



## Developing a Model to Prevent Job Isolation of School Principals in Iran Based on Grounded Theory

Neda Mozaffari<sup>1</sup>, Mohammad Ali Nadi<sup>2\*</sup>, Badri Shahtalebi<sup>3</sup>

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### Abstract

Job isolation affects the quality of work-life of school principals. Given the vital role of the principals in the success of the schools and, consequently, the success of the community, this issue is of particular importance. Current qualitative research is done to develop a model to prevent job isolation of school principals in Iran based on Strauss and Corbin's grounded theory and systematic approach. The research participants were school principals of three educational levels in Iran. A total of 18 school principals were selected by theoretical purposeful sampling method. In-depth semi-structured interviews continued data collection until theoretical saturation. Content analysis based on the continuous comparison method of Strauss and Corbin was used to analyze the interview texts. The results of data analysis during three stages of open, axial, and selective coding were 13 core categories, 34 subcategories, and 133 concepts analyzed within the framework of the paradigm model and in the form of causal conditions (Occupational causes and Managerial causes), contextual conditions (Extra-school Causes, Inter-school Causes, and Human causes), intervening conditions (Demographic causes and the atmosphere of society), strategies (Existence of spiritual assets in the organization, Creating a supportive umbrella, Managerial style, and Modifying the strategic structure of education), and consequences (Micro consequences and Macro consequences). The Lincoln and Guba (1985) approach was used to validate the data, including creditability, transferability, dependability, and confirmability. According to this study's findings, the Education System should initiate programs for principals to help them prevent their job isolation.

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1. Ph.D. Student in Educational Management, Isfahan (Khorasgan) Branch, Islamic Azad University, Isfahan, Iran.
2. Associate Professor, Department of Educational Sciences, Isfahan (Khorasgan) Branch, Islamic Azad University, Isfahan, Iran.  
\* Corresponding Author: Email: mnadi@khuisf.ac.ir
3. Associate Professor, Department of Educational Sciences, Isfahan (Khorasgan) Branch, Islamic Azad University, Isfahan, Iran.

## Introduction

Education is the foundation of any society's cultural, social, economic, and political development. Today, it is a growth industry with the largest budget in most countries after the defense budget. Since a significant part of educational activities occurs in schools, schools have a special place as a sensitive social system (Joudaki et al., 2019). Schools are open systems and like other systems, have inputs, processes, outputs, and subsystems that interact with the environment. If the process is defined as one of these subsystems, four subsystems are resulted in this cycle: principal, education, culture, and policies. According to studies, the most important factor that affects the success of the educational process is first the school principal and then the teachers (Ates & Artuner, 2013). The role of a school principal is considered the most prominent role in students' development and also is one of the internal factors affecting the improvement of students' performance after the role of high-level managers of the educational system (Khanifar et al., 2020).

Having reviewed the literature on the complex role of the school principals, the issue of job isolation emerged. Although school principals are surrounded by students, teachers, and parents, they often feel isolated in their work. Principals often feel like isolated links in the chain of command, which they catch somewhere between teachers, students, and parents. Principals feel that they are surrounded by people who ignore them, and they are starved for the opportunities to speak openly about their work-life (Drago & Pecchia, 2016). Palmer (1998, p.156) says: "If we want to support each other's inner lives, we must remember a simple truth: The human soul does not want to be fixed; it wants simply to be seen and heard". Suppose the role of an effective

principal includes multiple and various social interactions with students, teachers, and parents. In that case, the degree to which principals feel isolated may greatly impact their abilities to work as educational leaders. In addition, isolation may affect the quality of the work-life of principals, the overall effectiveness of school leaders, the school's work environment, and maybe principals' persistence or tendency to stay in their job (Bauer & Silver, 2018). Also, job isolation will affect the decision-making processes, and it may slow down principals' professional development and processes of sharing work between principals and teachers (Tahrir et al., 2015).

Many school principals enter the profession with experience as class teachers, an experience in which there is a lot of cooperation and support from colleagues. This reveals the difference between the role of a teacher and a principal. The principal is not one of the school teachers; rather, they are alone at school without job-alike peers. Schools have introduced collaborative systems, such as professional learning communities (PLCs<sup>1</sup>), to reduce teachers' isolation. Still, these collaborative structures are not available to principals (Drago & Peccia, 2016). Job isolation is one of the most important factors for new principals to stay or leave their job position. Johnson (2005), as cited in Bauer and Silver (2018), pointed out that "Profound Isolation" is one of the major reasons that school leaders mention for leaving their jobs, and lessening the job isolation is one of the ways which schools can retain their principals. Job isolation plays an important role in predicting job satisfaction and efficiency, even related to the quality of work-life of school leaders (Bauer & Brazer, 2013; Stephenson & Bauer, 2010). School leaders whose isolation is lower are less likely to burn out

1. PLCs are social groups of new and experienced trainers who come together to achieve their goals, such as gathering new information, re-examining previous knowledge, building experiences and ideas

of themselves and others to work on a specific topic, and improving student learning.

(Friedman, 2002). In this regard, Stephenson & Bauer (2010) showed that isolation significantly influences on physical and emotional burnout of new principals. Dussault and Thibodeau (1997) showed that job isolation reduced job satisfaction. Also, job isolation is inversely related to employees' professional development (Aizenberg & Oplatka, 2019). Previous studies have shown that isolation may lead to several individual problems, such as depression and psychological distress. It might also lead to turnover, low organizational commitment, and low job dissatisfaction, consequently reducing job performance in service jobs such as education (Chen & Kao, 2011).

Despite the above cases about job isolation, some necessary boundaries in leadership life require administrative isolation to some extent relating to personal and professional roles, decision making, and confidential affairs (Ackerman & Maslin-Ostrowski, 2004). The culture of isolation is inherent in the field of education. Because the educational hierarchy leads to keeping members isolated and departmentalized (Allgood, 2005).

