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Fall 9-17-2019

# Educational Leadership in a Mayan Village in Southern Belize: Challenges Faced by a Mayan Woman Principal

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### Recommended Citation

Oliveras, Yanira and Hickey, Wesley D., "Educational Leadership in a Mayan Village in Southern Belize: Challenges Faced by a Mayan Woman Principal" (2019). *Educational Leadership and Policy Studies Faculty Publications and Presentations*. Paper 26.  
<http://hdl.handle.net/10950/1901>

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## **Educational Leadership in a Mayan Village in Southern Belize: Challenges Faced by a Mayan Woman Principal**

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The structure of the Indigenous villages of southern Belize becomes evident in the school systems, especially those deep in the rain forest, where women leaders are rare and have just recently been accepted (Hickey, Linn, & Vaughn, 2013). In these villages, educational leadership by women can be difficult. Women often must navigate the cultural landmines that are set by the village, dangers that often are not consistent among genders (Sam, 2015). In addition, family issues may impact a woman leader even more than a man, which confounds the inherent challenges of principals in rural communities. The current case facilitates discourse about the importance of the balance of relationships within the family and community, and the challenges faced by women leaders, who have traditionally been responsible for caring for their children. Furthermore, the case explores the circumstances faced by rural school principals and the dynamics of leadership in remote communities. Educational leadership in these rural villages can be difficult in the most ideal of situations, but doing so while assimilating one's family to a village and challenging cultural norms makes for a unique dynamic. Through this case study, we explore the circumstances and challenges a Mayan woman principal, Mrs. Po [pseudonym], faces upon accepting a position in rural Belize, Central America.

### **The Village**

The village where Mrs. Po works is at the end of a long dirt road three hours from the nearest pavement. The rainy season leaves the road almost impassable, but that usually does not cause many problems. Few people drive to the village. In fact, most of the resources that are found in the village come from the neighboring country, Guatemala.

Individuals from Guatemala can often be seen selling clothes in the streets of the village, and a few students come from across the border to go to school. Many of the villagers know both Kekchi and Spanish, a skill that comes from the pragmatic need to communicate with neighbors. The location of the village and the Guatemalans that visit provide students the opportunity to become trilingual. They speak Kekchi at home, Spanish with some friends, and English at school. English is the official language of Belize, and the instructional language throughout the country.

The village is also the starting point for access to communities deeper in the rain forest. Another village, along with its school, lies six miles to the East, but it is inaccessible by car. A visit requires a long hike or horseback ride. The students and teachers hike out for events, but due to the remote location of the school, most of the Ministry of Education district's education managers have never visited this village.

The location of the village where Mrs. Po works makes for an isolated activity hub. There are a few small stores but little economy. The chickens and pigs represent the livestock for families, and these animals can be seen running through the bush. The younger children can be

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seen outside the thatch homes, and the older children are often walking to school. Corn is common, and corn tortillas are a staple for meals (Dvorak, 2015). The remote location of the villages and scarcity of financial resources often makes it difficult to get a meal that provides all nutrients needed for proper physical and intellectual development. The financial constraints and the nutritional deficits create increased challenges for the leaders of the schools. Mrs. Po's explanation illustrates the reality of acquiring simple necessities such as water, "There is no electricity, no pipe water. So, we had to go to the river, to the creek, to do what we need to do. We had to be collecting rainwater."

Principal Po is aware that addressing the communities' needs is critical; she is committed to helping families. Assisting parents sometimes means providing food or money. This type of assistance extends to the village leadership, too. Mrs. Po explains,

I can recall that in [the village], what we would do is buy gas in large amounts, so if they needed help, they would come to us. So, we would help them with gas, and if they would want to pay, we would tell them no, you are assisting us, we appreciate what you are doing. So, if this is a way we can provide incentive to you, then you know, we will continue. If I can help you this way, then I appreciate you helping me this way.

The interaction between this rural school the community presents a complex set of dynamics that impact the economic and financial resources of the residents and the school. Furthermore, the proximity of a foreign country and the social and business interactions among the residents present unique challenges for the school and community leaders.

### **Schools and Leadership in Rural Belize**

The schools in this region of Central America follow the British education structure (Arcia, 2016) and are primarily Roman Catholic; although there could be other Christian denominations that partner with the schools, and there are a few government schools that do not designate a denomination. In 2016, 87 percent of students in this region attended denominational schools, 10 percent were in government schools, and the remaining students were in "other" schools (Arcia, 2016). Regardless of the affiliation, the Ministry of Education and Youth pays the teacher salaries and provides minimal funding for supplies while the religious institutions are responsible for service delivery (Arcia, 2016). The church with which the school is affiliated may provide further assistance, including additional nominal funds and leadership support.

