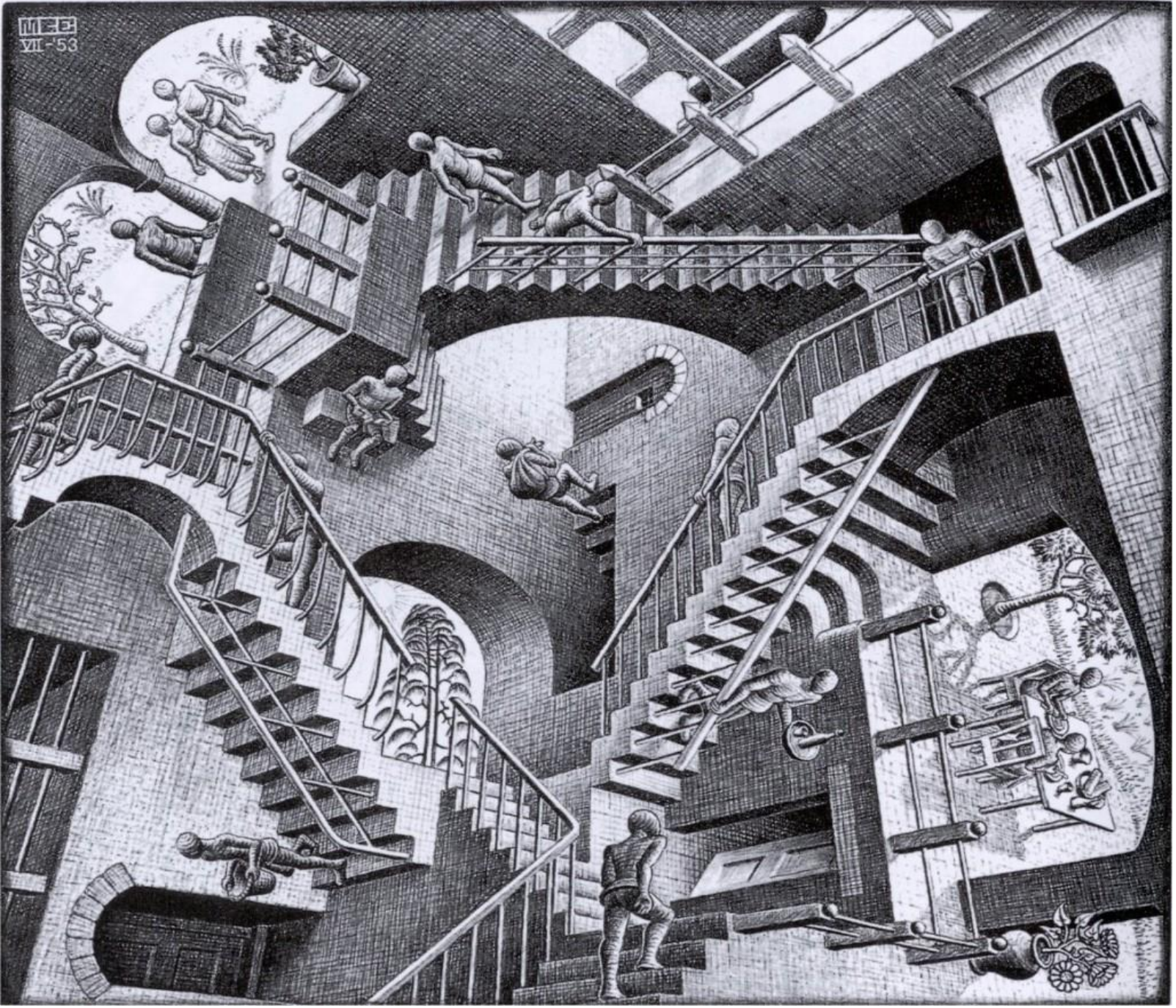


M.C. Escher, “Relativity,” 1953

It’s a paradox:

