

Principal's Leadership Based on Sensemaking and Seizing in the Implementation of Education Policies in High School

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Article Info

Article history:

Accepted: 24 January 2026

Publish: 04 Februari 2026

Keywords:

Leadership of the principal;

Sensemaking;

Seizing;

Policy implementation;

High School;

Abstract

Rapid and continuous changes in education policy have placed high schools in a complex, ambiguous, and uncertain organizational condition. In this context, school principals are not only required to ensure administrative compliance with policies, but also to interpret policies and convert them into contextual strategic decisions and actions. This study aims to analyze the process of sensemaking of school principals in understanding education policies, examine the seizing process in strategic decision-making and mobilization of school resources, and explain the relationship between sensemaking and seizing in the leadership practice of school principals. This study uses a qualitative approach with a case study design. Data was collected through in-depth interviews with principals, observation of leadership practices, and analysis of school policy documents. Data analysis is carried out in a qualitative descriptive manner through the stages of data reduction, data presentation, and conclusion drawn. The results of the study show that sensemaking plays a role as a cognitive and interpretive foundation for school principals in understanding education policy as a transformation instrument oriented to the needs of students. The seizing process can be seen in data-driven strategic decision-making, program prioritization, and allocation of school resources to support policy implementation. The linkage between sensemaking and seizing forms an adaptive leadership pattern that allows schools to respond to educational policy dynamics more effectively and sustainably. This research contributes to the development of educational leadership studies by offering a sensemaking and seizing based on school principal leadership frameworks that are relevant to the context of high schools in Indonesia

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1. INTRODUCTION

Senior high schools (SMA) as educational organizations are in an increasingly complex dynamic of change along with the development of national education policies, demands for public accountability, and the acceleration of digital transformation in school management. Dynamic education policies, such as curriculum changes, literacy strengthening, and digitalization of learning, require schools to not only comply with regulations administratively, but also to be able to implement them adaptively according to the context and characteristics of the educational unit (Hariyadi et al., 2023) . In this situation, the principal plays a strategic role as the leader of the educational

organization. The principal not only functions as a policy implementer, but also as a key actor who interprets the policy, communicates the meaning to the school community, and makes strategic decisions so that the policy can be realized in learning practices and school governance (Mahfud, 2020). Various studies show that the implementation of education policies at the school level still faces a number of challenges, including differences in understanding between school residents, resistance to change, and limited leadership capacity in managing organizational change (Yasin & Cornelius Siagian, 2025).

The study of educational leadership has tended to focus on normative approaches, such as transformational, instructional, and distributive leadership. These approaches make an important contribution to understanding the role of school principals in improving teacher performance and school quality (Frølich et al., 2025). However, this approach does not fully explain how principals interpret ambiguous and complex policies, and how these meanings translate into strategic decisions and concrete actions at the school level.

In the perspective of organizational theory, the concept of sensemaking put forward by Weick emphasizes that organizational actors build meaning through the process of interpretation of uncertain and ambiguous situations (Weick & Quinn, 1999). Sensemaking allows leaders to understand what's going on, why it's happening, and how the organization should respond to the situation. Meanwhile, in the framework of dynamic capabilities, Teece places seizing as the ability of organizations and their leaders to seize opportunities, make strategic decisions, and allocate resources to respond to changes in the environment (Woeleert & Stensaker, 2025).

“A sensemaking approach to strategy making: The role of the leader in times of ambiguity” underlining that the process of sensemaking not only gives meaning, but helps leaders create a common understanding and strategic acumen in ambiguous situations something that in turn drives better strategic decisions within the organization (Fahey & Saint-Onge, 2024). Sensemaking is understood as an automated process of communication and interpretation that allows members of an organization to create a shared understanding of ambiguous and uncertain reality. This has implications for actions taken collectively within the organization. Mbalyohere (2026) Integrating Sensemaking assumptions into the Dynamic Capabilities framework, shows that interpretation of meaning and strategic actions (sensing, seizing, and reconfiguring) are interrelated in the process of organizational adaptation to external ambiguity (Mbalyohere & Lawton, 2026). In dynamic capabilities, the sensing—seizing—transforming process is seen as three interrelated components that allow organizations to adapt to changes in the environment effectively.

The integration between sensemaking and seizing provides a comprehensive perspective in understanding the leadership of school principals in the midst of education policy dynamics. Sensemaking as a process in which leaders interpret and give meaning to policies collectively helps to shape sensing within the framework of dynamic capabilities, while seizing shows how that meaning is transformed into strategic decisions and actions to respond to opportunities and challenges correctly and pragmatically.

