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Pohnpei, FM 96941



# Micronesian Counselor

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## *CPR for Chuuk Public Schools*

### New Video

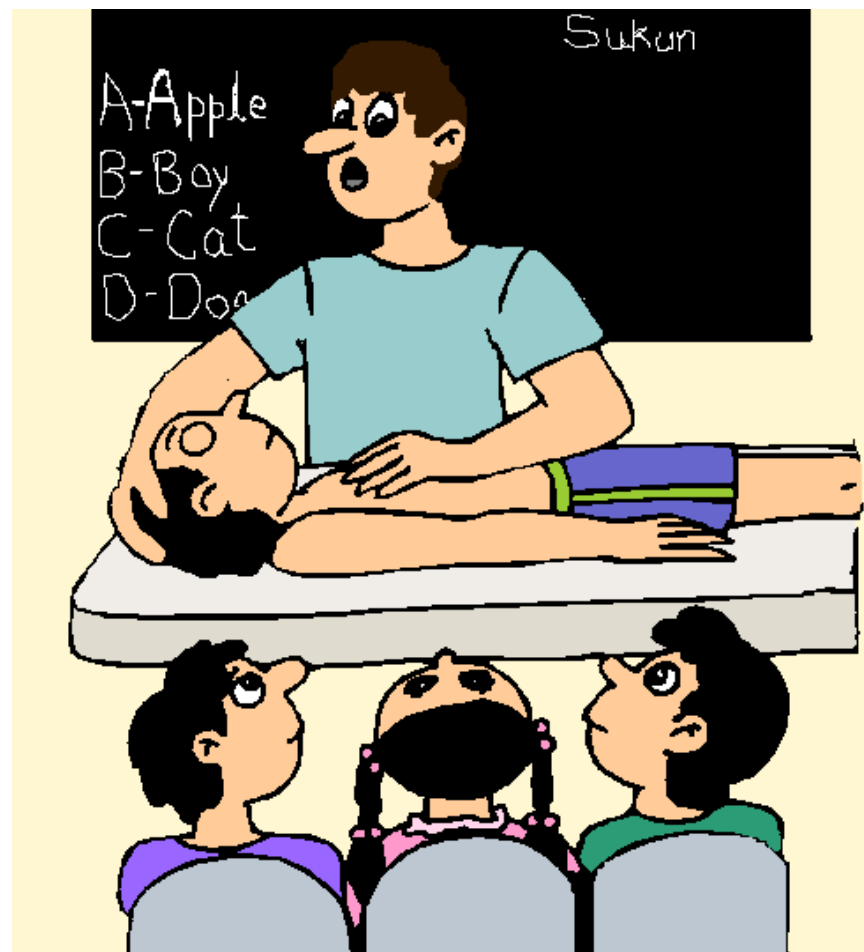
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*Island Topic 62*

#### **"More? Or Less? Quantity Counts"**



When the family is hungry, they have to be fed. But a ready-to-please mom finds out that there is apparently no limit to the appetite of her husband and children. The more she cooks, the more they eat. Even the announcement of class reunion, at which mom and dad would like to appear in their finest form produces only half



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## *A Response to the Challenge*

It is no secret that the Chuuk State School System (CSSS) is in dire need of substantial change. Most stories about principals in Chuuk are riddled with tales about how they blame everyone for the failures, except themselves; myths about the causes and solutions of the problems, jokes about the excuses they give for their incompetence, rumors about their involvement in dishonest practices, and whispers about them being ghosts.



In the last ten years all stakeholders in the CSSS have been challenged to propose new ideas and talk research and theory to improve student learning. There have been numerous attempts by many people to address this challenge, but there has been no considerable improvement. The CSSS narrative tells of a bleak situation with declining test scores, the high number of uncertified teachers and administrators, the deteriorating facilities, and a politicized Board of Education. The depressing storyline is repeated in the other sectors of the State of Chuuk.

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This paper is about lessons learnt from the 2007 Chuuk Principal's Retreat (CPR). The story of the CPR begins in 2002 during the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Xavier High School. At this celebration a 1963 alumnus, Asterio Takesy challenged Fr. Jim Croghan, the Director of Xavier on how the Jesuits could directly help Chuuk State where the school had been located for the last 50 years. This challenge was transferred to me when I assumed responsibility as Director in 2004.

