

# Preparing Future School Leaders

## Pre-service School Leaders' Sensemaking of Supervising for Equity

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**ABSTRACT:** Given increasing diversity in the United States and enduring educational inequities, leadership preparation programs are increasingly called upon to prepare pre-service leaders (PSLs) for social justice. In this qualitative study, we draw on sensemaking theory to examine how 83 PSLs enrolled in a supervisory preparation course grappled with the call to embrace leadership for equity. The data collected in this study included transcripts of in-class discussions, online discussion posts, and individual reflections. Findings suggest PSLs negotiated prescribed resources (video, readings, the Danielson framework, and class discussions) and selected resources (personal and professional experiences) to make sense of hypothetical scenarios and grapple with what it means to be an equity-oriented school leader. The authors discuss pedagogical insights for equity-oriented leadership preparation programs.

**KEYWORDS:** school leadership, teacher supervision, equity and social justice, sensemaking theory, leadership preparation

### Introduction

Increasing student diversity and enduring inequities in US schools are two major issues influencing the current work of educational leadership preparation programs. From 2000 to 2016, the percentage of school-age children who were White decreased from 62% to 52%, while the percentage of Hispanic or Latinx<sup>1</sup> children rose from 16% to 25% (Musu-Gillette et al., 2017). In addition to these changing demographics, Black and Latinx students, especially those living in economically oppressed communities, continue to experience limited opportunities to attend schools with rich curricular options, up-to-date materials and technology, or highly effective and experienced teachers (Hill & Lubienski, 2007; Oakes, 2005). The more school leaders are expected to respond to these issues, the more educational leadership programs are called upon to move beyond their focus on managerial and organizational skills to prepare pre-service leaders (PSLs) to respond to changing demographics and persistent inequities by teaching them leadership for social justice (Jean-Marie, Normore, & Brooks, 2009; Santamaría, 2014).

A growing body of literature has described the knowledge, skills, and practices of social justice leaders (Cambron-McCabe & McCarthy, 2005; Marshall, 2004; Scheurich & Skrla, 2003; Santamaría, 2014; Shields, 2010; Stevenson, 2007; Theoharis, 2007). School leaders working toward social justice

develop policies to promote social justice . . . (1) through culturally sensitive teaching and learning; (2) the promotion of inclusive organisational cultures; (3) the nurturing and development of staff (especially minority ethnic staff); and (4) the mobilization of the wider community in support of school objectives. (Stevenson, 2007, p. 778)

This work includes leaders setting broader goals, such as constructing and enacting a vision for school-wide equity, and also taking on more specific tasks, including collaborating with families and communities and supervising teachers for equitable teaching and learning (Ishimaru & Galloway, 2014). Further, leaders working toward social justice understand their actions through a critical lens; they consider how issues of oppression and privilege need to inform all the decisions they make on behalf of the children and families their school serves (Santamaría, 2014). This research helps illuminate what a social justice school leader does, but little research considers how to effectively prepare leaders to develop these commitments, actions, and dispositions.

The limited research on preparing justice-oriented leaders focuses on the pedagogical practices university-based faculty have explored within individual courses or across educational leadership programs (Brown, 2004; Diem & Carpenter, 2012; Furman, 2012; Gooden & O'Doherty, 2015; Hernandez & Marshall, 2009; Mansfield, Sherman, & King, 2013; McKenzie et al., 2008). For example, Brown (2004) suggests PSLs develop their critical reflective practices by completing cultural autobiographies, engaging in life history interviews, participating in prejudice-reduction workshops, and writing reflective analysis journals. Mansfield, Sherman, and King (2013) reported on their use of poetry as a self-reflective exercise for PSLs to better understand their privilege and power and to both recognize and deactivate stereotypes. Findings from across this research suggest social justice leadership preparation must provide opportunities for PSLs to unpack their ideas about race, racism, poverty, and diversity. PSLs are asked to reflect on how their prior experiences inform their current understanding of these issues and perhaps influence their leadership practices.

This study explores how PSLs with prior personal and professional experiences in education negotiate equity-oriented leadership coursework experiences. More specifically, we draw on sensemaking theory to examine how PSLs in a supervisory preparation course grappled with the call to embrace leadership for

equity. We studied the implementation of a lesson on *supervising for equity* (SfE) as a site to pursue the following research questions:

1. How do pre-service K–12 leaders make sense of school-based, equity-related issues?
2. How do they grapple with their role in addressing school-based inequities?

We examine the implementation of an SfE lesson taught across six sections with a total of 83 PSLs attending a large, public research II university in the Northeastern United States. We drew on sensemaking theory to analyze how the PSLs were negotiating course-prescribed tools as well as individually selected tools to make sense of equity-oriented leadership. Given the vast inequities in schools today, this study offers insights into preparing school leaders to work for social justice. We begin by summarizing sensemaking theory and the extant literature on school leaders' sensemaking about instructional leadership and educational equity.

### Sensemaking Theory

Our study of how PSLs construct meaning is informed by the increased attention to cognitive processes in organizational spaces and in the policy implementation process (Coburn, 2005; Meyer & Rowan, 2006; Spillane, 2004). Sensemaking theory posits that the way we come to understand a situation shapes how we respond to it and draws attention to the reasoning behind action (Meyer & Rowan, 2006). The meaning we assign to events and information in our environment both animates and constrains our behavior (Weick, Sutcliffe, & Obstfeld, 2005). Sensemaking is an ongoing process, but it is heightened and may become more visible at times of significant change, ambiguity, uncertainty, increased complexity, or interruption to the status quo (Evans, 2007; Ingle, Rutledge, & Bishop, 2011; Weick, 1995; Weick, Sutcliffe, & Obstfeld, 2005): “to understand sensemaking is also to understand how people cope with interruptions” (Weick, 1995, p. 5).

