

CHANGING CONCEPTIONS OF EFFECTIVE SCHOOL-BOARD UNIVERSITY RESEARCH PARTNERSHIPS

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AGENDA

1. Introduction and Purpose
2. Background Literature
3. Research Question
4. Theoretical Framework
5. Methodology
6. Findings
7. Concluding Thoughts
8. Questions and Contact



INTRODUCTION & PURPOSE

Collaborative partnerships between school-board districts and university faculty have been advocated widely (Henrick et al., 2016; Lopez-Turley & Stevens, 2015; Schuck, 2013).

Such partnerships are complex and negotiating the interface between the diverse cultures of university researchers and educational practitioners may be difficult (Ebbutt et al., 2000; Erikson & Young, 2011; Henrick et al., 2016; Schuck, 2013).

This self-study explored the experiences of two teacher educators who attempted to implement a funded five-year research program in collaboration with school-board partners that was based on a collaboratively developed proposal to engage in a longitudinal exploration of the experiences of school-board literacy coaches and a sampling of the teachers with whom they worked.



BACKGROUND LITERATURE

School-board university research partnerships (**RPPs**) can be mutually beneficial ([Henrick et al., 2016](#); [Lopez Turley & Stevens, 2015](#); [Martin et al., 2011](#)) through sharing resources and expertise, bridging the theory-practice divide, and promoting the likelihood that educational research will positively impact policy and practice ([Schuck, 2013](#)).

Successful collaborative RPPs require establishing trusting relationships, working towards common, mutually beneficial goals ([Lopez Turley & Stevens, 2015](#)), as well as developing in-depth understandings of the school-board and university contexts, and the complexities of each ([Henrick et al., 2016](#); [Phelps, 2019](#)).

Acquisition of external funding to support partnerships can complicate RPPs by bringing with it a pre-ordained focus or goal that does not meet the evolving needs of school-boards ([Mockler, 2013](#)).

The gap between the norms, power relations, and organizational structures of school-boards and universities can complicate the development of strong RPPs ([Phelps, 2019](#)).

BACKGROUND LITERATURE: CONTEXTUAL DIFFERENCES

The organizational structure of Canadian schools is decentralized - each provincial government determines which programs and approaches will be advocated, implemented & funded (Wallner, 2012).

Regional school boards act as a bridge between schools and the provincial government, which provides funding for schools through these boards (Wallner, 2012).

Provincial education policies and programs are politically influenced (Galway & Sheppard, 2015).

Creativity on the part of both RPP partners is requisite to resolving potential gaps between the funding focus and school-boards' evolving needs and moving forward with productive partnerships (Mockler, 2013).

By comparison, “university-based researchers operate according to their own, different accountability and reward systems, this has typically required that they follow their own research agendas while maintaining an appropriate level of independence from the government policy environment – even publicly criticizing government policy in some circumstances”.

(Galway & Sheppard, 2015, p.5)

BACKGROUND LITERATURE

Ko et al., (2022) noted the need for researchers to develop adaptive expertise working in RPPs and document their learning experiences doing so.

Self-study research is a form of scholarly inquiry intended to uncover the learning of teacher educator-researchers as they work with teachers, schools, and districts (Loughran, 2007).

Previous S-STEP research (Erickson & Young, 2011) investigated the tensions experienced by faculty members engaging in short-term collaborative RPP projects and attributed these to the different and competing discourses of researchers and teachers.

RPP S-STEP researchers (Ikpeze et al., 2012) have also noted the need to value teachers' practitioner craft knowledge as different but not inferior to the knowledge of teacher educators .

McConn and Mason (2019) documented tensions between a researcher and teachers involved in a one-year school-board university RPP which were a function of working together in their shared classroom; these tensions were resolved when the researcher released their preconceived notions of teachers' professional development needs and reframed and restructured their interactions with one another.

RESEARCH QUESTION

Although teacher educators frequently conduct research with school board partners, their experiences navigating these partnerships, particularly those that are long-term, and their learning as researchers through these partnership experiences, are not well explored ([Ko et al., 2022](#)).