Tension and ambiguity in the lives and work of principals

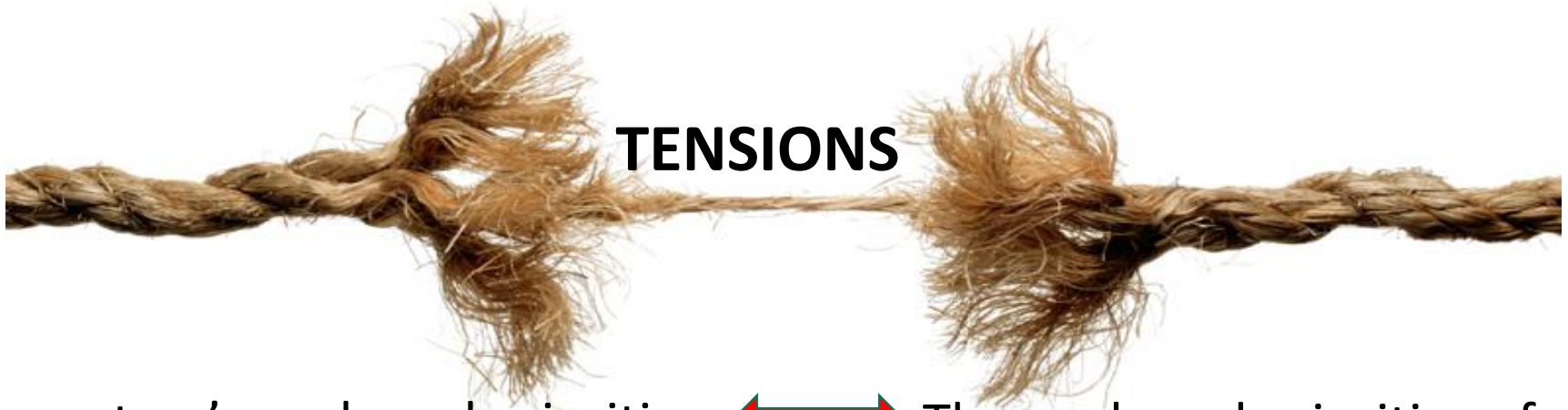
Dr Chris Dolan
University of South Australia

APPA Australian Primary Principals Association
Annual Conference, 2019

‘Paradox in the lives and work of school principals’ is a two-stage research project being 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).

A qualitative study based on interviews with 10 primary and 10 secondary principals

A quantitative study based on a survey of all SAPPA and SASPA principals



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

The 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

The 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

The residualisation of low SES schools brought on by the marketisation / choice agenda

The inequity of funding / resourcing across the school sectors

Autonomy ⟷ Systems membership

Making the case for paradox as a theoretical and conceptual tool

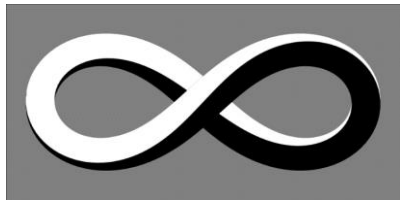
Paradox

para (beyond) / *doxon* (opinion)

Contradictory yet interrelated elements that exist simultaneously and persist over time (Smith & Lewis 2011, p. 382)

