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Principal resilience and vitality in extremis: the scenario of involuntary occupational dissolution

Abstract:

Purpose

High-stakes accountability and continuous multi-faceted pressures of the principalship require leaders to develop a broad range of personal qualities including resilience and personal vitality. Scant research exists on what happens to school principals when careers abruptly and involuntarily end, and the study featured here sought to hear principals' accounts of their experiences and to identify whether these personal qualities assist recovery and career re-identification.

Design/ methodology/ approach

A collaborative English and Australian study of former principals aimed to evaluate effects of involuntary job loss from their own perspectives. Twelve case studies involved one-on-one interviews during a two-year period revealing impact of job loss, coping strategies, resilience and personal vitality.

Findings

Successful management indicators were found: personal qualities, including the ability to retain a perspective and big picture view of career journey; an enduring love of teaching; health and fitness; study; getting another suitable post; and psychological and medical support. Time taken to regain pre-existing levels of personal vitality varied significantly based on resilience and contextual circumstances, whilst psychological and social support from family and professional colleagues was invaluable for recovery.

Originality/ value

This international study presents an original insight into effects of principals' sudden job loss – a perspective which has imposing pastoral relevance for employing authorities, professional associations and collegial networks. Aspiring and current principals may feel, 'There but for the grace of God, go I', and it is they who may need ultimately to be prepared for what is an increasingly common occurrence in schools across the world.

Purpose

In order to ensure success for both the principal themselves and the learners within their school, high levels of personal qualities, social and interpersonal skills are required (AITSL, 2014; Department for Education, 2017). In fact, a whole range of leadership requirements and professional practices must be developed as mandated in context-specific professional standards developed for principals all over the world.

Thus, skills and capacities such as resilience and personal vitality, progressively developed over a career, prior to and during principalship, help to shape the course of that career and, for the most part, contribute to increasing levels of success in the chosen profession. However, involuntary job loss is a phenomenon of the less successful kind, all too common in the principalship, and the question can be asked whether these leadership capacities and professional practices refined over the course of a career enable them to manage the impact of a potentially devastating career event. Involuntary job loss covers a range of phenomena such as voluntary redundancy, early retirement and non-renewal of contract. In short, it can be defined as any enforced employment scenario when the principal did not wish to leave their appointed role.

To date, little research has been undertaken concerning effects of involuntary job loss on principals themselves. The study featured here focusses on the phenomenon and interrogates the perceptions and observations of principals who have suffered involuntary job-loss. Does their capacity to be resilient ultimately matter – to them, to the school communities they serve or to the profession as a whole? Do their levels of personal vitality prior to the job loss assist them in recovery? How depleted are these levels after losing their job?

Resilience cannot be defined simply as a quality that is innate but as a social ‘construct that is relative, developmental and dynamic, emphasising the positive adaptation and development of individuals in the presence of a challenging circumstances’ (Day and Gu, 2013, p. 11). In parallel, the quality of personal vitality (defined as the retention of the original passion for teaching and then leading a school) (Simon, Christie, Graham and Call, 2015), is one which will be developed over the course of a career rather than just something one innately possesses.

It was anticipated that the findings from research conducted collaboratively by researchers in both England and Australia, would provide an original insight into uncharted territory: that of the personal impact of job loss on school principals. There could be emerging implications for employing authorities, boards of governors, professional associations and designers of educational leadership study programs in terms of principal preparation, ongoing professional development, and access to mentoring, coaching or other support. It is of interest that despite resilience perceived as being an ‘essential’ quality for school leaders, little has been written about it (Day and Gu, 2013, p. 105).

Background Literature

Personal capabilities, relevant experience and strategic positioning are important ingredients contributing to a successful career as a principal. Qualities of perseverance and flexibility are crucial (Hilborne, 2007) whilst the capacity to develop insight, manage stress and maintain health and wellbeing are also considered to be essential attributes and capabilities (Coleman and Glover, 2010). Being strategic whilst moving their own school forward, and knowing leadership behaviours and their potential effects on others, contribute significantly to this mix of desired leadership attributes (D’Auria, 2015).