Stephenson and Bauer (2010) asserted that the literature on job isolation continues to be sparse. The systematic studies that directly address the issue of principal isolation have either assumed it as a negative factor in the life of the principal or only generally established its relationship with principals' perceptions of their effectiveness (Bauer & Brazer, 2013). Given the above, and by changing the role of the principal from a principal to an educational leader who is responsible for all aspects of school programs, the impact of isolation increases (Bauer & Silver, 2018). In this way, Howard and Mallory (2008, p.9) asserted, "The one-principal-one-school still exists in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Therefore, coping strategies to deal with professional isolation are necessary for the 21<sup>st</sup>-century principalship."

Responsibilities of principals have grown to include fiscal affairs, school building

construction, and maintenance of the school in addition to educational affairs. These responsibilities combined with a lack of motivational factors for principals have left many school principals feeling isolated. Given that the challenges and effects of job isolation have made the working life of school principals an important issue, the topic of job isolation of school principals should be viewed from the perspective of their field of work as the organizations' leaders. In this regard, the purpose of the current study was first to identify the factors affecting the job isolation of principals, then to identify strategies to prevent job isolation and to develop a native model to prevent job isolation of school principals in Iran.

### **Research Background**

Rousta and Heidari (2019) in a study entitled, Structural pattern of job isolation with the intention to leave the work mediated by self-efficacy, job satisfaction, and burnout, which was conducted on a sample of 60 female school principals in Abadeh showed that job isolation has a direct effect on self-efficacy, job satisfaction, and burnout. Job isolation also has an indirect (mediating) effect on the intention to leave the job through self-efficacy, job satisfaction, and burnout. In addition, these results showed that job isolation has a negative relationship with self-efficacy and job satisfaction and a positive and significant relationship with burnout. The results indicate the mediating role of self-efficacy, job satisfaction, and burnout in the relationship between job isolation and intention to leave work in female principals. Forati and Tehrani Kian (2019) in their study entitled, The effect of job isolation on employees' intention to leave the service with the mediating role of self-efficacy, burnout, and job satisfaction, which was conducted on a sample of 384 employees of Tejarat Bank, north of Tehran, showed that job isolation had a significant negative effect on self-efficacy and job

satisfaction and had a significant positive effect on burnout, but its direct effect on the intention to leave the service was not significant. The findings also showed that self-efficacy had a significant positive effect on job satisfaction and had a significant negative effect on the intention to leave the service. But its direct effect on burnout was not significant. Findings also showed that all three variables of job satisfaction, self-efficacy, and burnout have a significant mediating role in the relationship between job isolation and intention to leave the service. In line with the results of the hypotheses of this study, it can be stated that employees with low levels of isolation are less prone to burnout, which in turn increases the likelihood of their efficiency at work.

Stephenson and Bauer (2010), in a study on the Role of Job Isolation in Predicting New Principals' Burnout conducted on a sample of 196 first- and second-year elementary, middle, high, and alternative school principals from across the state of Louisiana, showed that isolation is predicted by two forms of role stress (role ambiguity and role overload) and social support in an expected direction. Participation in a coaching program also emerged as a statistically significant predictor, suggesting that being involved in a coaching program reduces the degree of isolation at work. Then, Analyses showed that isolation serves as a statistical predictor of two manifestations of burnout, physical and emotional. Bauer and Brazer (2013), in a study on the Impact of Isolation on the Job Satisfaction of New Principals conducted on a sample of first-year school principals from across the State of Louisiana, examined whether isolation serves as a mediator in the relationship between the factors (social support, role ambiguity, role conflict, role overload, participating in a coaching program) affect the quality of work-life of the new principals and job isolation. Regression analyses showed that isolation completely mediates the relationship between social support and job isolation and the

relationship between role ambiguity and job satisfaction. Tahrir et al. (2015), in a study on the Novice Head Teacher's Isolation and Loneliness Experience conducted on 170 novice headteachers from Malaysian primary and secondary schools with less than 5 years of experience in headship posts, showed that the feeling of isolation was due to many factors such as heavy workload, autocratic style of leadership, unwillingness to share the workload, problems in communicating with teachers and lack of support from teachers. This study also explored the strategies for overcoming isolation. These strategies are as follows: 1) change in head's attitude, 2) enhance teamwork with teachers, 3) build networks with the other heads, 4) continuous interaction with teachers, 5) build open communication with staff, and 6) task distribution. Drago and Peccia (2016) conducted a survey study entitled, From Isolation to Collaboration: School Principals on 1972 elementary and high school principals that examined factors leading to job isolation and the effect of job isolation on job performance. This study examined the relationship between isolation and variables such as job performance and job satisfaction. The result of data analyses provided recommendations for designing and implementing two collaborative systems for school principals: 1) mentoring programs and 2) professional learning committees (PLCs). Bauer and silver (2018) conducted a survey study entitled, Impact of Job Isolation on New Principals' Sense of Efficacy, Job Satisfaction, Burnout and Persistence on a sample of 203 first-year elementary, middle, high school, and alternative school principals from across the southern state. The result showed that isolation is an important predictor of all four constructs in the model. When included as an antecedent factor, isolation is the strongest predictor of new managers leaving. Aizenberg and Oplatka (2019) conducted a qualitative study entitled, from professional isolation to effective leadership:

preschool teacher-directors' strategies of shared leadership and pedagogy on 25 preschool teacher-directors who work in the public state sector from the Ministry of Education's Tel Aviv. This study showed that structural contextual factors and human contextual factors are causes of preschool teacher-directors' professional isolation. This study also showed that receiving professional support, cooperation, leading educational projects, and professional development are preschool teacher-directors' professional strategies for coping with professional development.

Among all types of management, the management of educational organizations is of special importance. It has a vital role because, in educational organizations, all activities and goals of the organization are focused on human factors. Suppose educational organizations succeed in achieving their goals. In that case, society, including organizations and individuals, will benefit from this success. Society will witness significant growth and progress in all areas such as economic, social, cultural, and the like.

Regarding the important role of the school principals in the productivity and effectiveness of schools, principals should be familiar with the goals, basic tasks, and necessary management skills. In addition to the necessity and importance of principals' familiarity with their goals and tasks, factors such as job isolation, lack of motivation, stress, burnout, and leaving the job position that leads to any failure of principals should be prevented, because the realization of these factors imposes a lot of social costs on students and their families and society. Considering the important role of school principals in promoting productivity and the success of society, this research aims to develop a suitable model to prevent the job isolation of school principals. So far, more research has been done on teachers' job isolation, but there are no regular analytical studies on the job isolation of school principals in Iran. Studies in this area have

only examined the isolation of teachers, and some have examined the relationship between job isolation of school principals and other variables. Still, there is no comprehensive model to prevent this problem. Considering the mentioned challenges, it is necessary to fully and comprehensively discover the various factors of job isolation of school principals and provide strategies to prevent the negative consequences of job isolation of school principals.