Sensemaking theory requires us to attend to the building blocks of meaning-making—how they are selected and arranged into a narrative—and the impact of the stories we tell. According to Weick (1995), “how [individuals] construct what they construct, why, and with what effects are the central questions for people interested in sensemaking” (p. 4). Inundated by a wealth of information, we ignore certain messages and select others as we make sense of our environment (Coburn, 2005; Spillane, 2004; Weick, Sutcliffe, & Obstfeld, 2005). Weick (1995) advises us to examine how individuals extract and focus on particular cues from their environment: “Pay close attention to ways people notice, extract cues, and embellish that which they extract” (p.49). What we notice and how we bring information together to make meaning are shaped by factors at the individual, collective, and institutional levels (Spillane, 2004).

As sensemaking theorists, we are concerned with which resources from those available are selected and deployed to make meaning (Spillane, 2004). Individuals draw upon resources provided by their personal backgrounds and social and institutional contexts (Spillane, 2004). Our prior knowledge and experiences, the norms of our professional and social environments, interactions with others, local conditions and capacity, and policy directives shape how we make sense of new information (Coburn, 2005; Spillane, 2004; Weick, Sutcliffe, & Obstfeld, 2005). In an attempt to avoid uncomfortable changes in our ideas, we tend to notice what is familiar and to assimilate new knowledge in ways that confirm our existing worldview: "The sense we make depends on the sense we already have" (Spillane, 2004, p. 76). We avoid noticing conceptual differences and favor superficial variances that more easily allow us to assimilate new knowledge (Spillane, 2004). Sensemaking, in this way, is a conservative, slow process, suggesting that shifts in thinking are likely to be modest and uncommon.

Moreover, our selection of messages and the meaning we assign them typically constructs our identity and the reputation of our organizations in positive ways or in ways that preserve current perceptions of ourselves and our institutions (Weick, 1995). Weick, Sutcliffe, and Obstfeld (2005) explain that "who we think we are (identity) as organizational actors shapes what we enact and how we interpret, which affects what outsiders think we are (image) and how they treat us, which stabilizes or destabilizes our identity" (p. 416). Sensemaking is a process of identity construction and a site in which we try to maintain or repair identities when events or new knowledge threaten them (Weick, 1995).

### **School Leaders' Sensemaking About Instructional Leadership and Educational Equity**

School leaders' sensemaking processes are important to examine given the complexity of their position within schools (Ganon-Shilon & Schechter, 2017). School leaders have a disproportionate influence over how teachers and other staff members make sense of their professional environments and integrate new knowledge or policy mandates (Coburn, 2005; Evans, 2007). The stories that school leaders repeatedly tell animate the school environment and set norms for sensemaking, demonstrating how micro individual processes can come to affect institutional-level change (Weick, Sutcliffe, & Obstfeld, 2005). School leaders constantly make decisions on programs, policies, and practices that demarcate the possibilities and limits of others' sensemaking (Evans, 2007). As such, school leaders are not only influential sense-makers, but also sense-givers, shaping teacher sensemaking through the messages contained in words, actions, and resources provided to teachers (e.g., training; evaluation tools) (Coburn, 2005; Evans, 2007).

Prior research reveals that school leaders' sensemaking is influenced by their content knowledge, professional preparation and experiences, identity and

personal experiences, district and school context, and policy mandates. Content knowledge has been shown to shape sensemaking when school leaders enact a range of duties, including implementing policy (Coburn, 2005), supervising teachers (Nelson, 2010; Rigby 2015), and organizing schools for inclusion (DeMatthews, 2015). School leaders are also influenced by past professional experiences, such that when making sense of teacher quality and evaluating teachers, principals who previously worked in under-resourced schools are more likely to value a teacher's ingenuity to work effectively with few resources (Ingle, Rutledge, & Bishop, 2011). Leaders often invoke their current school contexts—including social networks, student needs, available resources, and grade levels—to make sense of events, new information, or policy mandates. DeMatthews (2015) found that principals organize inclusion in their school in ways that are responsive to student performance data and classroom observations, as well as teacher and parent resistance or support. In the area of instructional leadership, Ingle, Rutledge, and Bishop (2011) show that school leaders' perceptions of what teacher qualities matter most (and how teachers are thereby hired, fired, and evaluated) are shaped by whether their school is an elementary, middle, or high school. School leaders at the high school level put greater emphasis on teachers' content knowledge and involvement in extracurricular activities (Ingle, Rutledge, & Bishop, 2011). State, federal, and district mandates strongly influence what messages school leaders notice. Often, policy messages are transferred through artifacts, such as agreements with the teachers' union, rubrics for teacher evaluation, or sanctions for failing to meet accountability benchmarks (Ingle, Rutledge, & Bishop, 2011).

School leaders' cognitive processes are also influenced by messages about oppression and inequity that permeate society and their social networks. School leaders' understandings of educational equity are shaped by their personal positionality within US hierarchies of, for example, race, sexual identity, gender, language, class, or immigration status (Arnold & Brooks, 2013; Evans, 2007). School leaders who have not personally experienced discrimination may be critical of educational inequality, but they likely draw upon messages received from resources other than their personal histories, such as graduate education or professional experiences. Evans (2007) found that school leaders tended to favor dominant ideologies about race, such as color-blindness, when making sense of a growing Black student population. Although all leaders tend to make sense of their environment in ways that position them in a favorable light (Evans, 2007; Weick, 1995), school leaders early in their career concerned with establishing legitimacy may be especially prone to positively constructing their identity (DeMatthews, 2015).