The range of essential personal qualities needed to undertake the role of principal are well illustrated by myriad international studies including resilience and personal vitality (Allison, 2012; Beisser, Peters and Thacker, 2014; Celoria and Robertson, 2015; Day, 2014; Kirkham, 2002; Notman and Henry, 2011; Steward, 2014). Much is to be learned during a principal's career about different leadership styles, the development of critical thinking skills to facilitate effective leadership and to improve tenure longevity (Powley and Taylor, 2014), and an individual's ability to adapt to the changing nature of the educational context (Rosen, 2015). Ultimately, the counter-balance of things that the principal dislikes and the things that they love as expounded by Allison and Goethals (2012) builds both resilience and personal vitality – essential attributes for the job.

Strategic Alliances are Key

An experienced principal develops important leadership skills and behaviours over time on three levels: personal; systemic; and peer. Strategic alignment at the personal level means maintaining strong relationships during stressful times when there can be severe impact on family members (McFadden and McFadden, 2016). At the personal level, staff relationships and the provision of support during challenging situations is a fundamental aspect of good leadership, (Kirkham, 2002). Aria's (2016) analysis of the characteristics of trauma-based resilience and the regular daily resilience required in the role of principal, highlights that support received from others in the school is an invaluable contributor to principal wellbeing and, therefore, it is important for the principal to establish this personal alliance with their staff. Systemic strategic alliances are invaluable for functioning – and ultimately surviving - as a principal (Littleford, 1999). Peer alliances provide strong support mechanisms, collegiality and ongoing professional stimuli as part and parcel of the usual role of principal (Fluckiger, Lovett and Dempster, 2014), and they may have the potential to be invaluable in the face of involuntary job loss

Health and Wellbeing: for Sustainability

Byrne, Dionisi, et al. (2014) depict how leaders' pre-existing and on-the-job wellbeing affects their leadership capacity. Steward (2014) underlines the role that principals consistently take in developing others' levels of resilience whilst neglecting their own. Day's study of one UK principal (2014) reveals that this leader had effectively burned out, describing his professional identity as comprising courage, vulnerability and fatigue. To combat this potential outcome, training programs have been designed for principals or aspiring principals to prepare for the demands of the role. The National Professional Qualification for Headship (NPQH) in England refers to resilience as being one of seven leadership behaviours, along with 'commitment, collaboration, personal drive, awareness, integrity and respect' (Department for Education, 2017). In Australia, the Professional Practice of *Developing Self and Others* (AITSL, 2011) describes principals having to be 'committed to their own ongoing professional development and personal health and wellbeing in order to manage the complexity of the role and the range of learning capabilities and actions required of the role'. Day and Gu (2013) refer to principal resilience being reliant on four personal dispositions: willingness to take risks based on clear educational values: academic optimism; trust; and hope.

Additionally, Beisser et al. (2014) focus on the principal's need for work/life balance whilst in the job, and the ongoing, successful management of stress and maintenance of emotional well-being, are widely considered crucial professional practices for school leaders (Celoria and Robertson, 2015). It is apparent from the research explored, that preserving health and wellbeing whilst in the principal role is essential, especially as Thomson (2009) confirms that it is 'now not only possible but also very popular in some quarters to deal brutally with headteachers if they are seen to fall short of expectations' (p. 130). It is paramount to consider, therefore, that, should a principal's role end abruptly, he or she may well suffer in the same way that managers from a broad range of careers have demonstrated (Sheridan, 2012). Schroeder (2013) also investigated job loss effects of managers across industries and professions and the findings showed that

individuals with an exogenous job loss suffer in the long run: men are significantly more likely to be depressed and they have more trouble knowing the current date. Women report poorer general health and more chronic conditions and are also affected in their physical health: they are more likely to be obese or overweight, and to have any limitations in their (instrumental) activities of daily living (p. 5).

This research, undertaken with former principals in England and Australia, to investigate the effects of job loss, was anticipated to reflect their perceived levels of resilience and personal vitality, both of which would have impact on long-term health and wellbeing levels after such an event, and their ability to bounce back. There is little literature we can find specifically on involuntary job loss of school principals, Thomson (2009) being the sole specific case.

