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ST. STEPHEN'S COLLEGE

TEACHERS' EXPERIENCES OF CONGRUENCE AND ALIVENESS

by

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I dedicate this to my family with thanks for their support.

## **ABSTRACT**

This phenomenological investigation asked “What are teachers’ lived experiences of congruence and aliveness in the workplace?” Congruence is about living in a way that is respectful and open to self and to others while acknowledging the current context and one’s own history. This study sought to understand four teachers’ experiences of feeling alive in their jobs and what impeded or facilitated this experience. In-depth interviews were analysed using van Manen (2006) and Langdrige’s (2007) method of discovering the thematic aspects of a phenomenon. Four themes were identified to contribute to teachers’ positive experience of congruence and aliveness: struggling and striving, acknowledgment, engagement and viewing teaching as a calling. The study revealed that congruence is not a state one achieves but rather a dynamic process of constant striving toward alignment. When teachers find their own congruence, they actually feel more enlivened and stay in the profession. Implications for the teaching profession, administrators and the educational settings are discussed.

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## **Introduction**

Teaching was my first profession, and while on the job, I often observed inconsistency between the vision and philosophy provided by educational officials and what was expected and provided on a daily basis. I noted, in other words, a lack of congruence in that professional environment. It was difficult for me to deal with this perceived lack; my energy was impacted, and I came to believe that something in the system needed to be “fixed” so that I could flourish in it. I also became curious about how one can respond effectively to such a system without losing oneself. These preliminary questions prompted me to undertake a new scholarly venture.

This thesis, which presents the final results of my study, will explore teachers’ lived experience of congruence in the workplace. Teachers who perceived the challenges and sources of excitement in their profession as moving them towards personal and professional growth may experience more congruence and aliveness. One contribution of this study is that it will reveal congruence to be a dynamic process of struggling and striving to realign. Congruence is not a state that one attains, but rather a response in the here-and-now that acknowledges self and others within the context and that strives to heal or rebind these connections (Lee 2002b). The context of teaching is multifaceted and teachers and administrators may benefit from understanding the process of congruence that could support them with their desire to grow, belong and feel enlivened through their careers. In order to offer proper context for a study of this important, and very personal, concept, I will begin by telling stories of congruence that I have observed prior to this study. These observations are a collection of my own personal experiences of congruence as well as some from friends and colleagues.



My interest in congruence first emerged in 1997, when I began my training in Integrative Body Psychotherapy. One instructor brought to my attention that in any relationship where a difficulty arises, one needs first to sort out one's own internal psychological experience, and then to reconnect with the other person. This awareness felt like an epiphany, since I was brought up to avoid conflict and to disconnect from others when experiencing tension in relationships. After this insight, I began practicing more of that quality of congruence with myself and with others; as a result, I experienced more of my own flow of aliveness and connectedness to self and to others. Another instructor brought to my attention that I needed to learn containment. What she meant was that even when one experiences passion and excitement, one needs not to leak out that energy but to maintain that flow of vital energy to connect more deeply with one's inner experience.

I have found myself, over the years, in different work environments where I have observed and heard different stories in which congruence was present or absent. People spend a great amount of their life time at work. Furthermore, people are precious resources, and most organisations invest time and money towards their development. People are important assets since they are an important component of the production capacity of any organisation.

As I listened to numerous stories, I observed that when congruence is absent people experience personal distress as well as social and occupational impairment. As a result, they experience a sense of disconnectedness from self, others and the context. Hence, their production capacity within the organization is compromised. Understanding

the phenomenon of congruence may help enhance workers' psychological well-being as well as their contributions in the work place.

### **My Initial Observations of Congruence**

In this section, I will illustrate different stories in which congruence is either absent or present, and in which we can sense some underlying meaning one may experience internally and in relation to others, the context, and one's need to belong and be creative.

The first aspect of incongruence that I noticed in people's stories prior to beginning this study was a contrast between the values one expresses and the manner in which one behaves. This kind of incongruence seemed to impact me and my coworkers in a former work environment. As an illustration, I would like to summarize a passage I wrote about this experience in a previous paper.

