

Making the Mission Matter: Exploring the Novice School Leader's Sense Making  
A Qualitative Action Research Study

by

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## ABSTRACT

A principal's journey to leading an effective school is paved with many winding roads with different choices of which path to take. The number of challenges a principal can experience daily is astronomical and overwhelming, especially for a novice principal learning the trade. With all the different voices and influences coming at the leadership of a school, the principal needs a guiding light to lead the school in the same direction towards the success of all. Lezotte and Snyder (2011) describe seven strategies to creating a successful school, one of which, the school mission, became the focus of this research. This study set out to explore the sense-making process and experiences of a novice principal as they worked to keep the mission central. This qualitative action research study focused on a novice principal's sense making processes related to leadership experiences considering the school's mission. The author served as that novice principal in this study and tracked reflections, sense making and experiences across a three-month journaling period. Results indicated that the school mission played a significant role in the sense-making process of a novice principal, regardless of the type of experience at hand such as personnel decisions, professional learning communities and collaboration, as well as instruction and student learning. In addition, the study showed that keeping the mission central during the sense-making process allowed for the novice principal to move in a direction that was consistent and allowed the "noise" of the world of education to be quieted to remain focused on the task at hand: educating all. The study results found that additional research needs to be conducted on school mission and its direct connection to student achievement and school outcomes.

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## Definition of Terms

The study presents multiple terms within it that pertain to effective schools related to mission and novice-principal decision making. These terms are significant to understand the content presented by the researcher as it relates to decision-making through the lens of the school mission.

*Mission Statement: defines the school and tells us the direction toward which it is oriented (Kaffle, 2015, p. 15).*

*Vision: is an articulation not of purpose, but of a preferred future for the organization (Gurley et al, 2015, p. 6-7).*

*Effective schools: incorporate the following 7 correlates: clear school mission, high expectations for success, instructional leadership, opportunity to learn and time on task, safe and orderly environment, positive home-school relations, and frequent monitoring of student progress Lezotte and Snyder (2011).*

*Sense-making: “we treat sensemaking not as an event but as an on-going process. Individuals pay attention when something in their surroundings does not fit with their usual routines and use their experience to find patterns that help to explain new situations” (Louis et. al, 2009, p. 3).*

*Acquisition: “to come to have as a new or added characteristic, trait, or ability” (Meriam-Webster, 2024).*

*Interpretation: “occurs retroactively, after events occur unexpectedly, requiring information retrieval, stories or narratives, and pattern-identification to occur as a means of discovering what went wrong and why” (Turner, et al., 2023, p. 20).*

*Understanding: “involves agents theorizing and making inferences based on observations and experiments” (Turner, et al., 2023, p. 19).*

*Action: “ascribing meaning to” (Turner, et al., 2023, p. 19).*

# CHAPTER I

## INTRODUCTION

### Overview

In the ever-increasing high-stakes world of education, principals are tasked with excellence for all rooted in high-stakes testing and accountability. While those factors alone are enough to derail the daily goal of learning for all due to stress and pressure, there are also outside factors influencing principals and their actions daily such as parents, community members and central office staff (Calabrese & Zepeda, 1999, Wong et. al, 2020, and Findlay, 2015). With all these factors at play, a principal's goal is to establish and sustain an effective school. An effective school is one that Lezotte and Snyder (2011) say requires the creation and commitment to a clear and focused school mission: “In the effective school, there is a clearly articulated mission of the school through which the staff shares an understanding of and a commitment to the school’s goals, priorities, assessment procedures and accountability.” (Lezotte, 2001, p. 4-5). The effectiveness of a mission for various organizations across both for-profit and non-profit sectors has long been documented (Drucker, 1989, Spillane et al, 2015). Thus, it is imperative that leaders, especially school principals, work to communicate this mission to those they are leading: “any (mission) is useless unless the principal understands how to make decisions that lead to the fulfillment of the (mission). A right (mission) guided by poor decision-making leads to an abyss (Calabrese & Zepeda, 1999, p.11).

We are often reminded in research that “an effective principal is the key to a successful school” (Stronge & XuXu, 2021, p. ix). However, for a principal to be deemed effective, a factor that becomes essential is the ability not only to establish a mission statement but to clearly

articulate this mission statement to the staff through their decisions and actions. “These decisions, over time, communicate a vision. These decisions implement a mission” (Calabrese & Zepeda, 1999, p.8). Throughout this process, Schmoker notes that “clarity precedes competence” (2004, p. 85). Therefore, it becomes essential that the effective principal be focused on the issue of clarity for their staff as communicated through their school mission and daily actions taken that are aligned to that mission. By “starting with the mission...it creates a disciplined organization...it alone can prevent the most common degenerative disease of organizations...rather than concentrating them on a very small number of productive efforts” (Drucker, P. F. 1989, p. 89).

While the outside world continues to bombard the school and the school principal with suggestions around what might be best for the school, it has been made clear that “a well-defined mission shapes the culture of the school” (Lezotte, 2011, p. 68), and with that well-defined mission, the effective principal can take action that will lead their staff to a culture of success.

### **Statement of the Problem**

In addition to a clear school mission being an essential ingredient for a highly effective school, novice principals can often be overwhelmed by the volume and diversity of the tasks at hand, and a clear mission can help prioritize these tasks (Spillane, 2014). As the novice principal begins their new role, they can understand the scope of their role through the sense-making process. Sense-making is defined as being “concerned with the construction of new meanings that strengthen new ways of organizing and understanding” (Ganon-Shilon & Schechter, 2017, p.686).

Novice principals are not only working through the sense-making process to learn their new role, but they are also tasked with a large number of daily tasks and expected actions that will continue or change the trajectory of the existing school. Because the job of a principal is so substantial, “new principals frequently have difficulty managing and prioritizing the multiple tasks expected of them” (Spillane & Lee, 2014, p. 433). Therefore, it is going to be essential that a novice principal utilizes the school mission to help them prioritize the tasks at hand.

### **Purpose of the Study**

As novice principals assume the role of total responsibility (Spillane 2014), the daily experiences encompass a “large number of disconnected tasks” therefore, they “struggle to manage their time and priorities” (Spillane & Lee, 2014, p. 436). Because of this, it is essential that the actions taken by the novice principal be rooted in the school's mission. Eaker et al solidifies the importance of this by saying, “a school’s mission communicates in what direction each staff member needs to be heading” (2021, p.54). Without a clear and focused mission, the tasks at hand will pull the novice principal in many different directions, distracting them from driving towards the true north of the school.

Therefore, the purpose of this action research study is to examine the sense-making process of a novice principal as they experience situations that are challenging as well as the role the school mission played throughout that process. As I begin this role as a novice principal and begin to make sense of my new experiences, I will take both past experiences and current information to act. These actions have the potential to be disconnected and drive the school in different directions if not firmly rooted in the clarity of the school mission.

## **Research Questions**

Two specific research questions will be used to guide this study:

1. In what ways do I make sense of experiences as a novice principal?
2. What role does mission play in my sense-making process?

## **Significance of the Study**

The reason for the importance of actions rooted in mission statement, that creates a common target for both the principal and school staff, is solidified in the work of Lezotte and Snyder (2011) who remind us that, “generally speaking, educators tend to make huge untested assumptions that all the adults working in a school have a common understanding of the mission and a shared set of core values and beliefs” (p. 65). Principals can combat this potential downfall by working toward the historic business model of, “strategic planning” where experts have, “identified the value of mission statements as a key element in defining organizational purpose” (Gurley, et al, 2015, p.19). Through this understanding, a novice school principal can work to build strong decision-making skills through the lens of the school mission.

This study aims to provide insight into my experiences as a novice principal as I begin to make sense of my new role and work to take actions rooted in the school's mission. The journal prompts and subsequent entries will provide an inside perspective on the experience of myself as a novice principal as I work to combat the many factors at play to maintain a successful school. One implication of this study is the possibility of adding current research to include school mission as a key factor to principal and school’s success.

## **Research Plan**

The research plan for this qualitative action research study was to examine the experiences of myself as a novice principal as I worked through the sense-making process, attempting to keep the mission central. The research study began, and continued throughout, with journal prompts that guided my reflection after specific experiences within my role as principal. The journal prompts focused on challenges experienced, reflections on how I made sense of the problem or challenge faced, the possible solutions I explored, which action I decided to take and how the school mission played a part in making sense and arriving the action taken.

The journal prompts served as a guide to reveal thoughts, ideas and experiences that are not always evident to those from the outside looking in, and sometimes even evident to myself. Therefore, subjective judgements were required to allow these ideas to become evident throughout the study (Hatch, 2002). My journal entries followed specific experiences where my sense-making was rooted in the mission and was important to the success of the school. I completed these reflections after experiences such as Professional Learning Communities (PLC), faculty meetings, personnel decisions, instructional decisions and instructional meetings.

Once these experiences were reflected in the journal prompts, the data was transcribed and corrected for errors. At that time, I engaged in a two-cycle coding process that Saldana (2013) defines. Cycle one coding included two rounds of coding: in Vivo and descriptive coding. I completed the second cycle of the coding process with the discovery of themes and categories through the process of descriptive and then pattern coding (Saldana, 2013). Throughout this process, I utilized a critical friend (Shenton, 2004) to establish trustworthiness and ensure that

multiple perspectives had input on the reflective data from the journal entries as well as the categories and themes discovered.

## **Conclusion**

An effective school leader must work to take the entire staff and point them in the same direction: high levels of learning for all. To do this, the use of a clear and focused mission has been proven to be effective (Lezotte & Snyder, 2011). As a novice principal begins their new journey, they are faced “with the large number of disconnected tasks that accompany the role... and (they) struggle to manage their time and priorities” (Spillane & Lee, 2014, p. 436). Therefore, it becomes the central piece of the puzzle to create and sustain a school mission that allows the principal to focus their actions and even at times say no to the outside factors, pulling them away from the task at hand.

“Principals chart a direction and influence others to stay the course to meet organizational goals” (Stronge, 2014, p. 5), making the school principal an essential part of the school’s success. As the novice principal works to make sense of their new role, they are bombarded by outside noise. The school mission can help them take sound action that will keep them moving in the direction in which they began and to meet the target they have set out to hit. While “these issues of mission and values seem abstract, in reality, there is little that is more practical and vital to real, lasting school improvement than this visioning role of the principal” (Stronge, 2014, p. 7).

The following chapters include background research relevant to the study and the methodology that was followed for the research study's duration. Chapter 2 will provide an overview of effective schools and effective school leaders as it relates to mission statements,

novice principal sense-making as well as novice principal decisions and actions. Chapter 3 will provide a detailed explanation for the steps that will be followed to complete the research study using a qualitative action research approach to analyze findings collected from journal entries by me as the study's sole participant.

## **Chapter II**

### **Review of Literature**

#### **Introduction**

Highly effective schools are composed of several interdependent subsystems. Bryk et al (2010) argue that these subsystems are interlocking and work in concert. These subsystems include professional capacity, school learning climate, dynamics of student learning, instructional guidance, and parent, school, and community ties. Another framework for effective schools was developed by Lezotte and Snyder, which focused on similar interrelated correlates. The seven correlates in the framework include: clear school mission, high expectations for success, instructional leadership, opportunity to learn and time on task, safe and orderly environment, positive home-school relations, and frequent monitoring of student progress (Lezotte and Snyder (2011). While each of these attributes contribute to the effectiveness of a school, the first correlate of a clear school mission can be seen as the driver for the remaining six.

A school where every member is aiming for the same target mimics the work of a group of horses all pulling a wagon in the same direction. If these same horses were all pulling, but were all facing different directions, “the team will go nowhere even though the same potential “horsepower” is available. Maximum output from the team happens only when all the horses are pulling the wagon in the same direction. So, it is with the members of the school community” (Lezotte & Snyder 2011, p. 65). Eaker, et al, echo this idea by saying that, “a school’s mission communicates in what direction each staff member needs to be heading” (2021, p. 54).

As the culture of a school begins to form, it is defined by the mission statement created by its members (Lezotte and Snyder 2011). The mission statement must receive time, attention and discussion as it is driving every move within the walls of the school building (Lezotte and Snyder 2011). As schools learn from the research out of Chicago Public Schools, their “success is no ghost victory. Their measures matched the mission” (Heath, 2020, p. 168).

School success does not happen by accident. Successful schools happen with intentional and deliberate “commitment to the school’s goals, priorities, assessment procedures and accountability” (Lezotte and Snyder, 2001, p. 4-5). As Bryk (2010) notes, “thoughtfulness must guide the choice among potential competing initiatives, to eliminate those that may take attention away from core improvement priorities” (Bryk, 2010, p. 63), as schools work towards the success of everyone they serve.

Thus, this literature review establishes a foundation for the application of a staple from the business domain: the mission statement as an organization driver within the context of a public school. Throughout this chapter, the ideas around effective schools, effective school leaders, and the professional learning community as it relates to effective schools will be reviewed all while the impact of an enacted school mission is being kept central. In addition, special attention will be paid to the theories of a novice principal around sense-making as it related to the school mission.

### **Mission and Vision Defined**

While having a clear and focused mission “is a statement of what business your school is about” (Lezotte and Snyder, 2011, p.65), there is often confusion between the word “mission” and the word “vision” as it relates to guiding the coalition of a school desiring success.

According to Kaffle (2015), a mission statement “defines the school and tell us the direction toward which it is oriented” (p. 15). Dufour, Dufour and Eaker (2008) build on that definition, adding that a mission statement is “stating the business of our business” and helps us to answer the question of “why do we exist?” (p. 58). A mission statement guides a team of people working toward a common goal. It names the target for which each person should be aimed and shooting towards every day they come to work.

However, a vision statement, “is an articulation not of purpose, but of a preferred future for the organization” (Gurley, Peters, Collins, and Fifolt, 2015, p. 6-7). When one thinks of a vision, it should quickly be replaced with a picture of their future, a picture of the accomplished daily mission. Hellinger and Heck (2001) say that “a vision, by its nature is a source of inspiration for one’s life work. It is not by nature measurable or bound to a timeline. It draws its power as a well-spring of personal motivation that can act as a catalyst to action for oneself and potentially for others” (p.6). When looking at a vision, an organization or a school is looking long-term. They are working towards something bigger than themselves over an extended time period. Mission, however, is orienting the team is orienting themselves for their daily work. They are looking at the goals they have set that guide the daily, on-the-groundwork that reminds them of the direction for every step they take.

Mission statements can often be confused with the idea of a vision statement within the school and business community. While a vision defines the futuristic mindset of an organization, the mission is the daily path an organization follows as they work towards a common goal. Lezotte and Snyder (2011) remind school leaders that “effective schools use the mission as a guide for every policy, program, and practice that is adopted and implemented” (p. 74). For the purposes of this literature review, the definition of a mission statement I will be utilizing is as

Kaffle (2015) states it by saying that a mission statement “defines the school and tell us the direction toward which it is oriented” (p. 15).

### **The History of Mission Statements**

While mission statements are an integral piece of a successful school, mission statements did not get their footing in education and the non-profit world but in the for-profit world of business. Staples and Black (1984) state that “the preparation of a company’s mission statement is one of the most critical and fundamental components of the strategic planning process” (p.36). As the organization of a school system seeks to improve upon the goal of student success, they can learn from the for-profit sector that tells them: “the initial step is the definition of the company’s mission and management philosophy. The statement of mission and operating philosophy will basically define the types of business ventures, both product and market, which a company will pursue” (Staples and Black, 1984, p. 33). The mission agreed upon by the members of the learning community will help them determine the daily steps they are taking towards the common, agreed upon goal defined in their mission statement. While they are working to define this mission statement, they might heed the advice of Hellinger and Heck (2001) that states: “in successful companies, the mission is broadly defined, allowing room for innovation within a general framework” (p. 15). Leaving room for growth, feedback, and change will allow for the success of the mission statement as the school organization grows and changes over time.

Mission statements have been long-standing in productive companies outside of the world of education. While education is a “not for profit” organization, one can still gather insight from successful companies that note, “the purpose of defining your business mission is to specify the purpose of the company and to provide direction for those who work in the organization”

(Staples and Black, 1984, p. 38). A clear direction and target help the members of any organization align and drive in the same direction each day, ensuring success for all their stakeholders. While this model is effective in the for-profit world, and there are many educational researchers in favor of this same model, Moore (2000) says “the organizational strategy developed in the business world is not a frame that can be easily carried over into the public world of nonprofits, and that leaders of these organizations would be better served by adopting a different model altogether” (p. 186). While the idea of a clear and focused mission is one that Lezotte and Snyder (2011) coin as a requirement for highly effective schools, leaders should take caution about the subtle differences in the for-profit and the not-for-profit motivations within an organization as they model their mission statement process after theirs.

While education is worlds apart from a for-profit company, with different goals and motivations at its core, Coyle (2018) reminds leaders that “the commitment model focused on developing a group with shared values and strong emotional bonds...the commitment model consistently led to the highest rates of success” (p. 21). Braun et al (2012) seconds that idea and reminds educators that “mission statements are not exclusively a tool for for-profit organizations but relevant for not-for-profit organizations (like education institutions, membership associations or non-government organizations, too)” (p. 430). While there are some cautions to the subtle differences, research supports the use of mission statements as a means to establish an effective school.

### **Mission Statement’s Move into Schools**

As for-profit companies and their history have paved the way, not-for-profit organizations such as schools can begin to understand that “the mission defines the value that a nonprofit or government organization is trying to produce or achieve, the mission becomes

terribly important in such an organization” (Moore, 2000, p. 194). This importance helps to create an environment where each teacher and staff member is working towards a common goal through the “unity of purpose, or mission, within an organization (that) provides a means by which organizational members can work together toward a common set of objectives” (Gurley, et al., 2015, p.2). As Dufour et al. (2008) reminds us, collaboration is one of the most important keys to a successful school, and that collaboration cannot be attained if the members of the team are aiming for different targets with each daily decision.

