Enhancing Reflective Dialogue through Shared Understandings of our Tensions as Researchers

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BACKGROUND

SCHOOL BOARD-UNIVERSITY PARTNERSHIPS

o Advocated widely & complex (Henrick, Munoz, & Cobb, 2016; Lopez Turley & Stevens, 2015)

o Factors enhancing their potential for success include:

  o Establishing trusting relationships and working towards common mutually beneficial goals (Lopez Turley & Stevens, 2015)

  o Developing in-depth understandings of the school-board and university contexts, and the complexities of each (Henrick et al, 2016)

o In a similar vein, teaching teachers involves learning to deal with complex contexts, developing relationships, and being responsive to unpredictable dilemmas & situations that arise (Loughran, 2006)

SIX TENSIONS

BERRY (2008)

1. Telling & Promoting Growth through Active Learning
2. Planning & Being Flexibly Responsive
3. Confidence & Uncertainty
4. Action & Intent
5. Safety & Challenge
6. Valuing & Reconstructing Perspectives
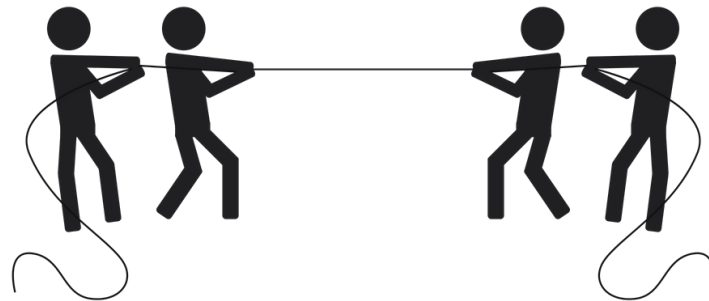
FRAMEWORK

o   Berry (2008) suggested that these six tensions provide a framework to enhance understandings of the issues that define teacher educators' practices

o   Freire (2000) outlined the importance of "naming the world" as a precursor to understanding, engaging in critically reflective dialogue, and working towards change

o   Berry's framework of tensions as a lens to understand and engage in dialogue about the dilemmas encountered by educational researchers in their work with school board partners, has not been examined
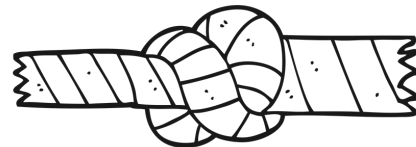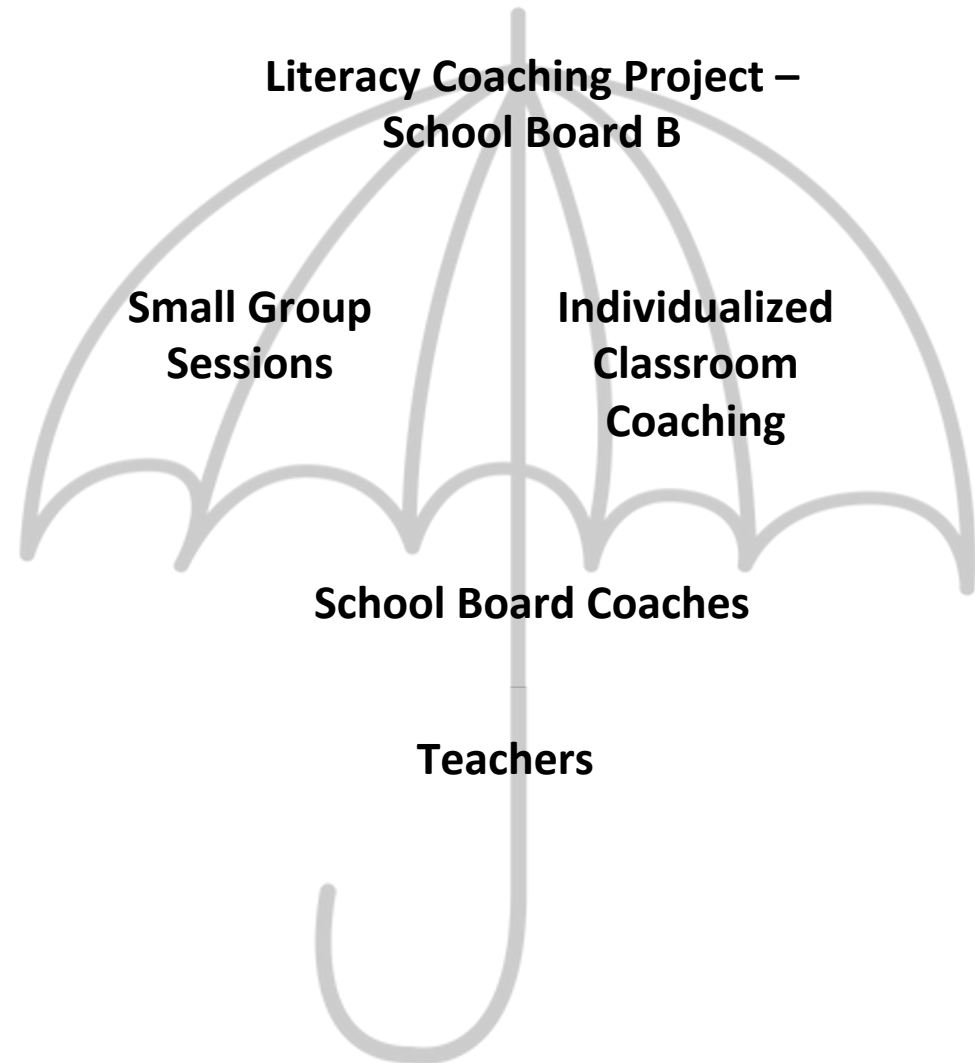
ABOUT THE STUDY

