Making Sense of Accountability: A Qualitative Exploration of How Eight New York City High School Principals Negotiate the Complexity of Today’s Accountability Landscape

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ABSTRACT

MAKING SENSE OF ACCOUNTABILITY:
A QUALITATIVE EXPLORATION OF HOW EIGHT NEW YORK CITY
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TODAY'S ACCOUNTABILITY LANDSCAPE

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Schools and school leaders today contend with a dizzying array of demands, including the need to comply with high-stakes accountability systems. The ability to make sense of these multiple pressures and guide the school to craft an appropriate organizational response is an important but little-understood aspect of school leadership (Firestone & Shipps, 2005; Honig & Hatch, 2004; Spillane, Reiser, & Reimer, 2002; Spillane et al., 2002).

Guided by the theoretical frameworks of sensemaking (Weick, 1995, 2001) and internal accountability (Carnoy, Elmore, & Siskin, 2003; Elmore, 2002, 2003, 2005) within the context of educational leadership (Firestone & Riehl, 2005; Fullan, 2001, 2008b; Spillane & Diamond, 2007; Wagner et al., 2006), I employed a multiple case study methodology (Creswell, 1998; Maxwell, 1996) to illuminate the ways in which eight current and former New York City high school principals made sense of and managed the complexity of accountability demands. My qualitative research design encompassed three rounds of 60-minute interviews with each of the eight participants (or
about 24 hours total), observation data from a principals’ network meeting, and numerous policy documents, and a cross-comparison multi-case approach to analyze the resulting data.

The study’s findings revealed that these leaders made sense of accountability in three forms—personal, organizational, and external forms—and that their understandings stemmed in large part from their professional experience and beliefs. These understandings also shaped their leadership of internal accountability, that is, their school’s collective commitment to meeting accountability demands. Other findings are that school leaders are aided in their sensemaking by habits of mind, professional relationships, and self-renewal strategies. These findings expand our understanding of school leadership and add to the theory of sensemaking.

This study includes implications and recommendations for policymakers and practitioners, as well as suggestions for future research. In particular, the findings here have implications for selecting and developing principals, as they show the value of broad experience, trusted professional relationships, ongoing professional learning, and self-renewal in effective school leadership.
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ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

io cominciai, come colui che brama,
dubitando, consiglio da persona
che vede e vuol dirittamente e ama.

I began, like a man in doubt,
but one filled with great desire for advice
from someone of clear sight, right will, and love...
—Dante, Paradiso, XVIII, 103-105

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S. S.

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Chapter I

INTRODUCTION AND OVERVIEW

In this opening chapter, I explain my initial motivation to engage in this study as well as the research problem, purposes, design, and methods I used to frame my exploration. I begin by presenting my initial rationale for doing research on my chosen topic—how school leaders make sense of and respond to the complexity of multiple accountability demands—and discuss the purposes and problem of this study as framed by the literature I used to develop my conceptual framework. My brief discussion of the literature will also point out gaps that I hope to address with this research. (I discuss the research literature more fully in Chapter II.)

Following this, I present the problem and research questions that motivated this study. My study focuses on how eight high school principals negotiate the complexity of their work, which these days has become even more complex as a result of high-stakes accountability policy (Bryk et al., 1998; Elmore, 2002, 2003, 2005; Elmore & Fuhrman, 2001; Spillane et al., 2002; Spillane, Reiser, & Reimer, 2002). My research questions are as follows:

1. How do eight participating New York City high school principals describe and understand the ways in which they make sense of the complexity arising from multiple accountability demands?
2. How do these principals describe and understand their role in working with other educators at their school to craft coherent organizational responses to these multiple demands?

3. How do these leaders describe and understand the supports that enable them to negotiate this complexity?

I then summarize the methodological choices I made in designing my research and in collecting and analyzing data. This chapter concludes with a brief discussion of the potential contributions and limitations of this research.

**Personal Interest**

I first became interested in exploring the relationship between sensemaking and school leadership as a result of serving as an evaluation consultant to a New York City Department of Education (NYC DOE) school reform effort. In the course of this work, I observed a 4-day professional development program designed for middle school leaders whose schools were participating in an ambitious 1:1 computing program. Most of these schools served a high percentage of struggling students, and some of them had been designated as Schools Under Registration Review (SURR) (Viteritti & Kosar, 2001), which meant they were under the supervision of the New York State Chancellor of Education and were at risk of being closed if student academic performance continued to fall short of accountability thresholds.

In the professional development sessions, participating teachers, administrators, and principals were being trained for and were expected to embrace a new educational agenda, one in which two significant reforms were embedded: a) the creation of a whole new technology-infused curriculum, and b) the delivery of that curriculum via a
student-centered constructivist pedagogy. Thus, the reform effort, situated along these two axes, represented significant changes in practice for the participants as well as a substantial reorientation of their theory of action (Fullan, 2008a; Schlechty, 2009)—that is, their understanding of how their school accomplished its primary mission and their role in enacting that mission.