Collaboration, the act of working with another person or group to produce a product or meet a goal, is an essential ingredient to success in an effective school. For decades, teachers have worked in isolation, but “collaboration represents the systematic process in which teachers work together interdependently in order to impact their classroom practice in ways that will lead to better results for their students, for their team and for their school” (DuFour, R., DuFour, R. B., Eaker, R. E., Many, T. W., & Mattos, M., 2020 p. 12). As schools work to improve and become highly effective, there is a wide range of information and knowledge to be gained from the world outside of education. Gurley, et al (2015) warns that a “lack of unity in defining a shared mission may result in a breakdown of mutual understanding of the primary purpose for the school’s existence and eventually lead to fragmentation of effort among organizational actors” (p. 6). The collaborative team must have a shared mission to ensure they are working together towards the same goal, and it is the job of the leadership within the school organization to remind the members of the team that “nonprofits are, of course, still dedicated to "doing good," but they also realize that good intentions are no substitute for organization and leadership, for accountability, performance, and results. Those require management and that, in turn, begins with the organization's mission” (Drucker, P. F. 1989, p. 89).

### *The School Mission's Impact on Student Learning*

The school mission is more than a macro-organization tool for a school. It is also a key driver of student learning at the classroom, micro level. As schools work tirelessly to impact student learning and growth, “lacking a mission can impact student learning... idiosyncratic expectations for student performance within and across grade levels, and incoherence between the regular and the supplemental instructional program can all weaken student’s overall learning” (Bryk, 2010, p. 51). Because of this, “educators must be willing to transparently communicate their commitment to students as it relates to their stated mission and challenge one another to live up to that commitment” (Lezotte and Snyder, 2011, p. 28). The mission is something that should be articulated and communicated from the leadership to the seats of the classroom. While it is important that teachers and stakeholders clarify the classroom's daily goal, that same level importance lies with the students for which the goal was created to impact the success of each student in the school.

Teacher clarity around a topic or idea means to provide teachers and staff with a clear understanding to arrive at a common goal. Schmoker (2004) says “clarity precedes competence” (p. 85), which means to do something successfully, one must first have clarity around the goal and target at which is being aimed. A collaborative team of teachers that has complete clarity around a common goal, will be able to make decisions that will positively impact their student’s success because they are not wasting time wondering in which direction, they should be driving the ship of their classroom. As they work collaboratively with their team through a common mission, they are bound together and motivated in their work. “The most deeply motivated people—not to mention those that are most productive and satisfied—hitch their desires to a cause larger than themselves... Nothing bonds a team like a shared mission. The more people

that share a common cause... the more your group will do deeply satisfying and outstanding work” (Pink, 2011, pp. 131, 174).

### ***The School Mission and the School Community***

While these mission statements dictate the daily happenings within the walls of the school building, they should also, “bring organizational stakeholders together to share in a common understanding of and commitment to the school’s purpose, preferred future, behavioral expectations, and next steps toward school improvement and increased levels of student learning” (Gurley, et al, 2015, p. 9). The mission of the schoolhouse is not just a mission that impacts those within its walls, instead “the mission of a nonprofit or governmental organization defines the value that the organization intends to produce for its stakeholders and for society at large” (Moore, 2000, p.190). While we understand that the mission statement being lived out on the inside of the school building is essential, “if the principal creates, cultivates and sustains partnerships with outside agencies and constituents to support the school’s mission and vision, then the entire community will unite in its efforts to maximize student success” (Hall Childs-Bowen, Cunningham-Morris, Pajardo, and Simeral, 2016, p. 84).

As educators work towards the mission of the school in which they work, they are reminded that a “mission statement articulates what is distinctive about the organization in ways that clarify the agency's contributions to a larger policy domain and mobilize external stakeholder support by showing how agency effort helps to achieve shared goals.” (Weiss, 199, p.4-5). While teachers begin to align their work to a common goal that will reach far outside the four walls of their classrooms, they are reminded that “the power of a mission lies in the motivational force of engaging in a shared quest to accomplish something special, not just in having a productivity target,” (Hellinger and Heck, 2001, p. 11).

## **An Effective School Leader**

As reviewed, the school mission can greatly impact student learning, which is the primary goal of effective school leaders. These leaders want each of their teachers to improve student learning and school improvement daily. While there are many avenues to take that will improve student learning, the “implementation of a school's mission puts actions to words to ensure school improvement initiatives are implemented” (Craft et al 2009, p. 1). Likewise, Stronge (2021) notes that “effective principals demonstrate an ongoing concern with schoolwide vision, purpose, mission and goals while constantly working to motivate constituents to accept and commit to school improvement and success” (p.5). Without the clarity of a mission statement, it stands to reason that the group of individuals aiming to work collaboratively for all students to learn might miss the mark as they all interpret the goal through their own lens and experiences. Therefore, it is the responsibility of an effective leader to “foster the success of all students by facilitating the development, communication, implementation and evaluation of a shared vision of learning that reflects excellence” (Stronge, 2021, p. 5).

The mission and the clarity it provides should be the focus of every school leader within each of their conversations with their staff. From conversations around decisions made for resources being purchased that support learning to the moment “when a principal sits down with a faculty member to talk about a lesson observed, she may bring up the mission and how the lesson connects to that mission” (Lunenburg, 2010, p. 6). The mission is the rock on which the school leader can stand when making sense of their experiences and when making decisions that will positively impact student learning, even if that decision is to say “no” to an initiative that is being expected that aligns outside of the school’s mission. It is a quality of an effective leader to, “steward the (mission) and fend off distractions when things get in the way of accomplishing

priorities” (Stronge, 2021, p. 6). The effective leader’s main role is as instructional leader of their school and their every day actions should be that of priority around student achievement and best practices around instruction in the classroom (Stronge, 2021).

### ***An Effective School Leader Builds Trust***

While a clear and focused mission is an essential element to a successful school, one must first begin by building trust among the team leading the charge. An effective leader is aware that the teachers and staff they lead come to the table with their own “web of belief” (Feldman, 2019). Leaders use this information in an important way as they use their skills to build trust (Coyle, 2018). Building trust with the teachers on any school team is rooted in creating what Coyle (2018) calls psychological safety. As a school culture is built, it is crucial to recall that, “safety is the foundation on which strong culture is built” (Coyle, 2018, p. 6), therefore, effective leaders spend ample amounts of time sending signals of belonging to each individual teammate. “Words are noise” as, “it depends on my behavior” (Coyle, 2018, p. 15), so working to build moments of intentional vulnerability between administration and the team is critical for success. As leaders strive to build a strong foundation, they are reminded to take root in the idea that, “mission statements are created to represent organizational values and guide the actions of schools” (Craft, Slate, and Bustamante, 2009, p. 2).

An effective way to begin to build trust is to focus on the creation of team norms as, “teams benefit not only from clarity regarding the purpose of their collaboration but also from clarity regarding how they will work together and what is expected of each member” (Dufour, et al, 2020, p 72). Dufour, et al (2020) reminds us, “teams increase their likelihood of performing at high levels when they clarify their expectations of one another regarding procedures, responsibilities, and relationships” (p. 72), so the time spent with developing norms and

upholding them is crucial for the success of any school organization, especially as they move towards the establishment and implementation of a school mission.

Building trust comes from creating a culture of vulnerability which is a critical component within a successful, collaborative school. “Science shows that when it comes to creating cooperation, vulnerability is not a risk but a psychological requirement” (Coyle 2018, p.111). A strong leader builds this vulnerability as the principal of the school by creating a safe space to share as one listens to the concerns of the people they are serving (Coyle 2018). By creating purpose behind their work, as one combines their skills to fit into the greater mission of the school, a leader can create a strong direction for the school (Salas, 2006). One is reminded, “high purpose environments are filled with small, vivid signals designed to create a link between the present moment and future ideal” (Coyle, 2018, p. 180), and the signal of listening is one that goes a long way as the teachers are given a voice and input as the school mission is created from those with their boots on the ground.

### ***An Effective Leader and the Professional Learning Community***

While it has been made clear that the effective leader leads with mission in the center, they must also work diligently to ensure the deep understanding of the work of a Professional Learning Community (PLC) to run an effective and successful school. A PLC is defined as, “an ongoing process in which educators work collaboratively in recurring cycles of collective inquiry and action research to achieve better results for the students they serve” (Defour, et. al, 2020, p. 10). If the leader is expecting their teachers and staff to be committed and aim towards the same mission through the work of the PLC, “leaders must have a deep knowledge of the work they are requiring others to do. Nothing can lead a school off the path more quickly than a leader who doesn’t exactly understand the why, the what and the how him or herself” (Eaker, R. E.,

Hagadone, M., Keating, J., & Rhoades, M. 2021, p. 18). As the teams begin to understand the work and commit to the mission of the school, “we realized the success of each school’s teacher collaborative team depends on the skill and knowledge of the building principal” (Eaker, R. E., Hagadone, M., Keating, J., & Rhoades, M. 2021, p. 50). The knowledge and understanding that the building principal has around concepts, such as the work of the PLC, that create effective schools is essential to the school’s success as we know, “if a principal doesn’t understand the PLC concepts, he or she will botch leading the PLC, making it difficult for teacher teams to do this important work, and the work will never be deeply and effectively embedded schoolwide” (Eaker, R. E., Hagadone, M., Keating, J., & Rhoades, M. 2021, p. 3). The leader then takes that knowledge that they have deeply studied and takes steps to share that knowledge with the staff through the work of collaborative teams. As the leader builds the shared knowledge of the staff they are leading, they must provide clarity, through the school mission, on what they hold ‘loose and tight’ (Dufour, et al., 2020) within the expectations of the school. Expectations that are held tightly, will allow for the principal to root deeply in the mission as actions are carried out. It is through the process of the PLC: a focus on learning, a collaborative culture and a focus on results (Dufour, et al., 2020) that the mission is lived out through the actions of both the leader and the staff.

While a mission statement is of the utmost importance when making decisions at every level of the school building, there has been, “no correlation between the presence of a written mission statement, or even the wording of a mission statement and a school’s effectiveness as a PLC. The words of a mission statement are not worth the paper they are written on unless people begin to DO differently” (Dufour, et. Al, 2020, p .34) The actions of each team member must be

directly tied to the mission of the school for that mission to be attained. Coyle (2018) goes so far as to say that:

They're just words. This is not how we normally think. Normally, we think words matter; we think that group performance correlates with its members' verbal intelligence and their ability to construct and communicate complex ideas. But that assumption is wrong. Words are noise. Group performance depends on behavior (p.15).

If the words are written on the paper or even displayed on the walls of the school, the impact will be for naught if the actions of the people inside those walls are disconnected, disjointed, and shooting for all different targets. Gurley et. al (2015) reminds educators that “perhaps school personnel who fail to achieve desired success in effecting change may be informed by reflecting on the possibility that school leaders, and the people they lead, suffer from a lack of understanding, articulation, unity, and shared commitment to the mission, vision, values, and goals of their organization” (p. 22). The words matter; but the clarity, understanding and the actions that follow are where the true impact of a mission lie.

### ***An Effective Leader and the School Mission***

As leaders work to take the first step to build a strong foundation of trust as well as establish the work of the PLC, one should not forget to reiterate the why behind what each one is working towards every day. Eaker et. al (2021) remind us, “the why is the cornerstone of aligning the work in a PLC; every major step on the school improvement journey requires reminders of the why” (p. 5). Effective leaders know the importance of the work to build the why is rooted in the fact that, “without purpose, the rationale for decision making becomes subjective and disconnected from the goals and objectives trying to be achieved. (Horwath, R., & Drucker,

P. 2005, p. 1). Effective school leaders know the purpose of establishing the direction of the school allows for all the members to be working towards the same aim, but in addition, “defining these elements also forces you to decide what not to do, one of the key characteristics of strategic thinking” (Horwath, R., & Drucker, P. 2005 p.2). At every turn, there are often many different initiatives thrown not only at school leaders, but also classroom teachers. A strong school leader takes the time to develop their why, the mission, and root it deeply in the actions of the school. This is done so their staff can make on the spot decisions where they might say no to certain things as they are not in line with the mission of the school organization. “An effective school has a principal who build among the faculty and staff a sense of autonomy, competence and relatedness to the (mission)” (Stronge, 2021, p. 7). As the leader works to establish the work of the school through the mission, they are reminded that, “a clearly defined mission will foster innovative ideas and help others understand why they need to be implemented” (Drucker, P. F. 1989, p 90). An effective school leader creates buy-in to the mission of the school through these avenues that allow for the staff to feel seen and understood, therefore commit to the hard-work of education.

While the importance of a clear and concise mission statement has been coined as a key to a successful school (Lezotte and Snyder 2011), creating a mission that everyone can agree on and work towards is a complicated and personal journey that leaders must have a skill to create. It is imperative that the school leader work through the important process of including their staff and all the voices and opinions as the mission statement is being formed. Lezotte and Snyder (2011) guide leaders to understand, “the challenge for the effective school is first to reach clarity and consensus on the mission, core values and beliefs, and second, to develop ongoing processes that ensure that the school and its staff don’t drift off in different directions” (p. 67). A mission

statement cannot simply be told to a group of people and expected to be followed. Those people must be included in the creation and modification of the mission statement as the work is lived out. As Gurley, et al (2015) says, “the process of articulating a clear and concise mission statement is imperative to solidify a shared understanding of what the primary work of the school actually is. Without careful examination, discussion, articulation, and clarification of the school mission, educational professionals who work together closely daily may interpret their purpose very differently, each assuming a different reason for why they do the work that they do” (p. 6). While leaders might assume that all the educators in their building are there for the common purpose of educating children, they would be amiss not to define the specific work those educators are doing every single day that impacts student learning.

### **Effective Schools, Effective School Leaders and the School Mission**

An effective school is built on the foundation of a strong mission that is kept central along with shared knowledge, and vulnerability-based trust (DuFour et al. 2020, Lezotte & Snyder 2011, Coyle 2018). An effective leader should build shared knowledge by allowing, “all staff members to have access to the same information, which increases the likelihood that they will arrive at similar conclusions” (Dufour, Dufour, Eaker, Many & Mattos, 2020, p. 28). It is essential to focus on “building consensus (which) requires conversations not presentation, dialogue not monologue” (Dufour, et al. 2020, p. 6), therefore, an effective leader will be sure to bring each member’s voice, talent, and years of experience to the table as they work to build the mission and goal of educating all. “Clarity precedes competence” (Schmoker, 2004, p. 85), which means to do something successfully, we must first have clarity around the goal and target at which is being aimed, therefore having the mission and goal in mind is where an effective leader should begin.

According to Drucker, “a fundamental responsibility of leadership is to make sure that everybody knows the mission, understands it and lives it” (2008 p.3), making it a required skill of an effective leader to clearly communicate and live out the school mission. It is likely believed that all educators come to work each day with the same purpose in mind, however, “it’s also one of the most overlooked parts of strategy development, as everyone assumes they are working toward the same purpose” (Horwath, R., & Drucker, P. 2005, p.2). It is the responsibility of the school leader to remind everyone, every day, that, “the mission... directs you to do the right things now and into the future so that everyone in the organization can say, “what I am doing contributes to the goal”” (Drucker, P. F., 2008 p.3).

Far too often, the goal of the school leader gets lost in translation as it travels to the ground floor. Cuban (1984) likens these efforts within education to a hurricane; while the storm rages at the top, the ocean floor is calm and unaware the storm is even happening. The ideas that begin at the top, often even with principals, do not always make it the ground floor, the classroom, to impact daily practices. However, if an effective school leader along with the voices of the staff creates a “clear meaningful mission statement (it) can aid in efforts to successfully implement strategies. A communication breakdown often occurs between strategy formulators and strategy implementors; a well written mission statement can enhance mutual understanding between these two groups of individuals” (Cochran & David, 1986, p. 110). It is through this mission statement that all members of the school will have a clear understanding of what they are doing daily as they work with students, and they will be able to block the noise of outside reform efforts trying to pull them in multiple directions each day.

## **Novice Principal Sense-Making**

The importance of the school mission remaining central to any school leader is key, but it is especially crucial to a novice principal as they begin to make sense of their new role in leadership. As they encounter many challenges in their daily routines, they also find themselves working through the theory of sense-making as they see their new role through their previous experiences and new interactions. Sense-making is defined in many ways, but in this literature review the definition I will adopt is that “we treat sensemaking not as an event but as an on-going process. Individuals pay attention when something in their surroundings does not fit with their usual routines and use their experience to find patterns that help to explain new situations” (Louis et. al, 2009, p. 3). In addition, “sense-making is about authoring as well as interpretation, creation as well as discovery” (Weick, 1995, p.8). As novice principals begin their daily work, they are met with problem after problem and as they begin to work to solve these problems, they, “do not present themselves to the practitioners as given. They must be constructed from the materials of problematic situations which are puzzling, troubling, and uncertain. To convert a problematic situation to a problem, a practitioner must do a certain kind of work. He must make sense of an uncertain situation that initially makes no sense” (Weick, 1995, p. 9). Novice principals must experience this phenomenon all the while still maintaining the importance of the school mission as it is essential to an effective school. In truth, Weick (1995) tells us, “A crucial property of sensemaking is that human situations are progressively clarified, but this clarification often works in reverse. It is less often the case that an outcome fulfills some prior definition of the situation, and more often the case that an outcome develops that prior definition” (p. 11) and the idea that, “...the reality that people can know what they are doing only after they have done it” (p. 24). Novice principals must first experience the situation and problem at hand to be able to make sense of it, store that information for later, and use that in the future for decision-making

purposes. They cannot know what they do not know. Sense-making says that the novice principal will constantly be interacting with their environment, experiences, and their own beliefs to interpret the information at hand and create meaning from those things. (Louis, et. al, 2009; Spillane, et. al, 2015; Weick, 1995).