In high school (SMA), efforts to integrate these two processes are becoming increasingly relevant considering the complexity of education policies faced by school principals, such as curriculum changes, accountability demands, and the diversity of characteristics of teachers and students. School principals not only play the role of policy implementers, but also key actors who interpret policies

according to school conditions and capacity. The sensemaking process allows principals to build contextual understanding of policies, identify policy implications for learning practices, and manage differences in interpretation among school citizens through organizational communication and dialogue.

The meaning of the policy produced through the sensemaking then becomes the basis for the seizing process, namely the ability of school principals to make strategic decisions and mobilize school resources in a directed manner. In the realm of high school leadership, seizing is reflected in setting program priorities, adjusting the school's operational curriculum, organizing teacher roles, and allocating time, budget, and leadership support to ensure policies can be implemented effectively. Thus, seizing is not simply understood as a managerial action, but as a strategic expression of the meaning of policies that have been built before (Eunice Fedha Daritsu, 2024).

The relationship between sensemaking and seizing emphasizes that the leadership of the principal is an adaptive process that is dynamic and sustainable. Sensemaking without seizing has the potential to result in a reflective policy understanding but has no impact on changing practices, while seizing without sensemaking risks giving birth to technocratic and non-contextual decisions. Therefore, the effectiveness of the leadership of school principals in secondary schools is largely determined by the ability to integrate policy interpretation with simultaneous strategic decision-making (Afifah et al., 2025; Wamalwa Nang'ole & Makau Muathe, 2023).

By positioning the leadership of school principals as an integration between sensemaking and seizing, this study expands the understanding of educational leadership that is not only oriented to leadership style or character, but to cognitive and strategic processes in responding to the dynamics of education policy. This perspective is relevant for explaining how principals navigate the complexities of education policy at the secondary school level, while also providing a conceptual basis for the development of adaptive and contextual school leadership.

Based on this description, this study places the leadership of school principals not just as a leadership style or character, but as an adaptive process based on meaning (sensemaking) and strategic decision-making (seizing) in the implementation of education policies. Furthermore, this study integrates sensemaking theory (Weick) and the concept of seizing in the framework of dynamic capabilities (Teece) which has been more widely applied in the context of business organizations, into the context of high school leadership. Third, this study empirically reveals the relationship between the process of policy interpretation and the strategic actions of school principals in the context of dynamic national education policies in Indonesia. Thus, this study not only enriches the theoretical study of educational leadership, but also offers a contextual and applicative sensing and seizing based on sensemaking and seizing leadership models for strengthening the implementation of education policies in high schools.

Rapid and layered changes in education policy have placed high schools in a complex and ambiguous organizational state. Education policy requires not only administrative compliance, but also the ability of schools to interpret, adjust, and implement policies contextually according to the characteristics of educational units. In this situation, the principal plays a strategic role as a key actor who bridges macro policies with educational practices at the school level (Afifah et al., 2025; Imadoeddin et al., 2025).

However, the study of educational leadership has so far been dominated by normative approaches that focus on leadership styles or types, such as transformational, instructional, or distributive leadership. This approach does not fully explain how principals interpret ambiguous and dynamic policies, and how they translate into strategic decisions and concrete actions in schools. As a result, there is a conceptual gap between policy understanding and leadership practices of school principals in the context of education policy implementation.

On the other hand, the concepts of sensemaking and seizing that are developing in the study of organizational and strategic management offer an alternative perspective to understand leadership as an adaptive process based on meaning and strategic decision-making. Although both concepts have been widely used in the context of business and higher education organizations, their application in the study of principal leadership, especially at the high school level, is still relatively limited and has not been studied empirically.

Therefore, this study is important to examine in depth how school principals make sensemaking of education policies, how the seizing process is manifested in strategic decision-making and school resource mobilization, and how the relationship between these two processes shapes the principal's leadership practices in the midst of education policy dynamics. This research is expected to fill the void in educational leadership studies by presenting a more processual, contextual, and adaptive perspective.

Based on this urgency, the research questions in this study are explicitly formulated as follows:

1. What is the process of sensemaking of school principals in understanding and interpreting education policies in high school?
2. What is the process of seizing school principals in making strategic decisions and mobilizing school resources in the implementation of education policies?
3. How is the relationship between sensemaking and seizing in the leadership practice of school principals in dealing with the dynamics of education policy in high school?

In line with this novelty, this study aims to: (1) analyze the sensemaking process of school principals in understanding and interpreting education policies in high schools; (2) reviewing the process of seizing school principals in making strategic decisions and mobilizing resources in the implementation of education policies; and (3) explain the relationship between sensemaking and seizing in the principal's leadership practice. This research is expected to make a theoretical contribution to the development of educational leadership studies as well as a practical contribution to strengthening the leadership of school principals in facing the dynamics of education policy.