The school in Mrs. Po's village, like the majority in southern Belize, is Roman Catholic. The building has six rooms and is made of cement, an investment from the government after a hurricane two decades prior. The cement school doubles as a hurricane shelter for the villagers. The rooms can hold 30 students, and the air blowing through open windows keeps the environment reasonably cool. Students in Mrs. Po's school, as students in all Belizean Catholic schools, wear uniforms. They wear dark green slacks with light green shirt which differentiates them from students in Methodist schools, who wear brown slacks with a checkered brown shirt. These uniforms create a visual signal of the school a student attends, but there are unattended consequences, too. Some students cannot afford uniforms, so they arrive wearing the clothes the family can obtain. Visitors often fail to recognize any behavioral differences, but as with all social interactions, these subtle signals increase, or divide, a sense of community.

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The economic status of the families in the villages impacts students and results in critical needs among some children. Mrs. Po is cognizant of the importance of supporting students and their families, which enhances the relationship between the school and community. Relatively small amounts of money to assist families in the rare times it is needed help create a connection to the school. This is a remote village that does not have the expenses of more modern areas, but shelter, clothing, and food are always needed. Subsistence farming can take care of most of this, but there are needs that are more difficult without some means of trading or selling. Thus, there are always going to be some students in need.

Recognizing the students in need means that Mrs. Po has to spend time with parents. She stated,

I had to be communicating with them, I had to be doing home visits, even though I could not understand the language. But I would have people that I trust, like a teacher, assisting me. Once the communication is there, I would assist in terms of things they would need. Those are the things we would do extra to get the outcomes we desire.

The connections with families are important, as Principal Po leads a school in a rural Kekchi village, which is unusual since she is both Mayan and woman. Many schools have all men teachers, even in the infant grades, and there has never been a woman principal who is Kekchi Mayan. Principal Po is Mopan Mayan. She is not the first Mopan woman principal in this village (Hickey, Linn, & Vaughn, 2013), and the first one had some difficult times and lessons to be shared. Mrs. Po explains, “They believe the man should be the leader, and the woman can’t lead.”

Mrs. Po had no leadership experience nor principal preparation; nonetheless, she was asked to take over the principal position in a remote village in the region, and one of the most difficult to access from the main town where the local Ministry of Education office is located. Mrs. Po has been given \$40 Belizean (\$20 US) by the district’s Ministry of Education to start the year for the 170 students in her school. From the nearest town, a trip to her school takes 3 hours by bus, a mode of transportation that goes into a nearby village on Monday, Wednesday, and Friday. Catching the bus is only possible after a six mile walk to a closer village. Mrs. Po stated:

In [Mrs. Po’s village] there is not transportation, there is no bus that leaves there. The road is really really bad with a lot of potholes. So that is my biggest worry. So, in June, when I was told [about the principal job], I was reluctant, I did not want to abide. I was finding many ways to decline from it, but I was told you are the correct person, you are qualified, and this community needs you. So, I said if that is my calling, then I will take the challenge.

Answering this call is the first step in the leadership challenges of Mrs. Po. She has taken her family to their new home with faith that things would work out. Principal Po and school leaders in rural areas face challenges that are often unique to their communities. The limited financial resources available to families and the dynamics of the various religious denominations impact students. These are challenges rural school principals must be aware of, take time to analyze to effectively implement systems that will have a positive impact on the community and its students. The circumstances of schools in Belize provides a rich context for rural school leaders

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to engage in discourse about effective leadership and educational practices to ensure the academic and social-emotional success of students.

### **The Principalship**

Mrs. Po has taken over the principal position in the village after six years teaching primary school in the largest town of the district, and she did so with no leadership training. She had just earned her bachelor's degree in primary education when she was informed of the assignment; her teaching experience had been at several different standards. In Belize, children start school at the age of five in Infant 1 (Law Revision Commissioner, 2010). After a year, these students move into Infant 2, and from there into Standards 1-6. Each standard takes a school year to complete, just like the United States does with grades. Students take a national exam in Standard 3, the Belize Junior Achievement Test (BJAT), and in Standard 6, the Primary School Examination (PSE). These tests have not yet reached the high-stakes level that is seen in the United States, but they do lead to academic recognition, both for individual students and for schools.

Mrs. Po's students had always achieved at a high level, which was one of the reasons she was asked to lead a school. Students in her new school have historically underperformed on the national exams, with student percentage scores averaging in the 40s and 50s. She is charged with leading the school improvement efforts to enhance teaching and learning in this remote village. Principal Po explains her reality when she was named principal.

