GOING DEEPER - STRATEGIES FOR MANAGING TENSIONS

The Thriving Principal

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PRINCIPALS AUSTRALIA
RESEARCH FOUNDATION

SASPA
SOUTH AUSTRALIAN SECONDARY PRINCIPALS' ASSOC.

SAPPA
South Australian
Primary Principals Association Inc

University of
South Australia

'Paradox in the lives and work of school principals' was a two-stage research project undertaken by the University of South Australia in partnership with the South Australian Secondary Principals Association (SASPA) and the South Australian Primary Principals Association (SAPPA).

Prepared by Dr Chris Dolan
University of South Australia
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paradox in the
lives and work of
school principals

A jointly funded research project of
the University of South Australian,
the South Australian Primary
Principals' Association (SAPPA) and
the South Australian Secondary
Principals' Association (SASPA).
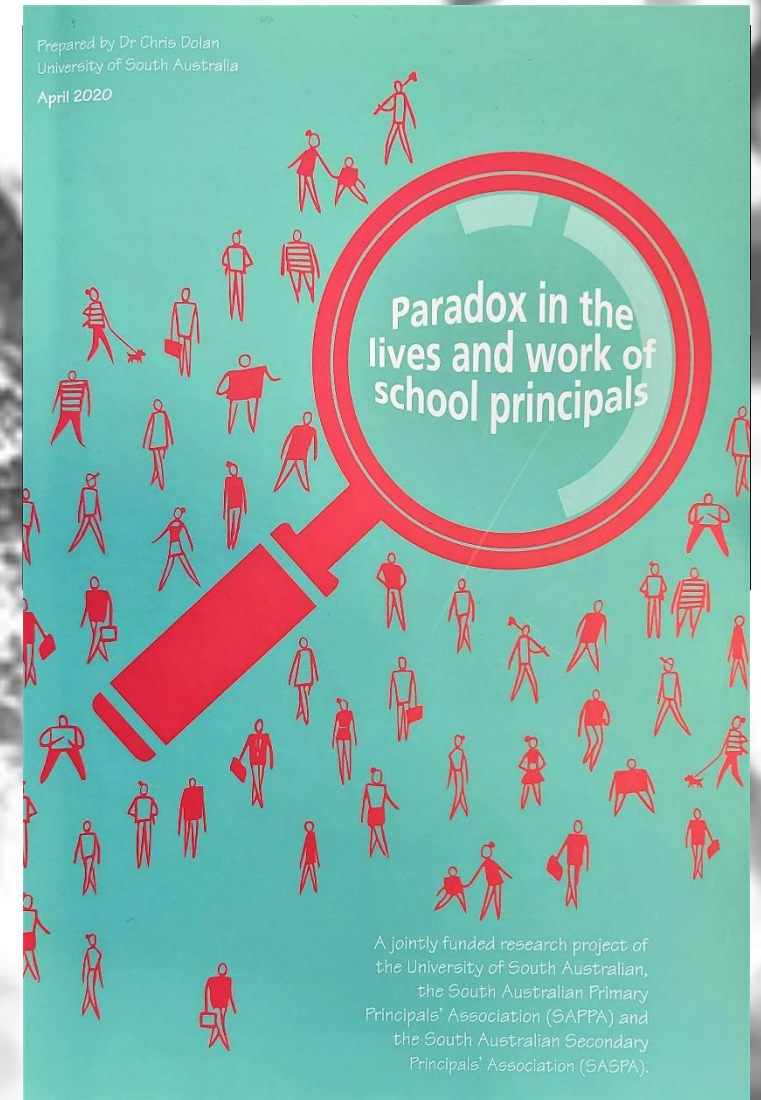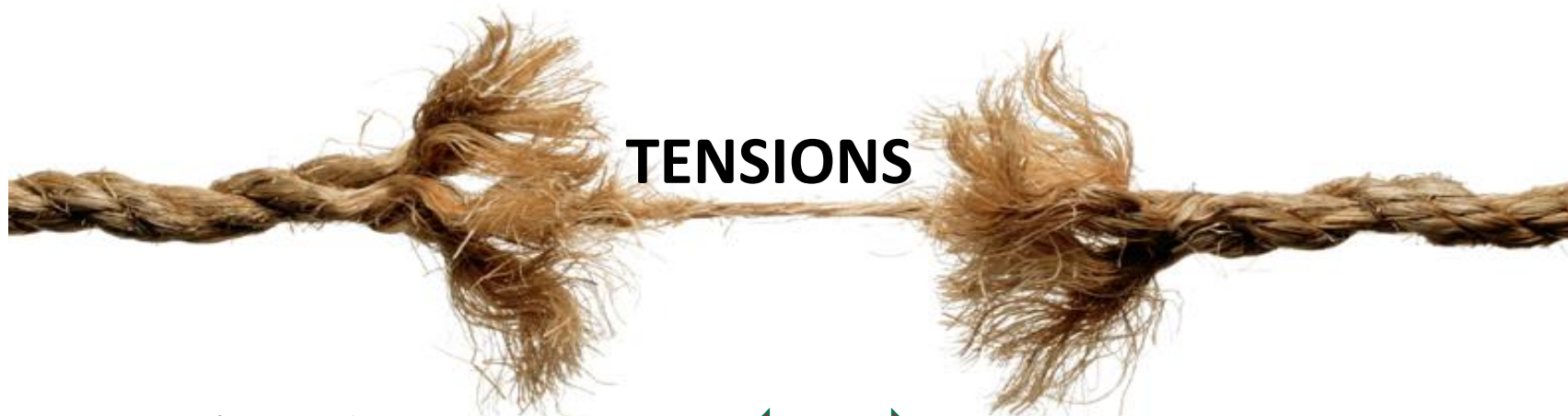
TENSIONS

The system's goals and priorities ⟷ The goals and priorities of my school

The external accountabilities applied to me and my work ⟷ My need to act autonomously as a school leader