Simultaneity

Contradiction

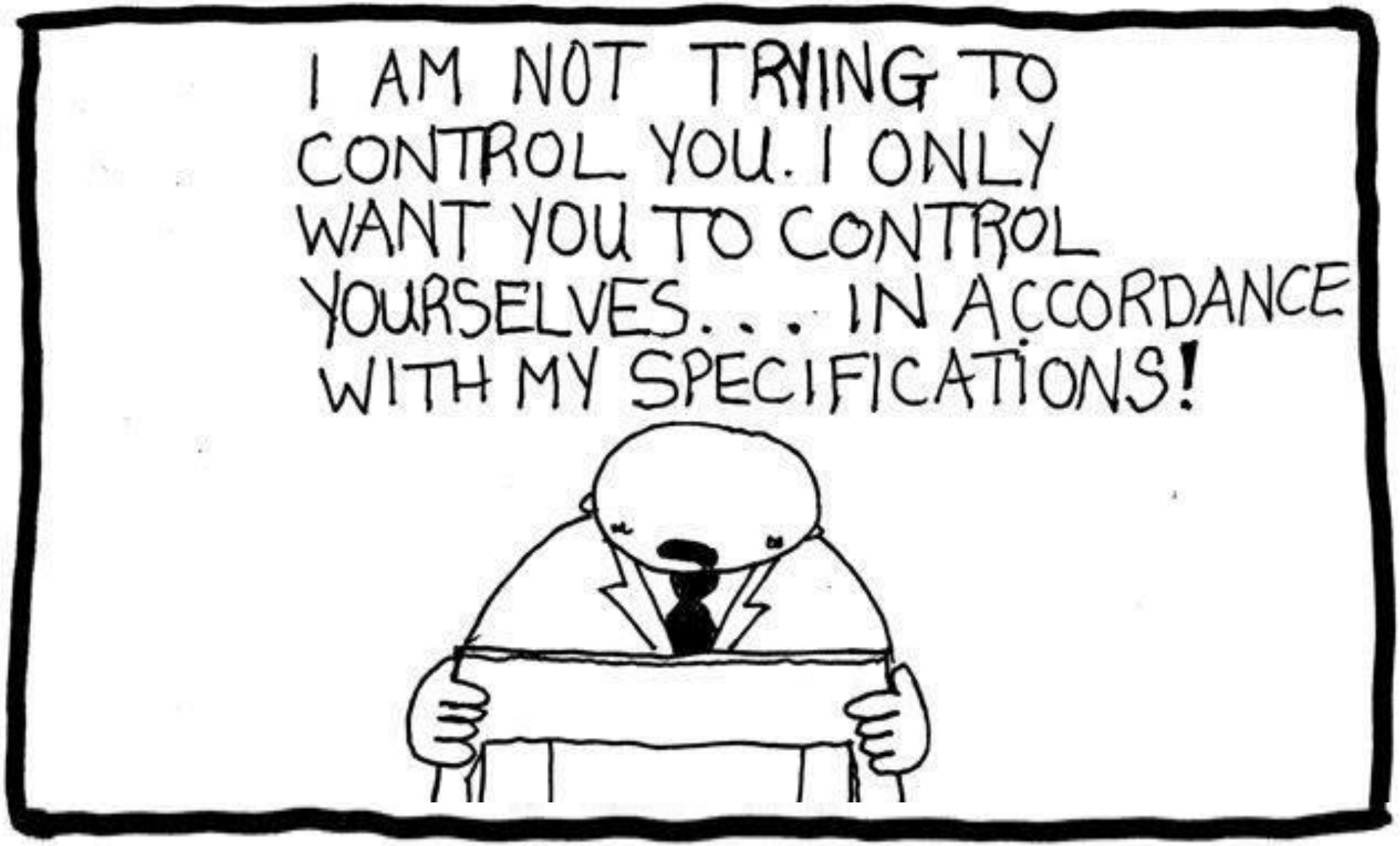


Interdependence

Persistence

Ability to challenge common opinions, to rankle to unsettle (Platt 2016, p. 4)

The paradox of politicised subjectivity



The paradox of system membership

Gains prominence when the principal's membership of the broader system is brought into conflict with local commitments and loyalties

Appeals from the centre urge principals to see their work in a system-wide context and embrace claims about their democratic and consultative systemic involvement

Paradoxically, appeals to principals to be 'systems players' may work against the interests of their school (within the system) and expose the system as more often directive and hierarchical than democratic or consultative

I suppose we can't get away from the fact that we are a public school and we are part of a big system, and that system has its structures and has its expectations of its schools and of its school leaders

(Principal Research Participant)

The paradox of gender identity

The narrow and prescriptive characteristics of managerial trends enforce particular understandings of how leaders look and who they should be (Sinclair 2011, p. 511)

The school leadership workforce (including principals) is often championed for the diversity of its membership, especially in terms of gender representation

Paradoxically, in the current policy environment leaders are encouraged to follow heroic and masculinist models for constructing their identities and performing their work

A paradox lens suggests the need for leaders to think critically about the way they are drawn to preferred identities and the work they do on themselves to secure their authority

The paradox of policy implementation

Gains prominence when the principal's membership of the broader system is brought into conflict with local commitments and loyalties

Principals are charged with the process of policy implementation at school level and the expectation is conveyed to them that they will be a conduit for centrally-mandated directives and keep the intentions of policy-makers intact.

Paradoxically, allocating this role to principals actually works against desired consistency and homogeneity when principals adopt processes to *change*, *translate*, and *settle* policy to better suit the needs of their school.