The novice principal is met with countless daily demands. Those demands come from both inside and outside the school walls, with which the novice will, “come to make sense of the multiple demands” (Ganon-Shilon & Schechter, 2017, p. 683). While the NP is working through many different scenarios at any given moment they begin to, “construct meaning from present stimuli, mediated by prior knowledge, experiences, beliefs and values that is embedded in the social context within which people work” (Ganon-Shilon & Schechter, 2017, p.684) all while “frequently have difficulty managing and prioritizing the multiple tasks expected of them” (Spillane & Lee, 2014, p. 433). While there are levels of support put in place in many school systems, often, “beginning principals essentially make sense of their roles by themselves or by using informal feedback from teachers, students, parents, and other administrators” (Crow, 2006, p.312). Because of this, it is even more imperative that the NP keep the school mission central as the sense-making process experienced will likely go without feedback, leaving room for the understanding and consequential decision made to be outside of the mission of the school.

As the novice principal is making sense of their new role, it is often met with being, “bombarded with all the responsibilities that a veteran principal has” (Crow, 2006, p. 318). With very little time to sit with each moment, seek feedback or ask question, the NP is required to swiftly make sense of the situations as they arise because they, “are immediately responsible for the full gamut of principal duties” (Crow, 2006, p.312). A principal just beginning their tenure is expected to make sense of the countless situations that arise within their day within the exact

moment it is happening as the next situation will arise within moments and the process will need to begin once again.

Novice principals quickly learn, “sense-making in school leadership is about giving a meaning to unclear experiences while dealing with ambiguity” (Ganon-Shilon & Schechter, 2017, p. 686). Through this experience, they will make meaning of each situation encountered to be able to create meaning and impact their decision-making in the current moment as well as for the future. As they grow in their role and work to become effective leaders in a, “complex and dynamic environment (they will be) required to understand and respect how all those within the school culture make sense of their work” (Ganon-Shilon & Schechter, 2017, p.686). They must realize that they are not in a silo, experiencing these moments that lead to their decision-making, alone. The way they experience their new role impacts others around them, all the way down to the classroom floor. While this can have major impacts on school and student success, it is, “through sense-making, school principals and middle leaders can learn about educational challenges. This occurs when school environment changes rapidly and requires a response outside the leaders’ existing repertoire” (Ganon-Shilon & Schechter, 2017, p.687). It is through these experiences, “people incorporate new information and eventually take action based on the interpretation they have created” (Ganon-Shilon & Schechter, 2017, p.684), then becoming seasoned in their role and able to move forward in confidence with their decision-making.

### **Principal Decision and Action**

Successful principals work through the sense-making process while continuing to keep the mission at the forefront of those experiences. As they continue to build their perspective on their new job, in any given moment or environment within the school setting, a principal must go through the process of taking action which causes them to weigh multiple avenues to arrive at the

preferred outcome (Robbins & Judge, 2012; Yukl, 2013). Typically, the decisions made and actions taken of the principal is rooted in their own personal experiences, knowledge base and beliefs (Beach & Connolly, 2004; Walter et al., 2012). As principals work through countless experiences each day, they have a goal in mind of taking action in a way that will best benefit all stakeholders. While they have the goal of a sound and final action, “every decision-making process produces a final choice, which may or may not prompt action (Shaked & Schechter, 20019, p.574), so as they work through t, the process of taking action and making a decision, that outcome may be no action at all. Regardless of the outcome, principals work through the process based in their experiences and the sense they have made of the situation to determine the outcome at hand all, “based upon sound judgment or common sense, which they deemed essential to their role as school leaders” (Findlay, 2015, p.494). The actions taken by the building principal are constant and made while several other things are happening at the same time, therefore the principal is required to make sense of their situations within a moment’s notice while taking in all the outside information as well.

### ***Influences on Principal Decisions and Actions***

While the desire of the principal is to take the most effective and efficient action, they are required to consider a significant number of actions while not always being able to devote the attention needed for each one, so the outcome can be less than they desired (Shaked & Shechter, 2019). While the latter presents a challenge to principals in high intensity moments, “the nature of the job demands an acute ability to make good decisions in an environment which demands immediacy” (Calabrese & Zepeda, 1999, p.8). An expert principal can take action in what seems like a split second in a way that is in line with the goals of the school. However, even expert principals have significant influences surrounding the actions explored and ultimately decided

upon such as, “the current era of high expectations, strict demands and rapid changes, principal’s decision-making is even more complicated” (Shaked & Schechter, 2019, p.575). Principals are often influenced by many things throughout their career, not in the least of these being the high-stakes world of testing and accountability. In addition, “while teachers often assume that administrators have the power to get things done, it is often the case that principals lack either the formal or informal authority to make or implement decisions. In some instances, the principal may lack the formal authority to decide that others assume he or she can make. In other cases, administrators may possess the formal authority to decide but lack the informal influence to see that it is implemented” (Hallinger & Richardson, 1988, p.230). As teachers influence the outcome of the determined action taken by a principal and, at times, believe a principal has more authority to take action than one might, principals also juggle the influence of parents, which can hold a higher impact if those parents have the support of community stakeholders such as the central office (Findlay, 2015).

As principals take in all that is around them through the sense-making process, they begin to act in ways that are in line with their ideals and previous experiences. Principals are also influenced in their actions and decisions from outside stakeholders such as parents and the central office (Wong et. al, 2020). Principals must make decisions in ‘episodic intervals ‘with almost half of their time spent in activities lasting less than 4 minutes...(they) may take care of nearly 400 separate daily interaction” (Shaked & Schechter, 2019, p.575), all while syphoning through the countless voices around them. While the outside stakeholders influence a principal’s actions, they also must take swift action when, “responding to a teacher, a student, a parent, or the superintendent. (Calabrese & Zepeda, 1999, p.8)

### *A Novice Principal's Decisions and Actions*

Building principals with experience and expertise work through an immeasurable number of actions each day, all while juggling the influence of every stakeholder they serve. A novice principal must do the same. It is expected that a novice principal begins to take on the same level of work as a seasoned principal immediately upon beginning the work. They are expected to take on the role of “orchestrator” (Pashiardis, 1993, p.8) in the process of taking action as they are making sense of each situation. As they are just beginning to make sense of their role and taking steps to begin taking minute by minute action, they are also expected to orchestrate the process of acting as it might include others around them. Pashiardis tells us that in, “recent studies concerning moves towards effective schools... (there is a) call on the principal to involve the school staff in taking part in decision which affect the school and student body” (1993, p. 10). In addition, novice principals must work to build, “the trust of their superiors (as it is) related to the principals’ ability to exercise discretion; with the establishment of trust, principals appeared to believe they had greater flexibility or latitude in their decisions. (Findlay, 2015, p. 484). As trust and confidence are major components in creating action, a novice principal needs time to build those things, but time is often the commodity they do not have.

Novice principals are also faced with acting and making a decision that may be, “based on their wish for an opportunity to move to larger schools with accompanying larger paychecks” (Findlay, 2015) in addition to the idea that the outcome of the decided action is being, “conducted in publicly accountable group contexts” (Truong et al., 2017, p. 82). While novice principals work to make sense of their new role and juggle all the influences from around them as well as the pull to make their mark and build relationships with their superiors, they must also be reminded of the importance of keeping the mission-central while deciding on the action taken.

As Calabrese & Zepeda tell us, “Principals, through each of their hundreds of daily decisions, attempt to do the right thing. Each of their interactions is driven by a decision. These decisions, and there are literally hundreds of them each day, determine the destiny of the school, the course of the instructional program, and the fate of the teachers and students who, with the principal, participate in the school community. These decisions, over time, communicate a vision. These decisions implement a mission” (1999, p. 8). While all the decisions that one can make in a day are important to a school and its functioning, a novice principal must work to discern which of the actions taken are truly impacting the mission of the school, and be able to prioritize those moments as, “the principal, as a leader, must be a person filled with vision and the other traits associated with school leadership roles. However, any vision is useless unless the principal understands how to make decisions that lead to the fulfillment of the vision. A right vision guided by poor decision-making leads to an abyss” (Calabrese & Zepeda, 1999, p.11).

### **Challenges of Novice Principal**

As the novice principal transitions from their previous role into one of “ultimate responsibility” (Spillane & Lee, 2014), they are met with many challenges. “Principals as instructional leaders are expected to be experts in teaching and learning, to spend the majority of their time in classrooms, and, more generally, to support improvements in instruction” (Bryk, 2010, p. 47). With these significant expectations immediately on the shoulders of the novice principal, stress levels are high as they work through the sense-making process in each new situation they encounter that requires a decision from them. While novice principals are working through the experiences of becoming the leader of the school, “they often struggle with feelings of professional isolation and loneliness as they transition into a role that carries ultimate responsibility and decision-making powers” (Spillane & Lee, 2014, p. 433). The isolation can be

heavy as, “new principals are increasingly left to fend for themselves without the time or the conditions to move from a peripheral trajectory to an insider’s one” (Fink & Brayman, 2004, p. 85). The novice principal often comes from within the school system as a classroom teacher or other role within the school which causes, “newcomers to the principals’ office to experience a change in relationships with colleagues and experience an increased complexity in their new role” (Reid, 2019, p.371), which continues to fuel the feelings of overwhelm and isolation.

Novice principals often, “experience uncertainty as they face challenges upon assuming their new position” (Bengtson et al., 2013, p.144) as the large quantity of demands put on them as they begin to understand their new role (Spillane et al., 2015). It is not uncommon that “new leaders may be charged with sustaining and nurturing the current direction of the school when they are taking over the leadership of a school that is perceived to be successful” (Bengtson et al., 2013, p.147). This presents a unique set of challenges as often, “members of the school community not only compare the new principal to the previous one but also often resist changes to the routines and culture to which they have become accustomed. (Spillane & Lee, 2014, p. 433). While the school may have been deemed successful, it is likely there are going to be changes the novice principal will need to make and decisions that are in line with their sense-making that will be different than the previous administrator. “Changes brought in by the new principal are thus often resisted because school members feel that their way of life is being challenged” (Spillane & Lee, 2014, p. 436). This can create challenges for teachers and community buy-in as the novice principal works to establish themselves in their new role. While the decisions they are making are done so through their own experiences and understanding of the situation, far too often, “principals are expected to conform to unwritten rules and expectations” (Bengtson et al., 2013, p.157).

## **Overcoming the Challenges of a Novice Principal**

While the challenges of a novice principal are many, “if we are to reform schools successfully, we need to understand how individuals, in the process of moving from novice to professional, change their conception of the role” (Crow & Glascock, 1995, p.1). The principal, novice or not, is a vital part of an effective school and can have a positive impact on student achievement (Dufour et. al, 2020, Stronge & Xu, 2021, and Spillane& Lee, 2014). “Individuals, who move to a new role, adjust in the new role conception so that they feel comfortable. New relationships are established in terms of individual needs and perceptions of the new role. Each person responds to a given situation in a personal manner characteristic of her/himself” (Crow & Glascock, 1995, p.4). As they grow more comfortable in their new role, they are reminded that the mission of the school is to stay central to their decision-making as they begin to make sense of the experiences, they encounter each day. Whether they are taking over a successful school and following a beloved leader, or they are charged with turning things around and setting the school on the path towards success, they are to do so with a specific aim in mind. It is their ultimate responsibility to make sure the entire staff is heading in the same direction to maximize their effectiveness as they work in collaborative teams. The novice principal should take time to get to know those they are serving so they are able to build a foundation of trust, which is essential to a high functioning team. They will need to work to build shared knowledge (DuFour et al., 2020) with their team as they move towards a common mission of educating the students within their care. It is imperative that they refine their skills in bringing those together under a common aim as so often there are competing ideas at every turn. “Thoughtfulness must guide the choice among potential competing initiatives, to eliminate those that may take attention away from core improvement priorities.” (Bryke, 2010, p. 63). It is key, “that the leader’s ability to

inspire teachers, parents and school community leaders and students around a common vision for reform” (Bryke, 2010, p. 63) is fostered as the novice principal assumes the role of leading each of the groups to the success of the school.

## **Conclusion**

A school mission is an essential piece to the puzzle of an effective school as well as a key ingredient of effective school leadership. While a novice principal works to make sense of their new role, they are faced “with a large number of disconnected tasks... and struggle to manage their time and priorities” (Spillane & Lee, 2014, p. 436). To combat the discord that could arise from this unique challenge of novice school leadership, the novice principal should keep the school mission central as they work to determine the action taken. The mission of the school is found at the heart of a principal’s actions, as decisions without direction can create chaos and confusion (Calabrese & Zepeda, 199).

Therefore, this literature review supports this study’s purpose, which is to examine how the school mission influences the novice principal’s sense-making process. This qualitative, action-research study will deploy the use of journaling through weekly prompts completed by a novice principal working through the sense-making process in their new role. Actions taken through the lens of the school mission will be researched as the novice principal learns to navigate their new role and works to continue trajectory of a successful school. In the following chapter, the methodological framing, and underpinnings of the study, as well as the methodological structure and justification for such structure, will be explained considering the research reviewed in Chapter 2.

## **Chapter III**

### **Methodology**

#### **Research Purpose and Questions**

Highly effective schools are composed of several interdependent subsystems. Lezotte and Snyder (2011) say that effective schools focus on the following seven ideas they call correlates: clear school mission, high expectations for success, instructional leadership, opportunity to learn and time on task, safe and orderly environment, positive home-school relations, and frequent monitoring of student progress. While each of these attributes contribute to the effectiveness of a school, the correlate of a clear school mission sets the tone as a guide for the remaining six. In addition to a clear school mission being an essential ingredient for a highly effective school, novice principals can often be overwhelmed by the amount and diversity of the tasks at hand and a clear mission can help prioritize these tasks (Spillane, 2014). Novice principals are not only working through the sense-making process to learn their new role, but they are also tasked with deciding between several actions every day that will continue or change the trajectory of the existing school.

The purpose of this qualitative action research study is to examine how the school mission influences the novice principal's sense-making process.

#### Research Questions:

1. In what ways do I make sense of experiences as a novice principal?
2. What role does mission play in my sense-making process?

## Theoretical and Conceptual Framework

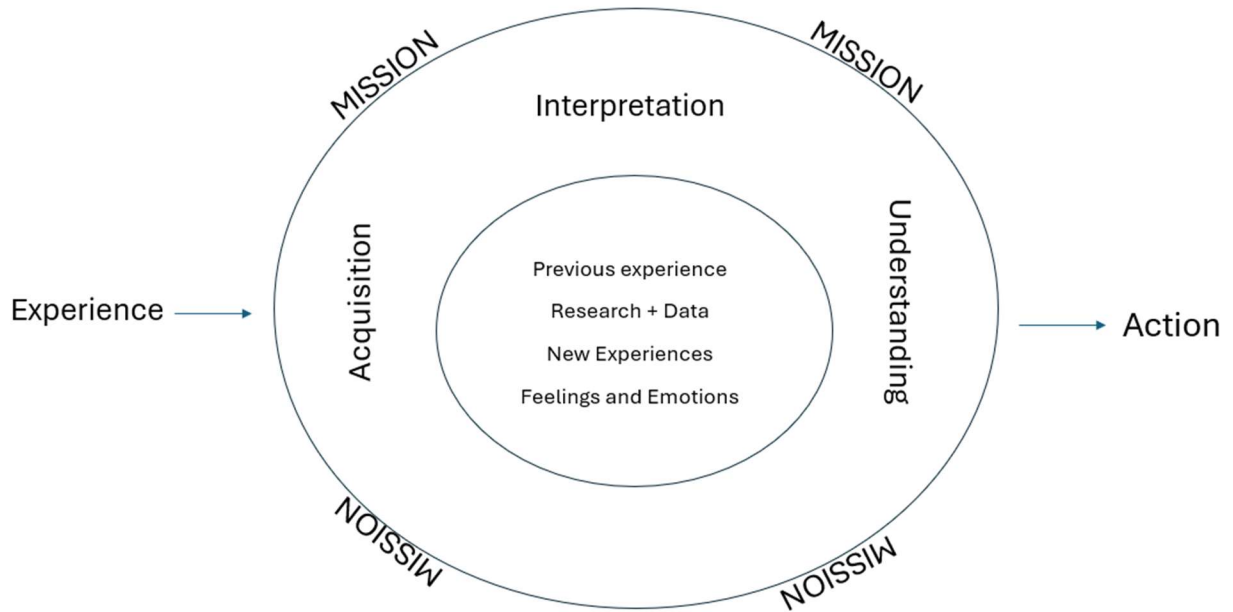


Figure 1: Novice Principal Sensemaking Process

The purpose of this qualitative action research study is to examine my experiences as I make sense of my new role as a novice principal as well as the role mission played in my sense-making process. “Sense-making involves turning circumstances into a situation that is comprehended explicitly in words and that serves as a springboard into action” (Weick et al., 2005, p. 409). As shown in the diagram, when arriving at an action, a novice principal will begin to make sense of the current circumstance within the lens of their previous experiences and, as Feldman (2018) labels it, their web of belief. Those factors will then make an impact as they move through the sense-making process. Sensemaking “is the primary site where meanings materialize that inform and constrain identity and action” (Weick et al., 2005, 409). The sense-making process utilized in this study is comprised of four parts: acquisition, interpretation, understanding and finally an action (Turner, et al. 2023). I, as the novice principal, interacted,

specifically using mission as a filter, with things such as new and previous experiences, data and research, as well as feelings and emotions as I processed the problem being presented to then make sense of the possible actions steps to be taken. I then decided on an action based on each of these steps as it pertained to the mission of the school. This study focused on the idea that “sensemaking involves humans being social while they interact with their environment and apply their reasoning capabilities to take action and to change the conditions to more favorable ones” (Turner, et al., 2023, p. 21). As the methods are to be described in the following paragraphs, it will begin by first describing myself, as the sole participant of the study.