It wasn't long before I noticed that our supervisor wasn't consistent or congruent with her values and behaviours. Some days, she was a very supportive mentor and could facilitate our process in a way that nurtured our confidence and released our creativity, which we knew was what she valued most. Other days, she approached us in ways that we perceived to be condescending and contemptuous. It was as if sometimes we were humans with whom she would engage in a process, and sometimes we were machines that had to produce, no matter what, according to certain standards and timelines. What I perceived to be inconsistent and incongruent behaviour seemed to create a lack of trust and a lowering of spirits within our work environment.

Following this experience, I came to believe that sometimes there is a very thin but tenacious layer that lies between people's awareness and their ability to behave congruently with what they know and value.

A second example, as I continued to explore people's experience of congruence, is what happens when the expressed values and vision of an organization do not match its daily communications and actions. Working in such context appears to put people in a bind: either way, they won't succeed. This seems to create personal and interpersonal distress and heated emotions. And so, like-minded groups begin forming and impact the cohesiveness and effectiveness of the organization. Also, relating only to like-minded people can disconnect one individual from his or her essence. A third kind of incongruence that has been related to me occurs when someone who is extremely introverted experiences incongruence with her personality traits and the expectations of the workplace in terms of participating in collegial interactions with coworkers. One could say that her temperament does not fit the work environment. Moreover, it may appear to be incongruent for this person to interact more with her colleagues if that action does not fit her personality. And yet, if she were to sit with the tension created by the incongruence and go more in depth within (the intrapsychic aspect of congruence), the incongruence felt could take on a new level of meaning. She might tap into her *universal spiritual longing* (Satir et al., 1991 & Tillich 1961) to connect with people in the workplace, where a significant amount of time, energy and resources is invested. In essence, the incongruence (tension) experienced is perhaps a need to enhance her ability to reach out and connect more deeply with others in the context in which she works.

Yet a fourth dimension of incongruence that people have explored when experiencing the tension of their story is not paying attention to calls or insights. By this I mean that one might begin feeling disenchanted with one's work situation, consequently displaying criticism, defensiveness, blaming, withdrawal, and contempt. The underlying meaning of this disenchantment might be a profound longing and desire to unfold more fully toward a new purpose where one connects with one's natural creative energy.

A fifth observation of the lack of congruence became apparent as I delved into these stories. I noticed how a person's aliveness would either contract or expand relative to whether he or she experienced congruence or incongruence. What I mean by aliveness is an energetic experience of connectedness with body, mind, and heart (spirit, soul). This quality of attunement (alignment) helps a person to respond to others and to a contextual situation from a place of connectedness. The more I attended to people's stories and the more they delved into their narrative and body-felt experience of contraction, the more they tapped into new underlying core meanings. Tracking the energetic contraction felt in the body and attending to it often led people to new awareness and insights about their experience of incongruence; this seemed to move them back to congruence with self, others, and their context.

### **Definition of Congruence**

Two terms that need to be defined to carry out my research project are *congruence* and *aliveness*. I take my conceptual definition of congruence from Lee (2008). I take my definition of aliveness, which represents a more somatic aspect of congruence, from Rosenberg, Rand & Asay (1991).

Lee and Rosenberg's understanding of congruence is highly relevant and significant for a research project that includes clinical, theological and transpersonal aspects of study. This is Lee's (2008) definition:

Congruence . . . It involves the four A's of attending, awareness, acknowledgment, and alignment. Congruence leads to greater attunement to self, others, and spirit. It creates an openness and fluidity in the way one attends to people and situations. Congruence is therefore the alignment of one's inner experience with how one lives in the world. It is living in awareness with the depths and promptings of one's spirit. In a broader sense, congruence means the acknowledgment of self, others, and one's history (p.11-12).

Fundamental to the concept of congruence is a culture of care for the self. Lee, following Satir, defines "self" as "life force, soul, spirit, core essence" (Satir et al., 1991, quoted in Lee 2002a, p.221). It is important to note that there is an energetic aspect to self in this definition – an aspect that is revealed in Rosenberg et al.'s (1991) definition of aliveness, a somatic aspect of congruence:

In Integrative Body Psychotherapy we believe that the aliveness in the body, the flow of energy, is the sense of Self. The Self is a nonverbal sense of well-being, continuity, and identity in the body, plus the verbal structure and cognitive process one learns. Our goal in therapy is to find that sense (p. 96).