The CPR was a collaborative effort by several people from the College of Micronesia, the Department of Education, and Xavier High School. At first, we brainstormed ideas on how we could address the problem of uncertified teachers in Chuuk, but we soon decided to shift our attention and energy to find ways to assist

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## *Improvements in school infrastructure (01 Example)*



***Before—Water filled classroom at Sapuk Elementary School***



***After—New classroom at Sapuk Elementary School***

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## Lessons Learned

The retreat and subsequent retreats with public school principals in the Marshall Islands have convinced me that if we want to change the sad narrative of the Chuuk Public School System, we need to include principals as one of the main characters. Firstly, the principals must know and understand what it means and what it takes to be a leader. Secondly, we need to understand and change the present context and realities. Thirdly, we need to change the strategy of training principals from analyze-think-change to a see-feel-change approach. In other words, we will act as mentors engaging the principals in self-reflection, beginning with their experiences and feelings which is in the form of a personal narrative not a consultant's report

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**At the end of program, we can hope, the principal will return to their stories, enriched by thoughtful and meaningful reflection, and can prepare to confront the ethical dimensions of leadership.**

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To do this will require a collaborative structure, grounded in respect and trust, that will allow the principals to engage in a process of self-reflection. A retreat setting proved helpful in our first CPR, but a sufficient length of time is needed to complete this task.

The type of assistance offered to principals will have to include storytelling. Story-based professional development allows the principals to be "learning-centered leaders" who develop learning cultures in their schools. Narratives and stories serve a way for principals to reflect on their practices, to challenge values structure, and to resolve dilemmas. In the process, they will reframe the roles and see themselves as leaders whose prime role is to pass on the teachers and students the elements of success stories in schools. At the end of program, we can hope, the principal will return to their stories, enriched by thoughtful and meaningful reflection, and can prepare to confront the ethical dimensions of leadership.

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*Fr. Arthur Ledger is a Jesuit priest and the former director of Xavier High School in Chuuk. He is now beginning his tertianship in Australia.*

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the principals since any change in the system depended on the changes to the principals' beliefs, values, attitudes, and habits. There were funds available and many principals would be expected to be on the main island of Weno for the summer workshops. I offered the use of the facilities at Xavier, and we had initially planned to request COM lecturers to provide the structure and the content for the workshop. Yet, we were worried that all this would not be adequate to promote the substantial change that was needed. The "band aid approach" to professional development had not worked before, and so we might be heading for another gathering, where the participants attended because of free food and stipend.

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## The Plight of the Principals

Principals in Chuuk feel disappointed that they are not in the loop in the education reform plans. Many are geographically isolated, but more significantly many feel that they are psychologically isolated. They are frustrated with dilapidated facilities that are not safe and not conducive to learning. They feel angry so they resist ongoing professional growth that requires seeking certification. They feel misunderstood so they have ongoing power struggles with the officials in the head office, the teachers, and parents. They feel crippled by the constant demands of their families, their culture, and their religion. Most importantly, the majority of principals are depressed because they lack academic qualifications and formal professional training; they feel anger that they have very little knowledge about curriculum standards as they related to new instructional methods, textbooks, assessment practices and test scores.

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To compound the problem, the principals had been written out of the story. The Chuuk State Strategic Plan for Education 2020 "Navigating with Pride" does not include the principals. It is as if there was no need for the principals in the canoe heading out into the future. The absence of any reference to the principals has reinforced the suspicion that a principal, once named, had to navigate his or her

own way through the “administrative oceans” with little guidance or support. Principals were set adrift to discover the shortest and most practical ways to survive in the school environment. Besides leading a school without sufficient funds, resources and certified teachers, principals were expected to implement an educational plan that some of them had never even heard of, let alone read.

The two programs offered to assist principals attain certification were determined by availability of funds and US standards. The courses offered on the COM Chuuk campus were too theoretical and outdated. The education administration theories expounded in the textbook were geared for principals who were seeking certification in an environment that had few problems with funding, facilities, absentee and uncertified teachers. They could not be readily applied to the Chuuk context. The second program, known as Chuuk State Leadership Academy, had been stopped because of lack of funds. In any case, one of the coordinators termed it a farce since it was money-driven and seem designed to do little more than provide the teacher-participants with stipends.