Past studies related to instructional leadership and leadership for social justice have considered how school leaders make sense of curricular and accountability policies (Coburn, 2005; Spillane, 2004), teacher quality and teacher evaluation (Ingle, Rutledge, & Bishop, 2011; Rigby, 2015), teacher support (Ingle, Rutledge, &

Bishop, 2011; Nelson, 2010; Rigby, 2015), inclusion (DeMatthews, 2015), and demographic change (Evans, 2007). This research substantiates the need for leaders to make sense of complex information, but absent from this literature is how they learn to do so effectively. It is reasonable to assume that PSLs draw upon their personal and professional backgrounds, current school context, societal ideologies, and content knowledge as much as current school leaders do. However, leadership preparation programs are in the unique position to support PSLs' sensemaking processes. In this paper, we adopt sensemaking as an analytic framework in order to encourage faculty to conceive of their instructional choices as equipping PSLs with resources that increase the chances they will bring an equity lens to sensemaking.

## Methodology

Using a grounded theory approach, we examined how PSLs grappled with the call to embrace equity-oriented leadership within the context of a graduate-level instructional leadership course offered in the educational leadership department in a large university located in the Northeastern United States. The department's mission includes a commitment to preparing equity-oriented school leaders. This study utilizes data collected across six sections the second author, Rachel Garver, taught during the 2017–2018 or 2018–2019 academic year. The first author, Tanya Maloney, revised this course, required of all PSLs in the university's master's of educational leadership, supervisor's certificate, and principal's certificate programs, in the summer of 2017 to include a lesson on supervising for equity. We define SFE as using supervisory practices—analyzing instructional practice in collaboration with teachers and supporting teachers in their professional development—in the service of promoting equitable educational experiences and outcomes across student groups, such as those delineated by race, gender, class, and immigration status (Garver & Maloney, 2019). In the fall of 2017, Rachel invited Tanya to study the implementation of the SFE lesson with her in order to revise it to more closely align PSL learning with the lesson objectives:

- Be attuned to teacher practices that promote or undermine equitable classrooms.
- Build your capacity to identify and address equity issues in instructional practice.
- Develop strategies to support teachers in leading equitable classrooms and anticipate the challenges of this work.
- Expand your understanding of supervisory practices beyond the focus on academic achievement to include other goals of public education in the United States (e.g., producing democratic citizens, promoting social justice).

In summary, PSLs were asked to (re)define their understanding of instructional supervision to include a responsibility for promoting equity.

Through a collaborative and iterative process of reflecting on PSLs' writings and discussions, we revised the lesson from one section of the class to the next (Garver & Maloney, 2019). Although the lesson varied across sections, the overall learning objectives remained consistent, and every iteration included the same assigned readings and introductory framing about SfE. In addition, all PSLs were asked to work through one or two scenarios that required them to imagine how they would respond as a supervisor to inequitable instructional practices. Rachel taught the lesson twice in in-person sections of the course and four times in online sections of the course. Table 1 summarizes the components of the lesson in its final form as it was implemented in an in-class section of the course.

The data collected in this study included transcripts of in-class discussions, online discussion posts, and individual reflections. During the initial implementation of the SfE lesson, Rachel collected rich field notes (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007) of the PSLs' whole-group dialogue around the first scenario. The students in the second in-person section responded to both scenarios in small-group discussions. These discussions were audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim. The four online sections shared their reactions to the two scenarios in a written discussion-board format. PSLs who participated in the online version of the course were explicitly asked to draw on prescribed resources such as the readings or the Danielson framework to support their responses. In all six sections, the PSLs completed a written individual reflection collected at the end of the SfE lesson. Table 2 provides an overview of the data collected across each cohort.

### **Participants**

Understanding the PSLs' backgrounds is particularly important as sensemaking theory tells us that educators draw upon personal and professional experiences to interpret and respond to new information and responsibilities (Coburn, 2005; Spillane, 2004). Of the 83 participating PSLs, the vast majority (80%) worked as teachers at the time they were enrolled in this instructional leadership course. Nearly 10% of PSLs worked as school counselors or psychologists, and 10% already served in some capacity as an instructional leader, such as a reading specialist, instructional coach, or English as a second language (ESL) coordinator. Some PSLs attended the same university where this study took place for their undergraduate education or for earlier graduate work in teacher or counselor preparation. Approximately half of the PSLs worked in high schools, 20% at the middle school level, and 35% at the early childhood or elementary levels. Almost all were