In general, current research is important in several dimensions; first, it covers the gap of studies in the field of prevention of job isolation of school principals in Iran. Second, this study identifies the causal, contextual, and intervening factors of job isolation and strategies and consequences of preventing job isolation of school principals and develops a native model to prevent job isolation of school principals in Iran, and it will be the first research conducted in this field. Third, preventing job isolation of school principals increases job satisfaction, and professional development, increases the level of participation, coordination, and cooperation between people, reduces leaving positions, reduces burnout, reduces depression and stress of principals, and increases the quality of work-life of school principals and finally, it will increase the effectiveness and productivity of schools.

Therefore, regarding the achievement of the research goals, based on determining the factors of job isolation of school principals and presenting strategies to prevent job isolation of school principals, the following questions were asked:

- 1) What are the causal conditions of job isolation of school principals in Iran?
- 2) What are the contextual conditions of job isolation of school principals in Iran?
- 3) What are the intervening conditions of job isolation of school principals in Iran?
- 4) What are strategies to prevent the job isolation of school principals in Iran?

5) What are the consequences of preventing job isolation of school principals in Iran?

6) What model can be offered to prevent the job isolation of school principals in Iran?

### **Theoretical Foundation**

The evolving role of the school principal has attracted the attention of various groups, from parents to policymakers, as the role of principals has changed over the years from bureaucrat leader to the educational leader that takes responsibility for all aspects of the school program. This evolving role of school leaders has implications for the effect of isolation on principals (Stephenson & Bauer, 2010). Leadership involves emotions about issues such as power, vulnerability, fear, and isolation (Ackerman & Maslin-Ostrowski, 2004). Given that most principals experience emotions such as anxiety, frustration, and job isolation about their role (Bush, 2018), so, emotions are considered an important and vital factor in human activities in all organizations (Schutz & DeCuir, 2002).

Emotion is the individual's reaction to an object or another person or situation. This response, based on personality, temporary moods, and intense emotions, ranges from the negative, such as tension, anger, or frustration, to the positive such as happiness and excitement. As a result, emotions affect the psychological and physical health of the individuals, and actual actions of the individuals in a group, consequently affecting the performance of the role of individuals or their emotional health as a member of the team and the overall productivity and efficiency of the organization. Studies have shown that employees' negative emotions about their positions, managers, duties, and co-workers in the workplace are destructive and are a factor in the depletion of financial and human resources, inability to focus on job issues, wrong decision-making, illness, and absence (Aizenberg & Oplatka, 2019).

Isolation is a complex and multi-dimensional phenomenon (Alligood, 2005). It is a broad conceptual emotion with many definitions. Isolation is described as a subjective experience that most people experience during their lives. In some people, the feeling of isolation appears for a short period and then disappears, but in others, it is a permanent daily reality (Solomon, 2000). The feeling of isolation appears when close and valuable interpersonal relationships are limited, lacking, or unsatisfactory or when the social relationships-both interpersonal and personal – are imperfect and accompanied by symptoms of emotional distress associated with a crisis and psychological stress, such as impaired social skills, inner conflicts, and emotional problems, poor self-esteem, and negative attitude about people and society (Aizenberg & Oplatka, 2019).

Job isolation is a negative feeling about lack of some resources needed or distance from some persons, places, or things that one needs (Williams, 2012). Bushy (2002) described job isolation in the context of being distanced from the support of peers and lack of communication with others. Bedward and Daniels (2005) described job isolation as being distanced from the support of peers, lack of opportunity, and not being recognized or praised for organizational achievements. According to Drago & Peccia (2016, p.3), job isolation is: "A state fostered by personal or professional barriers that prevent a person from collaborating with their job-alike peers". Morrissette (2000) defined professional isolation as a persistent decision-making pattern and practice without consultation with other mental health professionals. Job isolation is more of an emotional response to people's experiences than a structural reality. In operationalizing the concept, isolation is associated with the principals' sense of feeling alone at work (Bauer & Silver, 2018). Isolation is beyond a specific event in life or phase of professional development. It may occur for a limited time. Thus, job isolation does not refer to a person

going through a phase of isolation. For example, things like time constraints or moving to a new geographic area would not be considered job isolation because it takes time to develop a trusted audience in that area. Secondly, job isolation is deeply interlaced with action and decision-making. Individuals who are isolated professionally are not the ones who are geographically limited, for example, those working in rural areas, but further factors such as personal characteristics, job patterns, and ultimately motivational factors are associated with job isolation (Holliman & Muro, 2015).

Many new principals experience a sense of isolation because there are no co-workers or job peers in their building or their office, unlike new teachers, who can usually find a co-worker outside the classroom to sympathize with them. This sense of isolation is exacerbated when they receive little feedback from supervisors (Lashway, 2003). Another factor that reinforces job isolation among managers and senior employees of the organization is receiving little support or lack of opportunities to create meaningful interpersonal relationships (Wright, 2012). Abrams (1997) stated that one of the factors leading to isolation is principals' negative attitudes. Principals do not seek help from their colleagues or subordinates when they face problems or challenges in the workplace. Some of these negative attitudes that lead to isolation are (1) embarrassment to ask for help; as a major source of professional isolation, and (2) inability to listen to teachers' views, ideas, and suggestions. Studies of school principals showed that long working hours, endless supervision, and high workload are among the main reasons for the loneliness and isolation of school leaders (Tahrir et al., 2015). Isolation is one of the key barriers to working remotely, limiting the organization's activity and expansion and the employees in this field. Remote employees will experience job isolation and/or social isolation. From the perspective of job isolation, being away from the

work environment limits the opportunity for remote employees to receive organizational rewards and organizational promotions because they are off-site and out of sight. Socially, informal interactions gained through co-workers and friends in the community will be lost to a remote employee. In study after study, respondents cite isolation as why they do not want to telecommute frequently (Cooper & Kurland, 2002). Tahrir et al. (2015) reported in their studies that 1) the feeling of isolation is due to the bureaucratic structure of educational institutions, which negatively affects relationships between teachers and principals, and 2) lack of support from subordinates may lead to an increase in isolation between principals and their subordinates. Job isolation is inversely related to the job development of individuals in the organization. It is manifested by restrictions on social activities, coaching and training of employees, and informal activities in the organization. A work environment without such activities increases the likelihood of job isolation of employees in the organization (Cooper & Kurland, 2002). Barth (1990), as cited in Tahrir et al. (2015), emphasized that a healthy relationship between principals and subordinates is necessary to decrease isolation between principals and teachers. He also believed that the leadership style used by principals is closely related to isolation. In this regard, the autocratic approach is often related to principals' experience of isolation due to poor communication and interaction between teachers and principals.