It's not the principal who is making the policies; it's their role to see how those policies are going to be enacted in the school in a way that it's going to benefit all the students.

(Principal Research Participant)

Manoeuvre

Tweak

Push the guff aside

Negotiate

Filter

Push-back

Ignore

Find room to move

(Re)frame

Contextualise

Adapt

Massage

Dance a little

Manipulate

Realising the difference between policy intentions and policy enactment

'central input and local inflections'

(Clarke et al., 2015)

The term *policy* ven broad meani at includes ne centrally-developed docu advice and instructions that flow i ools, but also the problems to whi e complex processes of s nt, translation and enactment that s when they get to schools

What is the problem?

How does the policy respond to the problem?

How does the policy ‘move’ into schools?

What can schools do to enact the policy locally?

POLICY
POLITICS

Instructional Leadership

Transformational Leadership

Authentic Leadership

Distributed Leadership

Relational Leadership

Situational Leadership

Servant Leadership

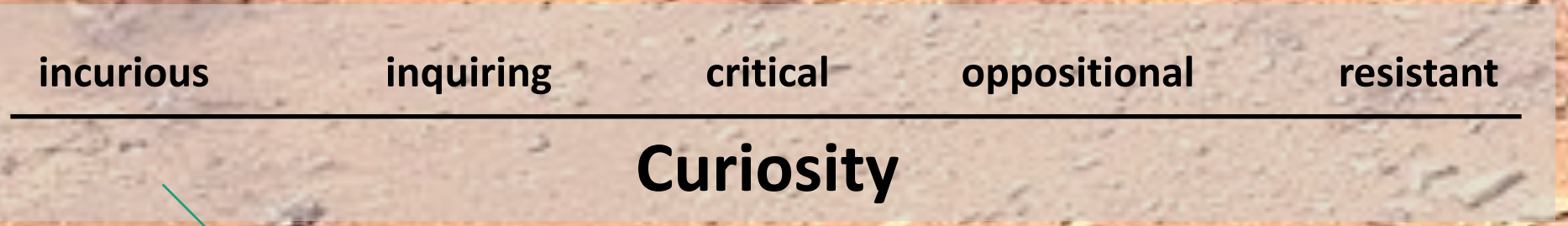
What about political leadership?

What is the evidence-based political project for school leaders?

Making room to manoeuvre

Curiosity

[Curiosity] evokes … a readiness to find what surrounds us strange and odd; a certain determination to throw off familiar ways of thought and to look at the same things in a different way; a passion for seizing what is happening now and what is disappearing; a lack of respect for the traditional hierarchies of what is important and fundamental. (Foucault, 2000, p. 325)