### **Positionality Statement**

As a novice principal, I am uniquely positioned to engage in this action research. In this next section, I share insight into my educational journey with a focus on my growing understanding of the role of the mission statement in schools.

I am currently the principal of an elementary school in rural Murfreesboro, Tennessee. Through my journey as an educator, I have opened three different elementary schools in three different times and roles in my career. My first year of teaching, when I was just beginning my journey in education and knew very little about the importance of a clear and focused mission, I was part of opening a brand-new school. I was not at all aware of the mission of the school or why it existed. Other than the obvious of students learning, I did not know the purpose and goal we were working towards as a team. I was following, but I did not know to what destination. As a new teacher, I knew that the goal of the school was student learning, but what and how we were to work towards that was a mystery.

I was then part of opening a second school 8 years later, in 2019, however this time I did so as a seasoned classroom teacher, specifically tasked with the role of team lead, with many years and experiences under my belt. I had spent the previous 3 years as an instructional coach and therefore I had become much more aware of the ideas and practices that made a successful team and in turn a successful school. This time, I was on the ground floor of creating the school's mission. I was part of a team of teachers, alongside the administration, which spent several meetings writing, discussing, and re-writing, the school's first mission statement. The process felt empowering and meaningful. I was proud of the work that was done, and I felt deeply connected to the outcome that was created. However, even still, once that process was over and the mission statement was adopted, as a classroom teacher, it did not have significant impact on my daily actions. The mission statement did not come back up in conversation or in any way after that initial creation, from my perspective as a classroom teacher leader.

I then opened my third school, this time as an assistant principal. The school was established in 2021 and quickly grew from 400 students to, in year three, over 600. We opened with less than 50 staff members and in year three, grew to over 70. In this role as assistant principal, once again, I found myself on the ground floor of creating the mission for the school. In the inaugural year, we had a very similar experience to my previous school opening where a team of teacher leaders worked on the schoolwide mission statement. The mission statement created in the first round was shared with the entire staff and their feedback was sought and applied. The first year's mission statement was adopted, and like my previous experiences, it was not used in action from myself as an administrator to the teachers in the classroom. The second year, after completing the initial coursework for my doctorate, I began to truly understand the importance and impact of everyone rowing in the same direction, led by the true north of a mission statement. Our mission

statement was then revisited and revised into something significantly shorter and more meaningful to all of us. At that point, when the current mission statement was adopted, it began to drive every action taken by the administrative team.

The mission became a conversation in almost every action from things that were purchased to instructional decisions made for each classroom, such as a focus on special populations to ensure all students were being educated at high levels. It became something I was highly driven by and something that I thought of all the time. Then, during the fall of my third year as the assistant principal, my current head principal took a new job. This moment then led to me becoming the second principal of the school in the middle of the school year. Being a novice principal with so much to learn, I then began to be the responsible party for the actions taken within the school. As I began to lead the mission of “we educate all”, I wanted to keep my actions rooted in the mission statement. The purpose of this research study is to analyze the sense-making process and experiences of myself as a novice principal as I work to keep the mission central.

### **Viewpoint of the Study**

This research study is a qualitative study which focuses on ideas and subjects that at times are not directly observable, because of this, “researchers must rely on subjective judgements to bring them to light” (Hatch, 2002, p. 9). This is important to my research study because I discussed and named my beliefs and assumptions as they related to making meaning within my study. As I am learning this new role, there have been many moments and sense-making experiences that are not directly observable to those around me, and possibly even to myself, therefore journals were used and coded so the sensemaking process could be seen as well as interpreted.

This study is seen through the lens of subjectivism and interpretivism. Subjectivism is defined as “negotiating your position within the discourse of what it means to be within a certain subject position (Bhattacharya, 2017, p. 35). This is relative to my study because I made meaning and sense of my new role as a novice principal as I worked to act through the filter of the school mission statement. While I may choose to act in one way, the perspective I hold might be different than that of another novice principal in a similar situation, therefore my position and subjectivity are impacting my actions.

In addition to subjectivism, this study is framed by interpretivism. Interpretivism is defined as, “taking into account the cultural and historical interpretations of one’s social world when conducting inquiry” (Bhattacharya, 2017, p. 60). This is relative to my study because the sensemaking process and actions taken were seen through the lens of the social world of a novice principal who has taken over in the middle of a school year. The position I hold is unique in that I am a novice principal, but I have also taken over the school after the start of the year. The perspective I hold as I begin to make sense of my role, as well as the process experienced that leads to actions taken, will be impacted by that interpretation.

### **Research Design and Methodological Approach**

This dissertation aims to understand the role of a clear and focused school mission in a novice principal’s sensemaking process. Specifically, I am looking to determine how the school mission acts as a filter as the novice principal is making sense of their new role and becoming socialized through the theoretical framework of sensemaking.

The research design most appropriate for this study is an action research study. An action research study is, “concerned with activity and change. It is undertaken for the sake of

investigating practice, usually in concert with those working on the front lines, and improving that practice based on what is discovered” (Hatch, 2023, p. 31). In this action research study, I analyzed the sensemaking process as a novice principal while I work to make sense of my new role through the filter of the school mission statement. I investigated the use of mission throughout the sensemaking process with the goal of improving my practice based on what is found. “Sensemaking allows humans to be in a constant process of learning and seeking knowledge when confronted with different kinds of challenges” (Turner, et al., 2023, p. 1). The research is framed around journal prompts that I worked to interpret how I as a novice principal made sense of my experiences through the lens of the school mission statement. I used what Dana & Yendol-Hoppey (2014) describe as the Cycle of Inquiry. I formed questions, gathered data through journaling, analyzed and interpreted the data through coding and completed the cycle by sharing my findings.

### **Research Site**

As described in the introduction chapter, the mission statement in the inaugural year was one of generic statements that was not created with everyone involved. As year one ended, I was beginning my doctoral journey and was introduced to the importance of a strong foundation in the process of a Professional Learning Community (PLC) through the work of Richard and Rebecca DuFour (2013). The work of the PLC suggests that an essential part of a successful school is a clear and focused mission. While there was a mission statement created prior to the opening of the school, it became something that no one was aware of, and certainly not thinking of, including the administration. Throughout the first year and into the second, the leadership team spent time revising, sharing, and getting feedback on the mission statement. As time was spent revising and voices were being heard around the mission of the school, it began to morph

into something everyone believed in. Our mission statement had many forms and went from a long, wordy statement, to a statement with just three words: We Educate All. This statement was simple, but it encompassed exactly what we intended to do day in and day out. We intend to educate everyone from the front office staff to the classroom and even outside the walls of the school into the community.

Our school mission statement went from a long sentence full of empty words that no one knew to a simple statement, we educate all, that had staff-wide input and deep meaning for the entire school. It quickly became embedded in the culture of the school and central to our thinking. As we began year three, the trajectory of the administration completely changed. The principal of the school left for another opportunity, and I was chosen to replace him and begin my journey as the principal, in the middle of the school year.

As the culture and the mission statement of the school began to morph and change, so did the physical make-up of the student body and the staff. The research site is a rural elementary school in Middle Tennessee with an approximate student population of 670 students with 70 faculty and staff which includes classified and certified staff. The school serves pre-kindergarten through 5<sup>th</sup> grade students. The demographic make-up is: White (74%), African American (13%), Hispanic (8%). The average student/teacher ratio is 23 to 1, and the average percentage of students who qualify for free/discounted lunch is 45%. The faculty is made of up 10% males and 90% females. Their years of experience range from 0 to 33 years.

## **Data Collection**

My data collection for this study is rooted in the reflective practice of journaling. “By examining, reexamining, the content and context of their own behaviors... (principals) are able to refine or even alter what they do and how they do it” (Stronge, 2018, p. 229). Journals allow for, “reflecting on (my) own thought process” (Dana & Yendol-Hoppey, 2009,109) as I am beginning the sensemaking journey of being a principal.

Therefore, my data collection consists of journal prompts that were completed after significant experiences that require actions such as but not limited to meetings such a professional learning community (PLC) meeting, planning meetings, administration/instructional coach meetings, staff-wide trainings, faculty meetings and leadership meetings. Other experiences journaled include personnel changes, student behavior concerns and instructional practice decisions about standards and daily interventions. Once per week, after one of the meetings or experiences described, I answered a series of journal prompts that specifically allowed me to reflect on my own sensemaking and experiences as I worked through the journey of being a novice principal in the middle of a school year amidst a leadership change. I reflected on my daily experiences such as grade level PLC meetings, hiring new faculty, team lead changes, teacher grade changes as well as student behavior and instruction. I completed a journal entry weekly as I reflected on experiences that required me to work through the sensemaking process to determine an action. These reflections were done with recording and transcribing since these experiences are frequently happening and I needed to reflect on them regularly. I used OtterAI to record the journal responses after each of the previously described experiences. I then corrected any errors in the transcriptions, so the responses were transcribed accurately. The journal prompts are below:

1. What is a challenge or problem I face today/ this week?
2. How did I make sense of the challenge or problem?
3. What possible actions did I explore?
4. What action did I ultimately decide?
5. Why did I decide to take that action?
6. How did I use the school mission in this process?

As I used this method for research, it is rooted in the idea that, “the key to increasing (my) impact—raising student achievement—lies in (my) ability to engage in frequent, accurate and deep self-reflection” (Hall & Simeral, 2018, p. 5)

I organized my journals chronologically. I used OtterAI to transcribe, edit transcriptions for errors and finally coded the responses to each prompt. I used a chart that allowed me to reflect on each of my journal entries. This chart included the type of data that was collected, an overview of the data and my initial thoughts about the responses to the journal prompts. I used these same set of journal prompts each Friday by 3pm. The reflection was done before the next week began as to not confuse experiences and actions taken from week to week.

The primary source of data for this action research study were my personal journal entries. These journals were recorded over the course of three months during my first year as a novice principal. I began my tenure as a principal during the middle of the school year, so not only was it my first year as a principal, but it also had unique challenges as it relates to taking over mid-year. The journals captured experiences that required me to stop and evaluate the situation as I was likely experiencing all of it for the first time from the perspective of principal.

As I continued to collect data through reflection journals, I specifically answered six questions each time a situation or challenge arose that required that I make sense of this new experience. Journals were recorded for the months of March, April and May after situations such as team meetings, interviewing for new position and planning for meetings. After all the journals were collected, select journals throughout the process were shared with my Assistant Principal that served as my critical friend. My critical friend read the journals and reflected on the six questions answered as well as offering feedback on the situations as they related to the sensemaking process and the school mission.

### **Data Analysis**

To begin the data analysis process, I kept a chart throughout the process as I was gathering data. After each of my journal entries, I included on the chart the type of data I collected as well as my initial thoughts that surrounded the data collected. As each journal response was recorded through OtterAI, it was transcribed and edited for errors. After each prompt response was transcribed, I followed a coding process to look for repeated patterns and possible themes within the journal responses. Coding is defined as, “a procedure that disaggregates the data, breaks it down into manageable segments and identifies or names those segments” (Dana & Yendol-Hoppey, 2009, p. 166). Saldana (2013, p. 9) also says, “to codify is to arrange things in a systematic order, to make something part of a system or classification, to categorize.” I followed a first and second cycle model of coding described by Saldana (2013). I first used In Vivo coding which is defined as “root meaning is ‘in that which is alive,’ and as a code refers to a word or short phrase from the actual language found in the qualitative data” (Saldana, 2013, p. 91). I followed the In Vivo coding with a round of process coding, which is the technique of pulling out the action or gerunds within the data (Saldana, 2013, p. 91). Both are a type of elemental

methods coding that were conducted in the first cycle of coding. I then transitioned to the second cycle of coding. “The primary goal during Second Cycle coding is to develop a sense of categorical, thematic, conceptual, and/or theoretical organization from your array of First Cycle codes” (Saldana, 2013, p. 207). By categorizing my first cycle codes, I began to determine possible themes, as I finalized the coding process by using descriptive coding and finally pattern coding (Saldana, 2013).

I transitioned into the second cycle of coding, pattern coding by taking these codes and developing categories. Saldana (2013) defines pattern coding as, “a category label (“meta-code”) that identifies similarly coded data. Organizes the corpus into sets, themes, or constructs and attributes meaning to that organization” (p. 266). I used this information to determine the novice principal’s focus on the school mission through the sense making process. During this process, I will used my critical friend to take the “opportunity for scrutiny of the project by colleagues, peers and academics should be welcomed, as should feedback offered to the researcher at any presentations that are made over the duration of the project” (Shenton, 2004, p. 67). The critical friend analyzed and gave input on the codes and categories being discovered from the data.

Once the data was collected and the critical friend reviewed and gave feedback on the journals, the journals were transcribed, and the coding process began. The first round of coding used was inVivo coding followed by a second round of process coding where the codes of acquisition (awareness), interpretation, understanding and acting were discovered. After the round of process coding, a final round of descriptive coding was completed that created categories within the four codes previously mentioned. Finally, these codes were used in the second cycle of coding to determine themes through pattern coding of the acquisition stage

which were the themes of personnel, professional learning communities and collaboration, and instruction and student learning were determined. Secondary themes were determined in the interpreting phase through pattern coding that were determined to be experiences, feelings and reflection. Another round of pattern coding was completed to analyze the data through the lens of answering the second research question, where the theme of utilizing the mission to determine an action as well as the mission was considered but abandoned to determine the action. The chart below shows the patterns and themes discovered.

Themes during the stage of Acquisition	Themes during the stage of Interpretation	Themes during the stage of Understanding	Themes during the stage of Action
Personnel	Experiences (both previous and new)	Mission was utilized	Mission was utilized
PLC and Collaboration	Feelings (both administrator and teacher)	Mission was abandoned	Mission was abandoned
Instruction and Student Learning	Personal Reflection		

*Table 3.1 Themes Found During Sense-Making Process*

As multiple rounds of coding were completed, I kept a journal of thoughts and reflections throughout the process. The codes and findings were shared with my critical friend for a second round of input and feedback. I also kept my two research questions accessible and at the forefront of each coding round to be sure the questions were being considered as the research was being analyzed.

### **Trustworthiness**

Qualitative research has many “critics” that are often “reluctant to accept the trustworthiness of qualitative research” (Shenton, 2004, p. 63). Because of that, it is critical that I established

trustworthiness throughout my study. Trustworthiness is defined in a qualitative study as having, “credibility” (Shenton, 2004, p.64). I established trustworthiness by building credibility during my research study by, “the adoption of research methods well established both in qualitative investigation in general and in information science in particular” (Shenton, 2004, p.65), as I collected data using journals and journal prompts. The recorded responses were used to analyze the sensemaking experience for myself, a novice principal, as I take action through the lens of the school mission statement. While this is just a single source of data collection, I responded to the journal prompts after several different types of experiences within my role as principal that included: PLC meetings, faculty meetings, and instructional meetings with instructional coaches and administration as well as student instruction, student behavior and personnel decisions. This provided ample amount of data to analyze. I followed a first and second cycle coding process described by Saldana (2013) where I used In Vivo coding, process coding, descriptive coding and pattern coding to discover the themes rooted within the data. I used a critical friend during the journaling process that allowed the friend to read my journal responses, coding categories and patterns, and who then gave feedback to provide a different perspective on the data. The use of a critical friend allowed for, “opportunities for scrutiny of the project by colleagues, peers and academics” (Shenton, 2004, p. 67). I also included a detailed positionality statement that reveals my perspective and potential biases during the data analysis process.

## Chapter IV

### FINDINGS

#### Introduction

The purpose of this action research study was to examine my sense-making process as I experienced situations that challenged me as a novice principal as well as the role the school mission played throughout that process.

In this action research study, the following questions were explored and answered:

1. In what ways do I make sense of experiences as a novice principal?
2. What role does mission play in my sense-making process?

The themes I share in this chapter will be organized using the sense-making theoretical framework. Using the sense-making process outlined in previous chapters and drawn from (Turner, et. al, 2023), this framework includes acquisition or awareness of the situation or challenge, the interpretation of the situation as well as the understanding and the subsequent actions taken. This section is organized by sharing different types of situations and experiences I have encountered during my first year as a principal. I am specifically sharing the situations that required me to stop and make sense of the experience that then required an action. These situations were captured in a reflective journal across a three-month span of time (journal excerpts and references will be labeled by entry and page; for example: J.3 P.5). I am going to share how I became aware of the situation, interpreted it, how I understood it and the eventual action that I took. I also used the critical friend approach throughout this process to ensure trustworthiness.

I will be telling the story and describing the data from the research as it answers each research question. First, I will address research question one, “in what ways do I make sense of experiences as a novice principal?” It will be explored through each theme that emerged through the sense-making process in the stage of acquisition and awareness. I organized the situations around three themes. These themes were: personnel decisions, professional learning communities and collaboration, and instruction and student learning.

### **Personnel Decisions: The Right People in the Right Positions**

The personnel decisions that I attended to included numerous situations such as hiring specific positions across the building, teacher placement, and team lead determination. As a novice principal, I faced logistical challenges related to hiring and arranging staff. I faced these challenges during times such as filling faculty vacancies, including teachers and support staff, and by assigning teachers new roles.