Job isolation involves several aspects: geographic, i.e., physical separation from employees or society. Second, professional, i.e., management of job information of the organization by one person, and the third, strategic, i.e., not participating in decision-making processes, which can lead to a lack of material or human resources (Aizenberg & Oplatka, 2019). Lortie (1975), as cited in Sindberg and Lipscomb (2005), described three

different types of isolation: Egg-craft isolation, psychological isolation, and adaptive isolation. Egg-crate isolation means the physical separation from the classrooms, where people have little communication and contact with others. Students and teachers enter the classroom and close the door, and the principal and the assistants do their work in their office. Psychological isolation refers to teachers' responses to mutual interactions with each other. Adaptive isolation refers to the overwhelming state of mind when struggling to meet new demands.

According to the cognitive approach to isolation, loneliness at work and job isolation are similar in meaning. Based on this approach, job isolation is a person's feeling of a cold and unfriendly experience when her or his network of social relations at work, whether qualitatively or quantitatively, does not work properly (Dussault & Thibodeau, 1997). The cognitive approach to loneliness used for job isolation led to the definition of two distinct classes for isolation: reacting quickly to events and predisposing to factors. Changes in social relationships or changes in an expected social relationship can lead to job isolation. For example, the genesis and emergence of interference is a change that can accelerate the feeling of isolation in the workplace. Reluctance, shyness, or aversion to social risks are personality characteristics that are often associated with the feeling of isolation. These feelings quickly lead to isolation (Ostovar-Nameghi & Sheikahmadi, 2016).

Numerous studies have presented different approaches to coping with job isolation. According to Aizenberg & Oplatka (2016), professional development, initiatives, leading educational projects, cooperation, and receiving professional support are strategies to cope with job isolation. Personal support systems (including a spouse or a member of the family)

and professional support systems (including mentors and predecessors whom the principal may approach for advice) can be effective to lessen the degree of isolation (Alligood, 2005).

### **Research Methodology**

Given that the nature of the current research is qualitative research that develops a model to prevent job isolation of school principals, so, the method of grounded theory with a systematic approach of Strauss and Corbin was used. Grounded theory is a theory that is directly derived from data that has been collected regularly during research. In this data collection method, analysis and final theory are related (Strauss and Corbin, 2008). The grounded theory is a qualitative research design in which the researcher produces a general theory taken from the perspective of several participants and expresses the processes, actions, and reactions of the subject (Cresswell, 2007). The current research is applied in terms of the purpose. According to the theoretical foundation and research background, the theoretical sampling method was used in this research. Theoretical sampling is based on the concept of comparison. In fact, in theoretical sampling, people are selected who maximize the possibility of discovering the diversity and enriching categories in terms of features and dimensions (Strauss and Corbin, 2008). In purposeful theoretical sampling, the researcher purposefully selects people who can understand the research problem and the central phenomenon (Creswell, 2007). Participants in the research were male and female school principals of three levels of education (primary, elementary, and high school) in Iran who were selected theoretically and purposefully based on their feelings of isolation. The research sample was 18 school principals (Table1).



**Table 1: Demographic Specifications of the Participants**

Interviewee code	Gender	Age	Educational degree	Grade	Years of service	Managerial experience (year)	Marital status	Interview time (minute)
1	Female	51	Ph.D. student	High school	30	10	Single	80
2	Female	45	M.S.	High school	20	3	Single	40
3	Female	48	B. A.	Primary	28	11	Married	70
4	Female	51	B.A.	High school	28	18	Single	65
5	Female	44	B.A.	High school	15	5	Married	50
6	Female	57	Ph.D.	Primary	34	22	Married	90
7	Male	52	M.A.	Elementary	30	25	Married	41
8	Male	44	M.A.	Elementary	22	15	Married	50
9	Male	51	M.A.	Elementary	31	20	Married	70
10	Male	48	M.A.	Elementary	29	20	Married	65
11	Female	47	Ph.D.	High school	29	11	Married	75
12	Female	52	M.A.	High school	32	20	Married	40
13	Female	58	Ph.D. student	High school	32	12	Married	58
14	Female	55	B.A.	High school	29	24	Married	54
15	Female	42	M.A.	Elementary	20	5	Married	71
16	Male	53	M.A.	Elementary	24	16	Married	46
17	Male	57	M.A.	High school	30	15	Married	63
18	Male	43	M.A	High-school	19	6	Married	48

In the current research, semi-structured in-depth interviews were used until theoretical saturation was achieved. Theoretical saturation means that data collection will continue until a) no new or relevant data is obtained; B) the categories are well developed in terms of features and dimensions; C) The relationships between categories are well defined, and their validity is proven (Strauss and Corbin, 2008). To increase the theoretical sensitivity, the researcher started analyzing the data after receiving the first interview and continued the analysis in data collection by drowning in the data and successive and continuous changes in the questions. Theoretical sensitivity is sensitivity to concepts and is considered the starting point for shaping interview questions and paying attention to data, listening to participants' statements, and analytical thinking (Javadi-Pashaki & Darvishpour Azar, 2019). Interview questions were discussed with expert professors to achieve maximum accuracy in the tool. Finally, the