Centralised measures of school success ⟷ The positive achievements of my school

Being the leader of teaching and learning ⟷ Attending to the daily demands of the job

Tension brought on by the management of underperforming staff

A need to sometimes oppose or resist centralised policy demands ⟷ The personal risks involved in such opposition or resistance

Tensions arising from school complexity and work load, and related issues of mental health and wellbeing

Excellence ⟷ Equity

High stakes testing ⟷ School-based pedagogical practice

Tensions related to residualisation of low SES schools brought on by the marketisation / choice agenda
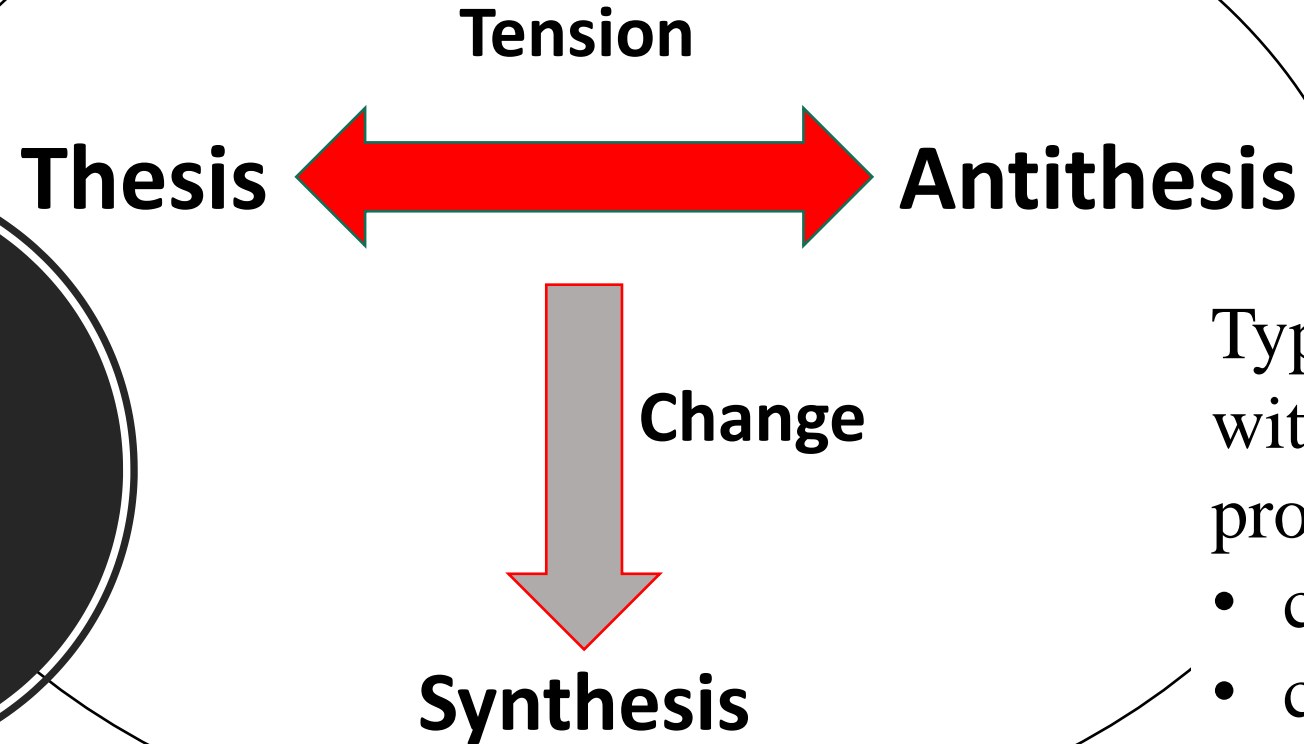
Tensions related to inequity of funding / resourcing across the school sectors

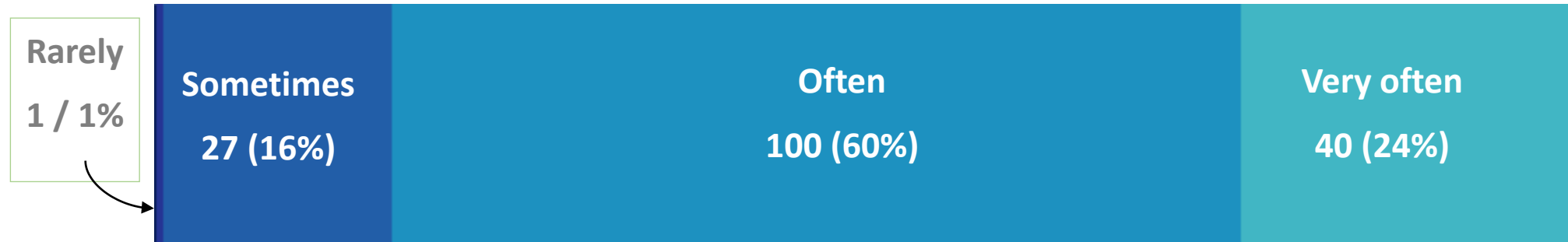Autonomy ⟷ Systems membership

Managing tensions

On managing tension by 'synthesis':

I seek compromise, agreement and win-win resolutions through processes such as negotiation, mediation and consensus decision-making

Rarely	Sometimes	Often	Very often
1 / 1%	27 (16%)	100 (60%)	40 (24%)
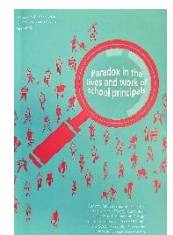
Five tensions discussed / referred to in our PLC

The system's goals and priorities ⬅️➡️ The goals and priorities of my school

External accountabilities applied to me and my work ⬅️➡️ My need to act autonomously as a school leader