I had to read a lot. I had not done any leadership training. If there is a way to assist, I have to always try to be there. In the first orientation, I did not know the status of the school.

She knows the transition is going to be difficult for several reasons. Mainly because she is moving into a Kekchi village as a Mopan woman principal; the tribulations are inevitable. Furthermore, she faces a challenge; the language of the community. While English is the language of instruction in Belize schools, the residents of the village speak Kekchi, a language Mrs. Po does not understand.

There are two populations of Mayans in southern Belize (Menjivar & Salmon, 2018), with the Mopan Mayan being truly Indigenous to the region. The Kekchi Mayans immigrated into the district in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century after being forced out of Guatemala. The two populations appear similar, but there are various cultural differences. Mrs. Po explained,

Then they take me out and send me to [the village]. At first, I did not want, told them I did not have the experience and though I was still a junior. I was told I was going to be the principal and got really scared and said, "no I can't do that, I don't think I'm ready". I don't know the community ... I don't know anybody there, so how am I going to survive. And my biggest challenge was language. I'm a Maya, I speak Mopan, but they speak Kekchi, which is totally far and can't be able to understand.

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Moving to a remote village that spoke a language she could not understand is frightening for Mrs. Po. Furthermore, she is considered one of the most educated and important people in a community where women are not traditionally considered leaders.

I had my orientation with the teachers. We had a meeting. It was my first experience, and my biggest fear was the language barrier because I don't know how to communicate with the people. God gave me the strength, so I was able to do what I needed to do, and I began enjoying it.

Good principals often embrace the challenges that come with leadership, but when you are breaking cultural norms, it helps to follow someone who started the process. A woman as school principal challenges the status quo. Mrs. Po is fortunate that she is the second woman principal in the school, so the village was able to come to terms with the idea before she arrived.

When I went there, there had already been a female principal, and she went through more challenges than I went through. Because ... one, she was the first to step in that village as a leader. The parents were not receptive. She had some of the same issues as mine, because she was also a Mopan speaking person. So, when I went there, she debriefed me on "this is what I went through, don't repeat it, don't do it cause you might put yourself in trouble". I am thankful to her for what she had done so I would not repeat that.

Although educational leaders cannot anticipate all the obstacles they will face, they must learn from those that have faced challenges that have stalled previous progress (Glickman, 2002). History is filled with individuals who challenged the cultural norms and paid the price. The first principal caused the discomfort and disruption within the village that is needed for growth. However, the first woman principal in the village was not accepted. There could be many reasons for the challenges faced by the former principal, including the difference in leadership styles, but the transition would have been more difficult for Mrs. Po if there had not been someone who challenged cultural norms before her.

These challenges are not just within the community. The school itself could be difficult for a new principal, especially a woman.

It is really really challenging knowing that it's a woman leading. In [the village], I have six males working under me, and I am the principal, so that is a lot of challenge in itself.

Mrs. Po acknowledges the problems that leading a faculty of Mayan men might pose; she even expects resentment. Mrs. Po counts on the help of an interpreter to communicate with her faculty, which makes Mrs. Po wonder if her message and the vision she is working to create are consistently shared as intended.

Implementing this mission requires a connection with the politics of the village, and she learned the dynamics of community leadership in a Mayan village. She has the courage to address the leaders of the community directly. She has contacted the alcalde and chairman of the village, requesting assistance. In addition, she has made sure that the school could assist as well, either through providing help to families or gas to the community.

Before I work in the community, I must be able to be in contact with the leaders. If you do not have support of the leaders, it is way too hard to get the support of the community. They will be the ones emphasizing in community meetings, this is what Mrs. Po will want.

### **A Teaching Principal**

Getting everyone focused on the mission and vision of the school goes beyond the language obstacle and the dynamics of Mayan leadership in a Kekchi community. Mrs. Po also has to face the challenges inherent of the position of a teaching principal. Her leadership within the school is embedded in her teaching a classroom of multi-grade students. She has the same teaching responsibility as the other instructors, and in addition, she is expected to provide the leadership for continual educational improvement.

I am also a teaching principal. What makes it worse too is that I am teaching a multi-grade class. So, I do my best ... and they did pass the PSE, so it boosts up my motivation to do more. [Being a teaching principal is tough] especially when a teacher is needing help, I don't have time to provide support. Especially when issues arise I have to be leaving the students and coming to deal with the issues, especially when it is an emergency.