Lesson component	Description
Assigned readings	Two articles assigned for PSLs to read in preparation for the lesson: <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Jacobs, J. (2006). Supervision for social justice: Supporting critical reflection. <i>Teacher Education Quarterly</i>, 33(4), 23–29.</li> <li>2. Abt-Perkins, D., Hauschildt, P., &amp; Dale, H. (2000). Becoming multicultural supervisors: Lessons from collaborative field study. <i>Journal of Curriculum and Supervision</i>, 16(1), 28–47.</li> </ol>
Mini-lecture	Instructor delivered an introduction to the idea of SfE and an orientation to the lesson.
Video	The <i>Coaching for Equity</i> (The Teaching Channel, n.d.) video provided as part of the mini-lecture. In addition to the readings, this video was intended to provide PSLs with an understanding of what it means to supervise for equity.
Activity: Identifying equity issues	PSLs provided a list of guiding questions that supervisors committed to equity may ask themselves, such as: Is a teacher encouraging students to critically analyze the racism, sexism, classism in our society, or are they shying away from these issues? Does the teacher use stereotypes when talking about racial, ethnic, gender, or income groups with students or colleagues? Does the teacher show value for or disregard the language and culture of the students and their community? PSLs then discussed in groups how they would categorize the questions into one or more of the domains in the Danielson framework for effective teaching: planning and preparation, classroom environment, instruction, and professional responsibilities. This activity was meant to encourage PSLs to locate equity issues within instructional practice.
Activity: Responding to equity issues	In groups, PSLs encountered one or two scenarios that raise concerns about how instructional practice contributes to educational inequalities. First, they identified the problem and how it undermines educational equity. Then, PSLs were required to imagine that they were the supervisor and to explain how they would address the issue. A graphic organizer guided PSLs to consider the options of ignoring, interrupting, or engaging and to weigh the consequences of each approach. A second graphic organizer asked PSLs to consider three possible strategies for engaging and the resources they would require for each. The two scenarios were provided below: <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. You are supervising in a school where the student body is drawn from a low-income Latinx and Black community and the teaching staff is primarily White and middle-income. You are working with one teacher whom you have heard talk disparagingly about their students and students' parents to other colleagues. This teacher repeatedly complains that parents do not care about their child's education and that they are too lazy to get their children to school on time. When you observed in this teacher's classroom, you heard a student ask if the teacher lived in the neighborhood. The teacher replied, "No way! I do NOT live around here."</li> <li>2. You are a supervisor in a suburban school district where the students are primarily White and middle-income. The teaching staff is also primarily White. The students perform well on state standardized tests and parents are pleased with the school. In your observations of teachers, you notice that issues of inequality and equity are rarely introduced. In the cafeteria and classrooms, you have heard students express the belief that everyone in the United States has equal opportunity and that educational and professional success are purely based on hard work and merit. The social studies and ELA [English language arts] departments can choose their materials and have elected to use the same American history textbook for the last 10 years. You recently saw that one page described slaves as "workers."</li> </ol>
Individual Reflection	At the conclusion of the lesson, the PSLs wrote about their most significant takeaways regarding SfE.

**Table 1:** Components of SfE Lesson



Cohort	Date collected	Data collected
1	October 2017	Vision statements for effective supervision independently written at the beginning of the course and revised versions submitted at the end of the course; online, written discussion in response to one scenario
2	November 2017	Vision statements for effective supervision independently written at the beginning of the course and revised versions submitted at the end of the course; independently written reflections regarding two scenarios and overall lesson takeaways; field notes capturing in-class discussions regarding two scenarios
3	April 2018	Vision statements for effective supervision independently written at the beginning of the course and revised versions submitted at the end of the course; independently written reflections regarding two scenarios and overall lesson takeaways; typed transcripts of small-group discussions of second scenario; field notes about in-class discussions; graphic organizers filled out in class during whole-class guided practice or small-group discussions
4	April 2018	Vision statements for effective supervision independently written at the beginning of the course and revised versions submitted at the end of the course; online, written discussion in response to two scenarios
5	October 2018	Vision statements for effective supervision independently written at the beginning of the course and revised versions submitted at the end of the course; online, written discussion in response to two scenarios
6	October 2018	Vision statements for effective supervision independently written at the beginning of the course and revised versions submitted at the end of the course; online, written discussion in response to two scenarios

**Table 2:** Overview of Data Collected by Cohort

employed by public school districts, with only 15 PSLs reporting that they worked in charter or private schools. Approximately 40% of PSLs had been in the field of education for 5 or fewer years, 30% between 5 and 10 years, and 30% for more than 10 years. The socioeconomic profiles of the school districts where PSLs worked reflect statewide disparities. Approximately 30% of PSLs worked in districts placed into the two lowest socioeconomic categories as defined by the state, and 30% worked in districts placed into the two highest socioeconomic categories as defined by the state. Most PSLs lived and worked in the districts surrounding the university, with the farthest PSL residing about two hours away. Many of the PSLs also grew up near the university and the districts in which they worked. Seventy-seven percent of PSLs identified as female and 23% as male. [Table 3](#) provides an overview of the PSLs’ gender demographics and work experience. Although we do not have individual-level race and ethnicity data for the PSLs in this study, institutional data reveal that more than 60% of PSLs in the educational leadership department identify as White, approximately 15% as Latinx, and less than 10% as Black.

**Data Analysis**

Both authors analyzed the data using a cloud-based, computer-assisted qualitative data analysis software system. We first organized the data from each source into categories (e.g., online, in-person, semester/year) and then read the data to get an

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	Total	Male	Female	Five or Fewer Years of Experience (n = 69)	Between 5 and 10 Years of Experience (n = 69)	More than 10 Years of Experience (n = 69)	Working in Low Socioeconomic District (n = 70)	Working in High Socioeconomic District (n = 70)
PSLs	83	19	64	39%	29%	32%	31%	27%

**Table 3:** Overview of PSL Gender Demographics and Work Experience

overall understanding of how the leaders engaged in sensemaking practices. We then employed open coding to transform the data into manageable units, paying particular attention to the resources students used to respond to the scenarios. We met to compare our initial coding scheme before using axial coding to group codes that reflected larger thematic and interpretive codes. These interpretive codes allowed us to develop themes across the PSLs (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). For example, we coded artifacts of sensemaking (Weick, 1995) such as when PSLs mentioned attending a professional development, engaging with colleagues, and other actions or behaviors. We then grouped these and similar codes as they revealed a larger pattern for how PSLs drew on professional experiences to make sense of supervision for equity. Our findings focus on how the PSLs negotiated Rachel's prescribed resources (video, readings, the Danielson framework, and class discussions) and selected resources (personal and professional experiences) to make sense of the equity issues in the scenarios and what it means to be an equity-oriented school leader. Variations between online and in-person PSLs' responses to the call for equity-oriented leadership are beyond the scope of this paper.

## Findings

We found the PSLs drew on multiple types of resources in order to make sense of how equity issues might surface in their work as supervisors. The scenarios provided a setting for them to make sense of the definitions and ideas found in the prescribed resources. We found that in order for the PSLs to consider their potential role as equity-oriented leaders, they thought about their own identities and prior professional experiences. In this section, we expound on these overarching findings.