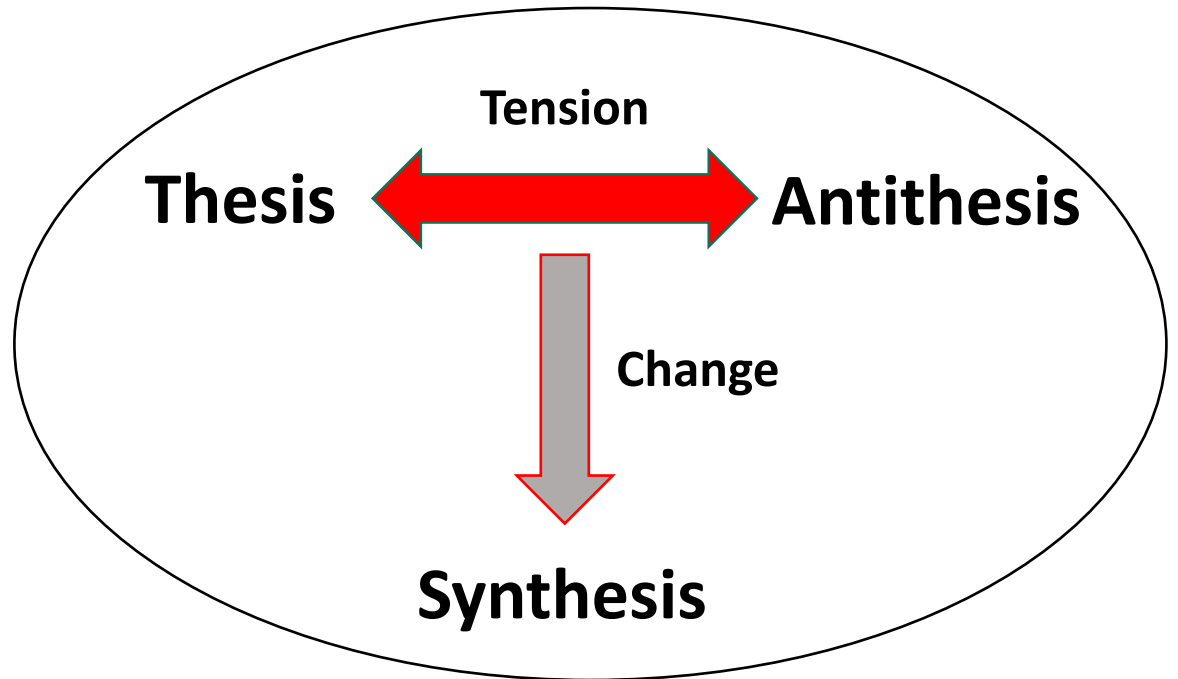Centralised measures of school success ⬅️➡️ The positive achievements of my school

Being the leader of teaching and learning ⬅️➡️ Attending to the daily demands of the job

Excellence ⬅️➡️ Equity

GROUP DISCUSSION

What happens when the process of 'synthesis' – using 'the basic dialectic' – is used to manage the tensions shown above?

Tension

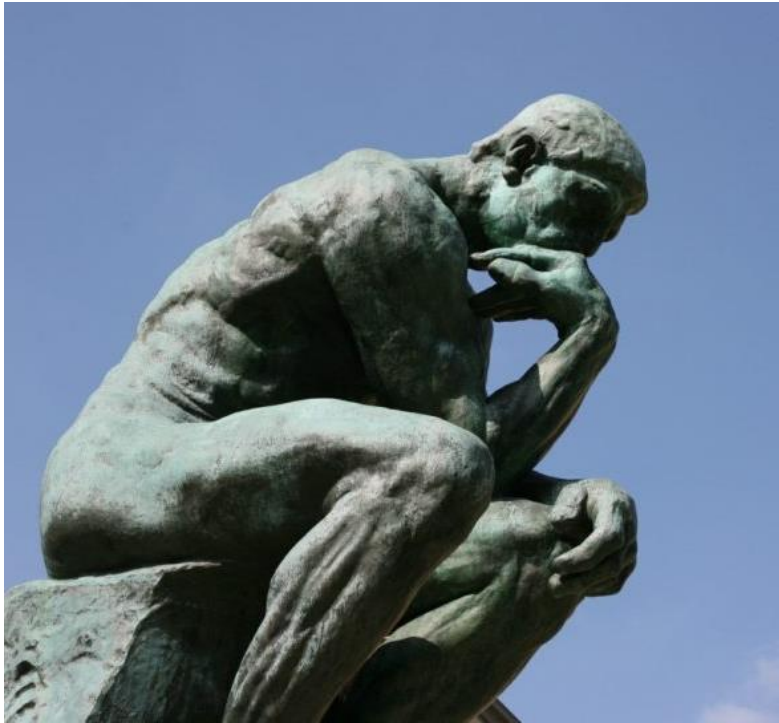**Thesis** ⬅️➡️ **Antithesis**

Change

Synthesis

Managing Tensions: What do you do when the sides can't be collapsed?

Three propositions and five management strategies

Holding open the sides (rather than seeking their resolution)

Embracing diversity and undecidability

Accepting and accommodating conflict, tension and ambiguity

Contesting one of the prized qualities of school leadership – the resolution of complex conflict by the unequivocal and decisive action of an individual

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Formerly School Organisation

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How (and why) to avoid making rational decisions: embracing paradox in school leadership

Cate Watson

Holding open the sides (rather than seeking their resolution) (cont)