CONTEXT

- This self-study explored the experiences of two teacher educators who attempted to implement a funded research program based on a proposal to engage in a longitudinal exploration of school-board literacy coaching

- Each teacher educator had long-standing school-board partnerships

- "4A" recipients who persevered & after 4 years of "4A", were awarded funding for their proposed 4-year study of literacy coaching developed in partnership with school board personnel

PROPOSED PROGRAM

**Literacy Coaching Project –
School Board A**

**Small Group
Sessions**

**Individualized
Classroom
Coaching**

School Board Coaches

Teachers

**Literacy Coaching Project –
School Board B**

**Small Group
Sessions**

**Individualized
Classroom
Coaching**
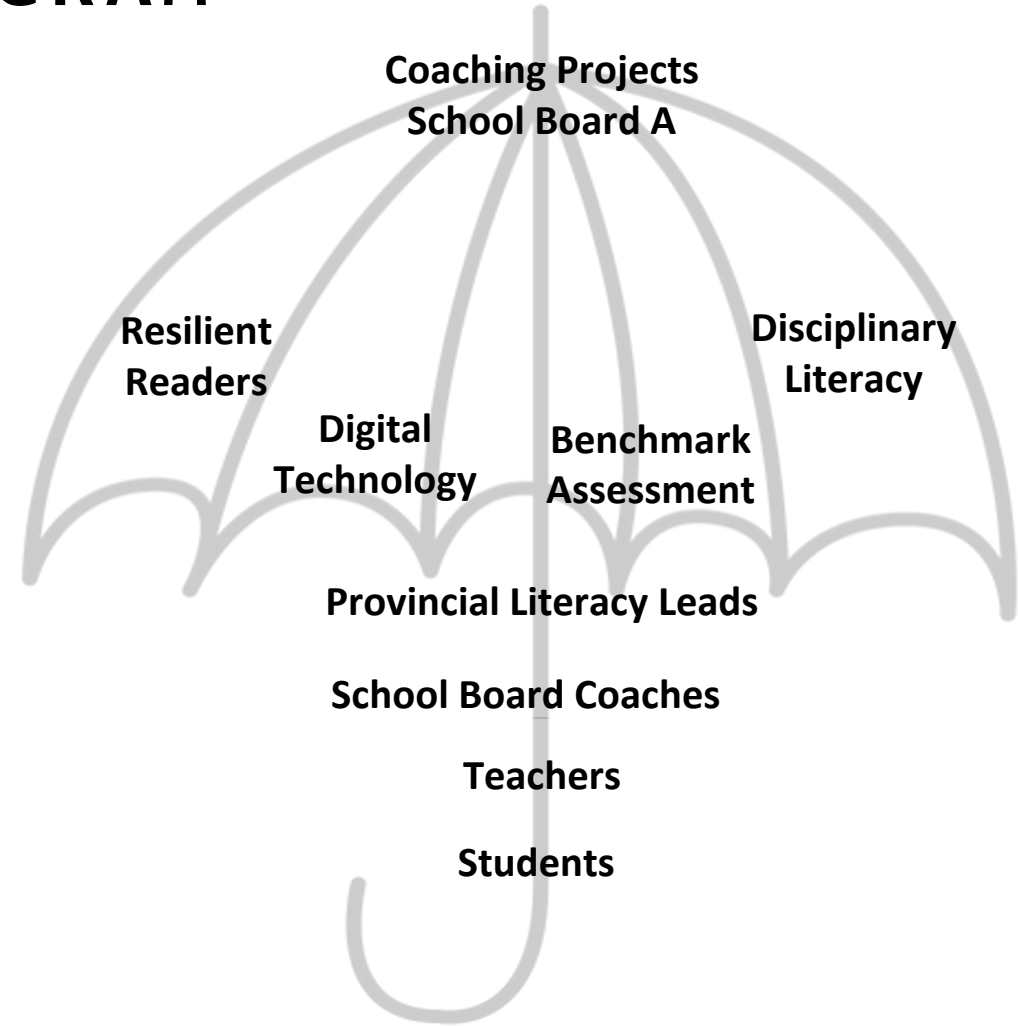
