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# Making sense of complex relationships in the workplace: principals in action

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## ABSTRACT

This article presents findings of research focused on school improvement efforts in two secondary academy schools in England, examining how principals make sense of their role, their (inter)actions within their schools, and the complexities of their relationships with their rapidly changing environment. Sensemaking serves as a foundation for thinking about leadership and organisational change, providing a framework for understanding how disruptions of existing practice, uncertainty and ambiguity lead school principals to rethink and reorganise how they perceive their role within their organisational context. Based on semi-structured interviews and document analyses, this article identifies how problem-solving capacities, trusting relationships and professional collaboration with an array of stakeholders encourage adaptation of organisational activities and support openness to change. The study contributes to the growing body of knowledge on how school leaders think and act in their roles and on how the focus on relationships transform and interact with existing norms and values.

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Principals; academy schools; sensemaking; complexity; organisational change

## Introduction

Changes in the organisational and governance structure of schools in England since 2010 and the policy narrative of a ‘self-improving school-led system’ have arguably increased the complexity of principals’ leadership during their daily practice (Eddy-Spicer et al., 2019; Greany & Higham, 2021). Over half of the state-funded schools are maintained by the local authority (LA), whereas the remainder are academies or free schools which operate outside of LAs and are funded directly by the central government (Department for Education DfE, 2022). Schools with academy status are often part of multi-academy trusts, which are not-for-profit multi-school educational organisations. Academy trusts vary in governing structures, phase and size, with a proliferation of leadership roles at different levels of seniority in central offices and schools (Greany & Higham, 2018; Male, 2022). As the professional and organisational challenges facing leaders at the school level become increasingly complex, their role features high levels of ambiguity and uncertainty in achieving desired outcomes.

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The current study aims to understand how school leaders make sense of tensions brought about by internal and external changes that occur in their role. Seeking to address complexity and leadership challenges, scholars highlight the importance of relationships among individuals and groups, actions, contexts, environments and cultures where processes of interaction shape principals' practices (Chapman, 2019; Finnigan et al., 2016; Shaked et al., 2018). Importantly, the complex nature and quality of these interactions are mediated by the conditions of policies and the design of the reform initiatives which emphasise school principals' role as local actors and knowledge brokers who develop adaptive strategies in order to respond to their context and not be subservient to it (Gu et al., 2020; Malin & Brown, 2019). The focus on multiple interactions within and between different components of a system is therefore relevant to this study, where social interactions within, between and beyond schools may provide opportunities for collaborative initiatives, and greater environmental adaption arising out of organisational change efforts.

There is a large body of literature which has recognised the role of leadership in effective networking and productive collaborative actions while driving school and system improvement (Armstrong & Ainscow, 2018; Azorín et al., 2020; Daly, 2010; Harris & Jones, 2010; Leithwood & Azah, 2016; Muijs et al., 2010; Rincón-Gallardo & Fullan, 2016; Townsend, 2015). Setting the ground for personal, collective moral, and social responsibility, drawing on local knowledge and experience, initiating and sustaining strong social and professional relationships within and beyond schools and local communities, and having relentless passion for improving student outcomes for all, are some of the qualities leaders draw on in their efforts to achieve greater system coherence and sustainable improvement and innovation. In a review of the evidence around school-to-school collaboration in the context of England, Armstrong et al. (2021) point to the role of leadership in creating the conditions necessary for purposeful collaboration between schools. They highlight the significance of trust and clear communication between stakeholders, but also identify school autonomy, power dynamics and competition within and between schools, as well as new governance structures, as potential barriers to collaborative insights. Azorín et al. (2020) report on the value of professional collaboration by mainly focusing on the form of school-to-school networks. They argue that embracing a systems leadership view echoes the leadership of networks, but only considers a macro-level view of interactions and highlights the need for a clear theoretical frame grounded in distributed leadership to understand micro-level leadership practices. Constantinides (2021b) embraces an ecological systems approach conceptualising systems leadership in English academy trusts as a complex multi-layered construct. He suggests that a systems-oriented view of leadership takes into account all elements of the education ecology and therefore that system leadership activities, roles and relationships reciprocally interact with the different system levels in order to respond to local needs and environments.