Proposition ①**:** Not all tensions involve *equal* and/or *opposing* forces

Being the leader of teaching and learning

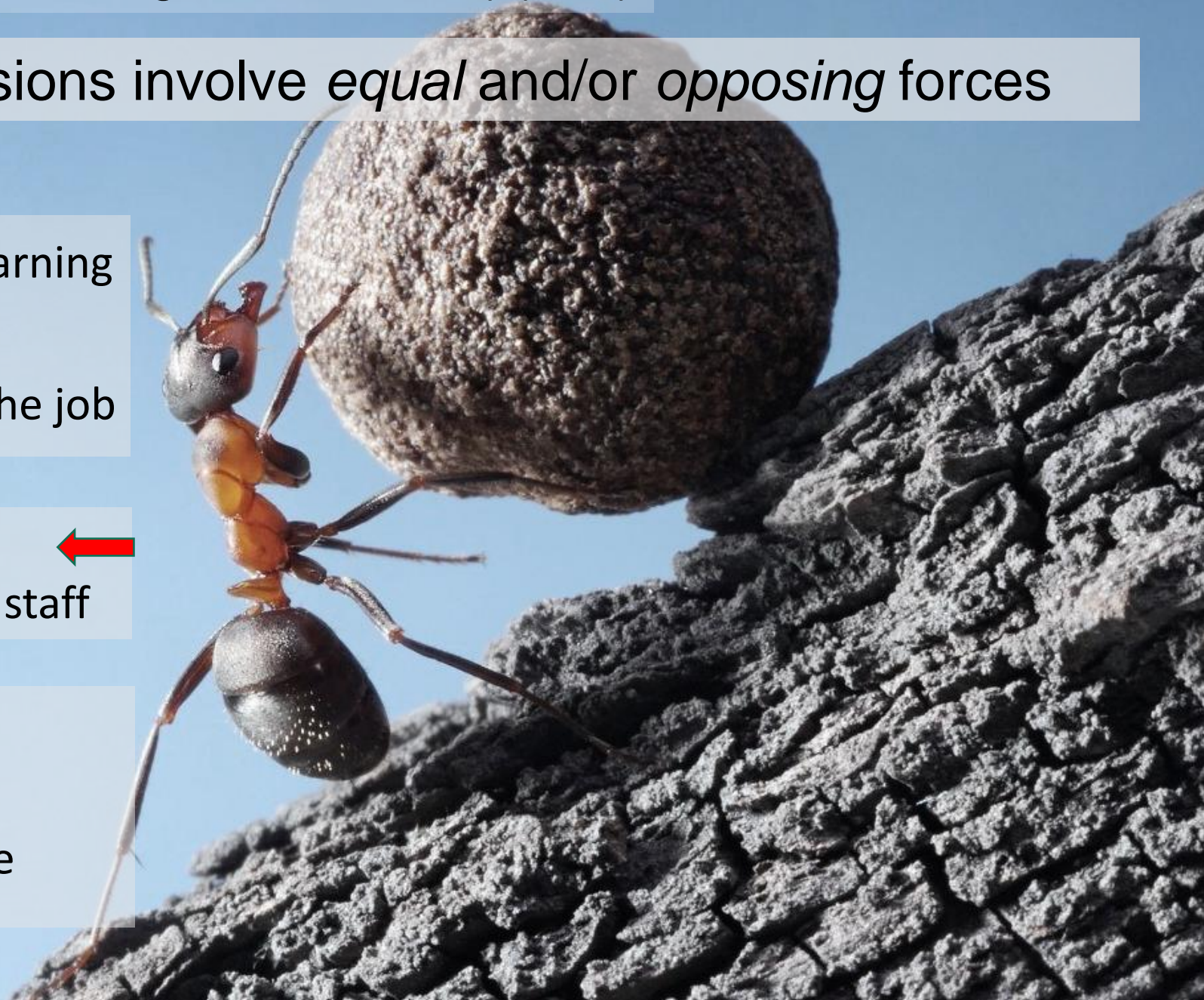Attending to the daily demands of the job

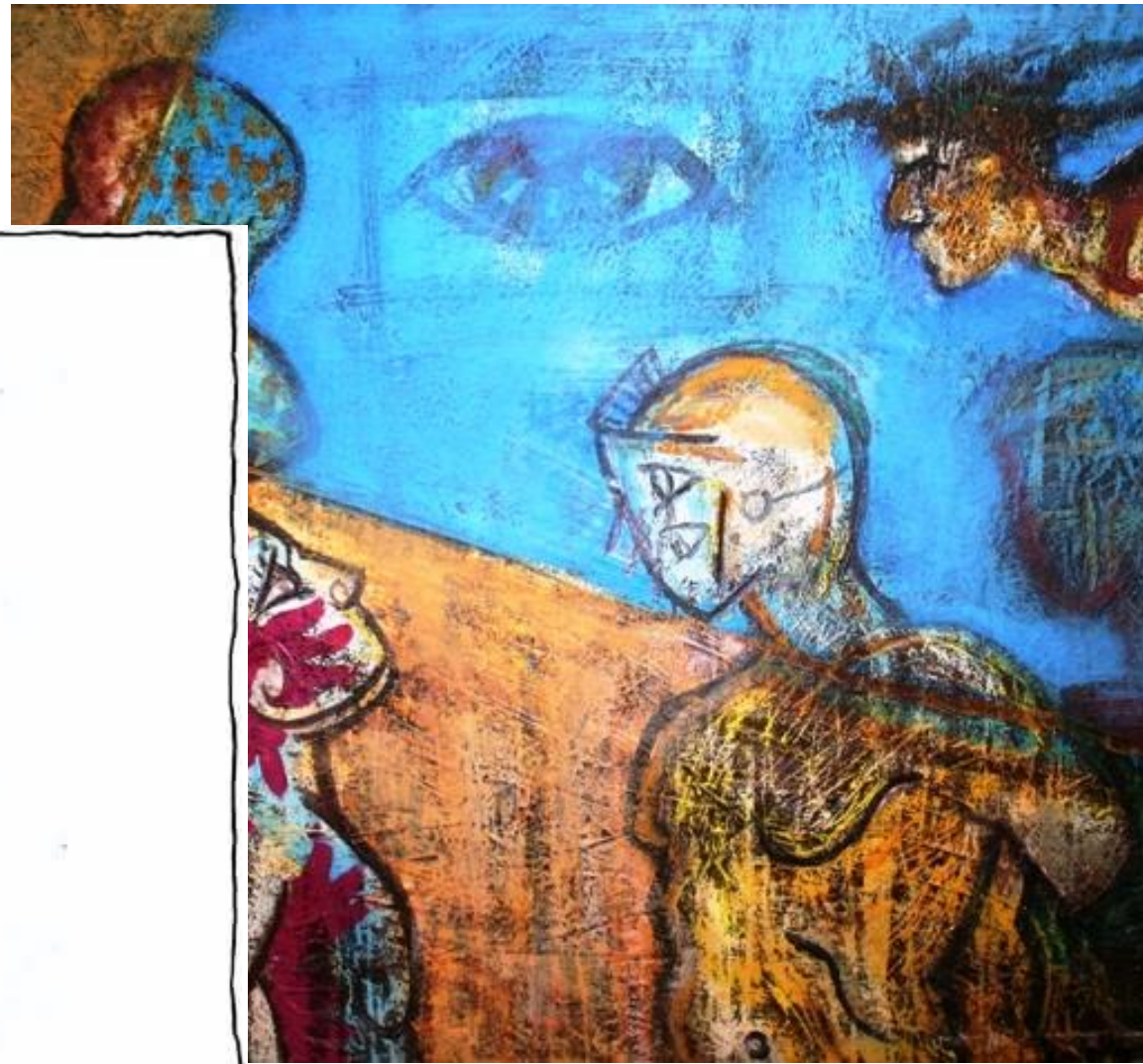Tension brought on by the management of underperforming staff