Approach

Professional networks were used to identify and communicate with potential participants due to the highly-personal nature and potential obstacles relating to termination agreements which are often characteristic of involuntary job loss scenarios. Ethical clearance for this research activity had been obtained through both a British and an Australian university, with particular attention given to addressing confidentiality and sensitivity concerns. Twelve former principals who had experienced involuntary job loss (four in England and eight in Australia) were approached to be interviewed during 2016 and 2017 in one-on-one interviews of approximately one hour.

The over-arching research question was how involuntary job-loss was faced and how it affected former principals. The same semi-structured questions were asked of participants in both samples and researchers encouraged expansion of themes according to significance for each person. To minimise potential distress, post-interview discussions were an important feature of the interactions with participants, with counselling available as needed.

The Case Studies

The participants from England were all aged in their 40s and, apart from school teaching, had no other employment. Each of them worked in state-funded schools,

had been in their positions for varying lengths of time and job loss had happened within the past year and a half prior to the interview.

Australian participants were between 40 and 65 years of age and had been employed in independent as well as state schools. Prior to their most recent post, several had long careers in senior educational leadership positions. One participant had lost his position 14 years prior and others had experienced the same at varying lengths of time before being interviewed.

The Process

Once the interviews with participants had been conducted, their highly individualised commentaries were collated and emergent themes subsequently analysed (Miles and Huberman, 1994). Case sampling (Cohen, Manion, & Morrison, 2013) was also utilized with snowballing to increase size (Given, 2008). Smith, Dalen, Wiggins, Tooley, Christopher and Bernard's (2008) range of levels of resilience and elements of the Personal Vitality Model (Simon et al. 2015) were adopted as lenses through which to interpret participants' reflections on the effects of involuntary job loss. This entire process is depicted in Figure 1. **(Insert Figure 1 here)**

Findings

Principals' perceptions of their previous high levels of resilience, performance, professional success and self-efficacy prior to job loss, emerged through the interviews. Participants unanimously, and often emotionally, also told stories of significant personal and professional challenges resulting from involuntary job loss. Narratives revealed that the levels of resilience and personal vitality required to cope with losing their job, related to personal capacity and available support to some extent, but also to contextual factors, such as re-employment. The coherence between the two countries' data was matched by an alignment across type and phase of schooling. Dominant themes included: personal qualities; the ability to retain a perspective; having a big picture view of career; an enduring love of teaching; health and fitness; study; getting another job; and psychological and medical support.

Personal Qualities

Both England's NPQH and AITSL's (2014) *Leadership Requirement of Personal qualities, social and interpersonal skills*, emphasise career-long development of these qualities. With the prospect of that career ending, confidence in these qualities sometimes waned, with such comments as:

I found myself to be involved a turmoil that I didn't expect to be in, so felt ill-equipped to deal with that.

Conversely, personal qualities were sometimes the means by which the person could cope with the consequences of job loss such as refusing to be 'regretful or angry with anyone'. The ability to move on from adversity relatively quickly was

attributed variously to the ability to forgive, to compartmentalise what had happened or to assert one's own efficacy:

My strongest character strength is forgiveness and that has helped me greatly – so I don't hang onto things that have happened that much.

I felt I knew I had to hold up and be brave – and be thick-skinned and know where I am. My ability to compartmentalise really helped me at the time.

They do not deserve me, and I am better than that. I deserve better. I will get another job because I am good.

For other participants, well-developed personal values and high levels of resilience were actually the catalyst to the eventual enforced job loss:

I made decision quickly that things were wrong – saw that this school was not aligned with my values. You are not being true to self if you are in a situation which is not true to what you are or what you believe.

Ability to Retain Perspective:

For several participants, having other important or life-changing personal circumstances brought perspective to what had happened:

We have come to realise that the down dip doesn't last for long. That can be a dangerous place to stay if you can't stay positive. I don't think I am someone to wallow for long.

We are conscious that having [a child with special needs], we need to be well, because [the child] needs us. We have had to re-think lives as we watch [the child] grow.

Another's sense of perspective was garnered once he started to focus on future economic survival:

I knew where this conversation was going, and I quickly realised that the only discussion I was going to have with my employer was about severance pay.