#### *Hiring New Positions*

In April, I reflected on the experience of having to hire for a growth position for the next school year. The candidates for the position were both going to be first year teachers upon hiring but they had starkly different experiences that led them to apply for our open teaching position. As I worked through the sense making process and became more deeply aware of the situation, I realized that my goal was to hire to effectively educate all, as I noticed:

It really goes back to the fact that our mission is to educate all which includes kids, teachers, parents. When we looked at what we had on the table while both would be brand new teachers, we had one candidate who had a little bit of experience to understand

how it works in education. To understand the content and how to plan and the intricacies of the job that we felt would better meet the mission of educating all. (J3. P5)

When looking at the candidates' experiences, I began to interpret the information at hand with simple reflection on the information I had gathered through their interviews as well as a deep reflection on what the team they would be joining needed, which became clear through my reflections such as:

What strengths those people can bring the team. This team is really needing some stronger teachers and while I didn't have a candidate with experience to consider, I did have one that at least had a year of student teaching experience. (J.3 P5)

Candidate one came to us with a degree in education and a full year of student teaching, whereas candidate two had neither of those things and would be hired on a permit. As I continued through the process of making sense of my experiences as they related to personnel decisions, I began to understand that our mission of educating all could only be met by one of the candidates as I noticed:

I had to look at the big picture. I had to consider what it means to educate all and it includes the ability to teach and the ability to have some type of content knowledge.

There was evidence of that through Praxis tests that were passed and edTPA that were completed by this teacher. (J.3 P6)

Having had experience gaining a college degree specific to education as well as a year of student teaching would allow that candidate not only to educate their students but also the teammates they would be joining, which is a newer team to that grade level content. The action that ultimately resulted from this process was to hire the candidate, that while a first-year teacher

either way, “we just really decided we were going to meet the mission by going with somebody who did have at least some experience in the classroom and education classes.” (J.3 P6)

Another situation that arose as a challenge was my experience with replacing a bookkeeper and hiring a replacement. While this situation was unique in all of my experiences thus far, as “this particular challenge was different than any of the others. The challenge that I faced was a bookkeeping situation where my bookkeeper had not been doing her job, and not been keeping the books correctly, had decided to quit.” (J.8 P1). While this was not directly dealing with a teacher or staff that works with students, it still proved to be a personnel situation where I had to work through the sense-making process deeply, as I had never experienced anything like this previously. As I gained awareness of the situation, I quickly realized that it was one of the most challenging experiences because the previous bookkeeper had not done their job correctly. That meant that the person I chose to replace them had to not only be right for the job itself but be willing and knowledgeable enough to correct a lot of mistakes. I continued to interpret the situation at hand, and it was then that I began to realize I would need to make a quick decision because of the time sensitive nature of the problem, but I would also need to hire someone that would be able to complete the job with minimal time commitment from myself. As I journaled about this situation, I noticed,

I really had to quickly make a decision that was going to be for the long game and one that was going to really be a positive impact in this role so that it did not consume everything that I was going to be doing daily. (J.8 P3)

I am tasked with educating everyone that steps foot in the building, and when my time is fully consumed with the brokenness of our bookkeeping situation, I am unable to complete that task to the fullest. While I interpreted this situation through the lens of key personnel needs, I

also reflected on the situation through the lens of never experiencing this before specifically as a principal, even though:

I've had some experience with bookkeeping tasks. I was the manager of the title I budget in my previous position, so I did have some context for managing a budget. I was able to make sense somewhat of the baseline expectations for a bookkeeper. I had a baseline level understanding of simple clerical things such as line items and money expenditures.

(J.8 P2)

As a novice principal, this was my first time having to hire someone that was not directly involved with students, but so significantly impacted our mission to educate all because of the time requirements it could place on me as the instructional leader if the wrong person was chosen.

Understanding began to unfold in the situation, and I knew I needed someone not only with experience in bookkeeping, but also experience in a school setting as bookkeeping in a school is very specific and unique. While a school bookkeeper has many jobs like a bookkeeper in another setting, such as writing purchase orders, keeping journal entries and collection logs, a school bookkeeper also has to understand the academic impact of the way school money is spent. They are approached by classroom teachers and other staff that directly impact student learning to spend money on different items that may or may not have a positive impact on student achievement. It is imperative they understand the operations of a school and as well as the school mission, as they are directing others to make purchases in line with those mission of the school. As I reflected, I began to focus on the idea that I truly needed to, "try to find someone with experience, but also someone that understands how a school functions, in particular how our school functions, but also had some sort of bookkeeping experience." (J.8 P3) I understood that I

needed someone that was self-motivated and would need little guidance from me as I focused on the priority of instruction in the building. Ultimately, the action taken was to hire an educational assistant that was currently on staff at our school that also had previous bookkeeping experience and was extremely self-motivated. As I reflected on the action taken, I realized:

I had to pull someone from my EA pool that was educating students, but it allowed me to continue the job of educating all on a larger scale because she was able to really dive into a situation that seemed to be unfixable. She would clearly work through it and fix it because of her skill set and her determination and being incredibly self-motivated. She would not need to call on me consistently and I can continue my job of focusing on education.

While this action ultimately took an educational assistant away from students for a short time until that position could be replaced, it immediately allowed me to return to the balance of office management with instructional management to support the mission of educating all. It also kept the school mission at the forefront of financial decisions in the building because the person that is now responsible for our bookkeeping was one that came into this role already sold out to the mission of educating all as an educational assistant in the building.

### *Assigning Teachers New Roles*

As a novice principal, another type of scenario arose around the idea of a grade level change being made for a teacher. Acquiring the information on this situation happened over the course of three months, as it was specific to a grade level team not collaborating to the highest of their potential. My awareness of this situation deepened as I noticed specific interactions within the team that were increasingly less productive as we were now late into the Spring semester of

school. I reflected on the idea that, “PLCs are essential to our student’s success and collaboration is required on each team. As well as the level of trust and vulnerability that must be there for successful PLC work.” (J.4 P2)

I began to interpret this through my previous experiences as a classroom teacher. I had teams that I had been on in the past that did not collaborate well, but the expectation was that we worked together to get the job done. I noticed in my current experience that the entire team and their ability to collaborate was being impacted by just one or two members.

Ultimately, I began to understand that a change was needed to properly and fully educate both the students and the teachers on the team. I truly reflected on the idea that, “it is not only impacting teachers, but it's going to impact other grade levels in the future because of the outcome of the education of the students that is being negatively impacted.” (J.4 P2)

The options for changes to the team were considered between teachers that desired a move and those that did not. As the change was being considered, I understood that moving someone that did not have the desire to move or teach a new grade level may end up being detrimental to the new team, while helping the old. In my journal, I reflected on:

The idea of putting somebody in a grade level that they're not interested in teaching, and they don't feel confident in the content. I don't want to potentially make it worse by creating a new problem because their ability to teach the content and the students could be significantly impacted.” (J.4 P4)

The action that was decided was rooted in the positive impact and education of both teams, as the person that was moved had the desire to do so. This allowed for both teams impacted to continue to work towards the mission of educating all without the negative impacts

that could have been imparted on just one team had the teammate moved not wanted the move therefore not actually solving a problem and just moving it to create a new one.

Finally, I reflected about naming a new team lead for a team that no longer had a one due to the movement of a teacher. During the acquisition stage as I made sense of this new need, I considered several things like the goals of the school as well as the leadership team itself. I spent a great deal of time reflecting on, “the goal of the guiding coalition and the leadership team and what I want them to do in support of our mission” (J.8 P2). I also looked at the characteristics of the teachers who were qualified to become team lead as they related to the collective commitments of the school and the school mission.

I began to interpret this situation from two different perspectives: both as a previous team lead myself and as now a novice principal tasked with creating a cohesive and productive leadership team. As I reflected on my time as a team lead, I knew the importance of hard work and the effort it took to lead successfully as I truly reflected on:

Myself as a team leader and my experiences on a leadership team and the amount of effort and work it takes to be a successful team lead. But I also looked at it from a new perspective that I have as a principal and what I specifically want out of a team lead when it comes to the PLC and kind of the high expectations, I have of leading the teams now, which is different than when I was on a leadership team as a team lead myself. (J.8 P2)

I also considered the influence I knew the team lead would have on the rest of the team as well as the leadership team and considered the importance of the person chosen being deeply aligned with the school mission.

I moved to understanding as I considered the differences in a newer teacher versus a veteran teacher on the team. I understood the importance of experience, but the alignment to the mission and the actions that follow weighed heavily in my mind. I was not able to reconcile choosing a team lead that was not completely committed to the mission, and the experience became secondary in the process.

In the end, the action that emerged was to name the team lead to be the newer teacher that was deeply aligned to the mission. The outcome will impact not only teachers, but also the students and their education as the team lead has a profound impact on the collaboration level of the team. Choosing someone just for their experience that may not be as deeply aligned to the mission would potentially do more harm than good when it came to the goal of educating all, including the teachers on the grade level team and the leadership team.

As the data was analyzed and coded, a clear theme of personnel decisions emerged during the acquisition and awareness stage of the sense making process. While personnel challenges and experiences were being interpreted, it became evident that my personal reflection, experience and feelings played a significant role in how I began to understand and eventually act within each situation.

### **Professional Learning Communities and Collaboration**

As the first theme of personnel decisions was concluded, a clear second theme in the data emerged: professional learning communities (PLC) and collaboration. I reflected on two situation types that included the work of a professional learning community as well as planning and implementation of year end reflective meetings.

## *The work of a Professional Learning Community*

I first reflected on a PLC meeting at the beginning of March and, as I gained awareness, I realized it was off-topic and off-task. The team seemed to be talking about things that were unrelated to each other and not on the idea of instruction and student learning. I then realized the meeting agenda included information that was not directly tied to student learning and the meeting conversation derailed into housekeeping items that were not involving instruction.

As I began to interpret the meeting, I reflected on my time in the classroom as part of a collaborative team:

I thought about my previous experiences in a PLC as a team lead. I thought about what it looks like to really stand up in those moments and say “this is off topic” as the team lead of the team. But now I'm looking at this as a principal, and a new principal at that, coming in in the middle of the year. I really wanted to say something in the moment as I would have as the team lead. But I just observed and thought ‘I wish that the team lead was saying something. I wish that another teammate would recognize this.’ (J.1 P2)

When I was the team lead, I expected everyone to stay true to the team norms and agenda, and I was bold enough as a teacher on the team to call us back to task when those moments were needed. However, as I began to process this experience in my new role as a principal, I was unsure how to respond in the moment. While I had a strong desire to respond in a similar way as if I was a member of the teaching team, I hesitated because I also recognized the idea that if I were to abruptly stop the conversation or turn it in a different direction, the way that would be received would be starkly different as I now served as their principal and not a teacher on the team.

I began to understand through this experience that while it was important to me as the leader of the school to spend our time wisely on conversations and tasks that would lead to educating all, I was not always comfortable in the moment to lean into that and speak up. I reflected upon my own experiences as a teacher, and I remembered feeling frightened and not as comfortable when our administration joined in our meetings, and I did not want to create that same experience for my teachers now. As I continued to reflect in my journals, I considered:

As a new principal, I didn't want to come into a situation where I was new to the role and hammer down to the point where trust was impacted. I wasn't sure how to address it without seeming too harsh, so instead I just stayed quiet. (J.1 P3)

In the end, the action that was decided in this case was to remain silent in the moment. This mission did not prevail, and the outcome was not aligned to the school mission of educating all. I had a desire to step in and bring it to their attention but based on my own previous experiences and the fact that I had not been in this situation as a principal before now, I instead chose to talk to the team lead after the meeting to address the expectations of the agenda and PLC meeting topics. If I had to do it over again, I would have addressed it in the moment so the entire team would have understood the importance of our time together being focused on the agenda items and student learning. I would address it in the moment so they could hear it from me and all be on the same page at the same time.

A second experience under the umbrella of the PLC was the journey of creating collective commitments as a staff. Collective commitments are statements that are created from a set of values that the entire staff agrees upon. These statements are not meant to be a rule book, but simply to define the culture of the school and the specific actions the staff is committed to as a unit (Dufour, et. al, 2020). As I began to acquire knowledge around this process in the middle

of April, there was one team in the school that had negative feedback around the commitments that were created and were not able to commit to them without further discussion and potential change. Their initial feedback was very direct and somewhat negative.

Through my own feelings of frustration and surprise, I began to interpret the situation: I was frustrated because there were very few people in the whole school that didn't seem to be on board or didn't seem to understand the collective commitments that were created. The feedback and the questions and their pushback came from a place of what appeared to be misunderstanding of the purpose of collective commitments and why we're doing what we're doing and what those collective commitments stand for. I had spent time educating everyone about the process and the purpose, so my initial feeling was frustration. (J.7 P2)

After reviewing the timeline of how the collective commitments were created and the information that was given to the staff to create shared knowledge, I began to question why they felt the way they did, and I tried to view the experience through the lens of a teacher and their feelings and current experiences. There had been almost three months since the training and the actual creation and feedback process of the collective commitments. There was a clear misunderstanding of the purpose of collective commitments and what they were agreeing to uphold.

Understanding the situation came in the form of two different possible routes to rectify the situation:

Once I was able to step back and see a little clearer, I just tried to understand why they may feel the way that they do and have the feedback that they did. The more that I was

able to process and think through it, the more I began to wonder if the response that they had come from misunderstanding my original training on what collective commitments are and what the purpose is. I also thought that maybe it there was just too much time in between when I explained the purpose and then when they created one (J.7 P2).

As I continued to reflect and gain more understanding, I considered retraining the entire staff since everyone had experienced such a large gap between the training time and the actual time of creating the commitments as well as just attending a team meeting of the one team that showed they were unclear through their feedback. Attending the one team meeting to clear up confusion would be specific to their concerns, and I would be able to address specific questions they had as it pertained to their concerns to committing to our statements, they were unclear about.

The action that I decided to pursue was to attend a team meeting with the one team that showed through their feedback that they had questions and concerns with the intention of redelivering the information and providing clarity where there was confusion. This action was directly aligned to the school mission of educating all, specifically in this moment, educating the teachers around the idea of collective commitments and the impact their creation has on student learning. Going to this one team allowed me to be able to retrain them on the knowledge and understanding behind collective commitments and it also allowed me to see and hear their concerns and address them directly. I was able to truly educate them on the purpose and research behind this practice and they were able to walk away with a clear understanding and able to commit to the statements. Moreover, the collective commitments were important to re-clarify because of the explicit link to the school mission and how they underpin that mission.

## *The Planning and Implementation of Year End Reflective Meetings*

As a novice principal that took over in the middle of the school year, I have never closed out a school as the leader of the school. There are several year-end meetings that I am responsible to lead, one of those being a reflection meeting with the entire central office instructional staff. As my awareness of this experience grew, I began to reflect on my first year as a new principal:

I've never really had to articulate my personal goals as well as the mission and vision for our school to anyone other than my staff that had been on the journey together and had input in every step along the way. So, I really had to reflect and make sure that I understood where we were as a school and where I envisioned us going in this next year. I really had to work to pare down the next step that we wanted to take. I had to be able to articulate that and in a way that would allow central office to support us. (J.11 P2)

Not only was I a new principal, but I also took over the school in the middle of the school year. So, this was the first time I was able to sit and reflect on what I needed as a novice principal and how they could support me as well as my staff moving forward into a new school year.

Through brainstorming where we had been as a school and where I envisioned us going in the next school year, I began to interpret the situation at hand. I used data to reflect on our success as well as the strategies used to get us where we are. I was able to use that information to ask a lot of questions as it pertained to our next steps and how the central office instructional team could support our school.

The understanding of the situation came when I was able to use our data to begin planning goals for next school year with my instructional team based on our data. We were able to root in our objectives from the year and the results we had access to through benchmarks and common formative assessments to articulate the needs we had and the holes that were evident in our planning and instruction. There was a common thread in PLC meetings and planning meetings throughout the year where we heard, “I don’t know how to teach that. I am still unsure.” Comments like these really helped us understand where we were in the journey of building a successful school through the process of the PLC.

Therefore, the action came in my sense-making process when I was able to articulate to the central office instructional team that we had a goal of filling in our instructional gaps next school year. We want to focus on PLC question one, which is ‘what do we want them to learn’ (Dufour, et. al, 2020). We want to create proficiency scales and utilize the science of learning to build our knowledge of instructional strategies that will span across all content areas. This specifically encompasses the essence of the school mission to educate all by not only focusing on the student’s learning, but also the teachers.

Another experience under the idea of end of the year reflection meetings, was the planning and implementation of the end of year leadership summit. As I reflected on this experience in my journals, I realized:

I have never planned an end of the year meeting before. I've been the assistant principal in this experience at this school. I've always kind of been a bystander. I just kind of did whatever I was told to do to assist in the reflection and year end planning. I helped to plan and prepare, but I wasn't the one in charge of deciding what our focus would be for the next year. (J.11 P1)

While I had attended our end of the year summit as a team member and Assistant Principal the previous two years, I had not ever been tasked with planning and leading it in the role of principal. I was becoming aware of all the parts and pieces that went into planning the meeting like the reflection of data from the entire school year as well as the goals we focused on and their level of success. I worked with my instructional team to make sure that I had a clear awareness of the meeting structure and the goal of our time with the leadership team.

My interpretation of this experience came as I reflected on the positive things that were done that impacted student learning and success. I leaned into the research around the practices that we were currently doing as well as practices that we were not yet implementing to further make sense of where we were and where we were going. I reflected on the places we had been and what made sense in terms of our next steps:

We truly worked as an instructional team to reflect on our current focus and where we've been instructionally this school year. We looked at the PLC process and what research says is the next thing to do so that we could really figure out what makes sense as the next step in our PLC journey that wouldn't feel like a brand-new thing. My goal is not to implement new thing, but just the next thing. (J.11 P2)

I then began to build a strong understanding of the process through my experience as both a novice principal as well as reflecting on our strong foundation in the process of a PLC. As a novice principal, I really wanted to learn alongside my staff, and I began to reflect on what that could look like:

I ultimately decided to call in experts to assist us and guide us along the way, because I, as a novice principle just don't have the full knowledge to lead my team alone. I really

wanted to lean into the experts that I had access to and make sure that my team also had access to those experts. I wanted to be sure I wasn't limiting them because of my new role as a principal. I wanted to send the message that I am still learning, too. (J.12 P2)

I did not want to create the persona that I was the one that knew everything there was to know about education and that I had nothing left to learn. I had the opportunity, of course, to lead this summit on my own with my own current level of knowledge, but I really wanted to allow my staff access to the information I had been learning for previous two years in my doctoral program. I also began to understand that we were going to be presenting the next thing, not a new thing, at the leadership summit because of my time spent reflecting on our strong foundation in things like collaboration, student data, goal setting and monitoring as well as celebrations and team norms.