High stakes testing

School-based pedagogical practice

Proposition ②: Power is everywhere

YOU MUST STAND ON YOUR OWN FEET

Leunig

Proposition ③: Risks are unavoidable

Managing tensions involves risks to you, your colleagues, your work and your identity as a leader

- Risks to mental health and wellbeing
- Risks to confidence
- Risks to working relationships
- Risks to the quality / quantity of your leadership work
- Risks of being seen as indecisive, biased, autocratic etc
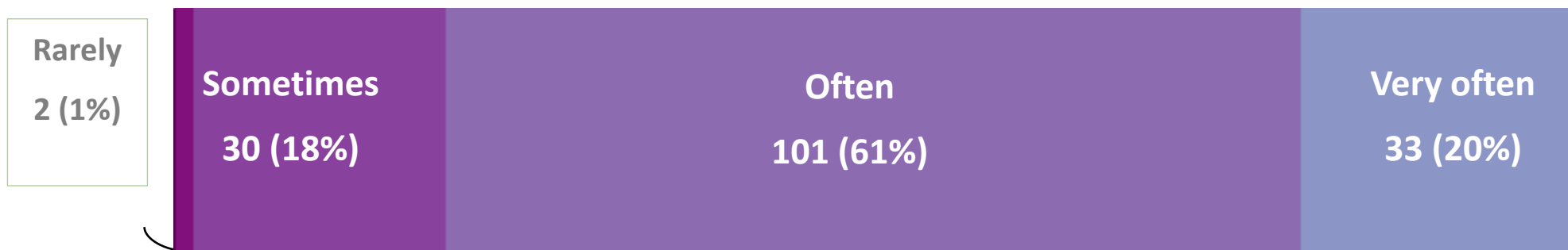- Risks to status and power
- Risks to career prospects

A need to sometimes oppose or resist centralised policy demands ⟷ The personal risks involved in such opposition or resistance

On risk and managing tension:

I manage the risk involved in order to protect myself and others from negative consequences

Rarely 2 (1%)	Sometimes 30 (18%)	Often 101 (61%)	Very often 33 (20%)

I am adversarial and resistant in the face of outside pressures, looking to push back and to advocate alternative positions

Never 13 / 8%	Rarely 41 / 68%	Sometimes 42 / 69%	Often 10 / 16%
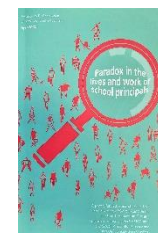
From *Paradox in the lives and work of school principals.*
Research Report, SAPPA / SASPA, 2020