While these studies have contributed to a deeper understanding of the role of leadership in nurturing trusting relationships through the development of a shared vision and set of values, few have incorporated the personal qualities leaders draw on as they enact effective leadership practices and which, in turn, are shaped by those enactment

experiences (Leithwood & Steinbach, 1995; Leithwood, 2012; Robinson, 2010). From a cognitive perspective, less guidance exists around knowing what and how principals learn and use information to make decisions about school improvement planning. Day et al. (2016) found that if school leaders aim to affect student achievement, then they need to demonstrate key values, qualities and skills, but also ‘highly attuned cognitive and emotional understandings of the needs of individual staff and students and of the concerns of both national government and local community’ (p. 245). Problem-solving capacities through processes of interaction, communication and collective learning as well as existing know-how have been found to be powerful explanations for successful leadership (Leithwood et al., 2020). This article therefore provides insights into the role of leadership, aiming to understand how school principals work through sensemaking and problem-solving processes to respond to growing organisational complexities and address local needs.

### Conceptual basis

When encountering turbulent and disruptive environments and novel competitive forces, educational leaders are expected to respond to multiple and often ambiguous tensions between their own beliefs and assumptions about how to improve teaching and learning and external expectations. Drawing on studies of social cognition and cognitive science, researchers in the field of policy enactment have embraced new cognitive frameworks or mental models to explore how teachers and leaders create meaning out of prior knowledge, experiences, professional norms, values and beliefs (Coburn, 2005; Ganon-Shilon & Schechter, 2018; Gawlik, 2015; Spillane & Anderson, 2014). One way to understand school principals’ roles when facing uncertainty is to do it through a sensemaking perspective. This approach considers both the increasingly complex world principals face (Beabout, 2012) as well as the complexity of the sensemaking process itself (Gioia et al., 1994). The former involves the efforts of individuals to interpret and understand their ever-changing environment (Balogun & Johnson, 2005), whereas the latter involves the interplay between action and interpretation (K. E. Weick et al., 2005).

To explicate the complexity of this process, this article builds on the sensemaking literature that focuses on the development of individual or collective interpretations of demands for change in school leadership. This approach suggests that emergent, varied patterns of behaviour are generated due to disruptions in the status quo, urging individuals and groups to reconsider their actions and the ways in which they act. Sensemaking is therefore considered here as an ongoing process by which individuals generate understandings of their setting and information from their broader environment (Kezar & Eckel, 2002; Maitlis & Christianson, 2014). Their actions are based on how they select information, as well as the ways they make meaning of that information and then act on their interpretations to develop culture and routines over time (K. Weick, 1995).

Empirical research informed by a sensemaking approach examines the complex and ambiguous nature of organisations, policies and relationships, as well as the environments in which actors operate (Coburn, 2005; Constantinides, 2021a; Evans, 2007; Longmuir, 2021; Spillane et al., 2002). These studies focus on the microlevel of analysis in order to understand how the role of actors is shaped by their beliefs,

values, expertise and prior knowledge in understanding organisational processes, as well as how they come to interpret and act upon them. One set of studies specifically examines principals' responses to external reform demands. For example, Ganon-Shilon and Schechter's (2017, 2018) studies of the implementation of national education reforms in Israel find that principals interpret policy requirements using a sensemaking framework in order to improve their local practices. They cultivate a strong sense of agency which was influenced by their prior knowledge and experience in their role to adapt external demands to local conditions. This was not always the case in a 2021 study of Israeli principals' perceptions of resource allocation autonomy, in the form of individual hours. They find that lack of time and professional guidance were among the challenges the participants faced in their efforts to drive pedagogical innovation in their schools. As a result, they acted as passive sensemakers following the Ministry's reform guidelines, albeit largely drawing upon their prior knowledge and experiences with large-scale national reforms.