### *Making Sense of School-Based, Equity-Related Issues*

The SfE lesson was designed to advance PSLs' understandings of instructional supervision, with equity-oriented aims. The prescribed tools, specifically the readings and video, defined SfE and provided concepts for the PSLs to consider when identifying equity issues in schools and classrooms. For example, Jacob (2006) define supervision for social justice, describe the tensions associated with such work, and suggest how critical reflection can be used to frame supervision around issues of

social justice. [Abt-Perkins, Hauschildt, and Dale \(2000\)](#) describe the development of their multicultural supervision practice in the context of a teacher education program. The *Coaching for Equity* video provided an example of how one supervisor helps urban teachers ensure that all students have opportunities to master the classroom content. The supervisor shared his definition of coaching for equity and reflected on the importance of this work. Along with Rachel's mini-lecture, these sense-giving tools provided definitions and examples of SfE. During the SfE lesson, the PSLs were also expected to use the Danielson framework to locate the equity issues within one or more of four domains: planning and preparation, classroom environment, instruction, and professional responsibilities. Most of the PSLs were familiar with the framework in their work as school-based educators.

The PSLs drew upon concepts from across the prescribed resources in order to name and make sense of the equity issue in each scenario. They most often cited the definitions of culturally relevant teaching or the impact of increasing student diversity described in these resources. Overwhelmingly, the PSLs drew on the two assigned articles to suggest a lack of cultural awareness on the part of the teachers depicted in both scenarios. One PSL responded to the first scenario in an online discussion board post:

The equity issue in this scenario revolves around the teacher not being culturally aware of her surroundings and quite possibly unaware she is not teaching with a multicultural perspective. [Davidman \(1990\)](#) describes multicultural perspective to "involve taking aspects of a student's culture (race, ethnicity, gender, religion, SES, and disability) into account as a variable in the student's learning process" ([Jacobs, 2006](#), p. 27).

A second PSL shared their ideas about the second scenario:

As I reflect on how the curriculum should change and how equity issues should be addressed, I think of this statement: Teachers, and supervisors are "unaware, unknowing, and unappreciative of how culture, ethnicity, and gender affect instructional and learning behaviors, or unskilled in how to apply cultural diversity in teaching. Correcting these limitations is a major goal of gender-sensitive and culturally responsive supervision" ([Abt-Perkins, Hauschildt, & Dale, 2000](#), p. 33).

In each example, an article provided a definition and description of what it looks like when teachers either do or do not demonstrate cultural awareness. The PSLs found definitions of cultural awareness useful when analyzing both scenarios, and each PSL highlighted different aspects of the definitions. For example, one PSL responded in this way to the first scenario:

Jacobs states that "teachers concerned with equity give students what they need to succeed" ([Jacobs, 2006](#), p. 25) and based off the information in

the scenario, my best guess would be that this teacher is not giving their students everything they need to succeed.

This particular quote from [Jacobs \(2006\)](#) was highly cited, and the PSLs made similar conclusions that the teachers in both scenarios were not culturally responsive because they did not give students what they needed.

The readings also helped the PSLs contextualize the equity issue in the scenarios by highlighting the issue of increasing diversity in US schools:

Due to [the] influx of minority students within the classrooms, there is a demand for teachers who understand and are familiar with diverse students in their classrooms . . . reading this [scenario], there is a clear picture of an equity issue of lack of social awareness of students' social milieu.

This common response to the first scenario pointed to the idea that the teacher was not aware of how increasing diversity should inform teaching practices. The PSLs suggested that increasing diversity meant there would be greater cultural differences between teachers and students:

The first equity issue here is the teaching community, mostly drawn from White and middle-income, teaching low-income Black and Latinx students, make it difficult for the teachers to truly understand the background of the students. According to [Abt-Perkins, Hauschildt, and Dale \(2000\)](#) . . . they “had difficulty establishing caring, productive relationships with students who were culturally different—racially or socioeconomically—from themselves” (p. 32).

The PSLs were using the readings to consider how dynamics including increasing diversity and cultural differences may be influencing the teachers' behaviors. Other PSLs determined that a *lack* of diversity was a contributing factor to the equity issue in the second scenario:

In this scenario, the equity issue is that the students are not exposed to nor are they being taught about the diversity and equality/equity issues of this country. [Jacobs \(2006\)](#) references [Villegas and Lucas \(2002\)](#) on page 24 by stating that, “Projections show that by 2035 the population of children of color will make up the statistical majority and by 2050 make up 57% of the population.” However, both teachers and students in this school district are not experiencing this increasing change in demographics, which is affecting their personal beliefs about diversity.

In many of their responses, the PSLs used similar pieces from the readings to draw comparable conclusions about the equity issue in each scenario.

The PSLs were also expected to use the Danielson framework during the SFE lesson in order to identify how the equity issue aligned with one or more of the

four domains of instructional practice. Across both scenarios, the PSLs located equity issues within all four domains. Regarding the first scenario, they most commonly located the issue within the “classroom environment and rapport” domain. Common responses included “this teacher fails to promote a safe and nurturing environment” and “the teacher is underperforming in Domain 2 Classroom Environment and Rapport, specifically Domain 2a—Creating an Environment of Respect by not displaying any familiarity or caring about the individual students.”

The textbook issue presented in the second scenario was most often critiqued using the “planning and preparation” domain in the Danielson framework: “The planning and preparation domain in Danielson’s framework is lacking from the school using books that are not current to world and cultural issues. This school is teaching students slaves are ‘workers’ with out-of-date materials.” Many of the PSLs described the textbook as “out of date” and raised concerns about the students not receiving a “multicultural education.” The Danielson framework, along with the other prescribed resources, provided ideas for the PSLs to consider as they analyzed both scenarios. Again, the PSLs were highly attuned to how the scenarios suggested a lack of cultural awareness on the part of the teacher or school.

