

Leading Inclusive Education Without a Map: Principals' Sensemaking, Preparation, and Confidence

Abstract

As global education systems expand commitments to inclusive education, principals are increasingly expected to lead specialized instruction without the preparation to do so. This qualitative study examines how school principals make sense of their instructional leadership responsibilities in special education. Findings reveal that limited preparation, contextual ambiguity, and equity-driven beliefs shape principals' confidence and decision-making, underscoring the need to strengthen leadership preparation for inclusive education in complex, evolving educational systems.

Across education systems, principals are positioned as instructional leaders accountable for ensuring equitable learning opportunities for all students, including those with disabilities. The main argument centers on a key gap: most leadership preparation programs stress compliance and administration but devote insufficient attention to the nuanced instructional aspects of special education. As a result, principals must interpret ambiguous expectations and make critical instructional decisions with limited training—often under uncertain conditions. Existing research details preparation gaps but less is understood about how principals make meaning of their roles amid these demands. To address this, the current study examines how principals construct understanding and respond to their instructional leadership responsibilities in special education.

Grounded in Sensemaking Theory (Weick, 1995), this study conceptualizes leadership as an interpretive process shaped by experience, social interaction, and contextual cues. Sensemaking provides a lens for understanding how principals notice and interpret challenges, draw on prior knowledge and beliefs, and act in response to complex and often ambiguous instructional situations. This framework is particularly well-suited to special education contexts, where instructional practices are highly individualized, expectations vary across settings, and leaders must balance pedagogical, organizational, and ethical considerations. This study employed a basic qualitative design within a constructivist paradigm. Participants included four campus administrators (principals and assistant principals) from two public school districts serving diverse student populations. Participants were selected through purposive sampling based on their responsibility for supervising special education instruction. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews lasting 30–45 minutes and were transcribed verbatim. Data analysis followed Braun and Clarke's (2006) thematic analysis approach, including iterative coding, category development, and theme refinement. Sensemaking theory guided the interpretation of how participants constructed meaning in relation to their leadership roles.

Three themes emerged. First, limited preparation led principals to rely on experiential and social sensemaking. Participants reported minimal special education training and learned through on-the-job experience, collaboration, and real-time problem-solving. Second, principals' confidence varied by context. They felt more confident in familiar areas, such as inclusion and general pedagogy, but lacked confidence in more complex settings, including behavioral programs, autism support, and early childhood education. Confidence developed over time through exposure. Third, equity-oriented beliefs guided decisions. Principals relied on beliefs

about fairness and expectations for students with disabilities to address challenges, especially when formal knowledge was lacking.

The findings suggest that instructional leadership in special education is an ongoing interpretive process shaped by preparation gaps, contextual complexity, and value-driven reasoning. The study extends sensemaking theory into inclusive education contexts, showing how principals develop confidence and enact leadership amid uncertainty. Key implications for leadership preparation and professional development include the need for practice-based learning opportunities, sustained support structures, and explicit attention to inclusive and equity-oriented leadership. For policymakers and practitioners, these findings indicate the importance of designing training programs that build evidence-based strategies, foster collaborative problem-solving, and provide ongoing mentorship. Although conducted in the United States, this study underscores a broader international challenge: equipping school leaders to navigate the complexities of inclusive education in diverse systems.