Mrs. Po, like other teaching principals in Belize, is constantly faced with the challenge of balancing her teaching and administrative responsibilities (Hickey, Gill, & Brown, 2011). Teaching principals in rural Belize are not solely administrators and managers but spend all or part of their day directly teaching (Hickey, Gill, & Brown, 2011; Newtown & Wallin, 2013; Preston & Barnes, 2017). While teachers in the United States often lack trust in their principals' capacity to serve as instructional leaders due to the principals' disconnect from the daily challenges faced by classroom teachers (Oliveras-Ortiz, 2017), Belizean teachers have expressed trust in their principals' instructional expertise as they are aware that the principals are facing the same classroom challenges they face daily. They are also aware of the limited support a teaching principal can provide. Regardless of the challenges a teaching principal faces as she balances teaching and school leadership, the Ministry of Education officers expect teaching principals to serve as the school's instructional leader (Law Revision Commissioner, 2010). However, the time Mrs. Po can spend in her teachers' classrooms observing teaching and learning, to provide constructive feedback and engage teachers in reflective conversations, is minimal. Mrs. Po must base the feedback and support she provides teachers on the short observations she can conduct while her own students are working independently. The need for Mrs. Po to leave her students unsupervised, working independently, presents challenges for Mrs. Po as a teacher. Her students, like students throughout the world, are prone to mischief when left unsupervised. Students begin to tease and bully one another, and time on task is significantly decreased.

An educational leader has many roles, and one of the most important is creating a culture of high expectations and universal achievement (Day, Gu, & Sammons, 2016). A teaching principal may have less time for many of the leadership tasks, but she can model instructional methods and management. She has the opportunity to model her expectations through her work ethic, drive, and passion. As principals are increasingly expected to engage teachers in

instructional discourse with the goal of improving the teachers' professional performance, the advantages and challenges faced by teaching principals ought to be explored. The context in which teaching principals lead provide for a unique environment to explore issues of instructional leadership, trust among teachers and principal, and the role of the principal as instructional leader.

### **The Value of Education in a Kekchi Community**

Research tells us that keeping the passion for education within the walls of the classroom limits student achievement (Barry, Saltmarsh, & Barr, 2014), Mrs. Po intuitively knows the importance of expanding the scope of her work beyond the schoolhouse. Her passion and commitment to educational attainment needs to hit a wider audience. Mrs. Po recognizes the importance of getting parents and community members involved, and she understands the process is slow.

Parent support is one of the greatest struggles because I think they don't really value education. They believe because it is expensive, they believe because some children come out of high school and nothing comes of it, they see it as a waste of time, a waste of money.

Changing this mindset is difficult, particularly in isolated Mayan villages. Most families in the villages live as subsistence farmers. Education is not required to grow corn or raise livestock, so there is not a strong connection between daily life and increased academic learning (Ethridge, 2015). Parents have a hard time seeing the benefit to education. Although parents verbally express their desire for their children to pursue a secondary education, behavior contradicts the expressed expectations (Curry et al., 2018). Mrs. Po faces further challenges because of the cultural beliefs that girls should stay home to learn chores upon their fourteenth birthday. It is not uncommon for teenage girls to start having children and for older siblings to be responsible for the wellbeing of younger siblings (Currey et al., 2018). This often creates attendance problems in school, which may lead to students not taking and passing the PSE. Without the PSE, the students have no opportunity to continue their education beyond primary school. In Mrs. Po's district, boys and girls attend primary school at nearly the same rate; however, the boys significantly outnumber girls in secondary school (Näslund-Hadley, Alonzo, & Martin, 2013). While Mrs. Po openly shares her experiences with parents in her new village, shifting the village's deep-rooted perceptions about the value of education and the impact it could have on the family's financial well-being is a tremendous challenge. Like many of the girls in the village, Mrs. Po grew up in a Mayan home with a mother who did not see the value of education and expected her to quit school at 14. However, Mrs. Po's father saw the need for change and sent her to high school. Mrs. Po credits her Mayan father's unconventional views and his value of education for that life changing decision. She hopes to serve as a role model and help others in her community understand the importance of education.

The Ministry of Education has tried to make secondary educational attainment easier for some of the more isolated villages. A high school was opened in 2009 to provide for village students in the more remote areas. Before this school opened, students would have to travel to the nearest town if they wanted to continue their education, and this was unattainable for all but a few. Places like [Mrs. Po's village] still struggle to get students to attend high school. The lack



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of transportation means that boarding must occur, which is another expense that the parents do not have the money to pay. Additionally, Mrs. Po and the educators in Mayan remote villages have to work in an environment where the value of education and the consequences of furthering their education are perceived negatively. Members of the community have expressed their frustration with the attitude of some of the youth who have pursued higher education. Upon returning to the village, some educated young Mayans have acquired an attitude of superiority over those members of the family and others in the village who have not pursued further education. A Mayan male teacher explained that “the young people that have left the village to further their education, return to the village and look down upon those that have stayed, rather than helping our people lift up”. This teacher expressed his frustration with the devaluation of education and the negative unintended consequences of the attitude some of the most educated members of the community have adopted. Educators in these remote villages aim at shifting the mindset of the villagers and increase the perceived value of education in the community. The perceived change in their attitudes creates tension between the educators who promote secondary and higher education, and the parents who cannot afford the expenses for an education they might perceive as having a negative impact on the youth’s attitudes toward their community and heritage.