This self-study sought to extend existing understandings of this important domain of teacher educators' work and addressed the research question:

What issues arose in the implementation of this longitudinal school-board university funded research program, and how were they navigated?

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Conceptual change - a complex process defined as altering old beliefs to be consistent with new information through accommodation. This begins with dissonance created by recognizing that new information is anomalous; then individuals must actively seek to eliminate the discrepancies between new and old information and perceive their efforts to assimilate new information as unsuccessful (Gregoire, 2003).

Social constructivism - emphasizes the role of context, social interaction, and language in the processes through which individuals construct representations as they make sense of experiences (Schwandt, 2003).

Freire (2000) outlined the importance of language, more specifically of “**naming the world,**” as a precursor to understanding, critically reflective dialogue, and working towards change.

Berry’s (2008) six interrelated, interconnected tensions in teacher education, which must be negotiated, to enhance existing understandings of the issues that define teacher educators’ practices and engage in productive dialogue about them.

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1. Telling & Growth
 2. Confidence & Uncertainty
 3. Action & Intent
 4. Safety & Challenge
 5. Valuing & Reconstructing
 6. Planning & Being Responsive

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK: BERRY'S (2008) TENSIONS

1. **Telling and Growth:** telling teacher candidates about teaching and facilitating their growth through active learning;
2. **Confidence and Uncertainty:** promoting confidence in teacher candidates' teaching abilities, while making explicit the uncertainty of teaching;
3. **Actions and Intent:** managing dichotomies that may exist between teacher educators' actions and teacher candidates' perceptions of their intents;
4. **Safety and Challenge:** negotiating when and how to move beyond safety and embrace the challenges of uncomfortable learning experiences;
5. **Valuing and Reconstructing:** valuing teacher candidates' experiences and conceptions, while enhancing their abilities to reconstruct them; and
6. **Planning and Being Responsive:** balancing planned learning opportunities with being responsive to unanticipated opportunities as they arise.

METHODOLOGY

Longitudinal chronological case study methods: descriptive and enable researchers to explore changes in a phenomenon over time ([Yin, 2014](#)).