In the United States, Spillane et al. (2002) examine the sensemaking of principals within the context of test-based accountability reforms in Chicago. They find that context, professional relationships and participation in networks influenced their responses. In this regard, the enactment of policy might be described as a form of contextualised sensemaking which is situated in the school culture and incorporated with its values, norms and beliefs. Furthermore, sensemaking studies on principals' instructional leadership approaches also highlight the ways in which high-stakes accountability policies may shape instructional decisions (Constantinides, 2021a; Rigby, 2015; Seashore Louis et al., 2012).

Other dimensions of sensemaking were crafted by a range of authors in the wider literature using different lenses, resulting in various interpretations, but somewhat similar connotations of the increasingly complex and uncertain work and professional lives of school principals. Several studies examined the nature of sensemaking in how principals view their roles in times of crisis (Hulme et al., 2021; Stone-Johnson & Miles Weiner, 2020), during shifting views in accountability (Constantinides, 2021a; Reid, 2021; Yurkofsky, 2022), and in relation to professional discretion and autonomy (Day, 2020; Stone-Johnson & Weiner, 2022; Weiner & Woulfin, 2017). For example, Stone-Johnson and Miles Weiner (2020) explored the concept of professionalism to describe how limiting principals' sense of autonomy in making school-level decisions (e.g. curriculum, budgeting, recruitment) resulted in diminishing their feelings of efficacy and job satisfaction. Similarly, Constantinides (2021a) analysed how academy school principals in England made sense of accountability requirements and the extent to which these interpretations had relevance to their contexts. Authority over key decisions about school improvement and policy demands related to curriculum and pedagogy, data monitoring, resource allocation and performance management were interpreted, negotiated and enacted by school leaders to allow for greater local flexibility and innovation.

Because of the variations in the education contexts, making sense of and processing information from the environment is an ongoing process inherent to the complex systems in which schools strive to make a difference. For the purpose of this study, sensemaking is framed as an approach one can take to navigate the dilemmas that emerge in these complex systems. As such, leadership practices and challenges, especially those

related to relationships and authority, are of particular interest to organisational and institutional scholars.

Relatively little is known about the changing role of leadership within the academy school system and how organisational change and innovation efforts are understood within and across the multiple levels of the English education ecology. To capture how school principals understand the complexity of their role within their broader organisational context, this study is guided by the following question: how do academy school principals make sense of their role as they build and sustain productive relationships within and beyond their schools?

## Methods

This article reports on two purposefully selected secondary schools led by principals who (a) showed a demonstrated commitment to create productive professional relationships within and beyond their schools, and (b) pursued high standards of student academic success in an increasingly complex educational environment. The selection allowed for maximum understanding of the individual cases, seeking variation in school location, performance and student composition. It draws on data from a larger research project that investigated the complexities of leadership in the academies and multi-academy trust model in England (Constantinides, 2021b). For the larger study, the sample of school-based leaders included principals that have been in their current posts for more than three years and could recall and reflect upon change processes over time.

Data collection included semi-structured interviews with principals alongside documentary sources through relevant reports such as school development plans, self-evaluations, inspection and peer reviews from network members. Interviews were designed to investigate principals' understandings of their experiences, their role and capacities triggering sensemaking activities and actions. Questions focused on the schools' context, reform priorities and processes, the wider involvement of the school and local community and the nature of collaborative systems. Interviews lasted between 60–90 minutes and were recorded and transcribed. Follow-up interviews were conducted to collect additional information and to clarify information from other respondents or previously obtained documents.

Ethical considerations regarding consent, privacy and confidentiality of data were observed by informing interviewees of the purposes and methods of the research through an introductory letter and a consent form assuring them that all the data obtained would be coded anonymously through the use of pseudonyms, be strictly confidential and non-accessible to others.