The principals in Chuuk had never been the target group for any organized workshops. Most of their “professional development” was limited to one to three days. The educational conferences, like those organized by PREL were aimed at a wider audience and focused on broader issues and themes. Over the years many principals have attended these gatherings, but very little was aimed at teaching them the skills to be professional school leaders. People did not notice improvement of the quality of work by principals and in fact it became a joke about how the selection of participants to workshops depended on relationships.

Of course, principals were regarded as merely incidental to the improvement of the school system. When people tried to explain the poor school system in Chuuk, they blamed the failures on low paid uncertified teachers, poor instruction in English, run down school buildings, land disputes, and out dated textbooks. Consultants, education officials, the board and the principals themselves perpetuated these myths. The August 2007 Chuuk Education Reform Plan confirmed these myths by maintaining that school improvement was directly linked to teacher certification, new text books, and timesheets. This was reinforced by the introduction of The FSM JEMCO Education Indicators which hinged on the fact that gathering and collating statistics about physical facilities might improve



*Whale Rider* in the evening. I introduced the New Zealand movie and gave them guiding questions to help them focus on how island leadership played out in the different characters, especially the heroine Paikea, her father Porourangi, her grandfather, Koro and grandmother Flowers. Many of the participants had tears in their eyes as they moved slowly to their rooms to sleep for the night. The movie had touched a cord in them so that they could truly empathize and accept that island leadership was about feelings and determining the right and wrong of a particular action. The topic for the next day was implicitly introduced to the participants: moral leadership

The first part of the schedule was changed to discuss the reactions to the movie. There was an animated discussion when I asked them with whom they would identify in the movie. It was no surprise that the males identified with the grandfather and the women identified with the grandmother. Since no one directly saw Paikea as a role model for island leadership, I chose her to show the major faults of Pacific island leadership, namely the skewed understanding that only males are destined by the gods to be chiefs. I posed the question; did Koro listen to the spirit or his family and Paikea? Why? I pointed out that we often make the wrong moral judgments and even use force to perpetuate values because we do not listen.

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**When the small groups returned, their stories reflected the typical scenarios that have happened in the Chuuk schools. They told stories of lying on timesheets, alcohol drinking, absenteeism due to deaths, conflicts between principal and teachers, the land issue, quarrels with people from DOE.**

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I referred them to Sanga’s article and how he argues that lack of character was the cancer of Pacific leadership, since many people view leaders as corrupt, tainted by poor or immoral choices and lack self discipline. I pointed out that the storyline and the theme in *Whale Rider* is our story. With this prompt, I ask them to go out in groups and develop case studies that depicted a situation where there was a clear struggle between doing what was right and doing what was wrong. I pointed out that they needed to tell the real story without the ending. After listening to the stories, it was the group’s responsibility to provide the conclusion. When the small groups returned, their stories reflected the typical scenarios that have happened in the Chuuk schools. They told stories of lying on timesheets, alcohol drinking, absenteeism due to deaths, conflicts between principal and teachers, the land issue, quarrels with people from DOE. They had then developed skits to dramatize the stories. Some were hilarious; while others just drew silence for they were too close to home.

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sacredness, and importance. Although leadership possessed these qualities, female leadership manifested itself in subtle ways, sometimes undetectable or lost in the mass of hair. She asserted that like the comb, the island leader had to possess the inherent ability to bring together many people into a unified pattern. However, the comb could separate, curl and even change the pattern of the hundreds of strands of hair in order to make the woman beautiful. In other words, leadership in Chuuk was about skills not gender; it was about unity; it was about flexibility and finally it was about beauty. There were grumbles from the male participants as I praised and endorsed the symbol of the comb.

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**We ended the afternoon session agreeing that it was easy to listen to stories, since many of the principals still depended on their oral and audio skills to learn about issues that were related to culture and religion. They were in for a surprise, for they were to find out that listening was a skill to be learnt through rigorous mentoring.**

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So I stayed with the uneasiness of the male participants and asked the entire group if they all identified with the metaphor of the Micronesian navigator. There was mixed feelings since it was still linked to gender and associated with outer islands of Chuuk. Nonetheless, I asked them to identify the attitudes, knowledge, and skills that the navigator needed to possess in order to help his voyagers reach safety. This led to a lively discussion which was used to explain the different theories of leadership, especially the born leader theory and the trait model. Building on the traits and behaviors of the navigators we asked the participants to apply them to their own lives as island leaders.