Context & Participants

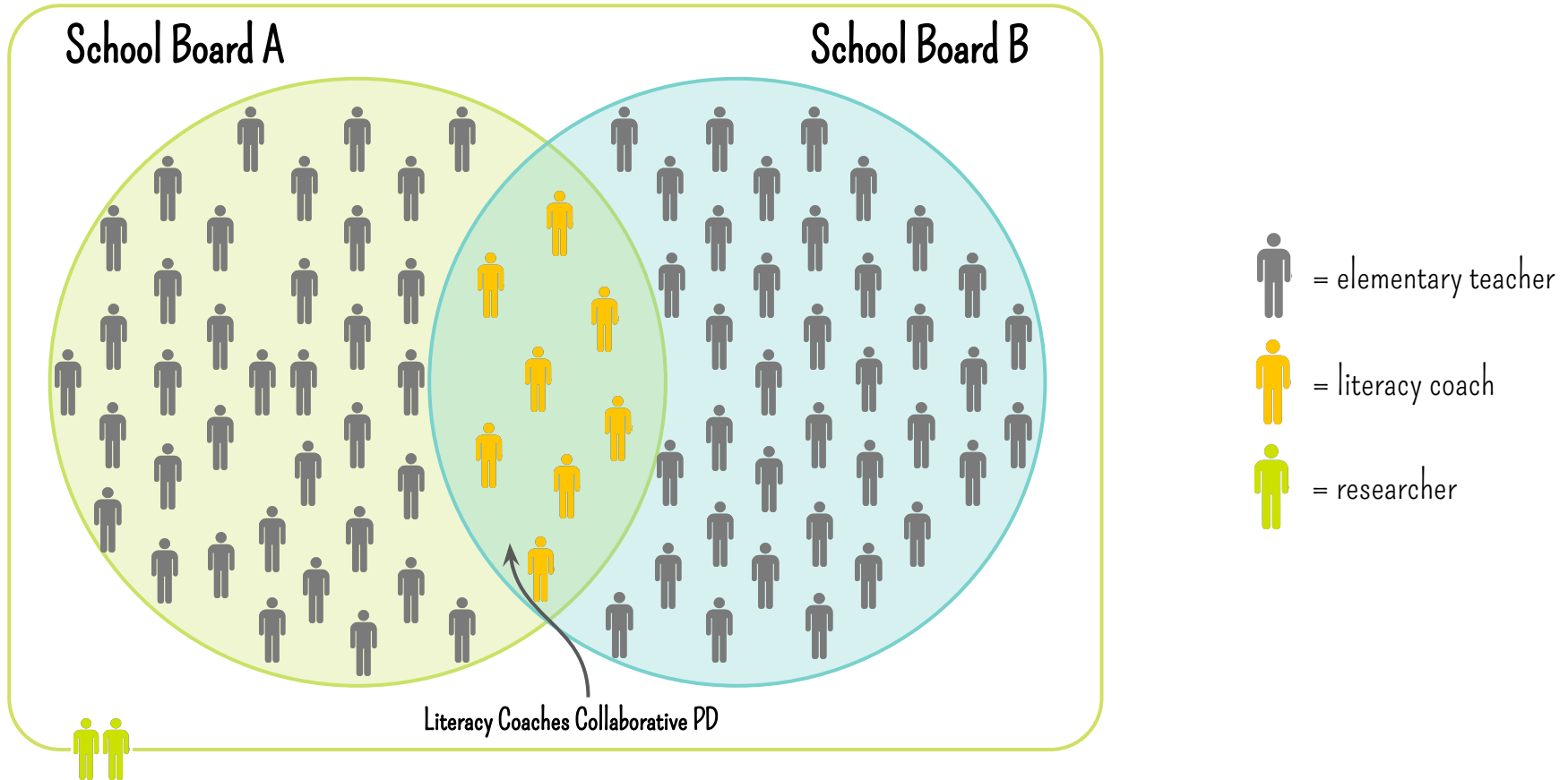
- Arlene and Tiffany - faculty members with long-standing productive relationship as co-investigators AND several productive, mutually beneficial, collaborative research partnerships with school-board personnel.
- Five-year research program investigating the professional learning of 9 school-board coaches, 3 literacy leads, and teachers in two Ontario school boards.

Data Sources & Analyses

- email communications between the researchers (2016-2021)
- researchers' written reflections
- field notes gathered during school-board research sessions
- five annual school-board research reports
- transcripts of six researchers' reflective meetings
- transcripts of our interviews with school-board coaches and literacy leads

Coding and categorizing to uncover emerging patterns that were inductively coded ([Creswell, 2014](#)) with Berry's ([2008](#)) tensions as a framework to analyze and interpret our findings.

CONTEXT: PROPOSED RESEARCH PROGRAM



CONTEXT: ENACTED RESEARCH PROGRAM

Year 1

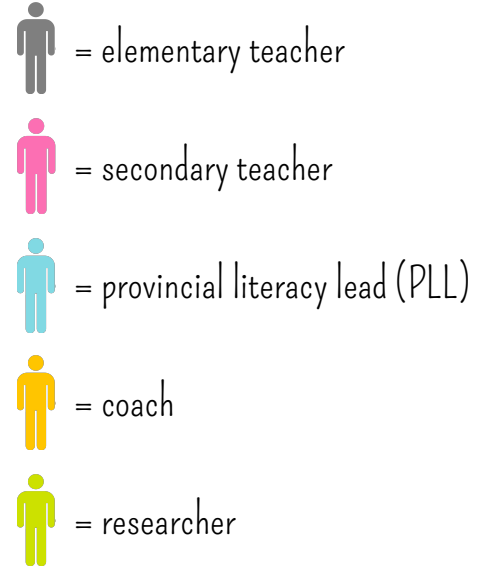
School Board A

Resilient
Readers
(RR)