In addition to the prescribed resources, we found PSLs called upon independently selected resources in their sensemaking of the scenarios. More specifically, the PSLs recounted professional experiences as either a classroom teacher, school counselor, or other school-based educator when reacting to the scenarios. They often made remarks such as “this describes my school,” aligning their school-based work experiences to either the first or the second scenario. One PSL remarked, “Reading the first study was very surreal for me. I felt as though I was reading conversations taking place in the faculty room at my school—almost verbatim.” The educators with professional experiences in urban, high-poverty, or low-income neighborhoods identified with the school context depicted in the first scenario. Many started their responses by recounting their enlightening interactions with their students and students’ families. For example, one PSL described meeting students that had been sleeping in class because they had to work at night to help support the family’s financial needs. Another PSL mentioned that they had learned to teach in a school where most parents did not own a car.

By drawing on their professional experiences, the PSLs came to a general consensus that the teacher in the first scenario needed to be more reflective, self-aware, and culturally responsive. For example, one PSL with experience working in an urban context stated, “I would’ve never alluded to the idea that their neighborhood was not worthy of living in or grouped all parents into one category.” She felt the teacher needed to explore their biases. Another PSL also shared her experiences working in a district “where 80% of the students receive free breakfast and lunch” before stating, “This teacher’s response to the student’s question was the complete opposite of what multicultural education should be,” and suggested the teacher

needed to practice self-awareness and reflection. In each of these examples, the PSLs were sharing the knowledge they acquired or the behaviors they exhibited when working in a similar situation as depicted in the scenario. Recalling their own prior professional experiences helped them pinpoint the equity issue in the scenario.

The educators with experience in predominantly White, affluent schools reflected on how the school in the second scenario reminded them of their school. This group of PSLs repeatedly lamented their students' sense of privilege:

This is similar to the school I work for. . . . Though the students perform well on standardized tests and the parents are pleased with the school, the students appear to be in a bubble that is not informed about the culture of other areas and the struggles of different backgrounds. The equity issue here is that the school lacks knowledge of diversity and current language.

Immediately after describing their own school, this PSL identified the equity issue in the scenario. This PSL later recommended the history department engage students in community service experiences or that the English department have the students "go outside of the community" and then write a reflection. A PSL in a different section also said the scenario reminded him of his school and suggested the teachers engage in an exchange with a different school so that individuals would be able to gain an "appreciation for what else is out there."

Though the PSLs from predominantly White and/or affluent schools felt their school "failed" at addressing issues of equity, one PSL did mention how in her "primarily White, very wealthy" district, the students are exposed to other cultures through literature. A few of the other PSLs reflected on the curricular materials used in their school or in their very own classroom. In the majority of these reflections, the PSLs concluded that students needed to experience "multicultural studies . . . that help them to see these equity issues," and that as supervisors, they would need to address equity issues immediately. In working to make sense of the scenarios, the PSLs compared their own schools to those depicted in the scenarios, pointing out how their own schools did or did not address similar issues.

### ***Developing an Equity-Oriented School Leadership Practice***

As the PSLs were working to make sense of SfE and the scenarios, they were also considering their role as equity-oriented supervisors. What would they do if they were a leader in each scenario? How they grappled with understanding their role was most evident when they shared how they might respond to the scenarios and also in their final reflection of the SfE lesson. When having to decide how they might respond to the contrived scenarios, the PSLs referred to suggestions from prescribed resources, including the readings, their own professional experiences, or comments their classmates made during a discussion. The scenarios offered a

place to try on the role of an equity-oriented supervisor and play with multiple different ideas presented by both the prescribed and selected resources. Some PSLs contemplated important factors not explicitly presented in the scenarios, suggesting these PSLs were moving beyond *performing* SfE in a contrived situation and considering what it would mean to *identify* as equity-oriented supervisors in their very real school contexts.

The prescribed resources provided PSLs ideas for how equity-oriented supervisors might engage with the teachers in the scenarios. Most of the PSLs concluded that as an equity-oriented supervisor in either of the scenarios, they would need to develop their teachers' cultural and self-awareness. The most widely cited suggestion from the readings was to engage teachers in what [Jacobs \(2006\)](#) define as critical reflection. A few PSLs said they would want the teachers described in the textbook scenario to reflect on the materials they were using in the classroom:

This school has also not provided its students with a sufficient amount of resources to “extend content knowledge and pedagogy” since they are still using a textbook that refers to slaves as “workers.” Overall, these teachers might not be reflecting on their teaching if they have not noticed that their students believe that educational and professional success is based purely on hard work and merit. It is important that the school as a whole moves beyond the “technical aspects” of teaching, “so teachers can see how their practice and the practices of the schools are embedded and linked to the greater social and political context” ([Jacobs, 2006](#), p. 26).

Through critical reflection, this PSL hoped to get the teachers to see their practice within a larger social and political context instead of simply focusing on test scores. Other PSLs suggested they would influence the school to adopt a new textbook.

A number of PSLs drew on the concept of critical reflection when responding to the first scenario:

I would attempt to conference with this teacher as soon as possible to make sure the comment was still fresh. According to [Jacobs \(2006\)](#), “Critical reflection serves as a tool to question what has been taken for granted in schools and learn how to analyze how issues such as race, ethnicity, and culture influence student learning experiences” (p. 31). My goal would be to open a conversation about how their comments might be affecting their instruction. This teacher may not even realize that they are making comments that are not culturally responsive.