In the next session, I introduced an article by Kabini Sanga titled “Pacific Leadership Hope and Hoping,” explaining that mentors do not have to be physically present. They could guide us with writing. In this article, the scholar from Malaita Island in the Solomon Islands stresses that in order to talk about island leadership we will need to involve ourselves “in careful and sustained ‘listening’ to common talks, jokes, complaints, sarcasm, ‘sugar talk’ about leaders and leadership”. I asked the participants if they felt that this skill, “listening to stories”, was important to all people who wanted to assume leadership roles. We ended the afternoon session agreeing that it was easy to listen to stories, since many of the principals still depended on their oral and audio skills to learn about issues that were related to culture and religion. They were in for a surprise, for they were to find out that listening was a skill to be learnt through rigorous mentoring.

With all this knowledge about island leadership, we watched the movie

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administrative efficiency and student learning. But these Indicators came with reporting forms and many principals had never seen them. If they had, they did not have the necessary skills and technology to effectively complete and return them in a timely manner.

Principals themselves collaborated by supporting these myths. In doing so, they were able to effectively deflect their weaknesses onto the uncertified teachers or ineffectiveness of the personnel in the head office. Moreover, the existence of mentors and specialists, who are supposed to assist principals with curriculum, instruction and assessment, have averted people’s attention from the need to hold the principals responsible for the low test scores and poor classroom instruction. Any stories of principals’ own incompetence, apathy, and complacency have usually been securely redirected to others.



### ***Our Hope Remained with the Principals***

In “Islands of Excellence,” an article written by Fr. Francis Hezel some years ago, the author maintained that education had its success stories in what was sometimes characterized as a “sea of mediocrity.” There were some public schools that exemplified quality education. These schools, he argued, shared two common features: a supportive community and the strong leadership in the person of the principal. I felt that if Fr. Hezel, with the extensive experience of educational research in Micronesia singled out the principal as a key person for school improvement, then there was hope that the CPR could build on this thesis. This encouraged me to continue with this project. I felt that if they could create success stories in the late 1990s, then more could be generated if we made some changes to the training of principals in Chuuk.

With the burst of hope, I decided that if we wanted to create and narrate success stories in the CSSS—if we wanted to enable principals to “navigate with pride” despite the problems they face—we needed to make some fundamental changes to plans for this professional development program. First of all, we would have to change the program from a workshop or conference to a “retreat.”

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I proposed to the group that we call the three week gathering: *Chuuk Principal's Retreat (CPR)*. The negative connotation of the acronym CPR was not lost to people who knew about the dismal state of affairs of the Chuuk State School System. Some joked that this was the last effort to “resuscitate” the principals from their intellectual and moral coma by forcibly pumping “oxygenated blood” into their brains and hearts. I did not object to this nuance, because this was in fact what we were attempting to do in the three week period. We believed that we were beginning with people who had lost hope and were literally in a state of lethargy. We wanted to provide a safe environment where they could experience a blast of new ideas and feelings through the medium of story. This hopefully would activate their heads and hearts, reviving a sense of pride as school leaders.

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The change in the dynamics of the week from lectures by the presenter to accompaniment in the story telling process consequently justified a name change from workshop to retreat. Although the idea of a retreat for principals was new to many people, I pointed out that big business organizations were using this spiritual terminology to stress several key factors in building a more collaborative organizational model of leadership: the need to move off site for silence, reflection and relaxation, the emphasis on respectful and reciprocal relationships, and the importance of group input for future planning.

Since the CPR was going to be a new experience for all, we really could not predict the outcomes or the direction in which we were to navigate. But a few basic principles of traditional navigation were going to guide the journey. We were going to create an environment where the participants would feel safe and comfortable, yet confined to only one location for a long period of time. We also allowed for flexibility in the schedule to have time for repetition, emotional outbursts, questions, discussion, and prayer. Lastly we were going to allow participants to proudly “tell their story” in their own Chuukese language.

I felt that we needed a metaphor that would enable the participants to indirectly point out the weaknesses and strengths of the leadership. The metaphor had to be easily recognizable by the Chuukese participants, while at the same time encapsulating the ideas of change, culture, and values existent in island leadership. It was not difficult to find an image that fulfilled these requirements. We adapted the theme of the “Navigating with Pride” program and decided on the metaphor of

feelings of teachers.