With all that understanding I was able to take the next action step of preparing the end of the year meeting with my instructional team while using the mission as our guide. Because of my interpretation and understanding of our current state rooted in data, I planned to bring in instructional experts from Middle Tennessee State University. My professors from the Assessment, Learning and Student Success program, Dr. Carter and Dr. Dillard, agreed to join our end of the year meeting to present to the staff our next steps. We presented a focus on teaching strategies rooted in the science of learning as well as the beginning steps of the process for creating proficiency scales.

Overall, as I spent time in the research data, during the acquisition phase of the sensemaking process, another theme of Professional Learning Communities and collaboration became evident. While I was working to interpret and understand each challenge, it became clear once more that my personal reflection, experience and feelings played a significant role in how I

began to understand and eventually act within each challenge as mission continued to prove as a guiding light through each experience.

## **Instruction and Student Learning**

The scenarios that I experienced as it relates to instruction and student learning divided into two clear categories of instructional concerns and a lack of student learning and growth. As a novice principal, the challenges I faced with these two concerns was rooted in the mission to educate all. I found myself challenged to uphold the mission through a focus on instruction and student learning.

### *Instructional Concerns*

I reflected on the experience of becoming aware that our educational assistants (EAs) were not being utilized nearly at all during intervention towards the end of the school year. The expectation is that EAs are working in small groups of students every single day, in every grade level, during their intervention time. It is also expected that classroom teachers create the plans the EAs are to implement each day. While these are the expectations, I also became aware that teachers were at their capacity at the end of the year and these things were not being done with fidelity.

While the importance of using EAs was significant, I interpreted this situation through two different experiences—both as a previous classroom teacher and now a novice principal:

My very first thought and reflection was from the perspective of an upper grade teacher.

When I was in that position, I struggled to also use educational assistants effectively. I had a really hard time planning for them and knowing exactly what to tell them to do.

Now as an administrator, I have a very different perspective and understanding of

intervention and its importance. I am much less likely to be okay with educational assistants being utilized any other way other than a well planned for small group of students. (J.6 P2)

When I was a classroom teacher in the fifth grade, it was incredibly difficult for me to use EAs well. I was not able to adequately plan for them and often they were doing busy work while with them instead of intentionally planned experiences. However, as a novice principal, I now understand through research the value and importance of interventions and students being taught by a human every single day. These lessons need to be intentionally planned to use their time wisely and not be busy work that does not increase student achievement.

Through my deeper understanding, I was able to process the idea of clearing up the expectations for teachers around the use of EAs during intervention and expect them to hold tight to those parameters as it compared to leaving it how it was for the remainder of the school year. As I reflected, I realized:

It was so late in the year and biting off something so big as planning for other people was going to be a big endeavor. We would really need to spend time explaining the why behind what we were asking them to do and the reason it was so important. So, research really needed to be there. And with it being so close to testing so close to the end of the year, it really was a lot to bite off. I also had to consider that we had already been through a lot of change this year. (J.6 P3)

I knew that teachers were overwhelmed at this time of the year with preparing for state testing. It would be such a big endeavor to retrain everyone on the expectations and then hold

tight to those expectations in a different way than they had been used to for almost the entire school year.

It was a difficult situation and the action that resulted was not one that I would have preferred. While I worked to interpret and understand the situation from multiple perspectives and knew the importance of intervention as a novice principal, I knew that the teachers were also exasperated and adding something to their already full plate may do more harm than it would good. Therefore, the action that was chosen was to simply clear up the expectations for EAs through an e-mail that I would then follow up on to begin the next school year. I did not expect them to change their practices and begin holding tight to the EA usage during intervention due to the concern for teacher burnout.

Another experience that was very similar to the previously described experience was a request that was made to stop intervention time completely after state testing was completed. The acquisition of this knowledge was difficult as I considered how many people are pulled during state testing and beyond for benchmark testing that would normally assist in intervention groups and implementation. However, while I learned of the number of people intervention would not have post-state testing due to benchmarking, I still considered the fact that my own son was in intervention each day and the importance of receiving that until the end of the school year.

As I began to interpret the situation from multiple perspectives, I considered the ramifications of stopping interventions and the gap that would be widened and, in some cases, created:

I have a son in an intensive intervention, and that played a big role in my decision for this. I really know the importance of him receiving the intervention every single day. I

see the ramifications when there's a gap in his instruction with intervention. I did not want that to happen on a school wide basis. I, also having been a classroom teacher, understand the difficulty and continuing intervention, while also prepping and planning for the state test and really wanting to be able to keep your own kids for a short time to solidify everything from the year and wrap everything up. It was difficult to go one way or the other because I was able to make sense of the problem from multiple perspectives, not just as a principal and the leader of the school but also as a mother and a former educator. (J.9 P2)

I also reflected on the research that supported the need for strong, daily interventions along with tier I instruction to close instructional gaps (Hattie, 2012).

My understanding of the situation began to deepen as I considered how different the daily schedule will be during benchmark testing that lasts most of the last month of school. With the schedule changing so significantly to fit in all the testing, it makes the intervention time each day along with the tier I instructional time limits difficult, and sometimes, impossible to uphold. There are also several staff members pulled from intervention to help assist in the benchmark testing process, so keeping those groups running fully is also a challenge. While these things are true roadblocks to continuing interventions as they were, there is also the understanding that interventions close instructional gaps and the importance of students receiving both intervention and tier I instruction each day.

My reflection of this problem moved to action quickly because the time for benchmark to begin was approaching quickly when this was presented to me. While I wanted to continue intervention exactly as is because of the known benefits and its importance, I also understood we could not create time or people. With that understanding and knowledge, I was able to modify

the schedule so that intervention did in fact continue each day, but not with its original time frames. Every grade level continued intervention until the end of the school year, but they were able to complete the interventions on a modified schedule to allow for all instruction to continue until the end of the school year.

A final challenge I faced as a novice principal under the idea of instructional practices was the request to “stop teaching standards” after testing. Upon this first request, I had to ask a lot of clarifying questions to fully acquire the knowledge and awareness of what was being requested. While that was the exact question, teachers were asking if they could continue the standards but with their own materials that they do not often get to use during the school year.

I was able to interpret this request both as a teacher and as a novice principal. As a teacher in the classroom, I truly enjoyed the time after state testing that felt less stressful and rushed. During these weeks, I was able to complete novel studies and wrap up any standards I did not have data to show were mastered during the year. While I would still follow the scope and sequence, there was more freedom in what I was planning and implementing as the year closed out. While I reflected and interpreted this situation through the lens of a classroom teacher, I also recognized I was charged with a new role within the school, and I had to consider different perspectives as things were brought to me to determine. As I reflected, I realized:

I really struggled with this question because you know, we have a vision of 100% of our students being on level. Our mission every single day is to educate all in order to meet our vision of 100%. So, with the question of, ‘Do we have to continue to meet standards?’ my very first thought was, ‘Well are we at 100% proficient? If not, then why is this even a question?’ (J.10 P2)

I truly struggled to allow this at all in even the slightest amount because of our mission to educate all and see 100 percent of our students on level. I knew, through data analysis, that were not at that goal yet. So, allowing us to stop moving forward at the same pace with the same expectation for the last couple of weeks of school was a very difficult thing to even consider.

However, I understood that I had two options at hand. I could have no wiggle room at all with the teacher's choices to end the school year or I could compromise in some way that would allow teachers to have some autonomy while continuing to press towards our mission. When considering that I would not have any wiggle room allowed for the remainder of the school year, I was looking solely at the data that we were not at our goal at this time. I did not want to waste the time we were gifted with at the end of the school year because our students stay with us, and this is an opportunity to continue to close their gaps for the next school year. While reflecting on the idea of being rigid was certainly there, I also considered what it might look like to be flexible with the teachers and allow for some supplemental materials to be brought in as the finish out the scope and sequence for the year.

Ultimately, my action was rooted in the fact that I am both teacher and novice principal. I understood the gift that the end of the year is both in autonomy for teachers and time to close gaps. So, I compromised. I expected the teachers to continue with the scope and sequence as well as focusing on any gap they had data to support, all while allowing them to supplement with materials and lessons they enjoyed and loved to teach each school year.

### *Lack of Student Learning*

As a novice principal, it was difficult to lead teams towards high student achievement. A particular experience I had was with a very high achieving cohort of students coming to a grade

level that had historically not made high achievement scores and had a newer team of teachers to the grade level. Upon gaining a deeper knowledge of the situation, student benchmark data was not on track to meet the goal of achievement and growth for the cohort. This information was shared with the team, and it was not well received or understood. The reaction of the team was frustration as well as confusion. The information I shared contributed to their confusion, as it was not clearly articulated, and the data was not presented in hard-copy form.

The interpretation phase of this situation was quite substantial, as there was a lot of previous experiences for me as well as a lot of feelings from all parties. I reflected on my initial feeling and reaction to the data where I was, “feeling frustrated that we had such a high cohort with such extreme potential, and we were missing the mark.” (J.10 P3) as well as a strong feeling of being overwhelmed. I had been clear with the team from day one what they were working with in this cohort, so it felt frustrating to see that it had not turned out how we planned. After some time in my feelings, I began to interpret the situation from a more gracious perspective as I knew that clarity was needed based on their reaction.

As all of this settled in, my understanding began to grow, and I was able to reflection on a few different possible responses:

I really went through two trains of thought. Am I going to hammer down on this team and just be somewhat harsh and make sure that they are doing this the way that I think they should do it no matter what? Am I going to really be direct in that way? Or am I going to find the celebrations in the data? Am I going to find the good focus on how close they were and motivate them in that way? (J.10 P4)

I knew that if I came back to the team in a harsh and frustrated way, that my actions would upset the teachers and in turn impact student learning because if the teachers are upset, they will not be able to perform at their best. I also understood that teacher's needs were very similar to student needs. They needed to be seen and valued, and they needed the information to be presented in a different way. While the mission to educate all was being threatened, I knew that coming down too harshly on anyone would not get the result of educating all. Coming to them with frustration and disappointment would only then do the opposite of educating all.

Therefore, the action that I implemented was to go back to the team and seek clarity around their reaction. I learned what it was they did not understand, and I took the time to present the data again and make sure they understood what it was we were looking at. I modeled with them that I would expect from them as they work with students that do not perform how they might have expected as well. I provided clarity to them through the data and was sure to answer any questions they still had so we could plan to continue to work with the students until the end of the year to ensure they were achieving. I focused on the positives within the data and celebrated the wins they had achieved at that point and set goals for them to get even closer in the coming weeks.

The final scenario that I encountered as a novice principal that threatened student learning was disruptive classroom behavior. I reflected on the idea that my awareness of this situation was limited until I became the principal in the middle of the school year. The behavior we were dealing with in a classroom was severe and distracted all the students from learning. While everyone was safe, the student learning was being impacted and I had to work to truly make a change in this situation.

Interpreting this situation was quite different because I had not experienced this before as a classroom teacher and certainly not as a novice principal:

I had never really seen behaviors that I saw today as a classroom teacher. So, I didn't have these experiences myself in the classroom, so seeing them now, as an administrator, I'm trying to figure out how the teachers feel as well as how the other students in the classroom feel. How do I feel? What is it that they need in this moment? What is it that this student needs? I'm really thinking about truly just the impact that these behaviors are having on not only this kid, but all the others around them, including the staff. (J.1 P2)

Therefore, I had to really observe the situation frequently and ask a lot of questions to experts outside of the school to begin to make sense of what was happening and what could be done.

As time went on and I truly began to understand what was going on with this student behavior, I was able to consider several avenues. I considered working with the behavior specialist and behavior interventionist to create a behavior plan that could be implemented by the classroom teacher and supports given by those staff members to both the student and the teacher. I also considered how I could support the other students in the classroom and the teacher instructionally during this time. With that, I began to work with our instructional coaches to create an intensive plan of support for that classroom that included both the students and the teacher.

The distracting student behavior was impacting everyone involved in the classroom and challenging the mission because the core to educating all is that all can be educated in a safe and orderly environment free from distractions to learning, therefore my actions had to support

everyone in the classroom. The behavior team was deployed to support the student within the classroom as well as the teacher in implementing interventions and strategies to replace the behaviors. My instructional coaches created a rotation to go into the classroom every single day to assist in teaching through team teaching as well as pulling extra small groups for both math and reading. As I continued to reflect, I realized, “I went all those different avenues because I want to support the student, all the students in the classroom and I want to support the teacher. So that required a lot of different hands in the pot to be able to do those things. (J.1 P6) This truly was a situation where all hands were needed, and all hands were used to educate all.

As I finalized my data analysis for question one in looking at how I made sense of my experiences as a novice principal, a final theme of instruction and student learning became clear during the acquisition phase of sense making. Throughout the process of interpreting the situations and understanding each experience, my personal experiences and reflections on each scenario played a very important part in how I understood and chose to act within each experience.

### **Mission’s Impact on Sense-Making**

I will now continue the story from a different lens by describing the data from the journals as it is related to research question two, “what role does mission play in my sense-making process as a novice principal?” Like question one, themes emerged as the data was analyzed to show two themes. These themes were: The mission was utilized to determine the action, and the mission was considered in the process but abandoned at the action stage.

## **Mission was Utilized to Determine the Action**

The school where I lead as the principal has a very simple mission: We educate all. While the words are few and simple, the meaning is deep and profound. The idea of educating all truly encompasses *all*. We not only educate students, but we take detailed data and serve students where they are. We meet every student at the door to ensure they receive the best education possible, regardless of their story. This mission also includes our teachers and staff. We work hard to for a collaborative culture through the process of a Professional Learning Community. A PLC has one purpose, to work together collaboratively towards a common goal through the education of our staff. We can only create student learning when we are learning ourselves. This simple mission encompasses educating our parents and our community and including them in the process of their child's growth and learning. We strive to not just educate in academics, but behavior as well as emotional and social support. As a novice principal, when I reflected on the experiences I have described above, I noted that mission played a role in the majority of my experiences. However, mission did not always come into play in the same moment within the sensemaking process. Each story showed the mission being considered at one of the four stages of sense-making: acquisition, interpretation, understanding and acting.

### *Considering Mission in the Acquisition Stage*

As a novice principal, I am expected to make sense of new situations daily. It is easy to be pulled in many different directions if I do not have a compass guiding my way. The mission serves as that compass. As I reflected on my experiences in my first year as principal, I noted that some of those experiences had mission being considered from the very beginning. When I was tasked with personnel decisions, I began to see a pattern.

When hiring a growth position to add to a new team of teachers, during the acquisition stage I was looking to mission to guide the idea that educating all did not just mean our students, but also the teachers on that team. I considered that, “I didn't want to just hire someone under just one attribute or skillset. I had to look at the big picture and I had to consider what it means to educate all and that includes the ability to teach the content.” (J.3 P6) I reflected on the idea that students were expected to learn and while content can be taught, coming out of the gate with some level of content knowledge was immediately aligned to the mission and purpose of our teachers. As I continued to make sense of the situation, I understood and ultimate outcome that some experience not only positively impacts the students but also the education of the team.

As I continued to reflect on personnel decisions, I noted that when tasked with moving a teacher to a new grade level, the mission was immediately considered as I thought, “It has significantly impacted that team's collaboration level their planning and therefore their implementation of the curriculum” (J.4 P1). Mission continued to influence my perspective and thoughts throughout the entire sensemaking process. The change of a teacher from one grade level to the next was one that impacted hundreds of people from the teammates on each team, to the classrooms of students as well as their families. By not making a change, or making the wrong change, the collaboration of each team was impacted. It is through collaboration that teacher's knowledge grows and if that is threatened in anyway, not only are the teachers impacted but also their classrooms of students and their ability to learn and grow. As I worked to understand this move and its significance, I understood that if I moved the wrong teacher, I could impact the mission of educating all because that teacher could not be able to teach the content of that grade or be so frustrated with the move that they are unwilling to work collaboratively with

the new team. Ultimately, mission prevailed as the decision to move a teacher was made in such a way that both ends of the move would educate all.

The final personnel decision that showed mission being considered from the beginning stage of sense-making, acquisition, was in the naming of a new team leader for one of my grade levels. From the beginning, I was considering the goals of the school and the alignment of my leadership team to the mission of educating all as, “I looked from the perspective that I have now as a new principal and I considered what I specifically want out of a team lead when it comes to the PLC and leadership team. I considered the kind of the high expectations I have of leading the teams to a greater understanding of their craft as they are part of the mission to educate all (J.5 P2). The staff being educated really begins with my leadership team and their belief in our mission and vision, so the addition to this team had to be someone that was deeply committed to our mission. As I gained a deeper understanding of the potential candidates for this new placement, I was reminded that a team lead has a significant influence on their team in the way that they decide to move forward to collaboratively educate themselves and their students. It was imperative that the action taken aligned with our ideals and that the person chosen would bring more to the table in our quest to educate all. The person that was added to the team was someone that was committed to our school and the actions of their classroom, collaboration and community involvement to educate everyone in their path was clear therefore the obvious choice to join the leadership team.