validity of the questions was confirmed. All interviews were conducted in person by the researcher. To carefully examine and extract the key points, the interviews were recorded with the prior notice of the participants. The text of the recorded interviews was analyzed line by line after implementation. It was extracted by the grounded theory method through three stages of open coding, axial coding, and selective coding of categories. Open coding is the process of analysis through which concepts are identified and their features and dimensions are discovered in the data. Axial coding links categories to subcategories and links categories at the feature and dimension level. Selective coding integrates and improves categories that the researcher creates a theory of relationships between categories in the axial coding model (Danaee-Fard & Emami, 2007). In the current research, the initial codes were extracted by constant comparative analysis and zigzag motion. The extracted concepts with semantic similarities were

conceptualized and organized as a primary concept during these comparisons. The basic concepts were organized according to certain criteria and categories in axial coding. Finally, with numerous revisions and increasing abstraction levels, 133 codes were explored in the form of initial concepts, 13 core categories, and 34 subcategories emerged from the data. In selective coding, the final choice was made according to the identified concepts and categories, i.e., the core category was selected and systematically relating it to other categories. In summary, codes and categories were sorted, compared, and contrasted until the analysis produced no new codes or categories. All of the data were accounted for in the core categories of the grounded theory paradigm model.

In the current study, the approach of Lincoln and Guba (1985) was used by the researchers to ensure trustworthiness including 1) credibility; 2) trust or dependability; 3) confirmability; 4) transferability. To achieve creditability, two methods of member checking and self-monitoring were performed. In this method, the findings were provided to the participants in the study and reviewed and evaluated by them. To achieve dependability, the research process has been investigated and it has been stated how the data were collected and how the data were stored. To

achieve confirmability, all recorded interviews, raw data, notes, and were retained for subsequent review, and the results were reviewed to confirm that the findings and interpretations were supported by the data. To achieve transferability, two methods of rich data description during the collection phase and the systematic approach of Strauss and Corbin were used, and all cases were performed step by step and accurately based on this approach. To increase the reliability, the interviews were conducted with prior planning at the school principal's office and by the interview conditions and without bias. After receiving corrective suggestions from experts, the necessary changes were made, and the final model to prevent job isolation of school principals in Iran was designed.

### Findings

Analysis of the first question, "What are causal conditions of job isolation of school principals in Iran?"

Causal conditions are usually those events that affect core phenomena (Strauss and Corbin, 2008). In the current research, two core categories of causal conditions emerged from the data; 1) Occupational causes and 2) Managerial causes. These core categories and their subcategories are stated in Table 2.

**Table 2: Categories and concepts related to causal conditions**

Causal conditions	Core Categories	Subcategories	Concepts
	Occupational causes	Limited motivational factors	Insufficient management rights, welfare-economic discrimination of school principals with other managers of organizations, failure to meet expectations of principal, class differences
Principals' role overload		multiple responsibilities, role conflict and being at a crossroads in decision-making related to school affairs, ambiguity in the role of school principals as the educational director or other titles such as (support manager, financial manager, etc.)	
Lack of support		The inattention of the department of education to the school, organizations and community's inattention to the school, school employees' inattention, incorrect evaluation of incompetent inspectors	
Managerial causes	Undesirable managerial behaviors	Extreme authoritarianism in the school, non-participation of colleagues in executive affairs, decision-making without consulting employees	
	Weakness in managerial skills	weakness in technical skills, weakness in perceptual skills, weakness in human skills	

Analysis of the second question, “What are contextual conditions of job isolation of school principals in Iran?”

Contexts are specific sets of situations that come together at a particular time and place to create issues that individuals respond to through action and interaction. Contextual conditions tell us why a phenomenon is limited in some cases

and severe in others (Strauss and Corbin, 2008). Analyses showed that from the viewpoint of school principals, the following contextual conditions classified in the form of core categories are as follows: 1) Extra-school causes, 2) Inter-school causes, and 3) Human causes. These core categories and their subcategories are stated in Table 3.

**Table 3: Categories and concepts related to contextual conditions**

Contextual conditions	Core Categories	Subcategories	Concepts
	Extra-school causes	Undesirable administrative functions	Administrative bureaucracy, homogeneity and incorrect method of evaluating the performance of principals, the concentration of administrative and educational structure, incorrect indicators in selecting principals, weakness in the proportion of jobs and employees in the process of assigning principals
Inefficiency of rules		Complexity and ambiguity in Education Laws, conflict and dichotomy between documents and official expectations, deterrence of laws	
Discrimination		Discrimination between school principals in terms of support, the injustice of the organization in allocating human resources to the school, the injustice of the organization in allocating financial resources to schools	
Inter-school causes	Resource constraints	Lack of financial resources, lack of human resources, the inadequate platform of new technology in the school	
	Physical-informational-communicational gap	Separation and lack of physical proximity of the principal with employees in the educational environment of the school, poor informational rotation at school, an unfavorable communication path between the principal and the school staff	
Human causes	Undesirable characteristics of the principal	Undesirable personality specifications, negative emotions, and family problems	
	Undesirable Characteristics of school employees	The personality of the employees, weakness of employees' technical abilities, inappropriate behavior of employees in the school environment	

Analysis of the third question, “What are intervening conditions of job isolation of school principals in Iran?”

Intervening conditions are general environmental conditions that affect strategies

(Bazargan, 2000). In the current research, two types of intervening conditions emerged from the data; 1) demographic causes and 2) the atmosphere of society. These core categories and their subcategories are stated in Table 4.

**Table 4: Categories and concepts related to intervening conditions**

Intervening conditions	Core Categories	Subcategories	Concepts
	Demographic causes		Quantitative factors related to the principal
Cultural differences			The geographical location of the school, the difference between the culture and dialect of the principal and the employees, the difference between the culture and dialect of the principal and the students
The atmosphere of society		Community anomalies	The political game in dismissal and installation of principals, the elite and the exclusion of capable people in the field of management, norms of society based on disrespect for education and its employees
		Illegal frameworks	Legislation in the country, favoritism in the country, circumventing the law in the country

Analysis of the fourth question, “What are strategies to prevent job isolation of school principals in Iran?”

Strategies are purposeful actions to solve a central problem or phenomenon (Strauss and Corbin, 2008). In the current research, four types of strategies emerged from the data to prevent job

isolation of school principals. 1) Existence of spiritual assets in the organization, 2) Creating a supportive umbrella, 3) Managerial style, and 4) Modifying the strategic structure of education. These core categories and their subcategories are stated in Table 5.