Career Big Picture:

For people possessing a big picture view of their career, job loss, whilst difficult to accept in the short term, did not mean that their career had ended completely. Retention of belief in future career options was paramount, with a commitment to remain collegial and maintain professional networks to optimise future employment. One participant recalled earlier career plans:

I was always going to apply for international posts and accepting this position had got in the way. So, I reverted back to the plan.

Participants reflected that long-term career success may depend on what is done at the point of job loss:

[Study] gave me a distraction and it helped my resumé which I have always been loyal to – I was uncertain about my future, but I don't remember panicking.

Personal reflection on the direction their career was taking, was indicative of the level of positive thinking in the face of adversity:

A return to leadership in schools completes a journey, almost akin to gaining a black belt, then returning to begin again as a white belt. The lessons learnt mean I feel it is the person not the position, the context not my shortcomings, that now defines my leadership capabilities.

One participant reflected on the limiting effects of how he had previously envisioned his career after talking to past colleagues, one of whom said that when you get a job 'the smart people think about the next one'. He had never thought about it like that, and this was a 'different mind-set'. He described how he had had to walk away from the organisation he loved where he saw himself as 'a lifer' and perhaps only being able to envision himself in that career context:

Really without being boastful – the next step was [a senior educational leadership role]. I see people since, who became that, and I know I could have done it. It's difficult to see people in a role which I coveted once.

Coping with dents in the career plan were alluded to frequently, for instance by one participant, who consequently avoided all professional situations where she knew she would feel uncomfortable, and by another who reflected on what he did career-wise to move forward:

Get busy. Define my objectives. Reflect on the obstacles I confronted and did not overcome... [I was] realistic that I had certain capabilities and I would just need to be patient, learn and re-engage in work that appealed to me.

A long-term appraisal of their career to date was reflected on by some, revealing that the good times were not forgotten:

OK the last principal role did not go as I would have liked, however, if I think about the best times in my previous role I could never replicate the feelings of satisfaction – it was an absolute joy.

Knowing that job loss is a relatively common occurrence also helped participants in the research place their experience into a longer-term view of their career:

I have met so many people to whom this has happened – not just in Education either. Yes, these things happen.

An Enduring Love of Teaching

Retention of a love of teaching for several participants seemed to be highly significant:

If you work hard, are passionate about kids and not silly – and have inherent love for learning - everything will fall into place.

Another participant had a deep appreciation for the unique contribution she can continue to make to teaching:

Interactions are warm and special [in schools] – an electric thing happens which makes you feel, ‘It’s great to be here!’ I am likely to dress up as a princess principal - the unexpected quality.... things that engage, and that becomes infectious. It says, ‘you’re up for it’. The ‘inner you’ is on the outside.

Furthermore, the continuing sense of purpose and passion for teaching was re-ignited for some:

My reflection on the last year has been a return to full-time teaching where I found my intrinsic joy.

These quotes exemplify Day & Gu’s (2013) belief that a strong moral purpose is a crucial component of high resilience.

Health and Fitness

Participants were aware of the importance of health and fitness in being able to cope with the principal role – and even more so now after a job loss.

I do the Principal Wellbeing survey regularly – it actually gets you to think if you’ve had health checks/ sleep well/ have too many drinks etc.

However, the immediate significant impact on health and fitness after job loss was commented on by several people, with one indicating that she ‘hadn’t slept much really for weeks’:

Sleep is interrupted – and even though I might try and write things down I still keep waking up. This interrupts my coping strategies. I need to work on this.

Some participants focussed more on personal fitness once they had lost their job as they then had more time. Others however, felt unmotivated to do so:

I didn’t do any exercise at all during the really bad part. I was exhausted and couldn’t be bothered – it’s only been in the last two years that I have got back into it.

Study

Engaging in study was viewed by some participants as being part of a holistic career view and a strategy helpful with job loss recovery:

Always thought that university may be the next step if this career finishes – but it would be going into a completely different world.

One participant thought that reading and researching leadership was actually his biggest saving grace:

I have looked at tons of writing from people I thought would have something to say and this has helped. Built up my knowledge base.

Another said:

The MBA stuff was good – I was with people from a whole range of professions and that helped me have an objective view.

This participant also specifically mentioned an academic reference concerning principals often having a difficult time in their first post and then having a pretty secure and successful position in their second. Finding professional references like this had certainly helped this participant to rationalise his own experience and to move on more confidently.