Data from both the interview transcripts and documents were analysed through an inductive thematic coding process (Charmaz, 2014). In this sense, the nature of the analytical approach was iterative and continuous. The process involved coding interview data for how principals frame their role and their views on the importance of relationship-building. Considering that context was at the heart of the inquiry, the intention was to investigate interrelationships within the data and among the participants that would reveal patterns of interaction among meanings, actions and messages that principals communicated about their system as an anchor for further decision and actions. These patterns included remarks about

principals' conceptualisations of key events, significant stakeholders (e.g. teachers, executive leaders, parents, etc.) and changes in personal and professional beliefs, values and practices that influenced, and were influenced by, the school and broader policy and social contexts. Participants' narratives reflected their views about change processes in their turbulent environments, but also reflected those aspects of school culture they placed their attention on, valued or ignored in their role as school leaders. School-related documents were also inductively coded for evidence of beliefs and values, as well as material practices. This approach allowed separate aspects of the analysis into the embedded patterns described above.

Steps to establish trustworthiness were taken by triangulating interview data with documentary evidence. Also, member-checking was applied with all the participants, which included sharing the transcripts with the interviewees and asking them to check for accuracy. Pseudonyms are used to keep data confidential and ensure anonymity.

## **Findings**

Schools are complex organisations involving multiple interactions and interrelationships between and among stakeholders, all shaped by a web of environmental factors, strategy systems, structures, resources, and culture that might facilitate or impede strategies for improvement. The following findings reflect this complexity since they are grounded in the daily experiences of principals as they make sense of their role, the practices in which they engage, and the complexities of their relationships with their environments.

### ***Principal and school background***

Thomas has been a principal at Taranaki Falls secondary academy for four years. Previously, he was an interim principal in a nearby school for two years. During his teaching career, he has held various senior leadership posts in other schools over a period of 10 years. He first joined the school while it was rated by the national inspectorate (i.e. Ofsted) as 'inadequate' (lowest on Ofsted's grading system), whereas at the time of the research it was rated as 'requires improvement' following two Ofsted inspections. He recalled not being well prepared as a new principal at his current school and was thankful for the support of the executive leaders (non-school based) of the academy trust (a multi-school organisation). The school is a mixed secondary academy (ages 11–16), with around 1000 pupils on roll, co-sponsored by the academy trust and the local Diocesan Board of Education, serving a community of high deprivation situated in the East of England. The proportion of students from low socio-economic backgrounds and those for whom English is an additional language are above national averages.

Noel has been a principal at Emerald Lakes secondary academy for four years, a co-educational sponsor-led secondary academy in the Midlands with 1400 students on roll rated by Ofsted as 'good'. When he joined the school, he brought his extensive leadership experience with him and was driven by a desire to increase school-level ownership of change and make a difference to student learning in his school. The proportion of students from low

socio-economic backgrounds and students whose first language is not English are below national averages.

### ***Problem-solving and decision-making skills***

Drawing on his experience as an established principal in his current school, Thomas aimed at significantly improving the quality of teaching, especially for the disadvantaged students. He collected relevant information about the use of research evidence in schools and introduced a teaching and learning methodology grounded in the use of evidence-based approaches to inform teaching practices.

At Taranaki Falls, we use the Sutton Trust-Education Endowment Fund (EEF) Teaching and Learning Toolkit, which gives guidance for teachers and schools on how to use their resources to improve the attainment of disadvantaged pupils. This guidance is used alongside other research-based evidence and knowledge of our pupils' individual requirements to select appropriate strategies to support learning.

According to Thomas, teachers were encouraged to share their expertise across the school and to learn from each other wherever possible, but certain pedagogical approaches had a mixed response to how it was received.

We've also used action research-based studies which have had a mix of responses. Some staff get it, some don't see the value of action research.