2. METHOD

This study uses a qualitative approach with a case study design. The qualitative approach was chosen because the research aims to deeply understand the leadership process of school principals in interpreting policies (sensemaking) and making strategic decisions (seizing) in the context of education policy implementation. The design of the case study allows researchers to comprehensively explore the phenomenon of leadership in the context of a school.

The research was carried out in a high school in the Bogor Regency area. The selection of research locations was carried out purposively by considering the characteristics of schools that are or have

implemented national education policies. The subjects of the study include the principal as the main informant, as well as related parties relevant to the implementation of policies in schools.

Data collection is carried out through several techniques, namely in-depth interviews, observations, and document analysis. In-depth interviews were conducted to explore the principal's understanding of education policies, the process of interpreting policies, and strategic decision-making in policy implementation. Observations were made to observe organizational leadership and communication practices in the school environment. Document analysis is carried out on school policy documents, work plans, and other supporting documents relevant to policy implementation.

The main instrument in this study is the researcher himself, who plays the role of a planner, implementer, data collector, as well as a data analyst. Data analysis is carried out in a qualitative descriptive manner through the stages of data reduction, data presentation, and conclusion drawn. Data validity is maintained through triangulation of sources and data collection techniques.

3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

School Principal's Sensemaking Process in the Implementation of Education Policy

The findings of the study show that the principal's sensemaking process takes place actively, reflectively, and contextually. School principals interpret education policies—such as the Independent Curriculum, not just as an administrative obligation, but as a strategic response to the needs of students and the demands of changing times. Policies are understood as a framework of direction that needs to be interpreted contextually in accordance with school conditions, human resource readiness, and student characteristics. The principal does not necessarily translate the policy into technical procedures, but first conducts an initial interpretation of the substance of the policy and its implications for the school. Policy understanding is built through the use of various sources of information, including official regulations, digital education platforms, Education Report data, and practitioner community forums.

This sensemaking process is characterized by critical reflection on school conditions and continuous dialogue with teachers. The principal consciously avoids a purely instructional approach and chooses a dialogical communication strategy to build mutual understanding. This practice reflects the role of the principal as a sensegiver who manages the meaning of policies at the school organizational level.

“I understand policy not only as a legal document, but as a response to the needs of the times. So the first thing I think about is not the administration, but the impact on students.”

These findings are in line with the sensemaking view that policy meanings are constructed through interpretive processes in ambiguous and uncertain situations.

Seizing Process in Strategic Decision Making

Based on the meaning of the policy that has been formed, the principal shows the ability to seize through strategic decision-making and the mobilization of school resources. The main strategic decision includes restructuring the Operational Curriculum of the Education Unit (KOSP) with a focus on strengthening literacy and numeracy, as shown by the data of the school's Education Report Card.

In addition, the principal designs supporting programs such as In-House Training (IHT) and the Pancasila Student Profile Strengthening Project (P5) that are relevant to the school's local context. Resource management is carried out strategically through the placement of teachers according to

competencies, the provision of collaborative time, and the reallocation of BOS funds to increase teacher capacity and strengthen learning facilities. This is because the results of the study also reveal that *the seizing* of school principals is reflected in a series of strategic decisions taken after the process of policy interpretation is formed. The principal selectively sets program priorities by considering the level of policy urgency and school capacity. Not all policy derivative programs are run simultaneously, but are selected based on relevance and feasibility of implementation.

In addition, seizing is realized through organizing teacher roles and allocating resources, including time, budget, and leadership support. The principal plays the role of a driving force who ensures that policies do not stop at the level of discourse, but are manifested in school practice. An informant stated:

"Not all programs can be run at once, so we choose the most realistic ones that have an immediate impact on learning."

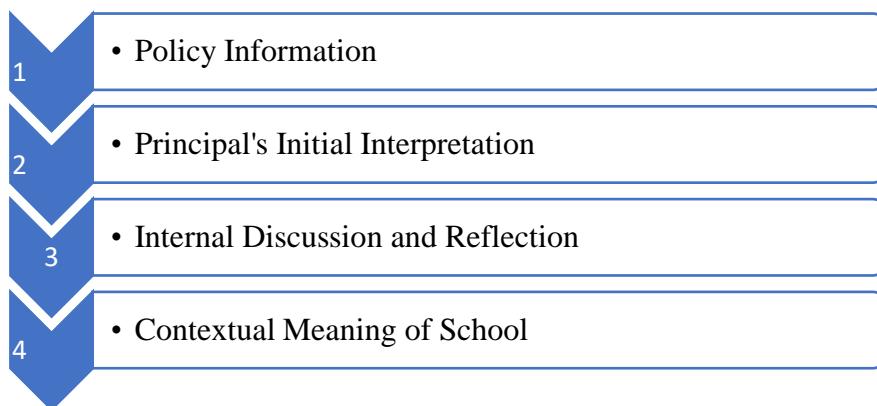


Figure 1. School Principal's Sensemaking Process in Understanding Education Policy

This image illustrates the stages of the principal's sensemaking process starting from the receipt of policy information, initial interpretation, reflection and internal discussion, to the formation of a policy meaning that is contextual to the school's conditions.