Some of the Indigenous people in Latin America have embraced society’s pressure to become assimilated to the mainstream culture and have become convinced that their culture and language are inferior (Schmelkes, 2011). The undesirable attitude of those young people has negatively impacted parents’ perceptions of education and their desire to support their children in the pursuit of a high school or college education. Education presents thoughts and beliefs that were previously unknown and modifying traditional beliefs to fit new ones is often an uneasy fit (MacKenzie, 2018). The authors of this chapter have seen an increase in Facebook participation among the Maya youth. While Curry et al. (2018) discovered sexually suggestive photographs in social media; “these factors indicate a socially transmitted pattern” (p. 28). Involvement in social media brings in a culture that often conflicts with traditional values and higher educational aspirations.

Mrs. Po views education as important at all levels and must create the perception of value among parents for primary school. However, this is not an easy task when she faces a language barrier, a negative perception about education, and a lack of trust among parents who perceive her as an outsider. Additionally, Mrs. Po faces the parents’ skepticism about education being more important than children working. The teachers in the village are the only individuals who have jobs that provide a regular income. According to the district’s education manager, the average monthly salary of a Belizean teacher, with an associate degree and a license, is approximately \$600 US, which does not provide teachers with the financial means to assist their communities monetarily. The district, where Mrs. Po lives and works, is the district with the highest poverty rate in Belize; with over 57 percent of the population living below the poverty line with an estimated minimum annual income of BZ\$1,287/USD \$643.50 (Food and Agricultural Organization of the United Nations, n.d.). Mrs. Po recognizes the financial needs of her community and the importance of creating a family-like atmosphere with everyone in the village; creating a culture of mutual support, particularly in her isolated village.

Increasing the education attainment of the children is a goal pondered by school leaders across the world. The implications of the community’s beliefs and values impact the efforts of school leaders in rural communities. Understanding change theory and the implications of

disruptive change are critical to the work for leaders who intend to alter the mindset of the families in their communities regarding the importance of education.

### **A Woman Principal with a Family**

Mayan women are generally expected to stay at home to take care of the household chores and children (Environmental Systems Research Institute, n.d.). Being a woman principal who is married with children adds to Mrs. Po's challenges. Working limits Mrs. Po's time for house chores, including food preparation, cooking, and laundry. Her village does not have a food store nor running water for the daily tasks, and going into town to purchase food or the things needed for daily life is not feasible. Getting to the nearest town is an ordeal that requires waking up at midnight, hiking six miles to the nearest village to catch a bus at 3 a.m., and taking the bus for three hours into town. Furthermore, the lack of running water requires Mrs. Po to go to the river or a creek for chores such as dishwashing and laundry.

The accessibility and living conditions in the remote village are not ideal under any circumstance, but Mrs. Po has a young child, and there are also healthcare issues to consider. As a mother, Mrs. Po has concerns about the lack of medical professionals in the village. The times Mrs. Po and her husband have to take their child to the doctor, they have to make the long early-morning hike to the nearest village to catch the bus into town.

Working mothers around the world face conflicting situations where they have to balance family and work. Mrs. Po is no exception. The reality of being a working mother, leading a school in a remote village, and the impact the living conditions have on the healthcare of her family is an issue that weighs heavily on Mrs. Po's mind.

### **Teaching Notes**

The authors have led educational professional development and travel study trips within this region of Central America for several years, and as such, have known Mrs. Po and her challenges and successes. In June 2018, the authors spent time with Mrs. Po and other women principals with the goal of expanding our understanding of their thoughts on cultural situations through their role as educational leaders. The relationship with the principals in the region had been built over a decade, so there was an openness that may have been more difficult in a "one-shot" interview and has provided us with a unique perspective about the issues rural educators face in remote schools. We decided to share Mrs. Po's case because of its value and potential for discourse about education in general, leadership in rural settings, and women in leadership.