Despite the engagement of some teachers, this approach as initiated by Thomas suggests that the culture of evidence-based practices still required changes in mindset and attitudes towards knowledge exchange.

Noel drew attention to the limited resources and the restricted budget of his school. While framing the problem, he recognised that among the wide range of his responsibilities as a school leader, he also had to make sure he understood where every development in the school needed to be. However, this paucity of resources appeared to have negative effects on staff motivation and job satisfaction.

The main challenge in my role is finance at the moment. We need to overcome that in order to make better investments and unfortunately this has an effect on the workforce. This contradicts the point that is made to try out and have a happy staff that really want to do their best, but if they think there is a risky redundancy, this might not happen.

To help him come to a decision, personal and professional values were invoked to effectively support and promote teachers' professional learning. He explained that he remained committed to creating a sense of security among teachers by building a healthy and positive school environment.

Noel also explained that distance between schools and therefore travel cost was also an issue in terms of knowledge sharing and accessing rich learning resources to meet teachers' professional needs. Attempting to adapt to these circumstances, Noel saw value in the use of new technologies to help expand the wealth of knowledge resources that teachers and leaders might leverage in their daily practice.



Distance is one of the main issues and therefore cost. Some of the things we have done is to use a lot of technology as best we can to have meetings, share a lot of things electronically and reduce the travel time and travel expenditure.

However, it was difficult to establish whether any potential changes have come from the technology itself or from the interactions between educators using the technology.

### **Trust and agency**

Thomas talked about how the working environment of the school was rooted in a culture of care. In other words, he argued that creating an ethos among teachers that strongly resembles that of the community would lead to school and wider community engagement.

When school staff realised that the focus was on learning conversations, then conversations were about the teachers feeling empowered to be much more reflective and deeply reflect on their own practice and what they can do to be constantly improving the quality of outcomes for their children. But not coming from a place of fear but coming from a place of genuine commitment to improving outcomes and standards for children.

The emphasis on workplace norms demonstrated through the provision of contextual knowledge and ownership in school improvement efforts highlights the role of teacher agency in shaping a culture that fosters trust in the professional abilities of teachers.

Likewise, Noel perceived his strategic role as one that initiates culture-building and staff leadership by focusing on developing professional capacity to improve teaching.

A lot of the strategies are from within the staff and when it comes to our strategic planning and identifying teaching and learning development priorities, that is very much led by the staff within the school, and we identify those as one staff and accomplish these together to improve teaching and learning.

According to Noel, teacher-led activities and frequent teacher interaction would stimulate shared norms that are focused on teaching and learning. In this way, a sense of professional community would entail mutual trust wrapped up in a shared vision for students and the school.

While giving due attention to the creation of the conditions necessary to foster mutual trust, both principals also recognised the need to earn the trust of their teachers. In so doing, a form of distributed leadership that focused on the interactions among leaders and teachers was framed.

The school when I came in was 'inadequate'. We worked very hard over the last 4 years to achieve a 'good' grade. It is not the support; it is the trust. If you have someone above you to trust you and who you can go to and say 'look I've messed up. What should I do?' and you can do that without fear, then you are more likely to be a successful leader. *(Thomas)*

Trusting people to deliver messages and work on your behalf, I think this is something that I have changed where now I have some really key members in my senior team who will go and represent me and the school. And that's very different to when I first started. *(Noel)*

Distributed leadership initiatives appeared to reinforce sensemaking and trust, becoming an embedded cultural element within which cooperation, dialogue and reflection form the foundation for decision-making about school improvement.

## ***Professional relationships***

Relational patterns were perceived by both principals as meaningful and important for their schools and focused on the active engagement of stakeholders within and outside the school promoting high expectations for all. Sensemaking worked by identifying, communicating and processing ideas around collaboration and full exchange of information.