**Table 5: Categories and concepts related to strategies**

Strategies	Core Categories	Subcategories	Concepts
	Existence of spiritual assets in school		Effective communications
Trust			Mutual trust between the principal and school employees, Mutual trust between the principal and students and their parents, Acceptance of the principal by their colleagues as a leader
Participation and teamwork			Team building and participation in the execution of school affairs, participation in decision making, the partnership between principals, sharing experiences with other principals
Qualified employees			The interest of the school employees in their jobs, the employees' positive mentality-personality traits, the existence of responsible, empowered, and disciplined employees in the school
Creating a supportive umbrella		Supporting	Support of school employees from school activities, support of the education department from the school, proportion to the level of expectations of the department with school conditions and facilities, proportion to the level of family expectations with school conditions and facilities, support of the local community from the school, support of organizations (governorate, municipality) from school activities, and adjusting the workload of principals

		Positive feedback	Declaration of positive feedback of students, declaration of positive feedback of school employees, declaration of positive feedback of parents
		Motivating	promoting financial incentives for principals, promoting non-financial incentives for principals, promoting social values of Education
		Empowerment	Continuous development of principals' scientific and professional competencies, holding principals' meetings, creating management consulting units in the department of education, creating principals' mentoring courses, and educating qualified principals for school management
		Procurement of resources	provision of financial resources, provision of human resources, and improving school technology infrastructure
		Establishing justice	A fair evaluation of principal performance, fair allocation of financial resources, and fair allocation of human resources
	Managerial style of the principal	Behavioral competencies	transparency in school management, fair behavior of the principal with human factors in school, creating happiness and provision of mental health in school by the principal, management of incompatibility and conflicts in the school, correct and constructive critique of the principal to human factors in the school, the forgiveness of mistakes and attention to the inevitability of mistakes in human, Timing, and discipline, Flexibility in behavior and performance, principal's physical proximity to employees, managing cultural differences at school, Balance in authority and camaraderie
		Technical competencies	using the collective wisdom of employees, the principal's knowledge and relying on the abilities, planning of the principal at school, managing the resources and organizing them properly, following up and reviewing the affairs
		Attitudinal competencies	principal's attention to ethics, The spirituality of the principal in the job, the principal's interest in the job
	Modifying the strategic structure of Education	Organizational supervision	Improving the performance evaluation indicators of principals, monitoring and worthy feedback of evaluators, reviewing and eliminating structural deadlocks in education and paying attention to the education of successful countries, selecting qualified principals for school management
		School-oriented activities	Giving more authority to principals, reducing the phenomenon of centrality in education (decentralization), participation and cooperation of parents, and the association of parents and educators based on their competencies

Analysis of the fifth question, "What are the consequences of preventing job isolation of school principals in Iran?"

Consequences are the outputs of employing strategies (Danaee-Fard & Emami, 2007). In the current research, the consequences of preventing

job isolation of school principals are classified into two core categories; 1) Micro consequences and 2) Macro consequences. These core categories and their subcategories are stated in Table 6.

**Table 6: Categories and concepts related to consequences**

Consequences	Core Categories	Subcategories	Concepts
	Micro consequences	Satisfaction	Increasing principal's work-life satisfaction, principal satisfaction with job position and social respect, principal satisfaction with being productive
		Interest in the job	Increasing occupational loyalty of principal, increasing principal's job enthusiasm, principal willingness to work under challenging conditions
	Macro consequences	Achieving organizational goals	Increasing organizational commitment, expanding the level of school interactions with the environment, successful school, organizational learning, organizational growth, active and energetic school at the community level, creating a synergistic atmosphere at school
Achieving extra-organizational goals		Systemic thinking, the transcendent society, being in sync with the changes of the day, Organizational citizenship behavior	

Question no. 6, "What is the model of preventing job isolation of school principals in Iran?"

open, axial, and selective coding, the model of the research was extracted (Figure 1).

To answer the above question, after analyzing the interviews and determining the categories via

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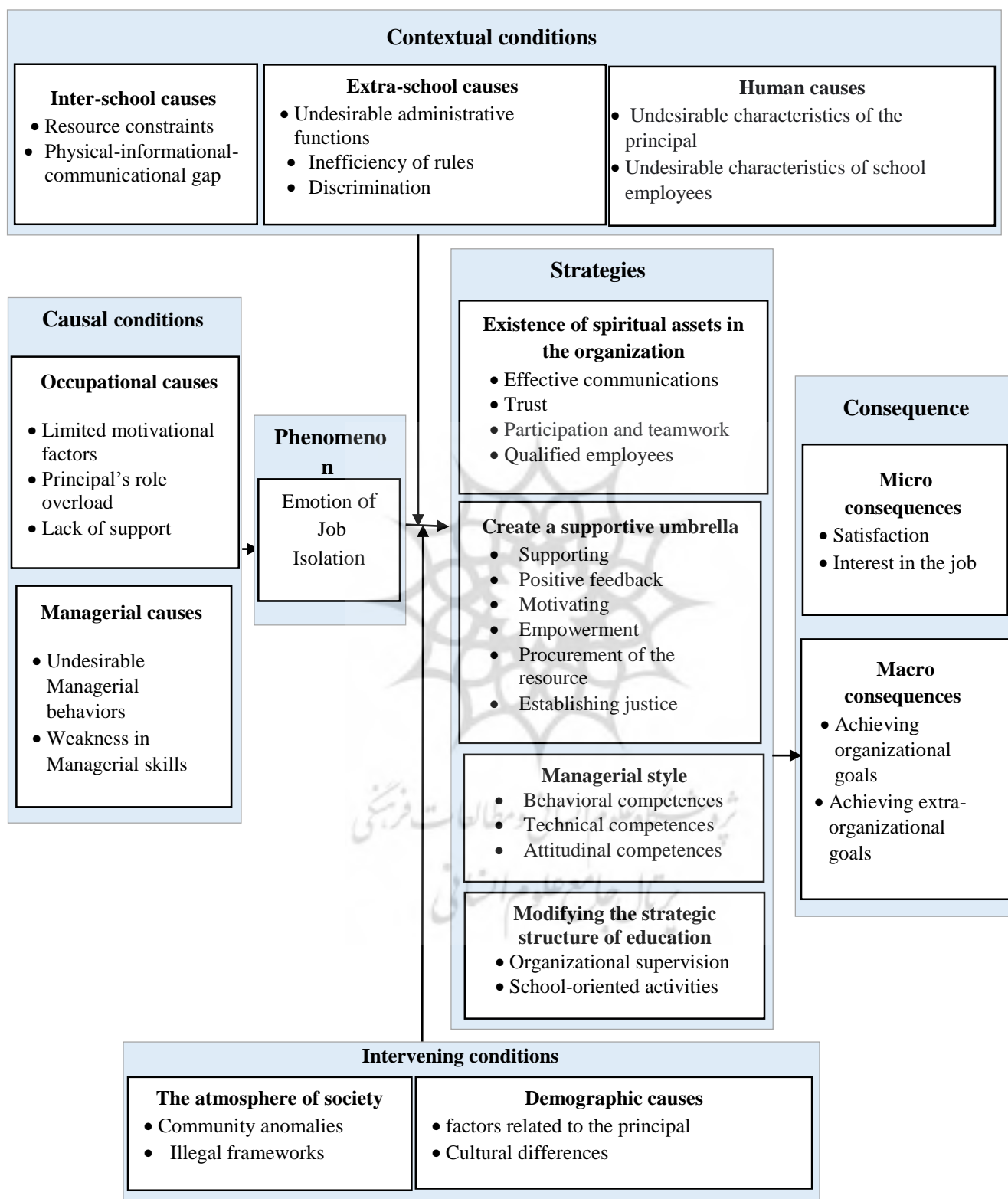


