

EPILOGUE – FINDING RESILIENCE WITHIN OURSELVES

Once upon a time, a rich man went to the market. As he was walking, his shoe ripped. He went to a cobbler on the outskirts of the market, and when the cobbler handed him the repaired shoe the rich man was not satisfied. “This is a poor job,” he scolded the cobbler. The cobbler apologized. “I’m sorry,” he said. “It’s hard to make a living, I have five children. My eldest daughter wants to get married, and I can’t help her with wedding. I’m worried and can’t concentrate on my craft.” The rich man took the cobbler to his house, opened the safe, and handing over a gold bullion he said, “Whenever one of your children is ready to marry, sell off some gold for the wedding expenses.” The cobbler thanked the rich man for the generous gift, ran home and carefully hid the gold. With his mind at ease, he worked happily and cheerfully, his fine work was widely acclaimed, and he prospered.

On his way home one evening, he walked by a man who was crying bitterly. The cobbler asked him why he was crying, and the man told him that he was poor and had nothing to eat and could not feed his hungry children. The cobbler invited him to his house and gave him the golden bar, still in the hiding place. “When you need money, use some of this gold and sell it, and that way you won’t have to worry anymore.” The poor man took the bar and rushed home. But he was skeptical, and, once home, he took a hammer and hit the bar. His skepticism proved true – under a thin layer of gold leaf there was nothing but a rusty block of iron.

As principals, we must believe that we hold the gold. We often experience events that disrupt our self-possession, scare us, and knock us off balance. How we get up when we stumble, dust ourselves off, and continue is a mark of our resilience. Falls, obstacles, challenges, difficulties, and problems are an inseparable part of a principal’s life. Developing the kind of resilience that allows a return to equilibrium, growth, and becoming stronger after a fall are essential for good functioning and professional thriving.

Principals are required to work in a technological environment, which is dynamic and uncertain; at times they face resistance to their work and their

authority is constantly tested. This intense reality creates considerable mental and emotional pressure, and negative feelings such as loneliness, physical fatigue, nervousness, ongoing worry, and in extreme cases, even depression. Thus, strengthening all dimensions of principals' resilience is essential.

This study deals with aspects and dimensions of resilience, using a comprehensive, holistic view, achieved by entering the personal, professional, and emotional world of school principals. The study presents the subject from principals' vantage point and their perception of their role and the unique difficulties and challenges it entails. Finally, it presents the attributes of resilience and the unique resilience practices that principals use to strengthen their steadfastness and adjustment to the job.

This book is the result of a qualitative longitudinal study that followed novice and veteran principals for a year. It included semi-structured in-depth interviews with the principals. This methodology enabled us to obtain a rich and comprehensive picture on the topic of resilience and the reality that principal's experience in relation to it. This study was conducted in 2020–2021 when the COVID-19 pandemic began, and this increased principals' need for resilience in order to cope with the challenges of management in a reality of uncertainty and ever-changing work guidelines.

We saw that the central resilience-inhibiting factors were overload that leads to a sense of stress, difficulties dealing with key players (staff, parents, authority, and supervisors), lack of administrative knowledge, feeling helplessness, and staff rejection. However, the interviews also revealed clear resilience-enhancing factors such as quick successes, growth stemming from life experience, social support, staff acceptance, and students' support. The study also revealed that principals pointed to educational-professional identity as a significant component of resilience, as well as a sense of mission and meaning, empathy and assertiveness, delaying reaction, optimism, perspective and proportion, and physical activity.

Furthermore, throughout the research, we realized that every principal reacts differently to different kinds of pressure. There are principals who are unnerved by demanding parents, whereas facing difficulties created by the staff do not faze them – and vice versa. Some principals are “felled” by facing the demands from staff but display resilience when dealing with demanding parents. As we have seen, the list of examples is long. This led us to coin the term *contingency resilience*, which expresses the reality of situation-dependent resilience that changes in encounters with resilience inhibitors and resilience builders. The conversations with the principals revealed five dimensions of contingency resilience. Each dimension complements the others, together creating a comprehensive and holistic structure. The dimensions are subdivided into those related to the principal's inner world – mental, emotional,

physiological, and ethical dimensions – and the external, social dimension that is largely dependent on the environment surrounding the principal.

This research contributes to both theory and practice. Its theoretical contribution is in expanding knowledge relating to identifying the factors that strengthen principals' personal and mental resilience, which seem to be the most important factor for their success, as well as for minimizing burnout and early quitting. Additionally, this knowledge suggests a multidimensional, coherent model to aid our holistic understanding of resilience and its practical applications. The results will facilitate providing practical information on resilience to support training and in-service processes for school leadership, and enhance the managerial abilities required of school principals in times of complexity and change. We hope that this study will be fertile ground for theoretical development, as well as new and renewed thinking regarding the dimensions of resilience among school principals.