Thomas perceived professional collaboration as an improvement leverage point for building his school system's efficacy grounded in dialogue towards developing learning for meaning and purpose. He believed this would be achieved through opportunities for teachers and leaders to meet as a group in inter-school collaborations.

I think teachers and principals of schools working together, finding ways to maximise their knowledge, wisdom and their skills has got to be a smart approach. Leaders need to be outward facing and need to go find the best and bring it home and make it work.

Noel aspired to foster a learning culture in his school that was enquiry-oriented and teacher-led so that local knowledge would inform decision-making and improvement in collaborative practices. The need for a mindset shift emphasised within-school subject networks.

We have subject networks. For instance, maths is a tough area to work in and for the last three years, the head of maths has worked in collaboration with subject teachers. They share exam results, measures of quality of teaching, they support each other to find solutions. They plan CPD together for each other. I initially insisted on collaborative practice and now it is well embedded, and it has actually been shaped and directed by middle leaders themselves.

Beyond their schools, both principals acknowledged the complex organisational environments in which they were situated, seeking to understand what actors are involved in, communicate and even negotiate with them.

Noel referred to building productive relationships with parents and the local community as partners in the learning futures of their children. He drew on narratives from the most successful English school improvement programme (i.e. London Challenge) to develop school-focused strategies accompanied by efforts to engage the wider community.

I think we are good at parental engagement, the power of getting parents on your side. If you look at the London Challenge, it was about engaging poor families with the schools, and they tried to replicate it and completely failed almost everywhere else. The reason it has failed is that you need to get the whole community on side.

For Thomas, establishing close relations with parents was fundamental in his responsibilities as a principal in an area of high deprivation. He valued the input of parents and strived to ensure that they were getting the support they required to actively participate in school improvement plans.

For start, I am a principal in an area of high deprivation where parents don't engage. So, we do a lot of work with them. For example, we have family learning in the school, we have an active family/parent group. We look for any strategies we can, every year group does an open afternoon every term. We have the usual concert and celebrations. So, we look to get parents involved but also we are trying to help them support their children.

Furthermore, both schools in which the principals worked were operated by an academy trust (a multi-school organisation). The executive leadership model found in many academy trusts often includes a chief executive officer (CEO) surrounded by a team of executive non-school based leaders. One of their leadership/managerial responsibilities is to oversee improvement processes in every school in the trust and hold them accountable for delivering against academic performance targets. Importantly, interactions between the executive leadership team (non-school based) and school leaders were dynamic and in a state of constant flux. Participating principals positioned themselves in different ways.

Thomas described his relationship with the executive team who facilitated and supported his school on its road to improvement as ‘very close’.

The school that I inherited was an institutional failure for a long period of time and now we are not. That’s quite a journey, I suppose with an outside measure. It has been a whole process of change and development and in each of those changes, I really value the interaction with them. I think it has been an improvement.

This reinforced the connection between school improvement plans and the executive leadership team’s plan as Thomas made sense of the expectations for student success in his school.

Noel experienced a different relationship with the executive leaders in his efforts to balance accountability with support. Accountability in this case refers to improvement in students’ outcomes and performance management systems, whereas support includes resources, coaching and mentoring and professional development.

They are focusing on the DfE’s guidelines, and they do that through the connection of numerical data. They are monitoring it and there is accountability but perhaps no way of support.

When asked about the role of executive leadership in developing a supportive atmosphere in his school, he stated:

I suppose we just have a productive relationship. That’s the best I can answer it.

This suggests that executive leaders may emphasise more surface-level aspects of reform initiatives and that it can be challenging to build a sense of internal accountability for all school leaders, especially in light of their interconnected role and work to communicate a widely shared set of purposes through professional relationships with principals. As a result, there was some ambiguity about the principals’ construction and negotiation of meaning from their interactions with executive leaders and the perceived impact of those leaders’ actions on principals’ sensemaking. The contradictory situations described above demonstrate how principals’ situations and social contexts shaped their decisions and actions regarding the ways in which they responded to accountability demands emerging from their institutional and organisational environments.