Figure 1: Paradigm Model to Prevent Job Isolation of School Principals in Ira

### **Discussion and Conclusion**

Achieving the school's goals and, consequently, achieving the education system's goals require special attention to school principals and especially their leadership role. Numerous studies have noted the impact of principal school leadership on the school's structure, culture, and mission, creating and maintaining healthy and positive learning environments, professional growth and development of teachers, encouraging teachers, and providing their satisfaction and success (Nazari et al., 2018).

Rapid scientific, cultural, and technological development in the present world has made the current era different from the past. Global changes and changes in societies have intensified the complexity of the role of school principals. The school principal is one of the most important pillars in the education system because they are directly responsible for planning, directing, and supervising the activities of students, teachers, and the school. Therefore, preventing job isolation of school principals is an inevitable necessity so that principals can turn schools into centers of growth and prosperity in the country and promote the productivity and growth of the country's educational system. If principals are going to become or remain effective leaders, they must learn how to manage the phenomenon of job isolation and system education should initiate programs for principals to help them prevent their job isolation. However, before taking steps to manage this phenomenon, it must first be identified and understood in the context of the personal and professional lives of school principals.

Analyzing research data led to two innovative findings. First, the factors of job isolation of school principals were identified in the form of a model, and secondly, effective strategies to prevent job isolation of school principals were identified. This research has investigated the factors of job isolation of school principals with a qualitative approach and the systematic approach of grounded theory to prevent job isolation of school principals. For this purpose, 18 semi-structured in-depth interviews were conducted with the principals of the three

educational levels until the theoretical saturation was reached. According to the coding results of the interviews and after reviewing the participants in the research and the opinions of experts, the model of preventing job isolation of school principals with 13 core categories in the form of causal conditions, contextual conditions, intervening conditions of job isolation, strategies of preventing job isolation and the consequences of preventing job isolation of school principals were developed and presented.

Occupational causes (limited motivational factors, principals' role overload, and lack of support) and managerial causes (undesirable managerial behaviors and weakness in managerial skills) are the main factors of job isolation, which are considered causal factors, according to the findings of the research's first question. Participants stated that the occupational factors are the main factor of job isolation. These factors are mostly related to the lack of support and the low salaries of school principals in terms of the workload of their role. Due to the wide description of the duties of principals in schools and the compulsion to support all the issues in the school, the volume of duties of principals and in a way the role of principals increases, and principals spillover, which increases job isolation. Another reason for job isolation is managerial causes. Unfortunately, the lack of skills required by principals, such as human, technical, and perceptual skills, as well as some negative managerial behaviors, such as extreme authoritarianism and lack of employee participation in decision-making and execution of affairs lead to job isolation. In their research, Bauer and Brazer (2013) showed that isolation completely mediates the relationship between social support and job satisfaction and, to some extent, mediates the relationship between role ambiguity and job satisfaction. The research results by Tahrir et al. (2015) showed that job isolation is due to several factors such as heavy workload and lack of support from teachers, the autocratic style of the principal, unwillingness to share the workload, and problems such as communication with teachers. Studies by



Howard and Mallory (2008) revealed the following factors that contribute to professional isolation: (1) time demands, (2) 'fishbowl existence', (3) accountability demands, (4) role and duties of the principal, and (5) the relationship with the central office.

The factors, such as human causes (undesirable characteristics of the principal, undesirable characteristics of the employees), extra-school causes (undesirable administrative functions, inefficiency of the rules, and discrimination), and inter-school causes (resource constraints, physical-informational-communicational gap between principal and employees) are the contexts of the job isolation of principals which are related to the second question of the research. Because of the large amount of time spent on the job, principals responded with a sense of guilt over the lost time from the family members. Participants believed that the principal's lack of self-confidence along with his/her negative feelings and attitudes and the principal's need for approval from others are human factors contributing to the principal's job isolation. Also, school staffs provide a context for isolation of the principal by the occurrence of negative behaviors such as punishing students or not mastering their duties. Participants noted that the concentration of administrative and educational structures in Iran, the ambiguity and complexity of Education Laws, and a lack of organizational resources, both financial and human, all contribute to school administrators' employment isolation in Iran. Most interviewed agreed that lack of organizational resources such as financial or human, especially financial resources are contributing factors to principals' job isolation. Aizenberg and Oplatka (2019) revealed two contextual factors in the work of the preschool teacher-director. (1) Structural factors related to the physical structure of the preschool, and (2) Human factors related to work partners: colleagues, assistants, inspectors, and other professionals. Ackerman and Maslin-Ostrowski (2004) pointed interpersonal and intrapersonal elements contribute to the feeling of isolation.