School Board Coaches

Teachers
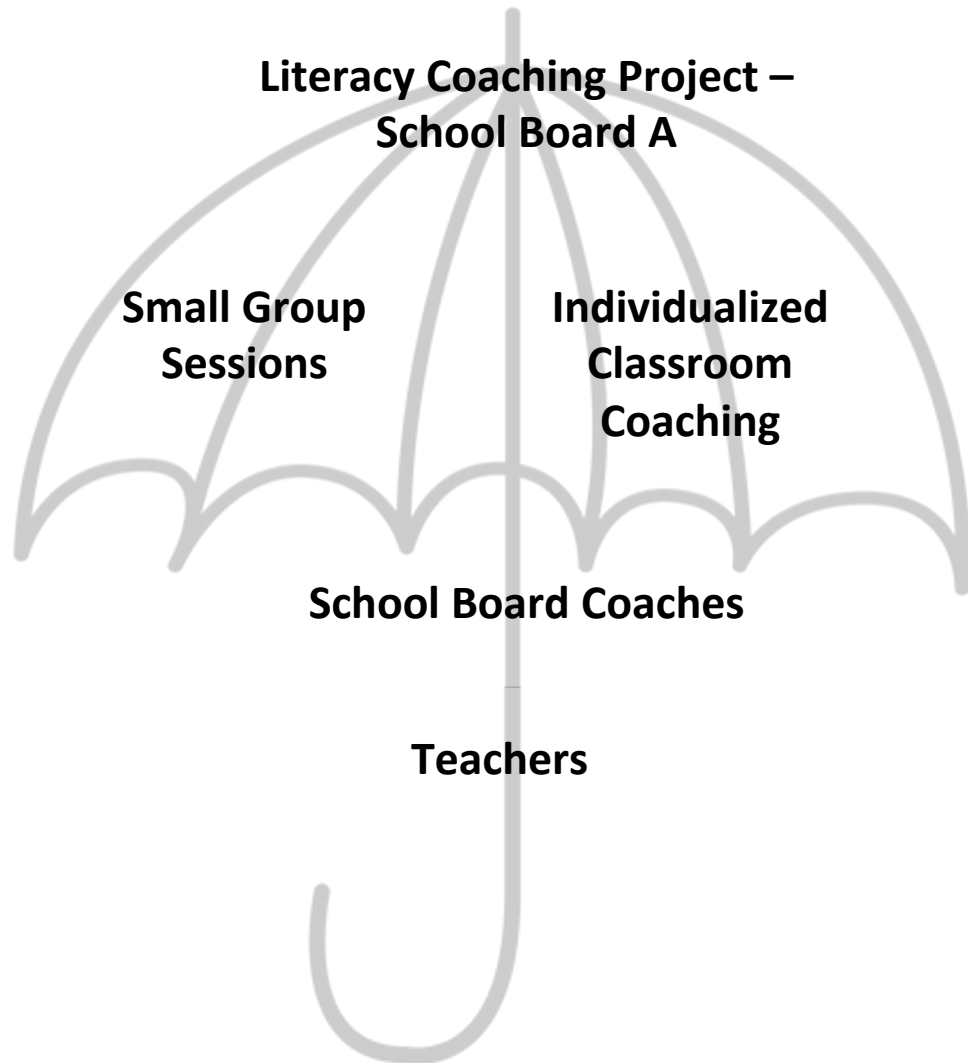
The tides are turning

IMPLEMENTED PROGRAM

- 4-Year Funded project

- Currently in Year 3

- Four different PD/Coaching projects in one school board

- Interconnected levels & participants including MOE PLLs

Coaching Projects
School Board A

Resilient Readers

Digital Technology

Benchmark Assessment

Disciplinary Literacy

Provincial Literacy Leads

School Board Coaches

Teachers

Students

METHODS

- Qualitative Case Study (Yin, 2012)
- S-STEP Participants: 2 Educational Researchers

Research Questions
1. What issues and dilemmas arose in the implementation of this long-term funded research program?
2. How did understanding these dilemmas affect the researchers' reflective dialogue?
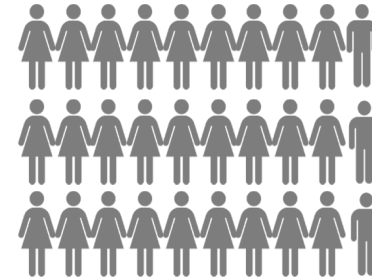
METHODS

