

**Exploring School Principals' Sense-Making of Their  
Leadership Role within the National Reform “Courage to  
Change”**

Ph.D. Thesis

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## Abstract

In today's increasingly global quest for off-the-shelf education reforms intended to improve student-learning outcomes, school principals undergo a 'role crisis' as they attempt to come to terms with high-performance standards. Finding it difficult to manage expectations from above (e.g., external reform demands) and below (e.g., internal school goals) while performing within multiple overlapping contexts, principals feel pulled in many different directions simultaneously. Sense-making, which is considered an effective research tool of interpretation, may be of significant benefit to school principals, particularly during times of national reforms when they need to navigate through high uncertainty while meeting policy demands.

Sense-making is an ongoing process through which individuals and groups work to understand issues or events that create ambiguities in their routine and are inconsistent with their prior beliefs. This dynamic process of constructing meaning out of present stimuli is mediated by prior knowledge, experiences, beliefs and values embedded in the social context within which people work. The connections between sense-making and school leadership throughout the implementation of an educational reform have not been investigated sufficiently. Therefore, the **research objective** of this study is to explore the concept of sense-making in school leadership through a holistic approach, focusing on school principals' perceptions, considerations and enactment of their role complexity during the implementation of a national education reform.

This study, in the **qualitative method**, includes maximal differentiation sample of Israeli 60 high school principals (38 women, 22 men) who have implemented the national reform, from various school districts. The participants work in the state Jewish educational system ( $n = 30$ ), in the religious state system ( $n = 18$ ), and in the state Arab

educational system ( $n = 12$ ). On average, participants have had 23 years of teaching experience (range = 4-43), and 9 years of experience as principals (range = 1-30). Principals have had 2 years of experience in implementing this national education reform. The sample is heterogeneous in terms of gender, years of teaching experience, years of experience as principal in general, years of experience as principal in the current school, background, and geographical location. The data derived from semi-structured interviews addressing four major **research questions** to participants: *What are the considerations that guide high school principals as they perceive and enact their role within the sense-making framework during the implementation of a national education reform? What metaphors do school principals use while making sense of their role complexity throughout the implementation of a national education reform? What considerations guide high school principals as they perceive and enact shared sense-making practices during a national education reform implementation? And finally, how do high school principals shape teachers' sense-making, while coping with national reform's intents and its implementation?* Qualitative data analysis was conducted by generating themes through an inductive process of condensing, coding, categorizing, and theorizing, grounded in the various perspectives articulated by participants.

A holistic understanding of school principals' role within education reform depends on an integration of sense-making approaches, cognitive and social constructivist, based on the dynamic school context in which reform takes place. In its cognitivist version, sense-making is an ongoing developmental process within school principals' minds, whereas in its constructivist version, sense-making is referred to as a collective process that occurs in social interaction and negotiation through the use of language. Both sense-making perspectives offer a consistent framework, through which

I investigated an individual as well as a shared lens for understanding “what” and “why” principals perceive and enact the same policy in various ways. The total sample, in the form of a collection of four articles, creates a logical model towards answering the research questions.

The **findings** of the first article, *Making Sense of School Leaders' Sense-Making*, framed 'sense-making' in both theoretical and empirical studies. The theoretical structure highlighted four aspects: (1) *Sense-making as a holistic concept*- sense-making consists of three interrelated processes: creation, interpretation and enactment. The *creation* process suggests bracketing, noticing, extracting cues, and creating a mental map from our lived experience of the ambiguous event. The *interpretation* process focuses on constructing an interpretive framework based on the map we have created. The *enactment* process emphasizes the translation of knowledge and understanding into actions. (2) *Sense-making triggers*- sense-making is triggered by an ambiguous event, identity threat, and negative emotions. (3) *Sense-making in school leadership*- school principals construct a personal meaning of unclear experiences while dealing with a dynamic environment, as well as offer the educational staff a different meaning as a social daily practice. In this sense, principals' sense-making process is nested in multiple contexts (e.g., school context and culture). (4) *Sense-making as a learning process*- school principals go through personal and social learning processes while making sense of the educational reform as individuals as well as influencing teachers' sense-making, both directly and indirectly. Directly, principals influence what teachers find themselves making sense of, by facilitating access to some reform messages rather than others. Influencing teachers' sense-making indirectly, school principals participate with the teachers in a collective learning process through formal and informal interactions.