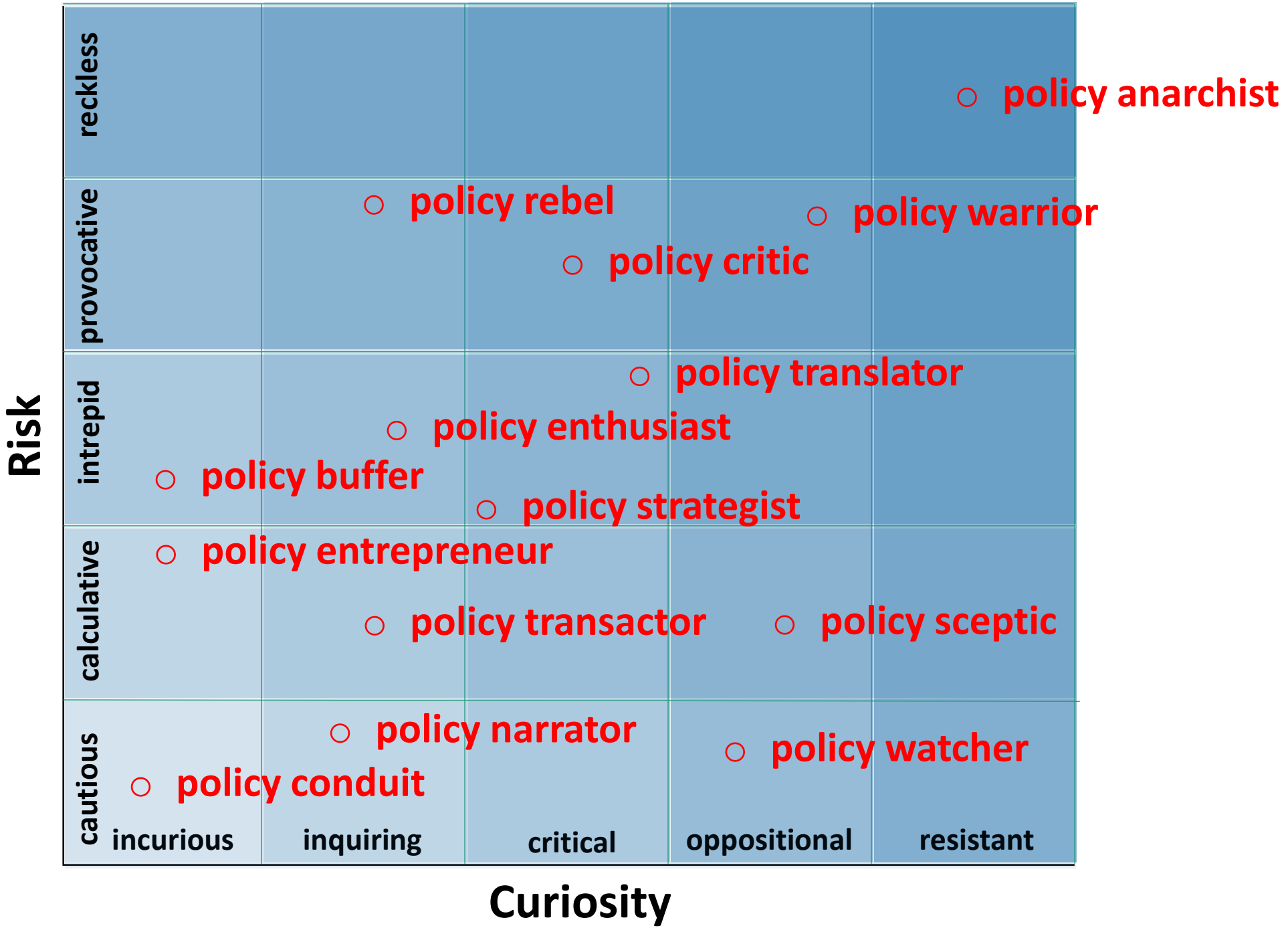


Risk taking

Testing the possibility of being other or otherwise

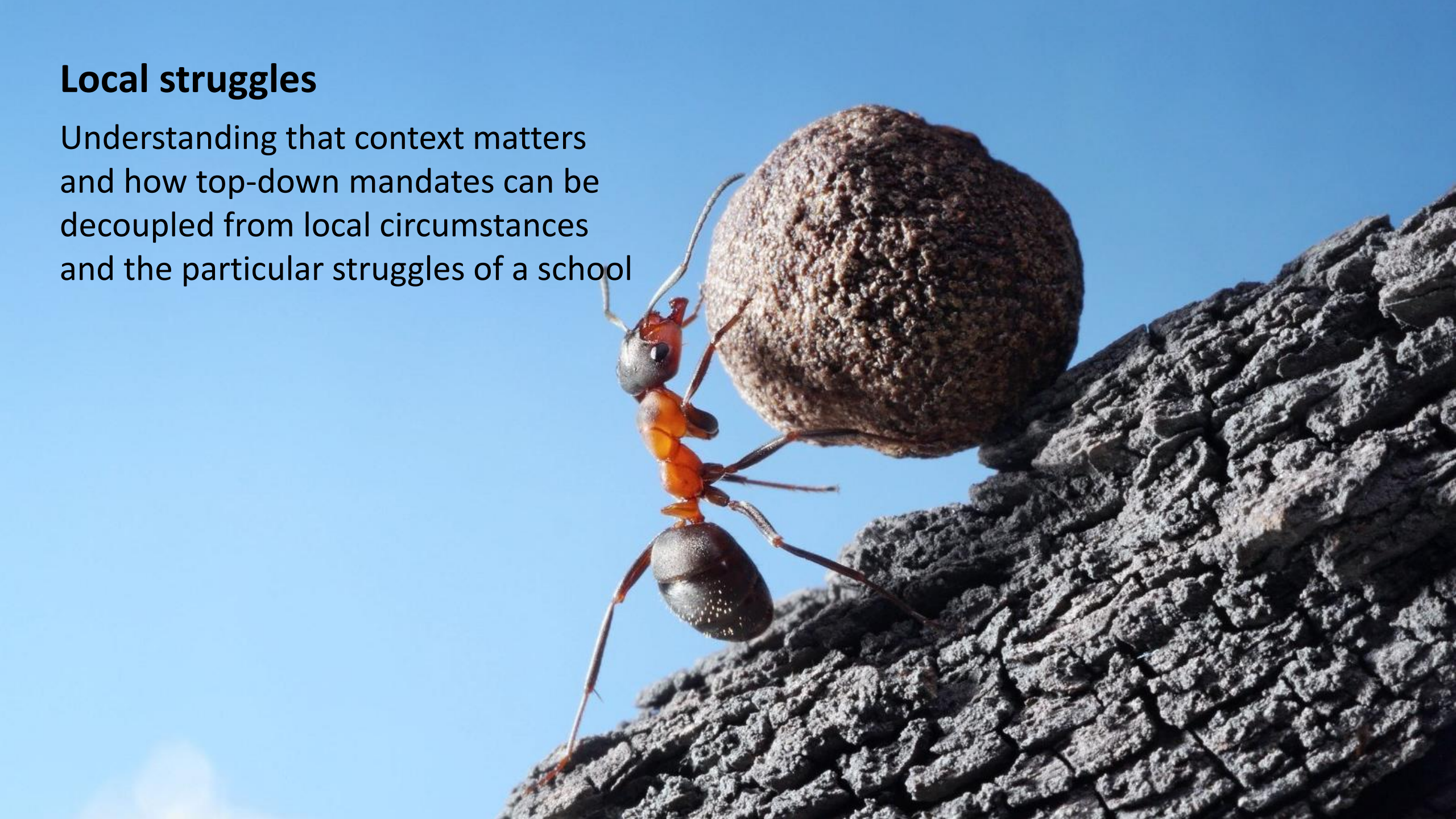
Risk

cautious — calculative — intrepid — provocative — reckless


Risk
reckless
provocative
intrepid
calculative
cautious
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
incurious
inquiring
critical
oppositional
resistant
Curiosity