Getting Another Post

Participants repeatedly recounted how job loss had quickly affected both self-efficacy and role-efficacy. One said that teachers and principals often question their own worth, but in this extreme scenario, they really question whether they are 'up to it'. Those who secured another suitable position soon after job loss were more able to bounce back from the experience. 'It would have been a very different story' if another job had not been forthcoming within a relatively short timeframe. Another said that what helped him was 'the sanctuary of a term's teaching contract in [his hometown]'. Most of our sample 'survived' with either new leadership roles or reinventing their career in a different field such as Higher Education. Table 1 depicts what had transpired for the participants in this study in terms of re-employment at the point of interview:

Participating Principals		Subsequent role	Time elapsed since job loss
England	Male Principal of Sponsored Academy (11 – 18)	Consultancy then Higher Education	6 months
	Female Principal of a Converter Academy (11 – 18)	Unemployed	6 months
	Female Principal of a Catholic Faith School (4 -11)	Assistant Principal in another school	18 months
	Male Principal of a Sponsored Academy (11 – 18)	Unemployed then Temporary Principal in another school	1 month
Australia	Female Principal of an Independent School (P – 12)	Academic	5 years
	Male Principal of Independent School (P – 12)	Head of Department in another Independent School leading to Deputy Principal	10 years
	Female Principal of State Government School (Special Needs, P – 12)	Potential new Principalship	On-going situation
	Male Principal of State Governments Schools (P – 12) and Regional Director	Professional Teacher Support (Tertiary)	7 years
	Male Principal of Independent School (P – 12)	International leadership position	5 years
	Male Principal of	Consultancy then Principal of	14 years

	Independent School (P – 12)	another Independent School	
	Female Principal of State Government Primary School	Principal at a new State School	5 years
	Male Principal of Independent School (P – 12)	School teaching and academia, and then Principal in an international School	18 months

Table 1: Principals' re-employment after involuntary job-loss

Psychological and Medical Support

Without exception, all participants paid tribute to the support they received from family – usually a spouse – with one commenting:

I said to my wife – you must have had a tough time supporting me and am eternally grateful.

Two participants had counselling with a psychologist, another recruited a professional coach, and many participants were loyally supported by their leadership teams, the staff of their school or by respected colleagues in the profession:

My senior team were fantastic, very supportive; they felt a great sense of injustice for me.

Others have faced many years of medical support due to the anxiety associated with her job loss:

I have been on medication for many years since it happened – it's minimal now but it's still a crutch. And I've had to try and re-program my brain with psychology and it doesn't always work because it comes down to self-doubt. I can stand up in front of 500 people and give an amazing address – I can give workshops for hours on end – no one would even pick it. I am not nervous with these things. I know I am very good at what I do. But suddenly finding myself with people I don't know, and I don't trust them. Put me in a situation which is not within my quality world and I hate it.

Implications

Notwithstanding the fact that the twelve case studies featured here present a range of contextual conditions and personal circumstances concerning involuntary job loss, there is, nonetheless, a high level of coherence of themes between the English and Australian samples, and these are neither differentiated by type of school nor amount of leadership experience. Their memories were universally vivid and the effects long-lasting, regardless of the time that had elapsed since the event. Schröder's (2013) findings concerning the prolonged effects of job loss on health are confirmed convincingly by this study's data. Seen through lenses of resilience and personal vitality, the findings illuminate how school principals face and can recover from the increasingly common phenomenon of involuntary job loss. However, even though many of our sample 'bounce back,' their narratives indicate that these events are significant for an extended length of time, and some do not return to the principalship.

The need for resilience when undertaking a challenging leadership role such as school principal has been established (Coleman and Glover, 2010) but the implications of the findings from this study are that there is a need for more awareness of the degree of resilience that may be needed when the going gets really tough – as in the ultimate scenario of involuntary job loss. Smith et al.'s (2008) study conceptually documents the varying levels of resilience which either enable a rapid bounce back after a significant event or prolong the period towards full recovery. The range of reflections shared in this study show varying levels of resilience which may be due to any of the contributing factors: personal qualities such as retaining a perspective; possession of a big picture career view; the context in which it occurs; the quality of support available and accepted; strategies adopted to cope; and whether or not another job was found relatively quickly.