Like so many of their peers, this PSL said they would want to engage the teacher in a conversation about the comments they had made. Many shared the types of questions they would ask to help the teacher reflect on how their comments was not culturally responsive: “For example a question like, ‘How do you think your



background influences your attitude about working with kids of a different culture?' might suffice." Some PSLs described how they would like to support their teachers' critical reflection by being what [Abt-Perkins, Hauschildt, and Dale \(2000\)](#) term a "positive irritant" (p. 39).

PSLs also drew on the ideas that were precipitated in conversation with their fellow classmates. For example, one PSL referred to a professional development another PSL mentioned attending:

[A PSLs] professional development, Undoing Racism by the People's Institute sounds exactly like what I think we all agree is the most helpful learning teachers need to understand their students as individuals and truly understand their culture. It's professional development opportunities like these that are beneficial for the teachers in both scenario 1 and 2.

The PSLs converged on the idea that the teachers in the scenarios were unaware that they were not culturally responsive and that it would be up to them as equity-oriented supervisors to help the teachers develop their awareness, mainly through critical reflection or professional development.

The PSLs' ideas for how they would respond to the scenarios extended beyond what was offered in the prescribed resources; they most often drew from selected resources. They recounted specific experiences they had had with colleagues and students or described a professional development session they attended that pushed their thinking about equity and social justice. Many also discussed personal experiences they had had with racial or socioeconomic-related issues.

The professional experiences PSLs described included formal experiences such as professional development sessions and more informal interactions with colleagues and students. For example, one PSL once worked in a school serving mainly students of color, and her principal asked the faculty to take Harvard's implicit bias test<sup>2</sup> and then reflect on their results. Another PSL suggested the teacher in the first scenario attend a powerful professional development she attended, *Undoing Racism*.<sup>3</sup> These professional experiences, which pushed the PSLs to think about race and racism as well as to unpack their implicit biases, were introduced as recommended action steps in each scenario and were influential in shaping the students' thinking about the scenarios.

Not all the PSLs described their professional experiences as enlightening or powerful. A White, female PSL working in a school serving an affluent, predominantly White student body described a faculty meeting she attended where the administrator highlighted how a disproportionate amount of disciplinary actions were for the students of color in the building. The administrator asked the faculty to publicly identify their race as part of their approach to developing the teachers' self-awareness. The PSL deemed this practice ineffective because it was uncomfortable. A different PSL suggested different people would experience professional

development focused on race and racism differently based on their personal experiences, thus complicating the work of a supervisor.

Though the PSLs seemed open to all the ideas presented in the prescribed and selected resources, some PSLs envisioned actually engaging in equity work as a supervisor in their own school context. In doing so, they discussed factors not explicitly represented in the scenarios. For example, a large number of the PSLs mentioned different aspects of their personal background as a lens they were using to interpret the scenarios. Most PSLs discussed aspects of their racial or socioeconomic background and how they felt these identity markers might inform their response should a similar scenario occur in their own school. For example, one PSL of color shared her reaction to the overall SFE lesson:

It . . . made me realize that being a minority myself has led me to have strong, almost visceral reactions to situations involving equity. It made me realize how hard I will have to work to make sure that I am supporting my staff and students, but also keeping my feelings in check.

Another PSL of color also felt her racial identity would likely influence her response. She also said anyone committed to equity should be “bothered” or “offended” by the situations depicted in the scenarios. She wrote, “Being a Latina myself, as the supervisor in this situation, it’s important to refrain from emotionally reacting to the comment and situation.” Both PSLs of color reflected on needing to recognize their initial emotions and “refrain” or keep their feelings “in check” as they interacted with their colleagues around issues of equity.

Though the majority of the PSLs enrolled in leadership coursework at the university identified as White, only one mentioned how they felt their racial identity might influence how they would respond to the situation. This PSL shared,

What I say as a White male who was raised in an almost exclusively White Catholic rural community will be viewed entirely differently than someone with a different background. This should not prevent me from finding a way to challenge the teacher, but my handling will likely be different than others.

Similar to the two PSLs of color, this PSL expressed how his racial identity should affect how he approaches the issue. Different from the two PSLs of color, he did not identify an emotional reaction he would need to keep “in check,” but instead felt his background “should not prevent” him from addressing the scenario. These findings suggest that some of the PSLs understood their racial identity would influence their leadership identity and how they might respond to various situations.

Perhaps as a way to envision themselves in the school depicted, a few PSLs said they personally identified with the socioeconomic profile of the school community depicted in the first scenario. One shared how she would want the teacher

in the scenario to “see each child as an individual.” Another PSL said he would divulge his background story as a way to discuss the comments the teacher in the first scenario was making about her school community:

I would tell my staff how my single mom at times worked 2–3 jobs to support three kids, so my mom wasn't able to make it to school functions or let alone take us to school . . . I came from the same background as the students in this school so it is very important to me that each teacher in the room think about these students.

Both of these PSLs identified personally with the children in the first scenario, and this would inform their response. They would push their teachers to humanize and individualize their students by developing empathy and understanding of their circumstances.

A few of the PSLs described how they felt their upbringing might have provided a greater awareness as compared that of the teacher in the first scenario. During his small group discussion, one PSL highlighted, “We grew up with all this awareness.” He suggested the teacher in the scenario may have had a different upbringing that did not afford her a type of awareness he felt he had achieved. Another PSL shared,

I grew up in a very diverse town. However, after tonight I can see that not all people have the same ideas of equity and inequality. It is important to ensure that all teachers are aware of these issues and to present these issues to their students.

Both of these PSLs were attempting to make sense of the teachers' motives by suggesting there are different levels of “awareness” that people develop based on where they grow up. It was important for them as future supervisors and school leaders to consider how teachers in their school site may have varying types of awareness about the school community.