English
Language
Learners
(ELL)

Digital
Technology
(DT)

Disciplinary
Literacy
(DL)

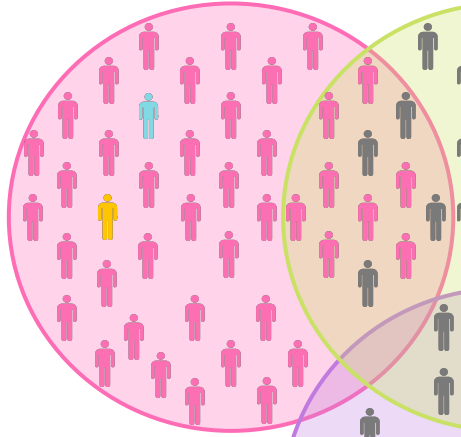


CONTEXT: ENACTED RESEARCH PROGRAM

Year 2

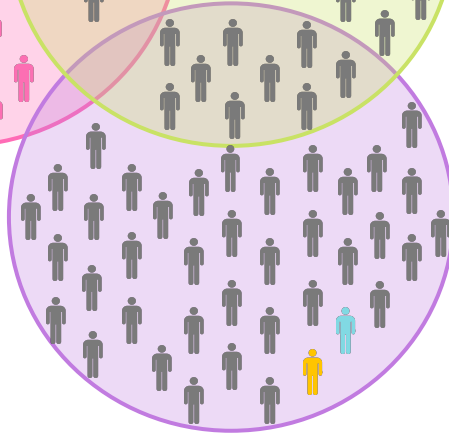
School Board A

Resilient
Readers
(RR)



Digital
Technology
(DT)

Disciplinary
Literacy
(DL)



= elementary teacher



= secondary teacher



= provincial literacy lead (PLL)



= coach



= researcher



CONTEXT: ENACTED RESEARCH PROGRAM

Year 3 & 4






School Board A

School Board B

Digital
Technology
(DT)

Digital
Technology
(DT)

DT/STEM Coaches'
Collaborative PD

-  = elementary teacher
-  = secondary teacher
-  = provincial literacy lead (PLL)
-  = coach
-  = researcher



THREE THEMES

1. Uncovering our tensions
2. Productive discourse about our tensions
3. Resilience navigating our tensions promoted by new conceptions



FINDINGS: UNCOVERING OUR TENSIONS

We were thrilled to acquire external funding, however, when awarded, government literacy coach funding was being discontinued. We began refocusing broadly on PL through coaching but encountered challenges such as lack of control over leadership changes in one board, as well as the interest, direction, and focus of potential partners. Our interconnected tensions between: **confidence & uncertainty, safety & challenge, and planning & being responsive**, are illustrated below:

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1. Telling & Growth
 2. Confidence & Uncertainty
 3. Action & Intent
 4. Safety & Challenge
 5. Valuing & Reconstructing
 6. Planning & Being Responsive

“ **Arlene:** *If I look at the progress that we had in the spring; we had such enthusiasm from the former superintendent.... his replacement basically just gave it to their research department and they have stonewalled it since... That [ethics] application was delivered in August. It was supposed to be reviewed by the middle of October; we are now at the end of December. And we've been told it's going to be January before they look at it.*

Tiffany: *It shows the importance of relationships... key people. You can't just come from the outside and swoop into a school board... the former superintendent before he retired; he just saw the relevance... he thought it was a perfect fit.*

Arlene: *It's just like School Board C.....there's no co-ordination because it was the ministry that said go to Board C, they would be a perfect fit...yet because of the projects and other things coming down from the ministry the school board says no.* (Transcript, Researcher's Meeting Dec 19, 2016)

FINDINGS: UNCOVERING OUR TENSIONS

Despite our dilemmas, compounded by labour disputes, we tried to remain optimistic that boards would be open to our plan. Our reiterative tensions between **confidence & uncertainty, and between planning & being responsive to unpredictable situations** persisted. As researchers, we felt responsible to the funder and had to **move beyond safety to accept the challenge** of proceeding irrespective of the uncertain direction.