4. Debate the topic: Should religious values be taught in Chuuk public schools?
5. Make a presentation to JEMCO about the cultural factors that hinder success in Chuuk schools.

### ***Change from Observer to Story Teller***

As the planning team assumed the role of mentors, I asked principals to trust us in the journey that we were about to begin. I also emphasized that stories could give meaning to their experiences as principals and cause change. The narratives would not immediately help solve the educational problems of Chuuk, but they would help explain why educational leadership was complex and involved more than being island talking chiefs or on site glorified clerks. Like the master navigators, we felt that we had done the necessary preparations; we had learnt how to make the mental charts. We were going to set sail with 34 anxious voyagers.

I began the first morning talking about the power of symbols and metaphors in the island cultures. With this brief introduction, the participants had to walk around campus searching for their symbol of island leadership. On returning to the classroom, they were asked to tell a success story using the object as the key to interpreting their narratives. The objects ranged from a new coconut frond and sea shells to local food and flowers.

There was one symbol, however, that really captured my attention. A woman chose a turtle shell comb as her symbol of island leadership. At first I was a little skeptical about how she would link this to island leadership. When she started to explain the symbol, I was stunned. She began telling her story how legends about chiefs in the islands were from a male perspective. Male leadership was always easy to detect, especially through the use of their power and violence. She continued that women were also chiefs, even though their power and authority were not as forceful and obvious. The comb, she explained was placed on the head, symbolizing authority,





technical factors like the lack of funds, old textbooks, and dilapidated facilities, they would begin to acknowledge that they might be the authors of the stories of failure. By doing this the story would move from an objective report to a real personal story. After mastering this skill, the principals would have learnt how to make decisions based on posing right questions about the context, personal experiences and other people's knowledge.

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**They would begin to understand that they had to begin to take some responsibility for the mess in their schools. So instead of blaming technical factors like the lack of funds, old textbooks, and dilapidated facilities, they would begin to acknowledge that they might be the authors of the stories of failure.**

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The third skill would involve the group making judgments on the answers and the data they have acquired in previous exercises. They may choose to move the conversation in such a way that would keep the storyline or decide to attempt crafting new stories. At this stage the other group members and mentors would challenge their decisions so they might better articulate their thoughts. With this exercise, the participants would experience some of the feelings that come with substantial change: debate and ambiguity, accountability, and shared values. This skill would allow the participants to gain new knowledge on their own through a systematic reflection on the self narratives. Through this process the principal would be learning one of the most important traits of being a leader; they should make judgments and decisions based on the context, the collective experiences and feelings of the group, answers to some difficult questions and expert information from mentors.

The fourth skill would help the principal experience the difficulties associated with putting the decisions into action. The exercises that would help develop these skills included skits, debates and writing case studies. The key to the mastery of this skill was the ability to discern the importance of a change in attitude. Since we did not expect people to change behavior within a short period of time, we still could monitor attitudes and a willingness to honestly rewrite their stories about the future that recognized both their strengths and weaknesses. Below is the plan for practicing of the skill of putting into action a resolution after the process of discernment for the first week:

1. Write up a new job description that included student learning
2. Create skits that would illustrate unethical practices in the Chuuk schools.
3. Develop a plan that would highlight collaboration and sensitivity to



the "traditional master navigator". The principals in Chuuk were like the Micronesian master navigators of the last century who were on a journey that was fraught with challenges. In their search for a better future, the navigators had to envision, plan and even change directions as the winds shifted course or the ocean swells changed shape.

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With all this in mind, it was decided that the participants of the CPR would all live on the Xavier High School campus. They would return home during the weekends. Arrangements would be made to pick them up on Sunday afternoon and drop them off on Friday afternoon. The CPR would be extended from the original three days to 15 days, or three weeks.

### *The Plan for the Retreat*

In the first week, the goal was to provide opportunities for the principals to see that "being an island leader" was primarily a human activity within a network of relationships. They would listen to stories that reflected real experiences of being an island leader. In turn they would tell stories of how they coped with the moral, the emotional, the spiritual and the cultural challenges in their respective school communities. We needed to immediately expose their biases in their personal models of island leadership so that attitudinal change could begin to take place. We would use case studies, critical incidents, role playing, and simulations to stress relationships and change. We wanted the participants, in participating in these activities, to come to a self realization that they were actually "being" leaders.