GROUP DISCUSSION

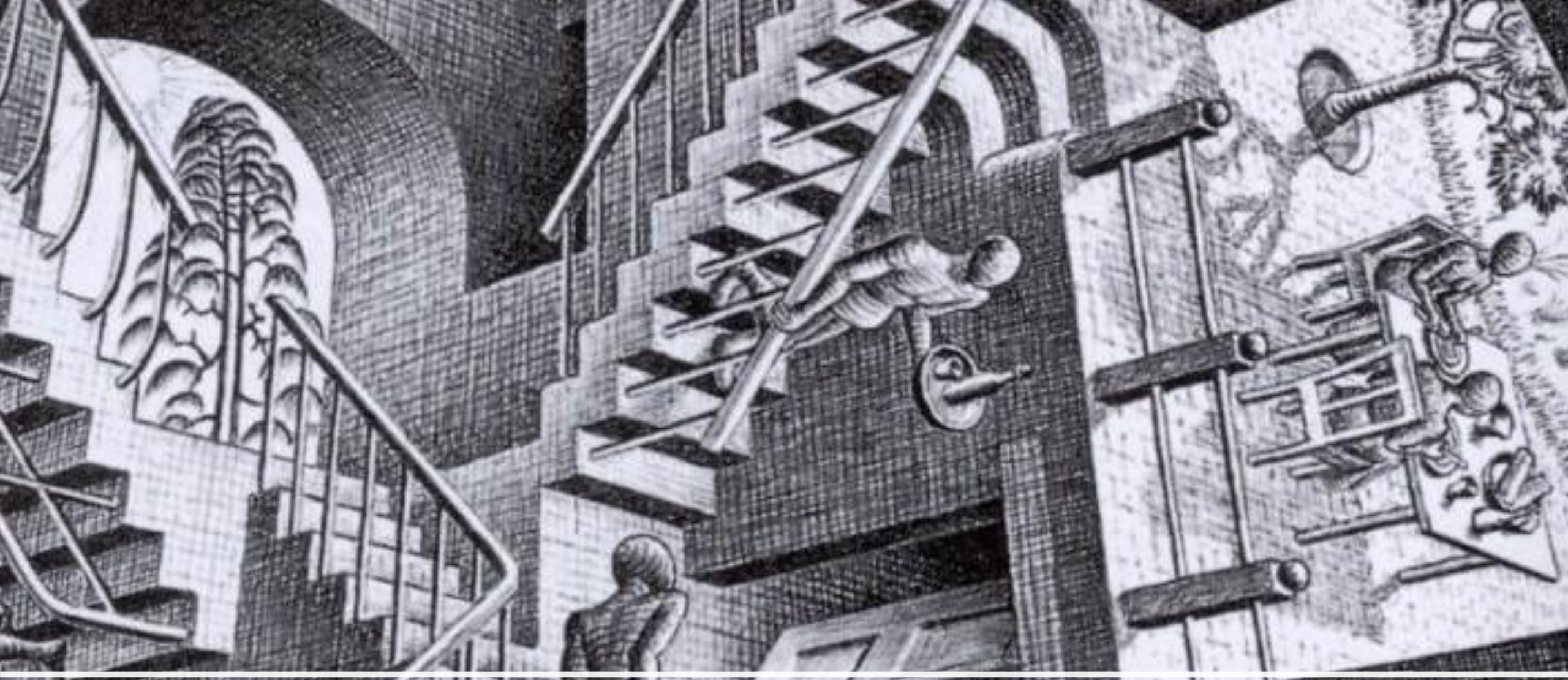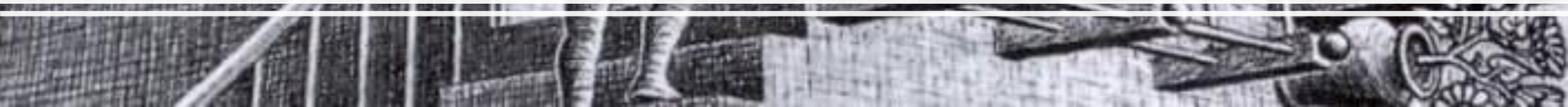How do the propositions about *power* and *risk* influence you approach to managing tension in your school / workplace?

Five Tension Management Strategies

Strategy 1: Know – then critically evaluate – your style and preferences for managing tension

e.g. What type of leadership do you provide in managing tension?
How do you evaluate the success of your leadership efforts?
How do you take account of power and risk?
What do you notice about your emotional responses when managing tension?
What do you need to work on?
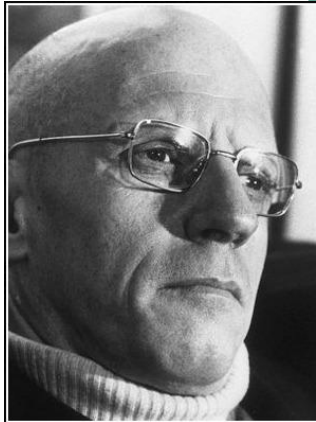
My point is not that everything is bad, but that everything is dangerous, which is not exactly the same as bad. If everything is dangerous, then we always have some thing to do.

Michel Foucault

Principal policy work (respondents chose up to 4 descriptors)

Conduit (13) I try to implement centrally-developed policy as exactly as possible

Interpreter (104) I look to interpret and decode centrally-developed policy successfully into my local setting

Translator (80) I look to make meaning for others and to tailor centrally-developed policy to local needs

Filterer (112) I sort out which policies I need to treat seriously and which I can ignore, give low priority, partially enact

Entrepreneur (38) I seek possibilities in centrally-developed policy for new and enterprising school-based initiatives

Critic (14) I look to critique centralised policy, defend oppositional positions and maintain counter-discourses

Enthusiast (11) I look for opportunities in policy implementation to strengthen my personal leadership influence

**Opportunist** (83) I use policy as a mandate to lead others in initiatives that would otherwise be difficult to achieve

Buffer (54) I look to protect (buffer) staff from outside interference imposed through centralised policy

Maker (76) I develop local policies for my school that are compatible with centrally-developed policy

0   10   20   30   40   50   60   70   80   90   100   110   120

Propensity to risk and curiosity in policy work
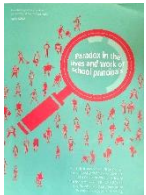
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Risk (vertical axis, bottom to top): cautious, calculative, intrepid, provocative, reckless

Curiosity (horizontal axis, left to right): incurious, inquiring, critical, oppositional, resistant

- policy anarchist
- policy rebel
- policy warrior
- policy critic
- policy translator
- policy enthusiast
- policy buffer
- policy strategist
- policy entrepreneur
- policy transactor
- policy sceptic
- policy narrator
- policy watcher
- policy conduit