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1. Telling & Growth
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“ **Arlene:** *I think that makes it feel uncomfortable because we had such a plan...we had so much interest from so many boards and I could see it all playing out the way we proposed it. And now I can't see where it's going...if I look at our five-year plan - the first year was to collect baseline data, and then to use that to develop professional learning or collaborative inquiry groups for these coaches. But I don't see where we're going to [do that].*

Tiffany: *I think it's worse than we thought because we don't have full access [in Board A because of labour disputes]. I'm optimistic that they will still be open to what we want to do in Year 2.*

Arlene: *We're at the whim and the mercy of transitioning school-board personnel, with their differing agendas and perceptions of needs. And they move in and out of their roles and carrying on a five-year plan is impossible.*

Tiffany: *So, I think, the way I kind of see it in my mind now, back in May and June we didn't know we would have the Provincial Literacy Leads. So, we now have them ... I don't know how long that relationship will continue, that's why I'm hesitating. So, we've kind of got a replacement. ... So, I'm not getting upset yet. Um, it just totally doesn't match what we applied for.... So, in other words then, we have to say, how are we going to definitely get what we need for the next four years from what we have?* (Transcript, Researcher's Meeting, December 19, 2016)

FINDINGS: UNCOVERING OUR TENSIONS

Throughout the first two years, our pervasive interconnected tensions such as those between: **valuing & reconstructing perspectives, action & intent, confidence & uncertainty, safety & challenge, and planning & being responsive**, persisted, as illustrated in our discussion about continued lack of access to School Board B participants, following ethics approval to proceed. This was attributed to school board leaders' perception that coaches were not yet ready to participate.

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1. Telling & Growth
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“ **Arlene:** *I think he [former superintendent] would be quite surprised to see two years later that we've gone nowhere ...and I do think that there's a perception of researchers evaluating something rather than documenting.*

Tiffany: *Yeah, we're outsiders...University too which is even more threatening.*

Arlene: *...if you think about trying to get it from their perspective, as a teacher, you know, it was stressed that you should use evidence-based practices, ...you should evaluate your teaching methods... that was the role of research. So, even though we have highlighted and explained and outlined that our initial role is to observe...their perception of what research does and what research means is really one of it evaluating rather than observing.*

Tiffany: *It precedes us, right? It's bigger than us.* (Transcript Researcher's Meeting April 8, 2018)

FINDINGS: UNCOVERING OUR TENSIONS

Our findings documented the applicability of Berry's (2008) tensions - our six interconnected and interrelated tensions as educational researchers were between:

1. **Telling and Growth:** Deciding when to facilitate growth through active learning and when to “tell” research partners/participants information;
2. **Confidence and Uncertainty:** Remaining confident while also aware of the uncertainty of the evolving foci and direction of our school-board partnerships;
3. **Actions and Intent:** Dichotomies that may exist between researchers' actions and school board partners/participants' perceptions of their intents;
4. **Safety and Challenge:** Moving beyond safety and embracing the challenges of school-board/university research partnerships;
5. **Valuing and Reconstructing:** Valuing while supporting school-board partners/participants' abilities to reconstruct their perceptions; and,
6. **Planning and Being Responsive:** Balancing planned directions or experiences with being responsive to unanticipated situations as they arise.

FINDINGS: PRODUCTIVE DISCOURSE ABOUT OUR TENSIONS

After analyzing the first two years of our data in May 2018 through the lens of Berry's (2008) tensions, our language changed, as illustrated in our discussion about whether to move beyond safety to accept the challenge of valuing while attempting to reconstruct the perspective of our partners with respect to enhancing teachers' accountability for change.

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“ **Arlene:** And again, that’s **safety and challenge**, ...am I willing to move beyond safety and accept the challenge of saying to them “there’s a lack of accountability...”

Tiffany: You’re confident, you know what needs to happen and you know what works.