The rural villages of Belize are often challenging for educational leaders. First, there is the simple fact that many of the basic components of existence (Maslow, 1943), such as food and water, are not as common as in more developed parts of the country. One of Mrs. Po's concerns is the lack of basic resources such as electricity and running water. From a personal perspective, working in remote villages creates concerns related to these and other basic needs. Of course, this is true of students and parents, as well. Addressing basic needs is a concern of any leader who wants to create an environment where achievement is possible. Mrs. Po exhibits many of the attributes a leader must possess to be successful in this context; she has built strong relationships in the community and her commitment to helping the families in her community is

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unwavering, and she works closely with other village leaders to collaboratively serve their community.

In villages like Mrs. Po's, the families have limited financial resources. She is savvy and understands that she needs the community's support to make sustainable changes to the education of the children in the village. She has had to work with the "alcalde" (mayor), church leaders and the village's councilman to build trusting relationships and find creative ways to support the community, at times supporting families financially. While one might think the leaders should invest their time in fundraising, the remoteness of these schools makes it nearly impossible to secure external funding in support of school. Hence, Mrs. Po has employed unique strategies, such as providing gas for the community members, often to secure support from the families that cannot provide a financial commitment but rather through trade of services and time.

To successfully establish these relationships in the community, as an outsider who does not speak the language in a leadership position, she made strategic efforts to communicate with the families of students by bringing a teacher along whenever she visited parents. Mrs. Po indicated that she did so not only to facilitate the communication by using the teacher as the interpreter, but also to leverage the existing relationship the teacher had with the families. She was determined to establish a culture of understanding and trust. This is important for any organization, but if you are a trailblazer, creating value where none existed, it is even more vital.

Creating connections in the community did not come easy for Principal Po. She had a bachelor's degree in primary education, which is rare among Mayan women. Teachers are one of the few people in the villages that have a formal education beyond high school, and in some cases even beyond primary school. However, when she was named principal, Mrs. Po had neither formal leadership preparation nor background. Some of her actions were instinctual, a combination of experience and genetics, but she also was self-educated. She had to leverage her experiences as an educator, her understanding of the Mayan social norms and culture, and the lessons she learned from her Mopan woman predecessor to lead the school in a Kekchi village.

Education, either through formal or informal means, helps, but it does not explain the impact of an educational leader. Knowing what to do is important, but without the courage to move forward, it is impotent. Educational leaders must recognize the importance of having the courage to face the challenges and battles they must choose to contest (Connolly, 2008). Mrs. Po was initially reluctant to take on a leadership position but her faith and success as a teacher gave her courage to move forward and take action. Her position as a Mopan woman in a Kekchi community did not prevent her from reaching out to the leaders of the village. She understood the historical, social norms of the Kekchi community, so she had to rely on the male teachers in her school to start establishing herself as a leader in the community. She intentionally began utilizing strategies that resulted in mutually beneficial relationships. There is a quid pro quo component to these strategies. Mrs. Po recognized that reciprocal behavior for favors was common, and although this is viewed unfavorably in many contexts, it revealed a leadership savvy that might be necessary when creating cultural change.

Principal Po was also connected to faith. Not only did she lead a Roman Catholic school, but she felt that she had been called to work in this village. She felt as if her faith added to her strength. Her interview ended with a biblical reference: "The bible says 'when you give, you shall receive', and I believe in that little phrase." Her faith and her call to serve this Kekchi village made the decision to stay in the village, or leave for the sake of her family, difficult. Mrs. Po had an impact in this village, but family needs led her to leave after only two years at the

school. The health issues of one of her children was an important factor in choosing opportunities elsewhere.

The reason I left there was because I almost lost my baby because of pneumonia, because I could not access healthcare. So, I said I needed to move, I'm a family person ... places like that are ideal for persons that are still single, so they can hike or find other ways to come out. In my case I have 3 children, plus myself and a husband, so it is a family traveling. Because of the incident I was having with my child I was able to relocate.

Principal Po loved the community, but there are few things that can match the concern for family. Having a child that got sick led to a request to work elsewhere. This seems to happen in many workplaces (Shockley & Allen, 2015). Leaders succeed at meeting the goals of the organization, but family issues force relocation. This seems to happen more often among women, of whom childcare issues often fall.

### **Transformational and Servant Leadership**

Transformational leadership is considered an effective style for revolutionizing schools in foundational and systemic ways. A transformational leader is cognizant of the importance of engaging stakeholders in the decision-making processes (Anderson, 2017). These inclusive practices promote collective efficacy and a collaborative culture (Demir, 2008). Establishing clear goals for the organization is an essential way for transformational leaders to influence the organizational culture (Moynihan, Pandey, and Wright, 2012). When a strong trust-based foundation is built, stakeholders support the organizational goals, and transformational leaders leverage their influence by encouraging and promoting a sense of ownership among stakeholders. When everyone within the organization embodies the organization's goals, a sense of self-value is established in ways that transforms the school and ultimately increases students' achievement. A transformational leader recognizes the importance of providing opportunities for others to be involved while actively developing the skills of these individuals (Northouse, 2018). Principals willing to develop other leaders within the organization must be trustworthy and cognizant of the organization's norms and culture. To earn the stakeholders' trust, transformational leaders model the desired behaviors, and they are often servant leaders.