Findings from the analysis of the third question showed that demographic factors (quantitative factors related to the principal and cultural differences) and the atmosphere of the society (community anomalies and illegal frameworks) are under the intervening factors of job isolation of school principals. Low educational-administrative experiences and a lack of management education, according to participants, are intervening conditions in school administrators' work isolation. Besides, community anomalies, such as political conditions in the dismissal and installation of principals, and elitism, play important roles in the job isolation of school principals. According to Gupton and Slick (1996), as cited in Allgood (2005), job dissatisfaction and exit from the superintendency were in part spurred by a sense of isolation and lack of support for women.

Findings from the analysis of the fourth question of the research indicate the strategies that can be used to prevent the job isolation of school principals. According to the findings of this research, creating a supportive umbrella (support, positive feedback, motivation, empowerment, procurement of resources, and establishing justice), and managerial style (technical competencies, behavioral competencies, attitudinal competencies) are among strategies to prevent job isolation of school principals. The Department of Education demonstrates its support for principals by providing organizational resources as well as financial and spiritual incentives. The existence of spiritual assets in the organization (effective communications, trust, participation and teamwork, and qualified employees), and modifying the strategic structure of education (organizational supervision and school-oriented activities) are other strategies to prevent the job isolation of school principals. Encouraging principals to behave honestly and with transparency and fairness in the distribution of organizational motivations and incentives can build trust and effective communication in the school and expand the level of cooperation. Aizenberg and Oplatka (2016) showed that

receiving professional support, professional cooperation, initiating educational projects, and professional development are strategies to cope with professional isolation. Alligood (2005) showed that networking, mentors, spousal support, personal strategies, and distributive leadership are ones that superintendents use to cope with the phenomenon of isolation. Drago and Peccia (2016) stated that inter-school collaboration, career development, professional learning communities, and principal coaching are the solutions to cope with isolation. Stephenson and Bauer (2010) found that participation in a coaching program reduces isolation. Howard and Mallory (2008) suggested that a professional and occupational network be created as a solution to prevent isolation. Mestry and Singh (2007), as cited in Khumalo (2012) suggest that there should be comprehensive training for newly appointed primary school principals to prevent job isolation and job dissatisfaction.

Finally, preventing job isolation of school principals brings micro consequences (satisfaction and interest in the job) and macro consequences (achieving organizational and extra-organizational goals). The results showed that preventing job isolation of school principals increases the job enthusiasm of principals. Also, preventing job isolation of school principals leads to organizational loyalty of principals, increasing the job and organizational commitment of principals, expanding the level of school interactions with the environment, successful school, organizational learning, organizational growth, active school at the community level, and creating a synergistic atmosphere at school.

While the current research leads to an important and practical analysis in developing a model to prevent job isolation of school principals in Iran, it also has some limitations. First, the participants in the research were school principals in urban areas of Iran, so generalizing the results to the whole country, including rural areas, is limited. Second, there were difficulties in coordinating and communicating with the school principals to collect data because of their roles and being busy. Third, in the grounded theory method, like other qualitative methods, defining issues such as credibility and

trustworthiness is associated with many problems. This is because different contexts and time situations lead to unpredictable results.

According to the causal factors resulting from the research, it is suggested that:

- 1) To pay more attention to principals' motivational factors, including financial and spiritual motivation.

- 2) Reducing the burden of the role of principals by paying attention and emphasizing the main task of school principals as well as increasing the responsibility and accountability of school staff towards their responsibilities.

- 3) move towards collaborative management and stay away from the authoritarian style of management.

- 4) Assessing the level of technical, human, and perceptual skills of principals before their appointment to management.

According to the contextual factors obtained from the research, it is suggested that:

- 1) Changing and amending inadequacies and inefficiencies of the country's laws in the field of education and involving school principals in the formulation of educational policies.

- 2) Delegating more authority to school principals to decide on school affairs according to the prevailing conditions in the school by highlighting the school-oriented policy.

According to the intervening factors resulting from the research, it is suggested that:

- 1) Selecting school principals among qualified staff with executive and educational experience in education.

- 2) Reform of illegal frameworks, including favoritism in the country's administrative system.

- 3) Avoid political issues in dismissing and installing school principals by emphasizing abilities.

- 4) Improve the way of monitoring and inspection evaluators.

According to the strategies resulting from the research, it is suggested that:

- 1) Establishing working teams to decide and execute affairs and strengthening the team-oriented spirit at the school level by the principal.

2) Fair evaluation of principals' performance and consideration of payments based on principals' performance.

3) Providing coursework and developing programs to empower school principals.

4) Measuring the level of school principals' motivation and their desire for management before appointing to the job.

According to the consequences resulting from the research, it is suggested that:

5) Considering job respect and individual and professional needs of school principals.

Further studies should be conducted on the job isolation of school principals in different cultural and national contexts to understand better whether there is a difference in dealing with this feeling and whether the use of these strategies depends on gender, service history, size of the school, area of the province, or education.

#### **Ethical considerations**

During the implementation of this research and the preparation of the article, all national laws and principles of professional ethics related to the subject of research, including the rights of statistical community, organizations and institutions, as well as authors and writers have been observed. Adherence to the principles of research ethics in the present study was observed and consent forms were conscientiously completed by all statistical community.

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#### **Conflict of interest**

According to the authors of the present article, there was no conflict of interest.

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### Introducing the Authors

**Author 1 Name:** *Neda mozaffari*

**Email:** *Nedamozaffari@yahoo.com*

I am a Ph.D. student at Islamic Azad University, Esfahan Branch. I am a teacher at the School of Art.



**Author 2 Name:** *Mohammad Ali Nadi*

**Email:** *mnadi@khuisf.ac.ir*

I am an Associate Professor of the Department of Educational Sciences at Islamic Azad University, Esfahan Branch



**Author 3 name:** *Badri Shahtalebi*

**Email:** *b\_shahtalebi2005@yahoo.com*

I am an Associate Professor of the Department of Educational Sciences at Islamic Azad University, Esfahan Branch