Arlene: I am confident but as a researcher and as a partner I don’t think I’m willing to **move beyond the safety** of having this partnership where at least they’re allowing us access and **accepting the challenge** of saying what I really think.

Tiffany: You and I are very vulnerable.... Because so much has gone into building that relationship and now I see some of these areas for improvement. **And do I stay safe? Or do I accept the challenge?**

Tiffany: ...**confidence and uncertainty too**. We’re confident with the existing relationship but we know that it’s uncertain terrain...that it could all blow up tomorrow and so, do you move beyond safety and say what you know from research-based evidence, needs to happen to enhance...implementation of change? (Transcript Researcher’s Meeting June 27, 2018)

FINDINGS: PRODUCTIVE DISCOURSE ABOUT OUR TENSIONS

Disappointingly, after two years of implementation, a newly elected government discontinued funding for several initiatives we had been researching. Our research with the Disciplinary Literacy, Resilient Readers, and English Language Learner projects, as well as the experiences of three Provincial Literacy Leads who were supporting school-board coaches working on these projects came to an abrupt conclusion. We felt accountable to the funder but lacked control over the project.

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1. Telling & Growth
 2. Confidence & Uncertainty
 3. Action & Intent
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“ **Tiffany:** *In terms of our provincial government, that's not changing.*

Arlene: *No, it is not changing. So we won't go back to being able to follow Resilient Readers, Disciplinary Literacy, ELL - all those projects*

Tiffany: *I mean if we thought there were problems a year ago. Those problems have expanded.*

Arlene: *Those problems are real... We are accountable to the funder but we have no control. It spins out of control all around us. We do the best we can ...I don't know where we are going [with the research] next year. **That's confidence and uncertainty.*** (Transcript, Researcher's Reflective Meeting, April 8, 2019)

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FINDINGS: PRODUCTIVE DISCOURSE ABOUT OUR TENSIONS

Our understanding of the need to navigate our tensions enhanced our perception of the importance of our responsiveness to the needs of our partners.

“ **Arlene:** ... everything from the time the [provincial election] writ was dropped in May [2018], there was no PD, everything that has started was put on hold and it has never been picked up again.

Tiffany: ...with the Ministry withdrawing their support for the coaches...The structures don't exist anymore.

Arlene: We have to **plan and be flexibly responsive to unanticipated situations**...we applied for a grant when literacy coaches were funded. We were flexibly responsive to changing our direction and all of a sudden going to digital coaching, ESL, Resilient Readers, Disciplinary Literacy. But this is like the Nth degree.... being flexibly responsive to a totally unanticipated situation. We value where our school-board partners are coming from ...They've got to proceed with some sort of **confidence and it is uncertain** if they will have any time to do coaching next year.

Tiffany: **But that's really our project...being responsive to what they need.** (Transcript, Researcher's Meeting, June 24, 2019) ”

“ This was in stark contrast to our initial hopes that our school-board partners “...will still be open to what we want to do,” and concerns about “...getting what we need” (Tiffany, Researcher's Meeting, December 16, 2016), as expressed at the onset of this partnership. In hindsight, this was a **nodal moment that affected our conceptions and actions.** ”

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1. Telling & Growth
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FINDINGS: RESILIENCE NAVIGATING OUR TENSIONS

Despite our reiterative tensions, we remained focused on enhancing existing understandings. We continued to research the one remaining initiative, DT coaching, and expanded this in 2019 to include a collaborative book study between DT coaches in two different school-boards. This began fruitfully, and the DT coaches appeared to appreciate their opportunities to collaborate.