Servant leaders aim to set up situations to promote success in others (Hung, Tsai, & Wu, 2016). They exhibit a high level of integrity through their service and concern (Liden, Wayne, Liao, & Meuser, 2014). The achievement of others within the organization is a top priority for servant leaders. Setting up members of the organization for success maximizes the organization's human capital and increases the servant leaders' effectiveness. Servant leaders take responsibility for failures but give credit to others when the organization experiences success.

Transformational and servant leaders facilitate long-term change in the organizations they lead. To successfully lead schools in the rural villages in Central America, principals must embrace an altruistic approach, one which Mrs. Po embodied. As may be the case with many rural school principals, the principals in rural Central America have limited financial and instructional resources. By embracing transformational and servant leadership, Mrs. Po has

developed the connections and relationships within the community to be a highly influential and effective principal.

### **Instructional Leadership and Teaching Principals**

Teaching principals are school administrators that have regular teaching duties as part of their workday and often view their role as instructional leaders as a difficult expectation given that they perceive this role as collegial (Newton & Wallin, 2013). Nonetheless, teaching principals are expected to be their schools' instructional leaders by observing and engaging in instructional supervision.

Instructional supervision focuses on the improvement of the teachers' skills to increase student achievement (Goldhammer, 1969; Marzano, Frontier, & Livingston, 2011; Nolan & Hoover, 2011; Sullivan & Glanz, 2009). Scholars have called for principals to fundamentally change the way they work with teachers (Zepeda, 2017), and a component of this is supervision in which principals engage teachers in discourse about instruction while linking observations, goal setting, differentiated support, professional development, and evaluation (Zepeda, 2017).

While the notion of instructional leadership is significantly different from the notions of the same concept in urban schools in the United States, teaching principals in rural schools in Central America are indeed expected to observe and coach their teachers (Hickey, Gill, & Brown, 2011). To accomplish this task, teaching principals assign their students independent work in order to have the time to visit other teachers' classrooms. Because of the limited time teaching principals have to fulfill their duties as instructional leaders, teaching principals interviewed by the authors have reported that they generally provide feedback to teachers in writing and rarely through post-observation conferences.

Trust is key to the success of instructional supervision. "Relational trust refers to the interpersonal social exchanges that take place in a group setting" (EL Education as cited in Oliveras-Ortiz, 2017, p. 41). Trust "is grounded in the social respect that comes from the kind of social discourse that takes place across the school community" (Bryk & Schneider, 2002). Without trust, it is difficult to establish effective supervisory practices that ultimately impact teaching and learning. When trust in the administrator as supervisor exists, teachers tend to perceive the process as increased constructive attention resulting in effective supervision and improved practices (Tschannen-Moran, 2014). While research conducted in the United States demonstrates teachers' lack of trust in principals' capacity to serve as instructional leaders (Oliveras-Ortiz, 2017), teachers who work with teaching principals have reported fully trusting their principals as instructional leaders because of their on-going connection to the classroom.

### **The Education of Central America Indigenous People**

The International Work Group for Indigenous Affairs (IWGIA) and the World Bank estimate that there are approximately 41 million Indigenous people in Latin America (Owens, 2016). While the educational attainment in Latin American countries has improved over the last few decades, Indigenous students continue to achieve at lower levels when compared to general student populations, primarily due to the limited access to quality education in their communities (Ribando Seelke, 2007). Although primary education is compulsory and tuition-free for children between the ages of 5 to 14, families are responsible for food, uniforms and in some cases school

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materials (Arcia, 2016). Being able to afford the expenses related to education is a challenge for Indigenous families in remote villages given the vast majority are subsistence farmers. Furthermore, families must also pay tuition for secondary students, and given that there are a limited number of secondary schools, the families must defray the cost of transportation.

At all education levels in this region of Central America, Indigenous children attend school at a much lower rate than other ethnic groups. Approximately 40 percent of Indigenous children attend secondary school and less than 10 percent attend post-secondary institutions (Näslund-Hadley, Alonzo & Martin, 2013). While there is a significant attendance gap between Indigenous people and other groups in the region, there is only a minor attendance gap between male and female enrollment at the primary level. However, educational leaders in the region continue to struggle to increase the value that families place on girls attending school. Out of the 330,000 children that were out of school in 2017, 75 percent were girls (UNESCO Institute of Statistics, 2019).