By really attempting to locate themselves in the scenario, the PSLs started to confront the realities of engaging in SfE in their own schools. One PSL said they “feel a bit overwhelmed by the amount of responsibility that effective leadership and supervision carries, especially since this is not something that I hear my own supervisors talking about frequently.” Imagining their own school and colleagues helped them make sense of the work it would take to truly take on the role of an equity-oriented supervisor.

## Conclusion

Our study sheds light on the promises and challenges of teaching SfE and offers pedagogical insights for leadership preparation programs. We used qualitative data to examine how PSLs make sense of school-based, equity-related issues as well as

how they grapple with their role as equity-oriented leaders. Our grounded theory analysis revealed that the PSLs drew on both course-prescribed and selected resources to make sense of the equity issues in two scenarios and to determine what their role would be in them. As the PSLs grappled with their role as equity-oriented supervisors, they considered factors beyond the scenarios, such as aspects of their own identity. Our study provides evidence for how sensemaking theory can inform pedagogical practices in the preparation of social justice leaders.

Sensemaking occurs when there is an interruption, or when the current state of the world is different from the expected state (Weick, Sutcliffe, & Obstfeld, 2005). The prescribed resources chosen for the SfE lesson intended to disrupt how PSLs considered their future role as instructional leaders. The readings, mini-lesson, and video offered messages about how race, socioeconomic status, and segregation impact classroom culture, curriculum, and instruction. These prescribed resources provided sensemaking resources to encourage the PSLs to see inequities in classroom practice and to take on particular roles. The scenarios intended to have the PSLs confront relevant, real-life equity issues; for some of the PSLs in this study, these scenarios interrupted their understanding of schools as politically neutral spaces and their ideas about the role of school leaders.

The PSLs drew on prescribed resources in the SfE lesson because it was required of the assignment, but *how* they drew on these resources was important, particularly because they did so in similar ways. The prescribed resources gave them language to identify the equity issue in each scenario. By connecting the issues to the Danielson framework, they were also able to see how the tools they already have in their schools can be used to support creating more equitable learning environments. What is perhaps most significant is how they drew from selected resources, as this was not required. The majority of the PSLs shared some aspect of their personal or professional experiences as they made sense of the ideas presented in the SfE lesson. In order for them to consider their role as equity-oriented leaders, they considered factors beyond the scenario, such as their racial or socioeconomic backgrounds. While the SfE lesson provided the PSLs with a common language, future lessons might bring the issues closer to home by asking the PSLs to process issues from their own school context. Doing so would allow the PSLs to realistically consider what it would mean to take on the role of an equity-oriented leader. For example, they could practice how to engage their colleagues in critical reflection in ways that would feel supportive and not punitive or how to persuade their school district leadership to conduct more equity-oriented professional development sessions. In either case, the PSLs would be able to weigh aspects of their own identity as well as the nuances within schools, both of which are often not captured in any contrived scenario.

Sensemaking theory suggests that shifts in thinking are slow and happen across multiple different learning moments. PSLs would benefit from engaging

in greater sensemaking opportunities across their preparation programs (Ganon-Shilon & Schechter, 2017). One inherent challenge to simply recommending that programs offer more opportunities for sensemaking is that PSLs' prior mental models can encourage what is and what is not noticed in a situation (Weick, 1995). When the PSLs had to respond to the textbook scenario, for example, many decided the textbook was simply out of date instead of a potentially racially motivated decision. Perhaps they did not notice racism because of the limited definition of racism they brought to class (Evans, 2007; Henze, Katz, & Norte, 2000). Leadership programs seeking to develop social justice practices need to provide explicit definitions, examples, frameworks, and tools to help PSLs unpack their ideas about racism and other forms of oppression and inequity. For example, the structured class discussions provided PSLs space to deconstruct their beliefs and have their ideas challenged among their peers. Programs might prepare PSLs to consider how to find or create new spaces, such as book discussion groups, to continue critical conversations, particularly conversations that center dilemmas, that will lead to greater educational equity. Future research should consider how teachers with little experience addressing issues of social justice in their classroom can learn to address educational inequities as they take on roles with greater leadership.

School leaders determine the goals, priorities, and overall culture in a school building, and leadership programs are in a position to provide resources to help PSLs develop a social justice leadership identity (Rigby, 2015). As Evans (2007) suggests, school leaders need to develop "professional ideologies that support diversity, equity, and inclusiveness" (p. 185). By drawing on sensemaking theory, leadership preparation programs can help shape PSLs' professional identities and actions by providing tools and frameworks leaders can use to interpret policies that have implications for equity. This study was conducted in a course on instructional supervision, so the scenarios focused PSLs' attention on equitable instructional practices. Other lessons could influence PSLs to consider equity in broader issues, including inclusive education, school desegregation and integration, academic sorting and tracking practices, union agreements, or state and national reforms. Universities are in a unique position to provide the tools and frameworks PSLs need to respond to increasing student diversity and address the many inequities that endure in our schools. Utilizing sensemaking theory to support PSLs in constructing their roles as equity-oriented leaders is a worthwhile approach.

## Notes

1. The National Center for Education Statistics defines "Black or African American" as "a person having origins in any of the Black racial groups of Africa" and "Hispanic or Latino" as "a person of Mexican, Puerto Rican, Cuban, South or Central American, or other Spanish culture or origin, regardless of race" (Musu-Gillette et al., 2017, p. 2). We use the term

*Latinx* as the gender-neutral alternative to *Latino*. Throughout the paper, we refer to the people of these racial and ethnic groups as *Black* or *Latinx*, or collectively as *Black and Latinx*.

2. Project Implicit is a nonprofit organization and international collaboration between researchers who are interested in implicit social cognition (<https://implicit.harvard.edu/implicit/aboutus.html>).
3. Undoing Racism® is a signature workshop of the People's Institute for Survival and Beyond (<https://www.pisab.org/programs>).

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