## Discussion

Findings from this study point to the complexity of sensemaking processes by focusing on school leaders’ cognitions whereby principals construct, make meaning, challenge and

deal with ambiguities in their efforts to understand and interpret their role and relationships between people, their actions, contexts, cultures and environments.

Efforts to change initiatives involved critical engagement with dissonance between different ideas of what participants valued and their understandings across a range of school and leadership practices. More precisely, how principals understood and responded to patterns of cognitive dissonance was critical for understanding organisational dispositions and the readiness of their schools for supporting school improvement. Leadership practices and strategies on which school leaders placed high value were practices that were more likely to be successfully implemented, or at least more likely to be prioritised by teachers in practice. And as such, these highly valued norms and practices as perceived by the participants of the study were more likely to be incorporated as sustained and embedded features of school culture.

In addition, principals' work focused on issues related to interpreting information from within and beyond their school and their academy trust, exploring new alternatives, refining established approaches, and coordinating with ongoing aspects of their situations that included social norms, organisational routines, work rules and processes. What stands out about the challenges experienced by the principals, albeit rather differently, are resource and financial support mechanisms and accountability expectations from their academy trust, as well as external policy demands. The latter were difficult to manage, as in the case of Noel, and underscored the prominence of the principal's role as a facilitator of their own school. This reveals the extensive changes at the top tiers of the academies' leadership/management systems, which have arguably created an air of uncertainty within school and multi-school organisations, as they represent a substantial overturning of the traditional governance system and have introduced new roles, responsibilities and values into the English education system – particularly into the leadership/management structure (Baxter & Jewitt, 2021; Connolly et al., 2017). As noted in other studies, the challenges experienced by school leaders in this article suggest that organising, coordinating and managing their role in ways that quickly generate positive changes is fraught with uncertainty and complexity, and therefore demanding of continuous learning and improvement (Constantinides, 2021a, 2021b; Ganon-Shilon & Schechter, 2018; Meyer & Patuawa, 2020).

Principals also acknowledged that patterns of leadership through top-down mandates and the loosely coupled structure of school systems hinder the kind of collaborative problem-solving that is necessary for improving complex systems such as schools and, by extension, education. They recognised that operating in siloed departments in central offices and schools needs to enable collaborative working and thinking modes within and across organisational levels (Balogun & Johnson, 2005; Jäppinen et al., 2016). To understand the processes involved in solving messy problems, it was important for principals to understand and interpret ambiguous situations and think flexibly in their efforts to articulate the intended outcomes and specific actions of reform work. By these means, both principals used their experiences in their roles to develop professional capacity and increased staffing stability within their schools. This finding is in line with previous research on principals' sensemaking about their role, which suggests that multiple meanings of a similar problem can be made on the basis of their values and beliefs in a specific professional culture (Ganon-Shilon & Schechter, 2018; Slegers et al., 2009; Spillane et al., 2002).

The findings from this study also demonstrate that these principals were highly reflexive and somewhat creative in understanding and interpreting the pressures from their institutional environment. The high degree of interpretive flexibility and improvisation was observed not only in how they made sense of their role expectations and identity within the workplace, but also in how they performed in their role through organisational actions (e.g. performance reviews, meetings with executives and other stakeholders). Their own perceptions of themselves and how they aligned those perceptions to their organisational role and agency required more than understanding their emerging views and practices within their school boundaries. In essence, they were positioned as boundary spanners (DiPaola et al., 2005; Millward & Timperley, 2010) that paid attention to formal organisational structures, their social connections to other organisational members and institutional ideas or logics in the environment about the role of the principal (K. E. Weick & Sutcliffe, 2015; Rigby, 2015).