The findings of this study reinforce the view that the leadership of school principals in the context of dynamic education policy cannot be understood only through a managerial approach. The *sensemaking process* carried out by the principal is in line with the view of Weick and colleagues that the meaning of organization is a social and reflective process in responding to ambiguous conditions. In the context of high school, *sensemaking* allows the principal to interpret policies contextually so that they are relevant to the reality of the school.

Furthermore, the findings on *seizing* show compatibility with the *framework of dynamic capabilities*, especially the concept of *seizing* which emphasizes the ability of organizational actors to convert opportunities into strategic decisions and concrete actions. In this study, *the seizing* of school principals is reflected in the determination of program priorities, the organization of the role of teachers, and the allocation of resources directed to support the effective implementation of policies.

The Dynamics of Interaction between Sensemaking and Seizing in Leadership Practice

The results of the study show that there is a close relationship between *sensemaking* and *seizing* in the leadership practice of school principals. *Sensemaking* serves as a cognitive and interpretive

foundation, while *seizing* is a strategic manifestation of that meaning. These two processes take place in a continuous manner and influence each other. In practice, strategic decisions made by school principals are not final, but continue to be evaluated along with the emergence of new dynamics in policy implementation. This shows that the leadership of school principals is adaptive and dynamic in dealing with the complexity of education policies.

The integration between *sensemaking* and *seizing* as shown in Figure 2 confirms that principal's leadership is dynamic and adaptive. *Sensemaking* provides an interpretive basis, while *seizing* represents the strategic capacity of principals in bridging macro policy with educational practice at the school level. Thus, the findings of this study provide a theoretical contribution in expanding the study of educational leadership based on *dynamic capabilities*, as well as a practical contribution to strengthening the role of school principals in dealing with the complexity of education policies. To summarize the empirical findings related to the sensemaking and seizing process of school principals, Table 1 presents a synthesis of dimensions, indicators, and key findings of the study.

Tabel 1. Sintesis Sensemaking dan Seizing Kepala Sekolah

Dimension	Indicator	Main Findings	Representative Quotes
Sensemaking	Policy interpretation	Policies are understood as adaptive frameworks, not mere technical instructions	"We understand the policy as a direction, but its implementation must be adjusted to school conditions."
Sensemaking	Interpretation of context	The principal considers the readiness of the teacher and the character of the students	"We first see the readiness of teachers, it cannot be forced."
Seizing	Prioritization	Programs are selected based on the urgency and capacity of the school	"Not all programs are carried out, we choose the most realistic ones."
Seizing	Resource allocation	Time, budget, and teacher roles are adjusted to the policy	"Our budget is directed to programs that directly support policies."

This table presents a mapping of empirical findings related to the process of sensemaking and seizing principals, including key indicators, key findings, and interview excerpts that represent leadership practices in the implementation of education policies. The findings of this study reinforce the view that the leadership of school principals in the context of dynamic education policy cannot be understood only through a managerial approach. The sensemaking process carried out by the principal is in line with the view of Weick and colleagues that the meaning of organization is a social and reflective process in responding to ambiguous conditions. In the context of high school, sensemaking allows the principal to interpret policies contextually so that they are relevant to the reality of the school.

Furthermore, the findings on seizing show compatibility with the framework of dynamic capabilities, especially the concept of seizing which emphasizes the ability of organizational actors to convert opportunities into strategic decisions and concrete actions. In this study, the *seizing* of school principals is reflected in the determination of program priorities, the organization of the role

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4. CONCLUSION

This study concludes that the leadership of school principals in the implementation of education policies is an adaptive process based on *sensemaking* and *seizing*. *Sensemaking* allows principals to interpret policies contextually and build a collective understanding of school citizens, while *seizing* represents the principal's ability to make strategic decisions and allocate resources effectively.

The linkage between *sensemaking* and *seizing* forms an adaptive leadership pattern that supports the implementation of education policies in a sustainable manner. Theoretically, this study enriches the study of educational leadership through the integration of *sensemaking* theory and *dynamic capabilities*. Practically, the findings of this study confirm the importance of capacity building of school principals not only in the managerial aspect, but also in the ability to interpret policies and strategic decision-making.

5. ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

We would like to thank Universitas Muhammadiyah Bogor Raya for providing financial support for this research activity.

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