise student lunches, a teacher asks to have a few minutes to talk about a student. As you are leaving your office, the secretary lets you know that MOE Human Resources has

called and needs you to call back immediately about teacher experience and pay levels. You make a note to call back and spend a few minutes observing students at recess.

A staff meeting is scheduled for the day so you try to take a few minutes to plan for the meeting. Before you can finish the planning, you remember that you need to call the MOE Human Resources office and make the call. You barely finish planning for the staff meeting before the teacher you observed arrives for her conference with you. The teacher is struggling with discipline, so you spend most of the conference time helping her sort out how she can more effectively manage the class so that she has more time to teach.

As you are going to the staff meeting, the secretary lets you know that the repair crew has questions about the window repair and wants to talk with you before proceeding.

The staff meeting lasts 30 minutes and mostly includes information on upcoming events and teacher needs. You are disappointed that you did not have more time to share your morning conversation with the director of education about school improvement. You are now back in your office considering the difference between leadership and management.

You reflect on a quote you remember from the Palau Leadership Institute:

- You lead people; you manage things.
- Leadership is about doing the right things.
- Management is about doing things right.

*Source for the task and timeframe and case study:
Module I: Sorting Leadership and Management,
Palau Leadership Institute, Palau Ministry of
Education and Pacific Resources for Education
and Learning (2008)*

Working through a familiar scenario, leaders have opportunities for decision making and discussion that open them up to new ways of solving old problems that are authentic and relevant to them. Included in the discussion about the case study above is an exploration of different problem solving strategies—some more socio-culturally appropriate than others—and of decision making theory. In the end, leaders head back to their schools energized and equipped with the knowledge, skills, and tools to address the challenges they face every day *in their context*, which will ultimately impact successful student learning.

Conclusion

Principals are expected to lead in an atmosphere of constant change, ensuring that all students have access to, and are successful in, mastering a rigorous curriculum and/or academic skills. Leadership institutes, like the one Palau offers its current and future leaders, enable the participants to have a *bai* experience and collectively explore how contextualized leadership standards and associated training modules can help them address and reexamine deeply held beliefs, values, and working assumptions about their roles as school leaders in a specific Pacific setting.

Effective leadership is dependent on context—on recognizing and understanding the *place* of leadership (where leadership takes place). The conditions of each school will always vary from its physical structure and location, to its instructional capacity of school staff, to its parental and community involvement. The principal must have the knowledge, skills, and tools he or she needs to ensure successful student learning are necessary steps the SEAs needs to take to promote and support leadership excellence in their entity (Noll, 2007).

Palau is one example of where these steps are being taken. Paying attention to context and knowing it varies within and between entities, encourages leaders to use multiple pathways and a pace appropriate for their school to achieve positive results. Using standards, as the Palau MOE has done, to help guide the work of their leaders, while valuing the unique context of each school, results in *great schools that have great leaders*.

About the Author

Masa-Aki N. Emesiochl started his career in education as a teacher at Palau High School from 1968 to 1971. From 1971 to 1974, he joined the Pacific language development for Micronesian language development at the University of Hawaii, which led to the publication of the Palauan-English Dictionary and Palauan Language Grammar text. From 1974 to 1982, he worked at the Trust Territory of the Pacific Islands Headquarters as Title VII Bilingual Education Program Coordinator, Language Program Coordinator, and, ultimately, Program Development Coordinator. From 1982 to 2001, Mr. Emesiochl served as Chief of the Division of Curriculum and Program Development, and later became Director of the Bureau of Curriculum and Instruction until he retired from the Palau Ministry of Education (MOE) in 2001. He also served as Federal Program Coordinator for the Palau Ministry of Education where he successfully applied for and was awarded various federally funded programs for the Palau MOE. From 1984 to 1986, he took a 2-year leave of absence from the Palau MOE and became Director of Interface Consultant, Inc., a nonprofit agency that developed programs for the Pacific region's desegregation assistance center. From 2001 to 2008, he has served as the Director of the Pacific Regional Technology Education Program and also became Senior Program Specialist at Pacific Resources for Education and Learning (PREL). In 2009, Mr. Emesiochl accepted the honor of becoming Palau's Minister of Education. Mr. Emesiochl has a number of publications on education issues, including teacher training programs, curriculum and instructional development, and technology education; a history of Palau textbook; and a

government of Palau textbook now being used in Palau history and government classes.

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