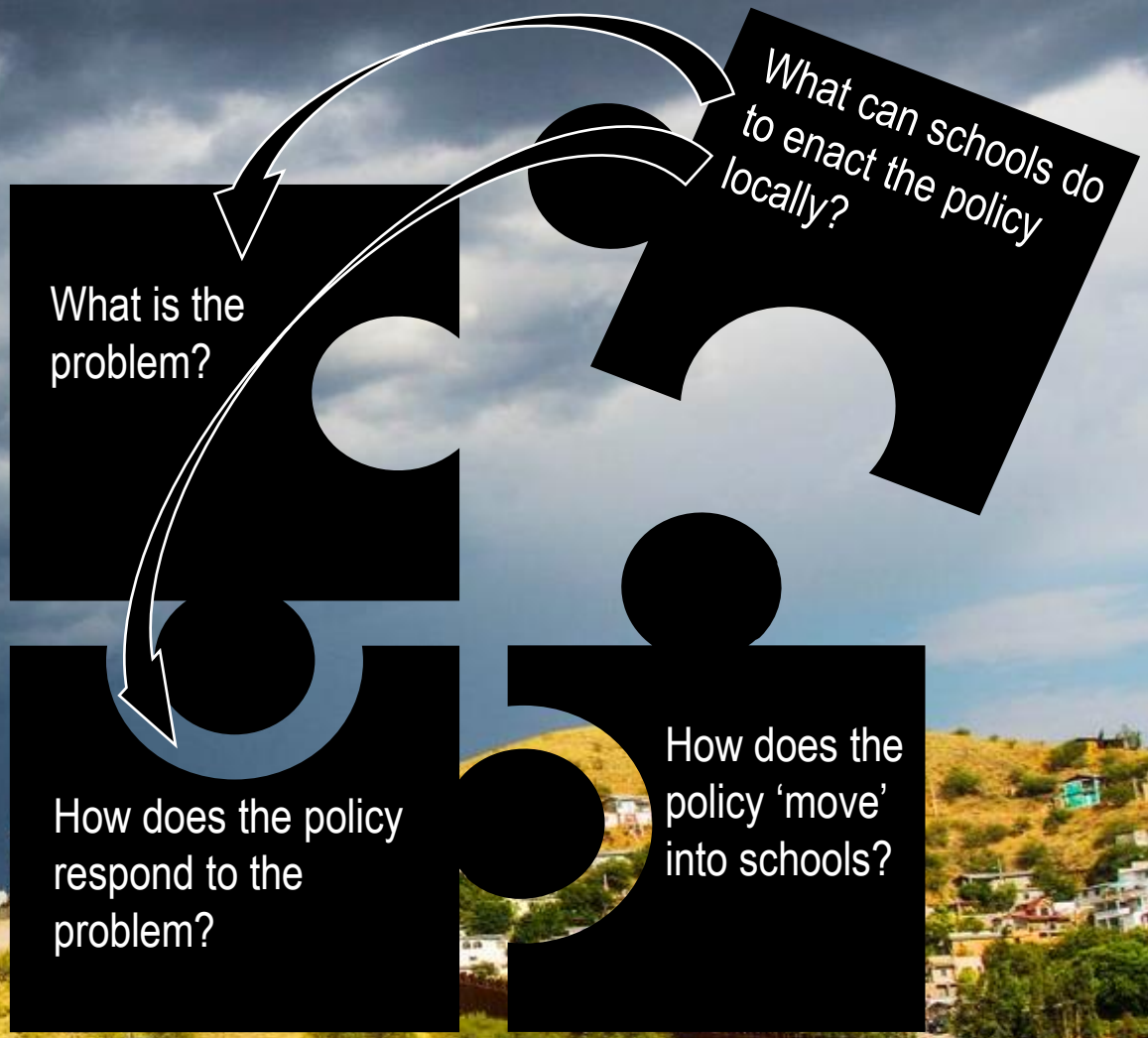
Local struggles

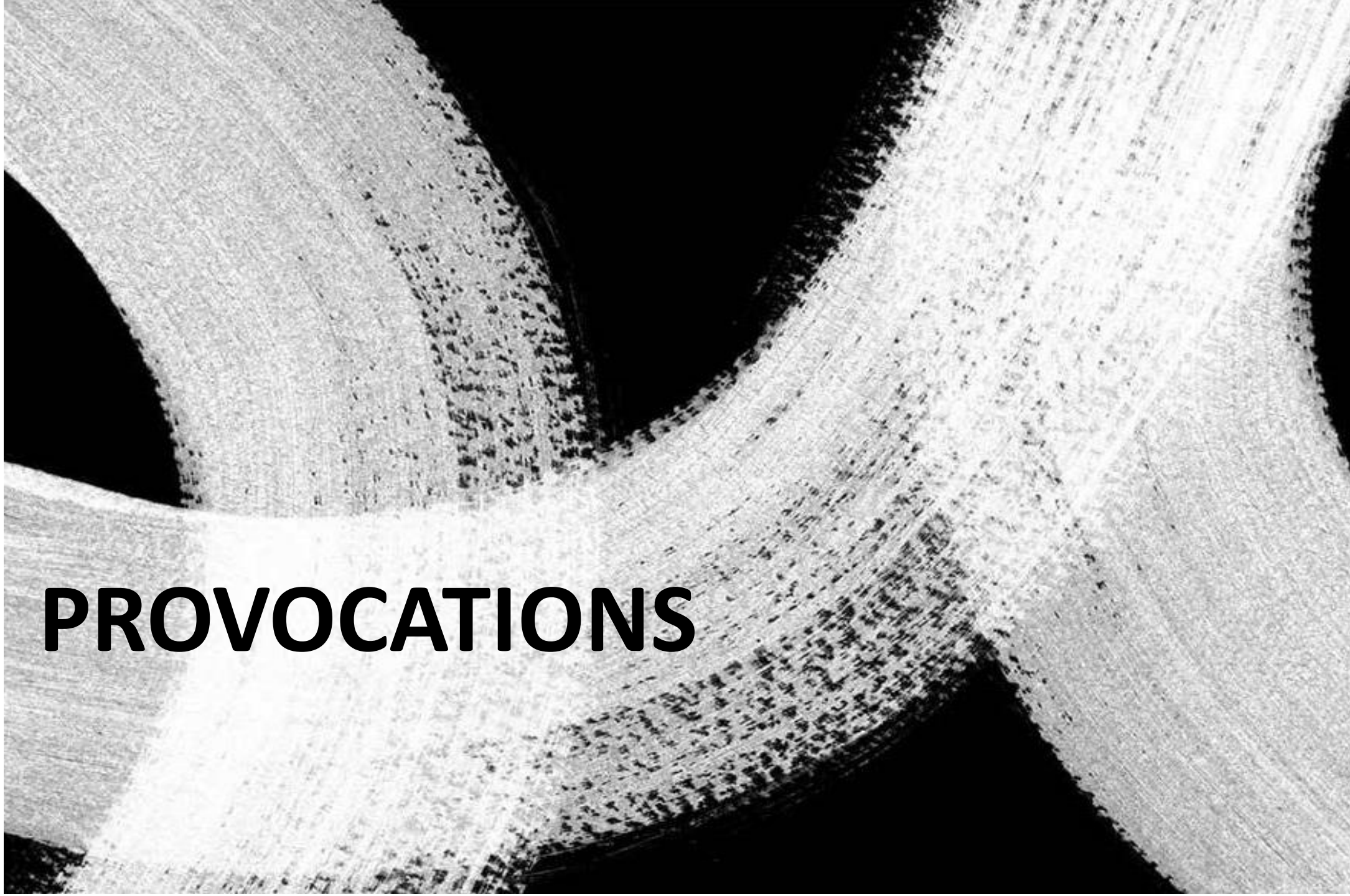
Understanding that context matters and how top-down mandates can be decoupled from local circumstances and the particular struggles of a school