The professional development (PD) programs I observed were well-designed and well-delivered. The program for school leaders aimed explicitly to increase both the technical competence and the instructional leadership capacity of school principals. The participating leaders, from my vantage point, were focused, intelligent, experienced, and competent. They spoke compellingly about the potential of the 1:1 computing program to motivate and energize their students. The PD instructors were engaging and highly skilled in demonstrating how technology could be integrated into the curriculum to better serve struggling students.

However, what was most striking about the PD program was not what was present, but what was missing. Each day closed with a debrief among the participants in which they shared their thoughts on the program’s content and curriculum. But what they did not talk about was how this extremely ambitious agenda would be integrated within the existing context of their schools, many of which were already operating in survival mode and struggling to meet the accountability demands of New York State.

And so, although many topics were raised, one issue that never surfaced was just how the implementation of these new objectives would fit into the challenging agenda these schools were facing. This tension seemed to me to be the proverbial 800-pound gorilla in the room—a tension that we all sensed but did not name. From this
observation, a series of questions formed in my mind: "How will these principals make sense of the new reforms within the context of their already challenging leadership agenda? What will they decide to keep? What will they give up? How will these leaders manage the expectations of those to whom they are accountable? How, in turn, will they help teachers, parents, students, and other stakeholders in their schools make sense of these multiple agendas? And where will they find the time, space, and necessary supports to help themselves understand and cope with the complexity of their work?"

This research arose from my desire to more deeply and rigorously explore these questions. To gain an understanding of the sensemaking of school leaders, I decided to undertake a comparative case study (Creswell, 1998; Strauss & Corbin, 1998) of New York City high school principals to learn more about the ways in which they make sense of, individually and collectively, the complexity of the multiple agendas, policy directives, and reform initiatives that characterize school leadership today.

In the pages that follow, I will describe how eight current and former New York City high school principals (six active and two retired principals, now consultants) made sense of the multiple accountability agendas to which they were held, how they helped other educators respond effectively to these demands, and what supports they relied on to facilitate the sensemaking process.

Research Purposes

Any endeavor as massive and all-consuming as a dissertation is driven by powerful motivations, not all of them always visible. In this study, I explored how leaders described and understood: 1) the practices, routines, and dispositions that help them to personally and collaboratively make sense of the accountability agendas with which they
have been charged, 2) the ways they work with and empower others in their organization to develop effective organizational responses, and 3) the supports that enable them to make sense of these demands. In this section, I reflect on the personal, practical, and intellectual objectives (Maxwell, 1996) that shaped my interest in and ability to conduct this research.

**Personal Purposes**

In my graduate studies and in my own private sector and educational consulting practice, I have studied and observed first-hand the ways in which leaders manage change efforts. The works and teachings of Kegan (1982, 1994) and Drago-Severson (2009, 2004a, 2004b) have added immeasurably to my understanding of the cognitive demands of leadership, particularly the ways in which leaders are called upon to make meaning of complex inputs to provide coherence for their organizations. As I have noted, through my professional work, I have been given opportunities to wonder about the ways in which principals deal with the increasing complexity of school leadership. This study has enabled me to think deeply and in a sustained manner about questions that I find intellectually compelling.

At the same time, I believe there is a deeper personal purpose motivating this work. I have a complicated relationship with complexity: I am intrigued by its presence in my own life, and yet, at times I am undeniably uncomfortable when surrounded by it. As I experience complexity, I can feel overwhelmed by the multiple options it presents; I sometimes fragment myself in an attempt to cover all the bases, consider all the options, and never be wrong. I have long admired leaders who are able to withstand the buffeting winds of change and stay grounded in the midst of confusion and ambiguity. As I grow
older and face a number of critical decisions—not the least of which is formulating a response to the inevitable question, “So, Susan, what are you going to do with your Ph.D.?”—I feel it would be valuable to negotiate a different relationship with complexity. Thus, while not an explicit aim, I cannot help but feel I have been drawn to this topic in an attempt to teach myself something I need to learn.

**Practical Purposes**

There is a current crisis in school leadership. The demands of the principalship have never been higher and the need for skilled leadership has never been greater. Many leaders are electing to leave the school system. I was interested in exploring how the participants in this study made sense of the many pressures of school leadership, as I was curious to see how their thinking about their work affected their leadership behavior. Their sensemaking about their work had implications for how they led their schools.

It is my hope that this study may influence policy, for if we better understand the relationship between sensemaking and leadership responses to accountability demands, we may be able to develop policies that acknowledge the critical role of sensemaking in effective leadership and reform implementation. This knowledge would enable policymakers and educational agencies to provide the resources, structures, and settings that support sensemaking. A deeper understanding of the factors that influence successful implementation of change may thus contribute to more effective leadership practice and, ultimately, to more effective schools.

On a more intimate scale, the principals participating in this study have told me they are hopeful that the results will be useful to them as a tool for reflection and self-