The second week would build on the insights and prepare them for the rigors and responsibilities of island educational leadership. At this stage we would introduce the art of leadership. They would be introduced to basic leadership skills that might be important to build a meta-narrative for all Chuuk educational leaders. They would be reminded of the traditional navigational concepts of envisioning and values scan, scenario planning, community collaboration, and risk taking. Like the master navigators, the participants would be involved in exercises that allowed them to formulate a vision based on the scan of competing values within the community, since values steer our actions. During this week-long stage the participants would also listen attentively to the dreams of fellow colleagues. They would all assist in the process of interpretation. This would hopefully result in the



formulation of a clear vision of the destination, and a strong commitment to reaching that destination. They would then determine the information that was required, the tasks needed to be accomplished, and who would be responsible for these tasks.

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**Since most journeys could encounter unexpected natural phenomena, the principals as master navigators had to learn how to take risks and make fundamental changes to their values and habits, so that the voyagers would safely reach their new destination**

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Through movies and stories, the CPR participants were made aware that trust from the community was essential if they wanted the vision and plan to become a reality. This would ensure support for the vision and a willingness to take responsibility for working toward it. Since most journeys could encounter unexpected natural phenomena, the principals as master navigators had to learn how to take risks and make fundamental changes to their values and habits, so that the voyagers would safely reach their new destination.

By the third week, the principals should have acquired new attitudes, skills and knowledge that they could now apply to their roles as educational leaders in the islands. During the last five days of the CPR, the principals would be introduced to the jargon used in contemporary literature on educational leadership. The plan would be to introduce the five types of leadership necessary for effective principal: i) organizational leadership, ii) instructional leadership, iii) human and interpersonal leadership, iv) professional leadership, v) political and community leadership

The skills of the five models of educational leadership closely corresponded with the navigational skills of the second week. Now the participants had new terminology to tell the same story about educational leadership in Chuuk. The skills of envisioning and articulating clear goals were integral to organizational leadership. When leaders were involved in scenario planning and communicating, they were exercising instructional leadership. Collaboration and being aware of one's weakness were important for human and interpersonal leadership. Principals were professional leaders when they searched for creative ways to improve skills for the co-workers. Leaders who took risks, made moral judgments, and were sensitive to the community's needs and values were exercising political and community leadership.

By the end of the CPR the principals could hopefully reframe their stories in



terminology that reflected their contexts, their experiences, and their new knowledge. They could construct a future narrative that included positive attitudes about themselves, the skills of self-reflection and self-knowledge in the context of Chuuk.

### ***Breakdown of the Day***

Each day was divided into five sessions where the principals would be involved in a disciplined process involving the four skills of self-reflection: i) be attentive to experiences and contexts, ii) be intelligent and seek understanding by questioning iii) be responsible by making informed decisions iv) be responsible by putting into action the decision one has made. By practicing these skills the principals would be involved in the basic dynamics of learning new knowledge. They would reclaim their self confidence so they could in fact "navigate with pride".

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The first skill would engage the participants in carefully scanning the different experiences of being leaders in Chuuk. They would take account of the real context of the principal's life, which would include family, clan, fellow teachers, the administrators, the school facilities, and resources, politics, economics, and religion. The students' backgrounds and their challenges were also to be considered as part of this context. They were being made aware of the complex nature of the problematic situation through the narrative. If the principals learnt this skill they would come to realize that being good principals began with truthfully listening to personal stories. This was the most valuable data because it gives them a true story of how human beings learn new knowledge.

The second skill would be asking the right questions and finding answers that were based on facts derived from readings, movies or information from the mentors. Principals would move from solely using their feelings and personal experiences to using their cognitive skills. They acknowledge these experiences but then are puzzled and ask numerous questions. They go beyond the experiencing to ask what and why and how and what for. They would be given several guidelines: they were not allowed to blame others, they would use only "we"; they were allowed to show their feelings; and they had to give concrete data as part of their answers. In this way, they would begin to understand that they had to begin to take some responsibility for the mess in their schools. So instead of blaming