Border crossing

Border crossing engages intellectual work … as part of a discourse of *invention* and *construction* rather than a discourse of *recognition* whose aim is reduced to revealing and transmitting universal truths (Giroux, 1994)




GROUP
DISCUSSION
PROVOCATIONS

Provocation 1: The leader as a subject of the system

The school leader *performs* a role and 'presents themselves as other than their real selves' (Gill and Arnold 2015: 13) in order to comply with homogenised and pressing centralised policy directives. As a result personal leadership efficacy, thoughtful resistance or unorthodox solutions to local problems are ignored or marginalised.

Provocation 2: Shared leadership, empowerment and control

Leaders freely acknowledge the importance of their school leadership team and the value that they place on the 'empowerment' of others through structures that delegate and share leadership responsibility. While sold as being emancipatory, this empowerment is, in fact, more likely to be a control mechanism that strengthens the power of leaders by inviting 'followers' to form a deeper connection with them and their vision.

Provocation 3: Gender and the cultural status quo

Metaphors describing the principal as ‘captain of the ship’ and as ‘company CEO’ reinforce masculine assumptions about the good leader as they are ‘premised around strong and entrepreneurial models of leadership more closely associated with masculinity than femininity’ (Blackmore 2005, p. 184). The effect of this demand for particular leadership identities is to narrow the field of possibilities and to force leaders, both women and men, to become agents for the cultural status quo.

Provocation 4: Creative enactment of policy

While leaders know their systemic and legislative responsibilities for implementing centrally developed policy, many also understand the need to adapt, diminish and even ignore central directives so that policy better meets the needs of their school. Between policy-making and policy implementation there is a space of ‘creative enactment’ (Webb, 2014, p. 366) where leaders can fashion opportunities for re-interpreting, challenging and changing policy. However, leaders are increasingly drawn to compliance with central policy directives rather than to the risks and rewards of creative enactment.

Provocation 5: Performing the plan

School leaders are concerned to create an impressive, ambitious and self-contained planning document that is suitably compliant, glossily finished and publicly accessible. However, they are less interested in the long-term realisation of its documented aspirations. Paradoxically, in performing a largely symbolic function, the actual content of the strategic plan – with its goals, targets and actions – may be more easily put aside, lost in a profusion of other priorities, rendered as outdated or mocked by teachers as irrelevant in their daily working lives.