Finally, findings suggest that principals perceived their school's climate as open and trustful, forming the basis of fostering teachers' professional learning. This organisational factor highlights the significance of sensemaking in developing their motivation and abilities to undertake organisational objectives, as well as in creating and sustaining supportive work settings. This points to trust as a precursor to and moderator of sensemaking, as well as the ways in which leadership distribution might be enacted (Louis et al., 2013). Attention to issues of trust and especially trust in teachers also appeared to influence the ways in which principals made sense of the processes and conditions that would enable themselves, and their teachers, to cultivate high-trust school environments and become vibrant learning communities. That said, the construction and sustaining of trust would be seen as an essential tool for moral agency and ethics when making decisions (Cherkowski et al., 2015). This is also consistent with studies that find that high levels of trust are associated with a wide range of efforts that need coordinated action, collaboration and shared decision-making (Bryk & Schneider, 2002; Cosner, 2009; Tschannen-Moran, 2009). Although trust appeared to be a key factor that contributed to relationship building and communication between the two principals and relevant stakeholders, different patterns of interaction were identified among school-executive leadership levels. Navigating the complexity of the relationship between executive leaders and school-based leaders indicates the significance of trust in developing cultures, systems and support for collective learning within and across school communities in the standards and accountability era (Armstrong et al., 2018; Kofman & Senge, 1995).

## Limitations and future research

This article has some limitations. Its purpose is limited to two secondary schools operated by a multi-school organisation with a focus on school principals. It does not seek to generalise to all principals in the academy trust or all the trusts in the country. Also, less attention was given to the dynamics of collective interpretations of the demands for leading schools in a rapidly changing environment. As a result, it cannot capture experiences of collective sensemaking processes through principals' interactions with teachers or executive leaders and explore how their actions might influence principals' sensemaking and their behaviour towards school and system reform initiatives.

The usefulness of future-oriented collective sensemaking strategies to facilitate change may be used in future studies that focus on principal identity and explore the ways in which sensemaking influences personal and professional agency. A future research agenda also deserves attention to formal organisational structures, their connections between different levels of the school system, and institutional logics (and forms) in the environment. In this way, future investigations would benefit from better understanding of the ways in which school principals shape professional identity and enact practices in coupling instructional reform efforts with changes in classroom and school-level work.

## Conclusion

This article argues that examining the sensemaking of school principals provides valuable insight into the processes that may lead to sustainable professional relationships, rather than examining the relationships themselves. It contributes to contemporary discourses on school leadership by investigating the multifaceted nature of sensemaking and the ways in which this process influences one's actions.

The use of this framework provides a micro-level understanding of how school leaders make sense of, interpret and shape their role in their daily work. In short, the sensemaking framework may be understood as an entry point for elucidating school leaders' agency. Such agency is modelled on the underlying micro-processes whereby leaders construct, make meaning and negotiate tensions and contradictions in their efforts to understand and navigate the dilemmas that arise in their environments.

Principals have a crucial role in shaping opportunities for sensemaking and organisational change, since their formal position of authority determines organisational conditions in which sensemaking occurs. This involves structures, cultures and resource allocation to any change activity. Nonetheless, one finding is clear on demands for change in educational leadership: change is complex, messy and unpredictable (Fullan, 2015; R. F. Elmore, 2004). Among the wide range of responsibilities assumed by school leaders, making sense of this complex, messy and unpredictable process might be best portrayed as a disruption that strikes schools as complex systems and the ways in which actors respond to that disruption.

While school principals are not exclusively responsible for disrupting organisational norms to support openness to change, they need to see their system as a whole and recognise their responsibility to lead change that contributes to improved outcomes for the whole, not just some of its parts. Putting small pieces together, rather than taking them apart, allows actors to see connections, relationships and patterns or interaction. Improvement efforts at whole system levels require collective or collaborative participation that re-evaluates organisational norms and objectives by drawing on knowledge mobilisation, tools and methods to guide organisational actors to achieve desired outcomes in their context.

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