Strategy 2: Find spaces of freedom
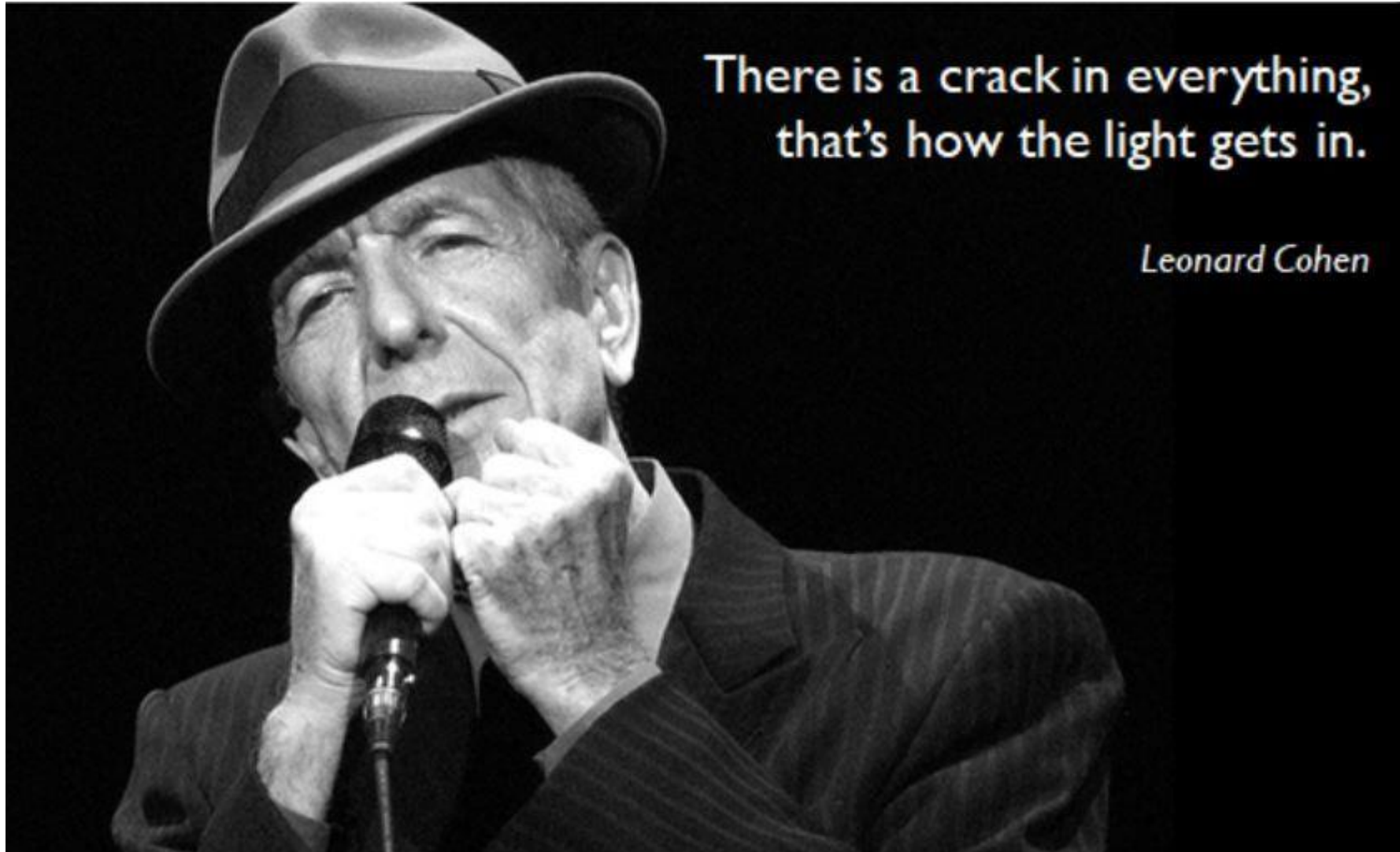

There is a crack in everything,
that's how the light gets in.

Leonard Cohen

Spaces where your power may be given expression in critiquing dominant assumptions, evaluating the force of centralised directives, caucusing on alternative positions and engaging in acts of 'micro-emancipation'

On finding 'spaces' in managing tension:

I sort and prioritise pressures imposed from outside according to my understanding of their importance and respond to them accordingly
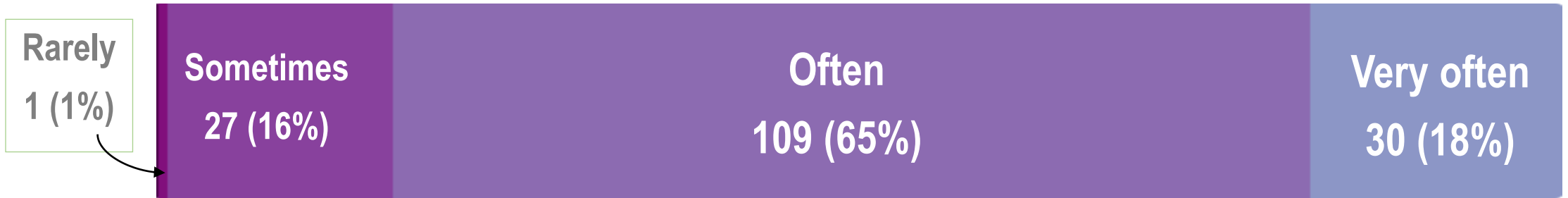
Rarely 1 (1%)	Sometimes 27 (16%)	Often 109 (65%)	Very often 30 (18%)

Power and the 'autonomous' principal: autonomy, teacher development, and school leaders' work

Amanda Heffernan

Faculty of Education, Monash University, Melbourne, Australia
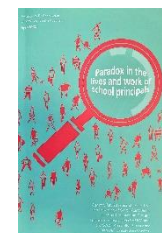
From *Paradox in the lives and work of school principals.* Research Report, SAPPA / SASPA, 2020

Finding spaces of freedom
- The policy work of principals
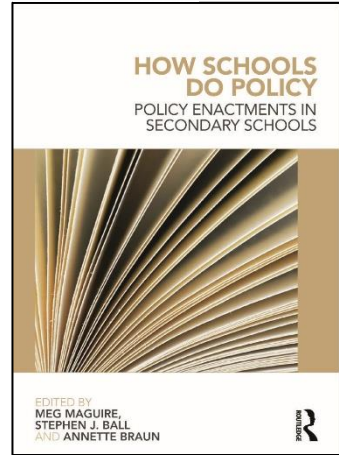
Intentions of policy (and policy-makers) ⟷ Enactment of centralised policy in schools

The crisp and authoritative requirements of centralised policy

The profusion of local practices that mark the implementation work of principals

Manoeuvre
Tweak
Push the guff aside
Negotiate
Filter
Push-back
Ignore
Leverage
Find room to move
(Re)frame
Contextualise
Adapt
Massage
Dance a little
Manipulate
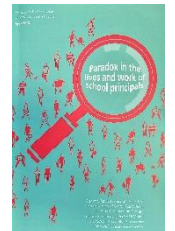
Policy intentions and policy enactment

From *Paradox in the lives and work of school principals.* Research Report, SAPPA / SASPA, 2020

Strategy 3: Caucus around issues in common

- Using the power of the group as both an antidote to individual action (and its attendant vulnerability), and as a catalyst for more productive participation in power relations.