Patterson and Patterson's (2009) investigations concerning characteristics of resilience observed in Greek primary school principals, focussed on ten key dimensions including that of having a sense of optimism (either reality-based or futures-focussed). The participants in this study had varying levels of optimism, partly due to their capacity to retain perspective and possess a big picture view of their career and their life generally. Gowan's (2014) study regarding career re-identification as being a crucial component towards recovery after job loss is emphasised by the findings from this study. Regarding self-efficacy, Paterson and Paterson (2009) emphasise that resilient leaders seek help from others when needed, anticipate that through adversity they will learn to be stronger and maintain a steady leadership presence as leaders, and these sentiments were seen in the reflections of the participants in the study featured here. A strong support base means that resilient leaders can learn from others' experiences and be nurtured during tough times: for many participants in the study, this support fostered resilience throughout what they regarded as a significant ordeal. That involuntary job loss can have significant impact on personal vitality may seem predictable, but the evidence presented here from people who have experienced it, underlines the depth of impact and provides an original insight into the phenomenon as expanded on below.

Originality and Value

Regardless of the reasons for a principal's job loss, subsequent effects on the school and student learning can be significant. However, little focus has been given by researchers to its effects on the principal personally. This study shows that if high levels of resilience and personal vitality are required to undertake the job of principal, even more are required by the individual to personally withstand the effects of job loss in terms of: career re-identification; personal health and fitness; future professional contribution; and their eventual recovery from the experience.

This study has discovered uniquely that principals' resilience, vitality and self-belief in the face of job loss, can be successfully enhanced when there is a high element of support gained from others: both from family and professional colleagues. Each participant seemed to benefit and increase their personal vitality from the high regard they were held in by fellow colleagues (including previous working colleagues); the

status given to them by others appears to help. This, in turn, increased their self-belief and professional efficacy.

One potential explanation for the importance of collegial support may be to do with the isolation and, in effect, loneliness of the role of the Head (Caldwell, 2006). All participants had periods of self-doubt due to what was happening to them, and they needed confirmation of their ability from others. This professional confirmation differs from personal confirmation they get from spouses and other loved ones, who tend to provide unconditional love and support, valuable in its own right. What can be described as a professional community of fellow principals is a recurrent theme – reference often being made to telephone calls, personal house calls and social occasions. One participant said:

I had a lot of colleagues - Heads in the [specific faith] community...and they were fantastic at the time. They could not believe what the Council had done to me.

Therefore, the notion of a 'principals support club' appears to be real and alive: and this may be not just a simple act of empathy. Rather, it poses the question of whether the members of the club also support others in order to support themselves. The act of supporting others can certainly contribute to their own personal vitality at the time, but it also perpetuates an established behaviour which one day they may need themselves, given the frequency of principal job loss around the world. It is possible that such collective support is an unwritten, but mutually-agreed to, aspect of being in a 'principals' support club'. Does an attitude of 'sticking together in the face of adversity' help everyone? Is there an element of, 'There but for the grace of God go I' in this support network? In the face of little other pastoral support for professionals who find themselves in this position, this at least is one avenue of support which has been demonstrated to be effective in its impact on resilience and personal vitality.

Conclusions

Long-term leadership success in a school is often contextual, and the community's support for the principal's efforts can quickly waiver. Knowing this, it is evident that principals themselves must attend to their own high levels of health, wellbeing, personal vitality and degrees of resilience not only whilst in the job, but during and after potential involuntary job loss; the data in this study indicates that the effect of such events are life-long.

Leadership preparation programmes refer to resilience but there is more that can be done by education administrators with regard to leadership professional development and which addresses these essential skills. There is more that governing bodies can do to harness the leadership talent which often is forced to go off-shore to gain a future appointment. There is also a critical role for current practising principals and professional associations, in being part of a support network or professional learning community to offer on-going professional support.