### Questions to Ponder

1. What do you believe would be different if a man were asked to take the principal position in a village with social norms and values similar to those in this case study?
2. Women leaders often feel challenged to choose between family and work. How can organizations support women who must balance the role of professional and mother/wife?
3. How could a principal leverage her role as a woman principal in her efforts to shift her village's perception about the education of girls?
4. What implications does community's perception about the value of education have for the school principal as she aims to improve student achievement?
5. What lessons can rural school principals learn from the challenges faced by Mrs. Po?
6. How could a woman principal maximize the influence that male teachers have in the village to increase the impact of her work in the community?
7. What attributes of transformational leadership would benefit a principal in her efforts to improve education of the children in the village and the community's perception about education?
8. What leadership skills or practices could a principal in Mrs. Po's situation use to successfully gain the trust of the community?
9. Leaders in border towns must understand the political climate of the region. What critical political, social, educational and economic issues must principals understand to successfully lead in that unique context?
10. Teaching principals in rural communities must balance administrative and teaching duties. What challenges and benefits would school leaders face when they remain connected to teaching? What impact would the connection to teaching have on teachers' trust in their principals as instructional leaders?

### **Activity: Culturally Proficient Leader**

Exploring and understanding ourselves, our biases, and our cultural norms and those of the communities and families that we serve are critical to the success of any leader. The cultural norms and expectations of the Indigenous families in the community in which they live significantly influence the interactions between the students and educators.

Keeping in mind Mrs. Po's case, refer to the literature sections, "Belize Education System" and "Developing Understanding of Self and Cultural Proficiency", reflect and outline your understanding, beliefs and biases related to the Indigenous people of Belize. Reflect on your own cultural groups and the norms that are acceptable within each of those groups. Compare your cultural groups' norms to those of the Indigenous people of Belize, identify similarities and differences that would impact your work as an educational leader in Belize. Develop a plan to bridge the gap between the cultural differences that you have identified, to deepen your understanding of their cultural and develop your awareness and skills to guide your development as an effective school leader in this context.

With your understanding of transformational and servant leadership, and considering your reflections and the plan you developed, design an action plan to take on an educational leadership role Mrs. Po's community.

It is critical that as a new member of the community, you avoid imposing your beliefs and values on the community. Your role as a leader is not to "save" the residents but rather to leverage their cultural and social values and the richness of their heritage as you work to enhance the learning opportunities of the children in the village.

### **Activity: Exploring the Critical Issues in Your Community**

Whether a principal in a rural, suburban or urban school, the context, the community's history, values, and beliefs significantly impact the work. This case also illustrates how gender impacts the work of women in Indigenous communities, and the challenges of working parents who serve remote communities face. Furthermore, the case illustrates the impact of a principal's preparation and experiences on their problem-solving skills, and ultimately on the principal's decisions and actions. In addition to all the external factors faced by rural school leaders, this case also explores the role of a teaching principal.

As a future (or current) school leader, analyze the context in which you lead. Reflect on all the factors presented in this case. Which of these factors are relevant to your community? How have the relevant factors impacted your school, teachers, students and other stakeholders?

#### **Expanding your understanding of your community's critical issues**

1. Identify two critical issues that have negatively impacted your school or community.

Possible critical issues:

- remoteness of the community
- beliefs about gender and gender biases prevalent in the community
- the school principal's non-traditional roles and responsibilities
- political tensions in the area
- religious overtones that are fused into the social and cultural values and norms

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- the community's value and beliefs of education
  - lack of principal preparation and/or induction support for new principals
2. Based on the critical issues you have identified, read the relevant leadership literature referenced below.
  3. If you are an aspiring school leader, interview a current principal or district administrator. If you are a current school leader, interview the superintendent or district-level administrator.
  4. While the interview questions will vary depending on the critical issue you have chosen, the question should include:
    - a. What is your understanding of the impact your chosen issue has had on our local education system?
    - b. As a campus/district leader, how has this issue impacted your actions?
    - c. Has your critical issue influenced how you interact with the community, teachers and students? If so, how?
    - d. How have you offset any negative impact (chosen critical issue) this issue has had on your role as a leader or on our students' education?
    - e. What skills have you had to acquire to be better equipped to handle the impact it (chosen critical issue) has had on your role as a leader?
    - f. What advice do you have for me (as an aspiring leader or a current administrator) as I strive to develop my leadership and/or problem-solving skills?

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