The final story that showed mission being considered from the acquisition stage was when I was tasked with meeting with the instructional team from the central office to articulate our school goals and needs for the upcoming school year. As I began to make sense of what I was expected to present:

I began to review our data and work with my team, ask a lot of questions of where we were, where we've been and where we envisioned ourselves going as a school this next school year. I thought a lot about our mission to educate all and our vision of 100% of students on level. We had to consider what kinds of actions really needed to be taken in order to meet those goals. (J.11 P2)

I immediately rooted in our actions that align to the education of everyone I come across from the students to the community. While I began to understand how the presentation should go and the information that should be shared, I reflected on our vision of having 100 percent of our students on level and that aligning our daily actions to the mission of educating all was the only way to make that vision become a reality. I was able to articulate the current state of our school through data and use the mission to drive our needs and next steps moving into the next school year.

### *Considering Mission in the Interpretation Stage*

While mission is an essential part of a successful school (Lezotte and Snyder, 2011) it does not always stay at the top of mind from the beginning of every situation as a novice principal. As I considered the creation of our collective commitments and the interpretation of one team not being fully on board, mission did not show until that moment:

I considered going to only that one team to retrain and explain collective commitments and using that opportunity to educate them on the concept specifically. I wanted to allow them to ask any questions that they had and provide clarity around their feedback and concerns. I really looked back over my time as an educator and used that data as formative assessment data to say, 'Well, not everybody in the class needed that refresher.

There was very specific to one team.’ So, I really felt that it was most appropriate to just talk with them because no one else showed that they needed to have that conversation.

(J.7 P4)

As I began to interpret what was going on through the lens of not only my feelings, but the feelings of the teachers, I was able to consider how I felt about the importance of stepping back to take the time to redeliver information that was misunderstood or even forgotten. Instead of getting frustrated and staying there, the mission allowed me to move forward into the understanding phase of my sense making where I was able to determine the actions of educating the team on the information, they needed to understand to be able to fully commit to our values as a school.

In addition, when I was tasked with replacing a bookkeeper that had not been properly doing their job, I did not immediately consider mission:

I was really taken aback by this situation. I was thrown off guard. I was blindsided. I was frustrated and I was overwhelmed. I really had to decide very quickly who was going to replace this person and what actions we were going to take to make sure that this position was being handled correctly and that everything that had been done incorrectly was being rectified, all while still managing every other aspect of the school. (J.8 P2)

It was clear that I was overwhelmed and frustrated, and I really allowed that to cloud my thinking for a time. But I was able to hire quickly as I shifted my focus back to the goal of educating all:

This allowed me to continue the job of educating all on a larger scale because she was able to really dive into a situation that seemed to be unfixable and work

through it and fix it because of her skill set and her determination to work. She is completely self-motivated which allowed me to focus on the education of all. (J.8 P4)

It was not until I began to interpret the situation from my new role as principal that I began to consider our school mission. The idea that my time was being consumed with the bookkeeping situation was the motivation to move quickly into the understanding and acting stages where I was able to hire someone that was competent and hard-working that would allow for my time to shift back to the focus of instruction and educating all.

#### *Considering Mission in the Understanding Stage*

As I continue to reflect on experiences I encountered as a novice principal for the first time, there were moments where the idea of educating all and our school mission did not come into play until I was deeply in the understanding phase of making sense of the situations. As I was tasked with supporting a classroom of students where a major behavior disruption was happening on a regular basis, mission was considered when I began to understand the importance of not just educating in the sense of academics. When I realized I needed to support the behavioral and emotional education of one specific student, but also the education of the teacher to be able to implement the strategies that would effectively lessen the behavior so the instruction could resume around standards and learning. I reflected on the idea that:

Mission was significantly considered because of the need to educate not only the student, the staff but also the other students in the classroom. I really had to dive in and figure out what supports were needed for every single party, so that every party is learning

academically, but also educated in the way of best serving our students with high needs specifically to behavior. (J.1 P7)

I truly began to understand the importance of not only academic support from our instructional coaches, but the action also included bringing in our behavior specialist and interventionist to support the student and the teacher as they learned to replace the negative behaviors with the positive ones desired by all. This began to show mission in an entirely new light. We were not only educating all in the sense of academics, but we were also taking the time to educate all involved in all layers of meeting student and staff needs.

Specific situations as it relates to student learning and instruction also proved to have mission begin to be considered in the understanding phase. As I was supporting a specific team to grow and educate one of our highest cohorts of students, I began to understand that my frustration could negatively impact the teachers and their willingness to have open ears and minds about next steps needed to improve student outcomes as I reflected:

And really, the way that school mission played a part in this experience was that I was constantly reminded that my goal is all and that doesn't just mean the kids. That also means my teachers. So, when I looked at it from a standpoint of educating all I really wanted to educate my teachers on the importance of focusing on the good, focusing on celebration, on the 1% wins and how close they were to their goal and how that impacts their student's ability to work for them. I really wanted to educate them on that and have them have that same experience with me, so that they can reproduce that with their kids. (J.2 P7)

I truly had to understand the importance of pausing to reflect on the value of educating

not only the students, but the teachers and spend time focused on the strategies that would support their efforts to grow an already high cohort of students. Ultimately, I had to act in the best interest of the teachers and not root in my feelings and frustrations that it was not currently going in the direction that I would expect it to go. I had to educate them in the current state of the students, rooted in data, and use that data to determine their next instructional steps so they would ultimately meet their goal of educating the students in front of them.

A second experience around instruction and student learning was when I was informed that educational assistants (EAs) were not properly being utilized during intervention. The mission did not begin to play a role in my sense making until I reflected on the level of work the teachers were tasked with doing at the time of year this was presented:

It was something that we felt like was going to benefit the mission to actually not require the EA usage to change in that moment, rather we would lay down some expectations. But we would not necessarily really revamp that program and that deep expectation altogether, because doing that might have actually gone the other direction for our mission because we would exasperate and exhaust our teachers. (J.6 P4)

While mission in the other scenarios was guiding my understanding and actions to step towards more instruction or improvement in the situation, in this case, mission played a role in causing me to step back. While I understood the importance of using EAs effectively during intervention, I also understood the level of work that requires teachers to put in. In the long run, I do expect EAs to be used and teachers to be planning for those experiences. However, that was not something that I was going to begin to require at the end of the school year. Being a novice principal that took over in the middle of a school year, I had to consider the things that have been previously expected of teachers when I was not the one placing those expectations for everyone

to understand. With that, the mission allowed me to consider the other side of the coin and the frustration and possible shut down that I would create by expecting more of them in the busiest time of year. So, instead of making a major change, I simply clarified expectations and noted that in the future this would be an expectation from the beginning.

Finally, as I began to plan for our end of the year leadership summit for the first time, I reflected on the idea that I had never done this before, and I may need some assistance:

I am still learning as a novice principal. I am still working to research, to stay current and to tap into resources that I have through my doctoral program to learn how to lead and what best next steps are. So, I really wanted to give my team that same opportunity. I wanted them to access to that same great information. I didn't want to limit them, because I am just learning myself. I really wanted to learn alongside them this day. (J.12 P3)

I initially wanted to lead the summit myself and walk us into our next steps, but I began to understand that it was going to be just as important for me to learn alongside my staff and give them access to the professionals I had been working with throughout my doctoral studies to walk our entire team through the process of our next steps on the PLC journey. I truly began to understand that educating all also included me, and that I needed to model my growth journey alongside them. Both of my professors from my program came to the leadership summit to teach us all about specific learning strategies and the creation of proficiency scales as we take the next step in the process of educating all.

### *Considering Mission in the Action Stage*

The final stage of the sense making process is when I take steps towards some type of action. Previously described stories all had mission playing a large role in the process at some

point prior to the action, but there were times where mission did not enter my processing until the final stage. When I had to consider if intervention would continue fully after state testing and during benchmark testing, I weighed a lot of different options that would potentially take intervention away in some form from a lot of our students:

I use school mission in this process because with the goal of educating all we know the importance of both intervention below grade level, and tier one instruction. So, in order for a student to close their gap, they're going to have to have both of those things every single day, if at all possible. (J.9 P4)

However, when it came down to finally moving forward with a plan, the mission prevailed and drove my actions. I was not able to continue intervention at its normal time and rate as it did the rest of the school year, but our mission to educate all and get 100 percent of our students on level, was the sole reason I worked to create modified schedule that would allow intervention classes to continue for all students until the end of the school year.

At the very end of the school year, we meet together with our leadership team to reflect on the success of the school year and make plans for the upcoming year. Being a novice principal in my first year, I had never had to make plans for this meeting myself. As I made sense of the problem and began to interpret it through reflection and into the understanding of our foundation, I was surprised not to see mission visibly until the action stage of planning. Specifically, the planning was around instructional strategies and creating proficiency scales to ensure we were all prepared to educate every student that came across our path, regardless of the level at which they arrived. The idea of educating all really came into play as I did not want to do something new, but I wanted to simply take the next step in our PLC journey and support teachers as they commit to educating all.

## **Mission Considered but Abandoned**

Research supports the use of a mission to allow everyone to row in the same direction (Dufour et. al, 2021; Lezotte and Snyder, 2011). Throughout my first year as a principal, mission continuously played a significant role as I made sense of the experiences I encountered and worked to align my actions with the mission. However, that was not always the case. There were times, though rare, where mission was considered and thought through, but previous experiences as a teacher paired with the lack of experience as a principal caused the mission to be abandoned.

Specifically, this idea shows up in two of my experiences around the PLC expectations and instruction after state testing. When teachers create PLC agendas, the expectation is that the items discussed during that time directly relate to student learning or their professional development. Upon my attendance at a PLC meeting, I began to realize that the agenda had items not at all related to student learning and the topic of conversation was trailing away even from the things that were listed on the agenda. I considered saying something to get the conversation back on track and rooted in the education of students or themselves, but I also considered what it used to feel like as a teacher for your administration to railroad a meeting so, “I chose to remain silent; I think because so many of them were off task. And I wasn't exactly sure what to say in that moment.” (J1. P5) I was concerned about building trust with the teams in my new role, so in the end my action of being completely silent and not addressing it with the team themselves showed a complete abandonment of the mission to educate all as I allowed time to be wasted in a collaborative meeting.

I was also approached about the idea of veering off from standards and curriculum after testing for the month of May and allowing teachers to teach from their old plans and supplement the curriculum with novels and materials they want to share with students during that time. In the

beginning stage of making sense of this situation, I considered simply saying no because the mission is to educate all and to get to 100 percent of our students on level and that requires adhering to this mission daily. However, as I continued to interpret the situation and understand it through the lens of my previous experiences as a teacher and my current knowledge as a novice principal, I began to sway. I began to consider allowing them to supplement and teach unit they enjoyed teaching. I knew the stress level of that time of year, and I also considered my experiences of teaching novel studies and fun units to my own students to end our time together:

So, this one I would say is one of the one of the rare times where while I was considering the mission and vision, I allowed for some of that autonomy and memory of being in the classroom to kind of trump my decision when it came to the mission. (J.10 P4)

While I knew the mission to educate all was required every single day in order to meet our vision, I abandoned that idea when I allowed them to veer off for the month of May. The mission did not trump my experiences as a classroom teacher, even though it was strongly considered and weighed in as the most important direction to move.

## **Conclusion**

This chapter set out to describe the examination of my sense-making process as a novice principal that experienced many new challenges each day. It also reviewed the role that school mission played throughout each experience as I worked to make sense of my new role. The questions that I explored and answered were:

1. In what ways do I make sense of experiences as a novice principal?
2. What role does mission play in my sense-making process?

I used the theoretical framework of sense-making that includes acquisition, interpretation, understanding and acting to describe each situation as it unfolded. I also used this same framework as I described the role that mission played in my understanding and actions as a novice principal. It became evident throughout data collection and analysis my sense-making followed patterns and themes of personnel decision, PLC and collaboration, and instruction and student learning. It also became evident that mission played a much larger role in a positive action towards educating all than it did becoming abandoned and allowing some other influence on the action outcome. In the following chapter, I will discuss the implications on future research and my suggestions, based on my data, for novice principals in their new role.

## CHAPTER V

### DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

#### Introduction

This qualitative action research study was conducted during the 2024 Spring semester of the school year at a small, rural elementary school in Tennessee. The study focused on a novice principal's sense making processes related to leadership experiences considering the school's mission. As the subject and sole participant in this study, I kept a journal of experiences over a three-month period from March to May. I was serving as my school's assistant principal, when in November of the school year, the current principal left for another position. I was then named the school's principal, during the middle of the school year, and was thrust into a wide range of new experiences all while trying to keep the ship sailing in the current direction, as the school was named a level 5 reward school and one showing great success. During this time, the experiences ranged from hiring new teachers for the next school year, planning for district meetings and responding to benchmark data that was not meeting the goals set from the beginning of the school year. Other experiences included hiring a replacement bookkeeper and rectifying wrongly kept books, choosing new team leaders and responding to disruptive student behavior for the month leading up to the state test. As a novice principal, I worked to make sense of and respond to each different experience while keeping the school mission central in my thinking.

Throughout the study, I collected data through weekly journal responses to six prompts. As the journals were completed weekly, at the conclusion of each experience, I worked to analyze my responses as I went through each experience. I looked for the impact the mission was

having on my sense-making process and noted where mission began to be utilized and to what extent, if any, the mission played a role in the outcome of each situation. Throughout the journaling process, I utilized a critical friend, my assistant principal, to read through three journals and respond with an outside perspective to the prompts and my responses. My critical friend allowed for feedback that continued to keep me looking objectively at my data as I analyzed each journal entry.

### **Summary of Results**

During this qualitative action research study, I was able to fully participate with honesty and transparency as I reflected in a weekly journal on experiences I encountered as a novice principal. I was able to utilize my critical friend, my assistant principal, during the data collection process by allowing her to read three journal entries as the data was being collected and reflected upon. She wrote reflection journals about the content of my journals that allowed me to reflect on my own bias throughout the process as well as interpret my results from a perspective other than my own. Once the coding process was completed and findings were analyzed, my critical friend was utilized once more as an outside perspective to review the data, findings and coding process to give feedback on the validity of the data collection as well as outcomes. The method of a weekly reflective journal and the use of a critical friend allowed for meaningful data collection.

The entirety of the study was written to answer the following research questions:

1. In what ways do I make sense of experiences as a novice principal?
2. What role does mission play in my sense-making process?

Once the research questions were formed and the data collection method of reflective journals selected, the following questions were written to align to both research questions as I completed my weekly reflection on the experiences I had as a novice principal:

1. What is a challenge or problem I face today/ this week?
2. How did I make sense of the challenge or problem?
3. What possible actions did I explore?
4. What action did I ultimately decide?
5. Why did I decide to take that action?
6. How did I use the school mission in this process?
7. What am I learning about the ways I arrive at an action as a novice principal?

The questions were written in a way that allowed me to interpret my data into four categories as they relate to the sense-making process: acquisition, interpretation, understanding and action (Turner, et al, 2023). Questions one and two focused on the acquisition and interpretation stage of sense-making where questions three through five allowed me to focus on the understanding and acting stages. Journal questions six and seven focused on the school mission and allowed me to answer research question two. The tables below show each research question aligned to the answers I found within the study based on my own answers to my reflective journal questions that were then coded using *inVivo*, descriptive and pattern codes.

Table 5.1: Research Question 1 Summary

<b>Research Question 1: In what ways do I make sense of experiences as a novice principal?</b>
<p>Summary:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• The sense-making process is completed in four stages: acquisition, interpretation, understanding and action</li><li>• During the acquisition phase, the themes that emerged were personnel, PLC and collaboration and instruction and student learning. Mission infrequently made an appearance in the data during this stage of sense-making.</li><li>• During the interpretation stage, the themes that were determined were previous and never seen experiences, feelings of both the administrator and the teachers and personal reflection.</li><li>• During the understanding and acting stage, mission began to be seen frequently and in two themes: the mission being utilized to further understanding and act, or the mission being abandoned during the acting stage.</li></ul>

Table 5.2: Research Question 2 Summary

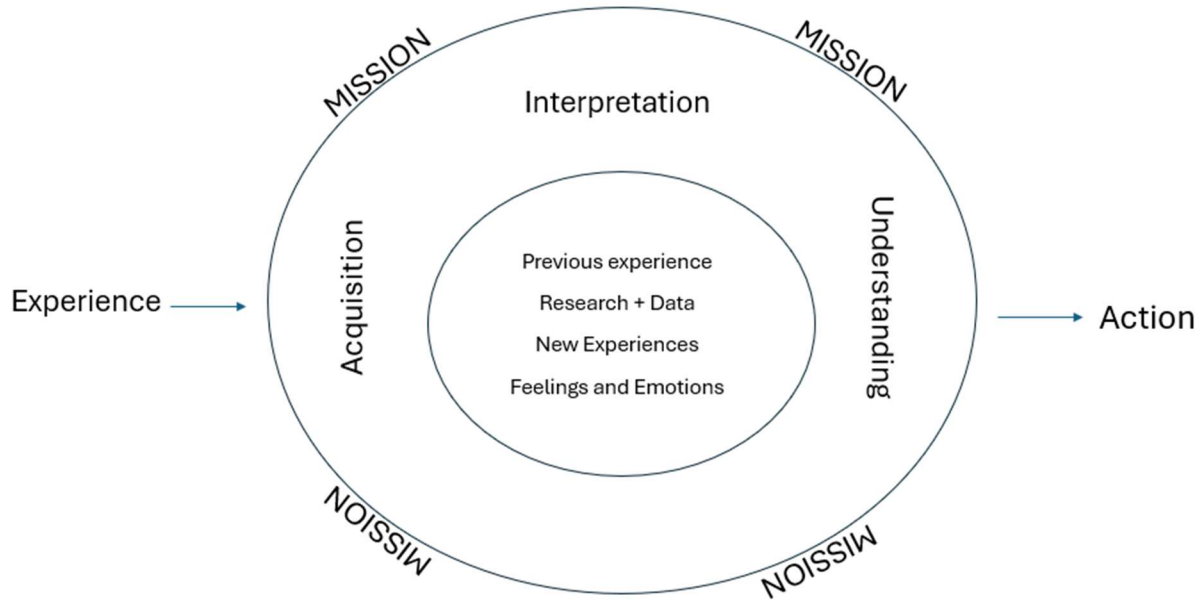
<b>Research Question 2: What role does mission play in my sense-making process?</b>
<p>Summary:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• The mission was utilized to further understanding and act.</li><li>• The mission was abandoned during the acting stage.</li></ul>

### **Discussion of Findings**

Throughout the research study, the goal remained to take a deep look at the sense-making process of myself as a novice principal as I worked to keep the mission central. Reflective journals were kept on a weekly basis over the course of three months, where I spent time reflecting on different types of experiences that ranged from personnel decisions that were specific to instruction such as teaching position hires and placement of team leads to decisions

that were outside of the specific realm of instruction such as hiring a bookkeeper for the front office. Below is a chart describing the theoretical framework that remained central to the study.