Framing school principals' sense-making processes in an empirical structure identified three aspects: (1) *Leaders' sense-making of education reform*- school principals' sense-making processes vary across schools as they are based on prior knowledge, deeply held values, beliefs, past experiences, and social contexts. Performing as local policymakers, principals play an active role in translating reform expectations into school practices while negotiating between external demands and internal goals. (2) *Leaders' sense-making as a learning process*- learning to construct their meaning making of their leadership role while interacting with their context, school principals facilitated both a personal and a social learning process. (3) *Facilitating a collective sense-making process*- creating different conditions for teachers' learning, school principals foster social sense-making processes through formal meetings and informal conversations. By modeling their learning, principals encouraged their educational staff to learn new pedagogical practices as well as constructed shared understanding of reform demands.

The findings of the second article, *School Principals' Sense-Making of their Leadership Role during Reform Implementation*, identified three interconnected considerations through which school principals actively perceived and enacted their leadership role within the Courage to Change reform: (1) *Caring for teachers' needs*- principals aspired to facilitate teachers' adjustment to the national reform plan in formal and informal ways. (2) *Preserving leadership discretion*- principals believed they were not supposed to merely comply with superiors' instructions and focus solely on managerial tasks, but rather interpret the reform's principles in accordance with their school vision. (3) *Adjusting to school reality*- principals thought they had to adapt the national reform to the specific state of affairs extant in their school.

The findings of the third article, *Making Sense while Steering through the Fog: Principals' Metaphors within a National Reform Implementation*, focused on school principals' metaphors as a representation of their sense-making of their leadership role within the context of the national reform. Principals' metaphors identified four major internal and external fields: (1) *The principal's role and pedagogical autonomy*- changes required by the national reform led school principals to formulate new perceptions of their role. Perceiving their key role as fitting reform demands to their particular school reality, principals were clearly aware of their wish to maintain pedagogical autonomy and flexibility within their schools. (2) *The principal's work*- carrying out of their new leadership role, school principals maneuvered between different and multiple work demands. Principals felt overburdened due to administrative workload and described their complex role in maintaining harmony within their schools. (3) *The school culture*- principals reinforced a shared working culture while using reform demands (e.g., individual and attendance hours) as tools for school improvement. (4) *The principal's relationships with the teachers*- attaching great importance to retaining a positive atmosphere in their schools, principals balanced their teachers' needs against the reform guidelines.

The findings of the fourth article, *School Principals' Perceptions of a Shared Sense-Making Process in a National Reform Implementation*, identified three interconnected considerations through which school principals perceived and enacted shared sense-making practices. These were (1) *Common language*- principals framed reform demands as a platform for creating a shared pedagogical and emotional discourse with their teachers, in formal as well as informal settings. (2) *A collaborative learning process*- principals shaped their meaning making of reform guidelines as a collective learning process. Collaborating with their educational staff, they constructed

mutual goals for school improvement as well as created opportunities to question beliefs and practices. (3) *Shared working culture*- interpreting reform principles as opportunities for creating conditions for teachers' collaborative work, school principals reinforced a shared working culture.

This study has **theoretical and practical implications**. Theoretically, the existing literature on sense-making in school leadership within a national reform implementation has considered it an effective tool for promoting a long-term school improvement. The current findings indicate a broader role for sense-making in the context of school leadership, from a holistic approach, in which school principals can use it on an ongoing basis to deal effectively with all aspects of their role complexity while going through a national reform. This perception of the interrelations between sense-making and school leadership during reform implementation is presented in the current study as *School Principals' Sense-Making of their Leadership Role* approach, defined as a holistic approach where principals perceive, interpret and enact reform demands into the existing platform of school practices to promote local interests through personal and collaborative sense-making processes.