Ultimately, resilience and personal vitality matter greatly for school principals. A broader awareness of the personal effects on former principals affected by job loss,

and advocacy by key players for increased professional development and support are recommended in these regards, in conjunction with further research and evaluation of proactive programs and policies which aim to extend opportunities for former principals' future leadership growth. If, as Day and Gu (2013) suggest, resilience has 'always been desirable in principalship but is now become an imperative' (p. 107) then it is essential that such programs seek to develop such skills in aspiring and incumbent principals.

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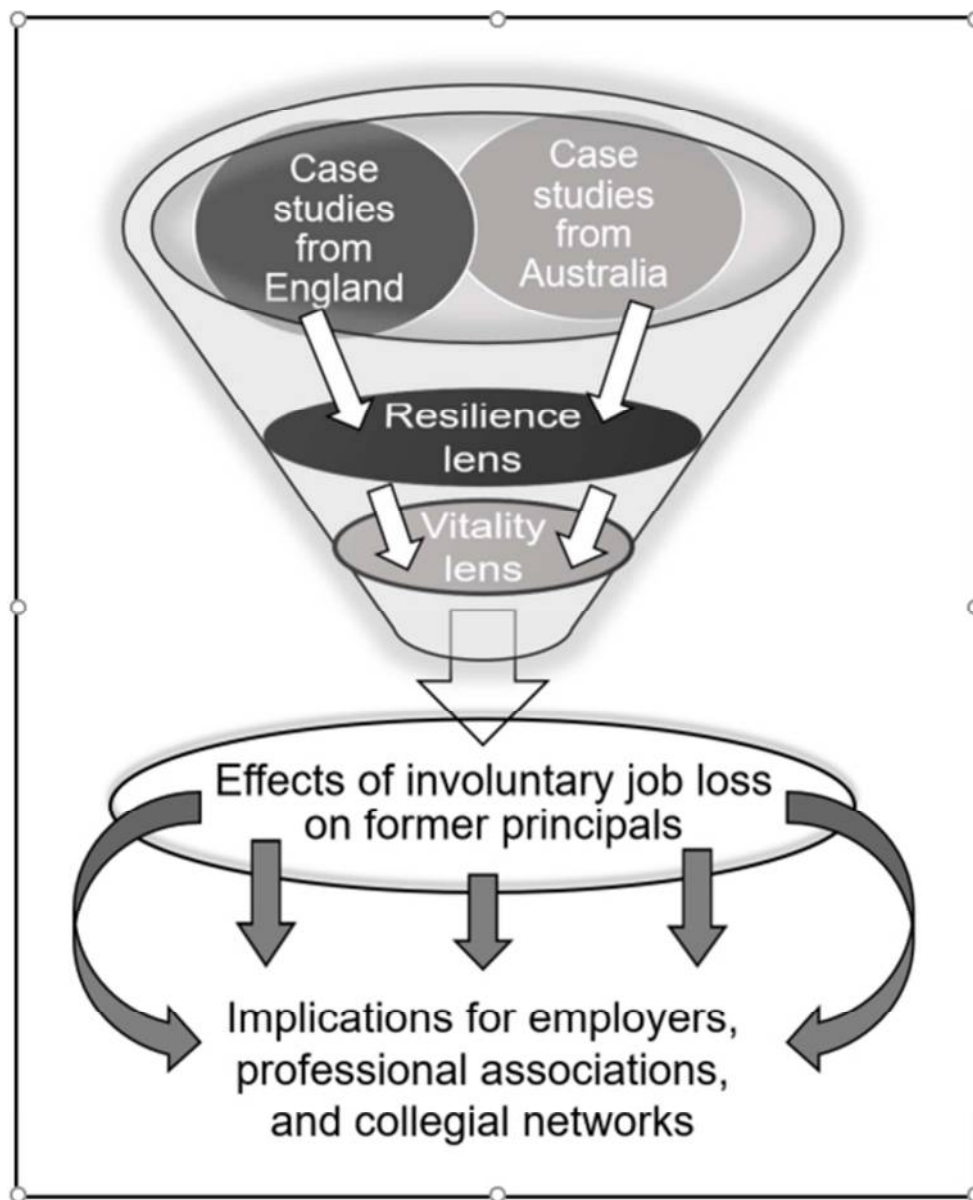


Figure 1: Conceptual framework: Resilience and Vitality Lens Analysis of Principals' Involuntary Job Loss Effects

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