Figure 5.1: Theoretical Framework



The theoretical framework then played a significant role in the coding process as categories, patterns and themes emerged. Those can be found described in the figures below.

Table 5.3 Themes Found During Sense-Making Process

<b>Themes during the stage of Acquisition</b>	<b>Themes during the stage of Interpretation</b>	<b>Themes during the stage of Understanding</b>	<b>Themes during the stage of Action</b>
Personnel	Experiences (both previous and new)	Mission was utilized	Mission was utilized
PLC and Collaboration	Feelings (both administrator and teacher)	Mission was abandoned	Mission was abandoned
Instruction and Student Learning	Personal Reflection		

*Table 5.4: Table of Categories to Themes Related to each Question*

	Categories	Themes
Question 1	Acquisition Interpretation Understanding Action	Personnel PLC and Collaboration Instruction and Student Learning
Question 2	Acquisition Interpretation Understanding Action	Mission was considered and utilized  Mission was considered and abandoned

*Shortcomings and Roadblocks*

As the data indicates, it becomes evident that there are shortcomings and roadblocks that keep the novice principal from acting within the mission as so desired. There are several different lenses through which new experiences are seen, such as whether that experience is brand new or has been experienced in some capacity before, the consideration of the feelings of both me as the administrator as well as the feelings of the teachers and staff, and finally the concept of acting in the moment or taking time to reflect and then act.

When I came upon an experience that I had never encountered before, a recurring roadblock was time. Mission did not show up as soon as it did when the experience was familiar, therefore the actions taken tended to be delayed as well as not as strongly rooted in the mission, sometimes being abandoned altogether. When I had experienced something similar prior to that moment as a novice principal, I tended to move quicker into the action and mission became evident earlier in my sense-making process. Thus, time became of the essence and if the action was delayed, it often showed that the mission was put aside. The mission did not always prevail, and the decisions made, and communication shared became confusing and often disconnected.

As experiences in my journey as a novice principal continued, I also reflected on the feelings of both me and the staff I was interacting with at the time. When feelings became heightened and consisted of frustration and stress, I often shied away from the mission. The mission holds us accountable, and there were times where I let things go or ignored them completely for fear of making those feelings worse and the level of stress deeper. While the mission can help me remain aligned to the same goal school wide, I found myself analyzing the way staff felt, as well as my own feelings, and making a decision that might make someone ‘feel better’ instead of the accountability that the mission would have upheld.

The final challenge of keeping the mission central became that of acting right as the situation was unfolding or taking time to reflect before acting. When I was able to take time to reflect on the situation at hand and truly weigh out different paths to take, I more often stayed in line with the mission. I was able to regulate previously discussed emotions and get the input of my instructional team and their experiences, that then most often lead to an action aligned to our school mission. When I was charged with acting more swiftly and within the moment, I found myself abandoning the mission more frequently as I more often let the feelings of the room dictate the outcome.

While these shortcomings and roadblocks were experienced, it has become evident through this study, if a novice principal can keep the mission central, even in a challenging moment, the outcome will continue to be aligned schoolwide, and clarity provided for all.

#### *To Compromise or Not to Compromise*

As a novice principal, I worked to keep the mission central to allow for clarity and cohesiveness across the board. It is important as a leader, according to DuFour et al., to

determine what can be held "loose or tight" (2020). The mission helped me to maintain, at times, a clear line. There were moments where I would hold tight to the mission within my chosen action such as the outcome of a hiring decision or a teacher placement. In other instances, I found that the situation could be looser in relation to upholding the mission such as the autonomy of teachers in relation to the content during certain times of the year.

Previously it was shown that mission was compromised due to timing, feelings or a lack of experience, but there are more times within the study and the data that mission was not abandoned, and the outcome was positively aligned to the school mission. There were moments where the mission was abandoned for the purpose of not overwhelming a situation that was already significantly stressful. It became abandoned when moments would come across to staff as too heavy handed, and as a novice principal, I was still trying to determine where on the leadership spectrum I needed to be to produce success. However, more times than not throughout this study, mission was the center of the sense-making process, showing up from the acquisition stage through the acting stage. When mission remained throughout the entire process, the outcome was clearly aligned to the school mission of educating all and the clarity was seen from the administration to the students. When I chose to root in the mission, I was able to create explanations that were aligned across the school and allowed students, staff and community members to have clarity and understanding. It also allowed for more buy-in as the consistency was there, regardless of the topic. In the below figure, the data collected in inVivo codes show the consistency with which the last two questions were answered rooted in the mission.

*Figure 5.2: Action Rooted in School Mission*

Question	Response/Codes
Why did I decide to take that action?	Mission used to educate students and staff. Leadership positions impact students and teachers. I wanted to learn alongside them. Educating all includes Educational Assistants. I wanted to educate them in the data.
How did I use the school mission in this process?	Used the mission to act. Reminded the goal is to educate all. Mission drove each conversation. Educate all is both students and teachers. Decision was rooted in the mission. Held accountable to the mission. Balancing mission with expectations.

*Clear is Kind*

The school mission’s goal is to give a target for which everyone in the school can aim. This target is set for everyone from the students in the classroom, to the teachers, the front office staff, the community and the administration. Each stakeholder is responsible for not only knowing the mission but acting within that guide. While it provides a roadmap to the destination and allows for clarity to be provided when confusion ensues, if the mission is not consistently utilized and communicated, the principal can have a false sense of security. While through this study, it was evident that as a novice principal, I kept the mission central, there were still times where my staff or students became confused by expectations or trainings. There were opportunities where I had to go back to teams of teachers or individuals to provide more understanding. While those moments happened, it was evident that the retraining remained

rooted in the mission, so while confusion may have happened, it was rectified in a swift manner in large part, because we were easily turned back to the same page.

### **Implications for Practice**

As the research study concluded, it became evident that mission was central in the majority of the sense-making process as well as the actions that were taken within my experiences. The table below helps to show how mission is interwoven into the entire process from beginning to end:

Table 5.5: Mission and the Sense-making process

Key Reflection	Sensemaking	Role of the Mission	Tensions	The role of mission in sensemaking
Personnel Decisions	Old and new experiences; Feelings of the administrator and feelings of the staff; personal reflection.	Mission was used to determine candidates chosen as well as teacher placements and new team leaders.	Looking at experience (number of years) verses belief in the mission regardless of years' experience.	Mission was considered in every stage: acquisition, interpretation, understanding and action.
Professional Learning Communities and Collaboration	Old and new experiences; Feelings of the administrator and feelings of the staff; personal reflection.	Mission was used to ensure that the educators within the building also had access to research-based practices. Mission was used to provide clarity and retraining as needed.	Determining if I would lead the pack alone or bring outside assistance to ensure I was included in the education of all.	Mission was considered in every stage: acquisition, interpretation, understanding and action.
Instruction and Student learning	Old and new experiences; Feelings of the administrator and feelings of the staff; personal reflection.	Mission was used to determine which professionals would provide support in needed situations as well as actions that teachers needed to take based on data.	Deciding when it would be appropriate to hold tight to the mission or to let the mission fall to the background.	Mission was considered in every stage: acquisition, interpretation, understanding and action.

### *Challenges of Keeping the Mission Central*

The goal of this action research study rested in the idea of keeping the mission central in a novice principal's experiences that led to action. While this study offered many examples of this happening on a regular basis, it did not come without its challenges, among which were many. The challenges consisted of a range of experiences such as the volume of actions expected to be taken along with the different types of actions experienced.

During the data collection process, a gamut of experiences was reflected upon while I transitioned from the assistant principal to the principal in the middle of the school year. While learning my new role and working to make sense of each new experience as it came, I held the mission at the center, but I did not always err on the side of an action that was rooted in the school mission. When faced with a PLC meeting that was significantly off task from the focus of student learning, I reflected upon the school mission, but I did not allow the mission to guide my response. Instead, my feelings of insecurity and uncertainty in my new role overcame the mission and it was abandoned as actions were taken and ultimately silence in the moment was chosen. While there was not an experience where mission did not show up at some point in the sense-making process, there was more than one occasion where mission did not prevail. A second example where mission was considered, but ultimately my own previous experiences and feelings drove the outcome, was when I was asked if teachers could work on things outside of the scope and sequence after state testing was completed. While mission was strongly considered in this circumstance as the goal of reaching all students at 100% was at the forefront of my sense making process, I allowed for the previous feelings I experienced as a classroom teacher to drive the ultimate outcome to veer off from the scope for the last two to three weeks of school. I knew the importance of our time and how our mission was not just about that current moment but how

those actions would bleed into the next school year as the time being spent on closing gaps was essential before and after the state test. However, once again, my own emotions and experiences prevailed, and I did not hold tight to the mission as I allowed for some veering off from the scope and sequence to allow for some ‘fun’ activities to be done to round out the school year.

Overall, throughout this study, the school mission to educate all was at the center and the driving force for the actions taken as each new experience was interpreted and understood. However, there were times where previous experiences, emotions and insecurities were the cause for the mission being abandoned and actions taken that were not ultimately rooted in educating all. Keeping the mission central during the sense-making process allowed for me to take actions that were overwhelmingly aligned and rooted in the mission as the outcomes could have easily been disconnected and misaligned due to the amount of variety in experiences a novice principal is faced with on a daily and even moment by moment basis.

A range of experts have advocated for instructional leadership as the primary focus of a principal’s work (Lezotte and Snyder, 2011; Stronge 2021; Bryk 2010). While this is assuredly the one of the most important and significant of roles played by the principal, it has been made clear by this study that the school leader’s role is vast. The principal is the instructional leader, the manager of the front office and bookkeeping, the head of human resources and teacher placement, the disciplinarian and liaison between all parties from the classroom to the community, to the parents to the central office. With the expectation that the principal should be able to change hats at the turn of a dime, there must be something put in place to guide the principal as they change lanes so frequently and so swiftly. This research study shows that when the mission is kept in the center of the sense-making process, the principal can take action steps that align to that mission, regardless of the current hat they are wearing.

### *Keeping the Mission Central: School and District Level*

Based on the research found and analyzed in this study, the following recommendations should be considered. As a new principal begins to understand their new role, it becomes important that they are aware of the mission of their school. The principal should take time to educate their staff on the importance of school mission and the expectation that everyone is rowing in the same direction. If the mission of their school does not exist or no one is aware, the first step would be to implement a schoolwide mission that everyone understands, has input in creating and can commit to. The principal would then begin to navigate their new position through the lens of the mission, working to make sense of the experiences they encounter through their previous experiences, feelings and reflections.

As a novice principal begins their journey as the leader of their school, it will become imperative that they reflect on their daily experiences and actions taken to determine what their outcomes are aligned to. The principals will need to focus on their actions to determine if they are steering their ship in the same direction with each opportunity, or if they are taking several different twists and turns, in the long run getting off course and missing their destination. A weekly reflection journal should be kept reviewing the outcomes from the week. The reflection should include questions that will guide them in a reflection on whether their actions are aligned to their school mission entirely, or if they are regularly missing their mark. It becomes the moment-by-moment expectation of the school principal to reflect on the actions they take to determine if those actions are aligned to the mission or if the mission was taken into consideration before acting. As the principal works to provide clarity to their staff and lead the students and community all to higher student outcomes, the mission remaining central in their

thinking is essential. The regular reflection of understanding circumstances and analyzing outcomes is a critical step in a successful school rooted in the school mission.

It is not only important that a novice principal keep the mission central for their own understanding and actions, but it is also crucial for classroom teachers to understand the mission and begin acting rooted in the same expectation. While a leader can root in the mission personally, if the staff is not truly clear on the mission and the steps and actions that align to that mission, confusion can still ensue as others are interpreting the circumstance from their own perspective that is being guided by their personal mission, if the school mission has not been made evident and expected to be used regularly.

As these implications for site-based changes are explored, it also becomes essential that these same ideas are explored on a district-wide level. The same processes should be implemented and worked through to determine the district-wide mission and training of central office staff. As they are having experiences that lead to daily actions that impact each school, the lack of a mission to guide their steps could cause significant disruptions in district-wide initiatives as they are incorrectly implemented in different schools across the district.

#### *Future Novice Principals: Making the Mission Matter*

As I have walked this path of becoming a principal and all the challenges that come with it, there are a few recommendations I feel essential to share for any future novice principal that finds themselves in the throes of what Spilane and Lee call “total responsibility” (2014). As the journey of a novice principal begins, it will become evident very quickly that everything within the building, every decision, every experience, every success and every failure, are in the lane of the principal. It is their responsibility to wear every hat and wear it well. With that expectation to

change lanes at the drop of a hat, it is imperative that the novice principal have something to light their way. The north star and guiding light of every novice principal can be what Lezotte and Snyder say is a “clear and focused mission” (2011).

As the novice principal works to determine the mission that will guide their way, it will then become essential that the mission is shared out to their staff not only with their words, but through their actions. Every action taken can be seen through the lens of the mission. When the lens becomes fogged and the mission hard to see, the actions of the principal can become disjointed and cause confusion for those they lead. If the mission is clearly communicated and the roots are deeply planted, when the tasks become overwhelming, the gift of rooting in the mission becomes clarity and swift responses in high-stress experiences. As a novice principal has an experience they have never before encountered, and they are unsure what direction to go or which action to take, having a clear mission at the forefront of their mind, guiding their way, will allow for confidence in their actions and a cohesiveness across their building.

### **Future Research**

A future study should consist of three to five novice principals that would collect data through reflective journaling on the sense-making process and the school mission’s impact on their actions within the process. The novice principals would first need to be educated on not only the importance of a school mission, but also how to implement a school-wide mission that is adopted by all. The novice principals would then need to be trained on the sense-making process and the way to journal their experiences in a reflective way, rooted in both sense-making and the school mission. The research would then seek to understand the different perspectives of novice principals as they take on their new role in potentially different sized schools with different supports and expectations of their superiors, along with different scenarios of the type

of leadership they follow and the commitment level of their staff. A second part of future research that should be considered is the addition of other types of data to confirm or deny the impact that a focus on the school mission has on student outcomes. This research should be conducted by the addition of student data trends over multiple years of a mission focused school as well as formative data assessments that are tracked over the course of one to three years.

Another facet that should be studied is the impact that the school mission has on parents and community members as it pertains to their support for their student and local school's success. This study should consist of parent and community training on the importance and impact of a school mission specific to the role these two stakeholders play in the process. The study should then collect data in the form of parent and community surveys that are rooted in their student's and school's classroom assessment data as well as perspectives on their student's and school's success. Another form of data to be collected in this study should be a focus group that would consist of parents and community members as they reflect at the beginning of a school year as well as the end of a school year to show the impact of mission over time.

While the school mission begins with the leadership, it is imperative that it makes it to the ground floor of the classroom. A future study should include a close look at the impact mission has on the sense-making process of classroom teachers and the actions they take as they are similarly bombarded with initiative after initiative, parent and community expectations, school-wide expectations as well as student behavior that impacts student learning. Research should include teacher survey data as well as individual teacher classroom data on achievement and student growth. As the limitations to the study will show, the future research on this topic would benefit from widening the scope of research from the limitation of just one novice principal and school to the perspective and view of multiple novice principals and their schools.

## **Limitations with Study**

Although this study was intentionally designed to be a reflective and singular action research study, this study is limited in scope due to those decisions. Because this study only looked at the perspective of one novice principal during the end of a school year where there was an administrative change midyear, this created a unique perspective. This design allowed for me as the researcher to only look at myself and my own school, without having the perspective of other novice principals to compare.

While intentional in design, this research study only utilized the reflective journals of one administrator along with the use of their critical friend. Considering opening the study up to more than one novice principal along with the possibility of teacher survey data around the school mission would have allowed for a broader perspective to compare outcomes and themes.

## **Conclusion**

This research study began with the goal of understanding the sense-making process of a novice principal as well as how the school mission played a role in that process. As I began to reflect on my own practice as a novice principal and analyze how mission played a part in the outcome of each experience, I began to understand that without a guiding light and a target for which to aim, my actions became disjointed and easily influenced. Even when mission was present, if it was abandoned at any stage, the outcome became rooted in something other than educating all. At every turn, the novice principal is expected to analyze a situation, that is most likely new, and often quickly act. The role of the principal is all encompassing, and without the lens of the mission, the responses to each scenario can become disjointed and cause confusion for those they lead. Without the protection of the mission, the novice principal becomes vulnerable to a 'yes' at every turn, causing more initiatives and expectations not only on

themselves, but the faculty they lead. The mission plays a crucial role for a novice principal as they make sense of their experiences and gain the wisdom and strength to say 'no' to the things that get in the way of positive outcomes for all.

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