“ *Ah and I think I shared something with her. I sent her a QR...You know what, it's not even whether I got something from her or not, it's [that] sometimes we need peers to be able to throw ideas around.*

Jenna, School Board D Coach Interview, January 15, 2019 ”

“ *We're not in the same [school] board which is nice.... She was willing to share her wealth of knowledge. I thank you for that connection.*

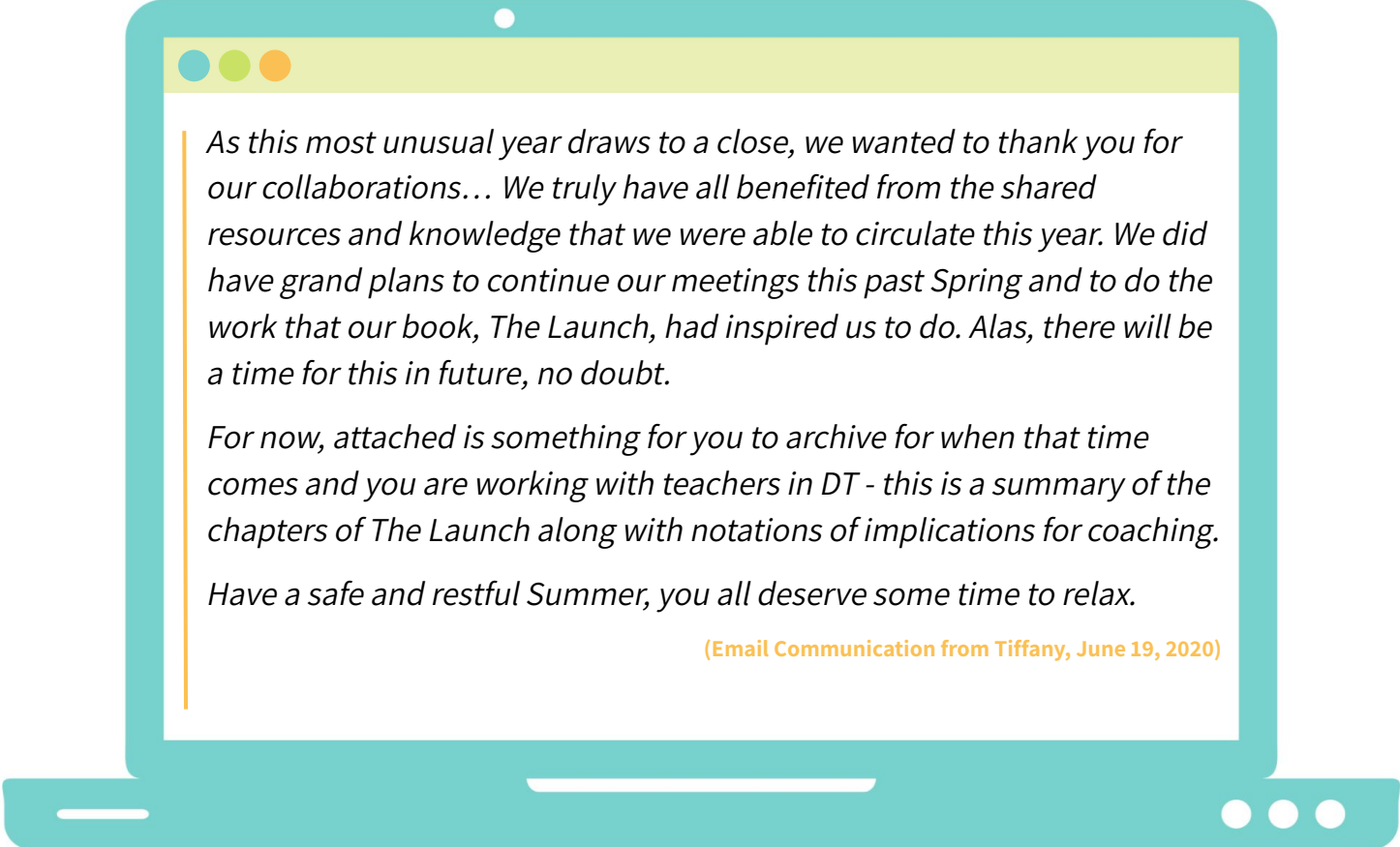
Helen, School Board A Coach Interview, June 11, 2019 ”

After reading several sections of the book and beginning to discuss how to implement innovative ideas from it, the cross-district book-study project came to an abrupt end as the COVID-19 pandemic began.