- Creating possibilities for public versions of resistance and refusal, rather than having these actions reduced to the fragmented 'discontents, murmurings, indifference and disengagements' (Ball, Maguire & Braun, 2012, p. 150) of disaffected individuals.
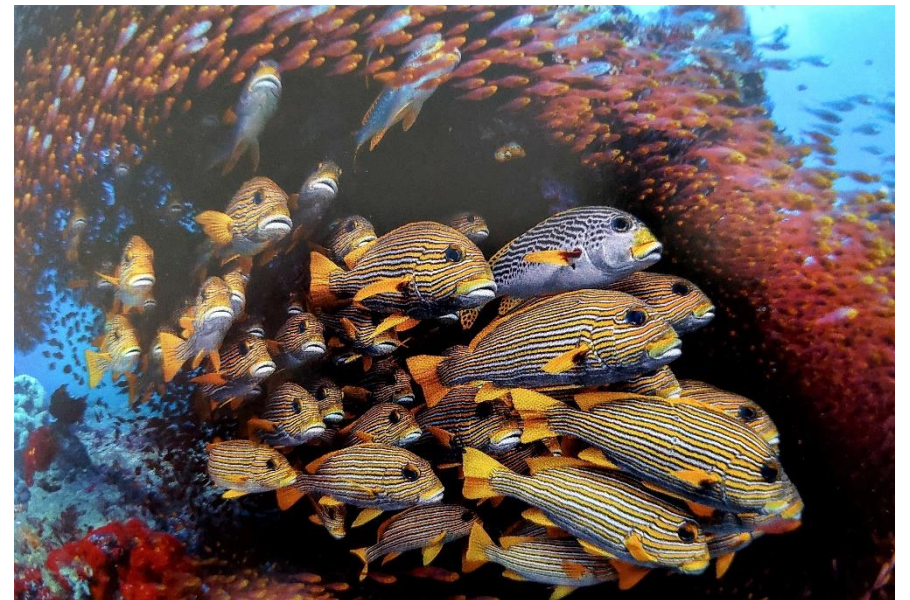
On caucusing to manage tension .... I mobilise my various networks and alliances to give me support and to help me deal productively with outside pressures

Rarely	Sometimes	Often	Very often
14 (8%)	59 (35%)	75 (45%)	9 (11%)

How often do principals rely on their associations (e.g. SAPPA and SASPA) for political representation?

	Primary	R-12	Secondary	Total
Never	2 / 1.9%	0 / 0.0%	1 / 2.4	3 / 1.9%
Rarely	7 / 6.7%	1 / 4.8%	2 / 4.8	10 / 6.4%
Sometimes	14 / 13.3%	2 / 9.5%	11 / 26.8	27 / 17.2%
Often	**45 / 42.9%**	**11 / 52.4%**	**17 / 41.5**	**73 / 46.5%**
Very often	**30 / 28.6%**	**4 / 19%**	**10 / 24.4**	**44 / 28.0%**
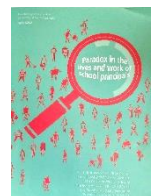
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Strategy 4: Find merit in the other side

Understanding how to mediate between two contradictory positions / applying duality theory to practice

This requires a particular mindset that:
(i) allows both positions to be encouraged (rather than one being championed and the other denigrated)
(ii) works towards *simultaneity* (keeping opposing position in play) and *synergy* (trying to derive mutual benefits from the interaction of opposing sides)
(iii) resists resolution of opposing sides

Duality theory and the management of the change–stability paradox

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ABSTRACT
This article proposes that duality theory plays a role in obtaining more nuanced and textured insights into the complex, paradoxical stability–change nexus by illustrating how tensions are managed not through definitive resolution toward one pole or the other, but through improvised boundary heuristics that establish a broad conforming imperative while opening up enabling mechanisms. Duality thinking also reinforces the need to discard assumptions about opposing values, instead replacing them with an appreciation of complementary concepts. The article explores the characteristics of dualities to allow managers to chart what they are seeking from their management interventions and subsequent choices in structural support systems. A key benefit of identifying and explaining duality characteristics comes in attempting to understand how to mediate between two contradictory dimensions of organizing, such as continuity and change. Our argument is that both need to be encouraged, but this requires a particular mindset where the problem of mediation viewed as the need to work towards simultaneity and synergistic mutuality rather than resolution of action between the two opposing dimensions.

Keywords: paradox management, duality theory, duality characteristics, continuity and change

The system's goals and priorities ⟷ The goals and priorities of my school

Strategy 5: Re-evaluate the meaning of 'leadership'

Value capabilities that allow principals to:

- contain contrary ideas in their minds,
- delay decision making by holding open conflicting sides for scrutiny, development and transformation,
- resist the tendency to lapse into defensive actions,
- create the spaces in which new thinking may emerge,
- resist heroic models of leadership based on strong and decisive (but often faulty, ill-informed, expedient) decision-making.

References

Ball, S. J., Maguire, M., & Braun, A. (2012). *How schools do policy: Policy enactments in secondary schools*. Abingdon, UK: Routledge.

Haugaard, M. (2012). Power and truth. *European Journal of Social Theory, 15*(1), 73-92.

Heffernan, A. (2018). Power and the 'autonomous' principal: autonomy, teacher development, and school leaders' work. *Journal of educational administration and history, 50*(4), 379-396.

Sutherland, F and Smith, A. (2011). Duality theory and the management of the change-stability paradox. *Journal of Management & Organization* 17: 534-547

Watson, C. (2013). How (and why) to avoid making rational decisions: Embracing paradox in school leadership. *School Leadership & Management, 33*(3), 256-269.

GROUP DISCUSSION