Project Context

Two school years of professional learning projects (2016-17 & 2017-18)

Teachers took part in small group PD sessions and/or individualized coaching

Participants

30 Teachers

3 School Board Coaches

3 Provincial Literacy Leads

2 Educational Researchers

METHODS

DATA SOURCES

o   Data were gathered over two years

Email communication

Researchers' reflections

Fieldnotes gathered during school-board research sessions

Transcriptions of five researchers' reflective meetings

METHODS

ANALYSIS

o Coding and categorizing (Creswell, 2012)

o Reviewed all data identifying idea units and looked for emerging patterns

o As we identified dilemmas that were reiteratively encountered, Berry's (2008) tensions resonated

o We then used inductive coding (Creswell, 2012) with Berry's tensions, as a framework for analysis and interpretation

FINDINGS

o   In this self-study, we first illustrate the applicability of the framework of tensions as a lens to understand our dilemmas attempting to be responsive to the unpredictable situations, most of which were attributable to continuously evolving priorities, personnel, needs, and interests of our school board partners

o   We next document how uncovering that as researchers, we navigated Berry's (2008) six interconnected tensions, promoted development of the language to engage in productive reflective dialogue about our shared tensions

Tensions in School-Board & University Educational Research Partnerships

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 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

6. Planning and Being Responsive: Balancing planned directions or experiences with being responsive to unanticipated situations as they arise

FINDINGS

THE TENSIONS

o   We saw Berry's (2008) tensions mirrored in our findings

o   We lacked control over the interest, direction and focus of our school board partners

o   Our interconnected tensions between confidence and uncertainty, planning and being responsive, and between actions and intent, are illustrated in the following quote:

Researcher A: If I look at the progress that we had in the spring; we had such enthusiasm from the former superintendent... because his replacement basically just gave it to their research department and they have stonewalled it since...We know that the former superintendent said they would review ours... he will present it and he will garner support. And he thinks this is exactly what they need...it comes down to what is relevant to them. He saw how it fit within their model for coaching PD and that it was a perfect fit and basically said that he would help it get through...now it's his replacement's call and he doesn't know anything about this...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....

Researcher B: 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 saw that this was going to fill a niche and it was an answer to his problem and he thought it was a perfect fit and he was so keen.

FINDINGS

THE TENSIONS

o Our lack of control over the project revealed our need to negotiate moving beyond safety to accept the challenges in these partnerships

o These included navigating interconnected tensions between planning and being responsive to unpredictable situations, such as unanticipated labour disputes that precluded working with elementary teachers in one board, leadership changes, and continuously evolving school board priorities

Tiffany: I don't know if I'm feeling okay, I'm just resigned to the whole thing because it's so disjointed. So I don't take it personally because I feel like I have no control.

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 base line 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.

~Transcript, Researcher's Meeting Dec 19, 2016

Tiffany: And they were going to coach, right? That was your intention.

Coach: That sort of fell apart. So, I don't know if we're going to go back to that or, or what. We'll see.

Tiffany: Those decisions have to be made soon though, don't they? Here it is the middle of June. I'm not [pressuring], I'm just remarking on it.

Coach: Well I don't know, there's no release money for ESL so, I did this all through a code grant. There's no word on whether or not these code grants are going to be available yet.

~Transcript, Coach Interview June 13, 2017

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, as a consultant with the board, it was stressed that you should use evidence-based practices, that you should share research that supported these practices, that you should evaluate your teaching methods…and that was the role of research. So I think even though we have highlighted and explained and outlined that our initial role is to observe…they still…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

Moving Target

FINDINGS

Our experiences illustrate that Berry's (2008) tensions provided clarity in defining our dilemmas

o   Importantly, following initial data analysis, shared understandings of our tensions **enhanced our reflective dialogue and promoted productive discourse** about our recurring dilemmas

o   For example, our language change was evident in our discussion about whether to move beyond safety to accept the challenge of valuing while attempting to reconstruct the perspective of a school board partner with respect to enhancing teachers' accountability for change. This interaction also illustrates our ever-present tension between confidence and uncertainty.

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 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?

Arlene: Of mentioning those and again, 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 capacity building and real capacity building and real implementation of change?

~Transcript Researcher's Meeting June 27, 2018

CONCLUSIONS

EDUCATIONAL SIGNIFICANCE

o This self-study extends previous research, by illustrating how Berry's (2008) tensions defined and provided clarity in the dilemmas that arose in our school-board research partnerships

o Being able to name our tensions heightened our ability to navigate and engage in productive reflective discourse about these issues and dilemmas

o Importantly, these understandings may likewise enable other researchers to negotiate dilemmas that arise in school-board research projects

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