FINDINGS: RESILIENCE NAVIGATING OUR TENSIONS

In keeping with our focus on attempting to meet our school-board partners' needs, we prepared a summary of the book and implications for coaching and distributed this to coach participants.



*As this most unusual year draws to a close, we wanted to thank you for our collaborations... We truly have all benefited from the shared resources and knowledge that we were able to circulate this year. We did have grand plans to continue our meetings this past Spring and to do the work that our book, *The Launch*, had inspired us to do. Alas, there will be a time for this in future, no doubt.*

*For now, attached is something for you to archive for when that time comes and you are working with teachers in DT - this is a summary of the chapters of *The Launch* along with notations of implications for coaching.*

Have a safe and restful Summer, you all deserve some time to relax.

(Email Communication from Tiffany, June 19, 2020)

FINDINGS: RESILIENCE NAVIGATING OUR TENSIONS

We also investigated the experiences of the DT coaches and teachers they supported in the move to emergency remote learning during the first year of the pandemic, and shared our findings and recommendations with our school board partners.

“ **Recommendations:**

- *School board funding for supporting teachers’ digital instruction through coaching should be a top priority as post-pandemic models of education will undoubtedly include pervasive technology use.*
- *Schools and boards should consider parent education for technology use in the home*

(Excerpts from School-Board Research Report, May, 2021) ”

While unexpected, this was worthwhile for us as researchers and for our school-board partners.

Over the duration of this program of research, we increasingly learned to be resilient, as we uncovered, then learned to name and discuss our reiterative tensions. This in turn, promoted our conceptual change, which enabled us to confidently hone the skill of becoming flexibly responsive to the evolving educational context and seek to enhance understandings that could benefit educational researchers and practitioners.

CONCLUDING THOUGHTS

Naively, we anticipated that in keeping with researchers' assertions ([Henrick et al., 2016](#); [Lopez Turley & Stevens, 2015](#); [Schuck, 2013](#)) because we entered this partnership with strong relationships and common goals, the planned research would be implemented.

Like other self-study researchers ([Erikson & Young, 2011](#); [Ipkeze et al. 2012](#); [McConn & Mason, 2019](#)), we encountered tensions working in collaboration with school-board partners.

We began our research with a presumption of continuity – in school-board priorities, personnel, and programs. However, our reality was trying to learn to be responsive to continually changing priorities, some of which were a function of changes brought forth by a newly elected provincial government.

In hindsight, the development of our school-board university RPP failed to recognize the pivotal role of the provincial government in determining the direction of publicly funded education ([Wallner, 2012](#)).

Consistent with McConn and Mason's ([2019](#)) findings, this self-study revealed that over time, tensions in our school-board university research partnership could be a catalyst for our productive growth.

CONCLUDING THOUGHTS

We document the applicability of Berry's (2008) tensions as a lens to understand our dilemmas as educational researchers working in a RPP. This study illustrates they are also the tensions of educational researchers working with school-board partners.

Understandings of Berry's (2008) tensions heightened our ability to name, engage in productive discourse about, and navigate the issues and dilemmas that arose in the implementation of this longitudinal funded research program. These understandings may enable other researchers to negotiate, discuss, and navigate issues and dilemmas that arise in their efforts to implement collaborative school-board university research projects.

Consistent with Freire's (2000) assertion, naming our dilemmas enhanced our reflective dialogue, which in turn promoted our conceptual change and affected our actions - this promoted our growth as research partners.

We concur with Mockler (2013) that the acquisition of funding brought a pre-ordained focus that did not meet the evolving needs of our school-board partners, that creativity was requisite to overcoming this gap & this enabled us to move forward with a productive partnership.

In keeping with the assertion of Ko et al., (2022), this self-study details the importance of researchers learning to develop adaptive expertise as they work with school-board partners. We illustrate this may necessitate changing conceptions of the project objectives and the role of researchers in these partnerships.

QUESTIONS & CONTACT