These definitions of congruence and aliveness will be used as a theoretical framework for my inquiry. I will analyze my findings against the theoretical assumptions behind these constructs to see if they confirm or deviate from these pre-suppositions.

Since congruence is ultimately about relatedness, I would like to emphasize Rand and Fewster's (<http://drrandbodymindtherapy.com/boundaries.html>) developmental perspective on the matter. They believe that

traditionally a person's development has been perceived as stages to grow out of. First, a child bonds with a parent; then a child learns to separate. These two transpersonal and body-centered therapists believe that our lifelong development task is not about bonding and separating from one's parents but about the relatedness of a person with one's core self and others as a fundamental quest in our human journey. This lifelong pursuit of relatedness is part of the core construct of congruence.

### **Theological Theme**

My theological theme relates to connectedness with self, others, one's context, and the life force, as opposed to feelings of alienation (Satir & al., 1991). In that same line of thought, Tillich (1959, 1961) believes that human beings in nature possess a good essence. And yet, this theologian asserts that it is part of human nature to experience estrangement from that essence – that is, from everything we were meant to become. The religious and spiritual quest involves reuniting all parts of our being.

For this purpose, I am both curious and excited to delve into the following questions: How does one's awareness of self, of one's interaction with others and of what impacts one's aliveness help one feel and behave with a sense of congruence and wholeness? When one acknowledges the different parts of their being, does one have a better sense of connectedness and psychological well-being? When one practices congruence with oneself and others in the workplace, does this improve the dynamics with oneself and others, and provide a sense of belonging? When one practices

congruence in the workplace, does one experience more connection with one's natural flow of aliveness?

## Chapter One: Literature Review

In this chapter, I will elaborate on the concept of congruence, as articulated by Lee (2008) and Satir (et al., 1991), which will inform this study. In order to do so, I will review literature on the somatic, spiritual and theological aspects of congruence. As well, I will examine how Wilhelm Reich and Carl Roger addressed the importance of the body in the integration of a whole person. Furthermore, research on other theoretical perspectives on congruence in the work place will be briefly reviewed so as to acknowledge what else has been accomplished before properly entering this study.

### The Theological Significance of “Congruence”

Lee (2002b) emphasizes the parallels that exist between the concept of congruence implicit in Satir and the understanding of salvation in Paul Tillich’s theological philosophy. Tillich speaks of *salvation* in his religious and philosophical construct of the human being. His understanding of the human being rests on the following notions: “*essence and existence, individuation and participation, and destiny and freedom*” (p. 57). Lee (2008) further defines Satir’s three dimensions of congruence – *interpersonal intrapsychic* and *spiritual-universal yearning* – and creates a new dimension -- *intergenerational* (Lee, 2009, 2012). Satir speaks of *restoring* the individual into one integrated person in connection with self, others, and the life force. Both Satir and Tillich have a construct of the human being that is systemic. They regard the human being as a whole with different interacting parts. When one part of the whole person is not attended to, the person becomes alienated and disconnected. Tillich (1963, cited in



Lee, 2002, p. 75) emphasizes that “the whole depends on a ‘central self’ that is the seat of consciousness which converses with and manages the various parts of personality.”

Tillich (1996) does not believe in salvation only after death. He believes that “the New Being represents the living manifestation of humanity’s ‘essential truth’ as the integration with self, with each other and with the depth of one’s being, a ‘manifestation of the divine’ in the world” (p. 51).

Lee (2008) believes that congruence reconnects into a whole element in the intrapsychic, interpersonal, universal-spiritual and inter-generational dimensions. In the intrapsychic dimension, one needs to be aware of one’s beliefs, thinking, feelings, and expectations that impact one’s perception of self, others, the context, and trust in the world and life. One’s intrapsychic state will impact how one interacts with others.

Satir (Satir et al., 1991, quoted in Lee, 2002, p. 65) has constructed four aspects of communication that reflect dysfunctional patterns of communication. The first is “blaming,” which involves protecting oneself to the detriment of one’s relationship with others. Second, “placating” involves surrendering to the other and disconnecting with self. The third stance is “super-reasonable,” which involves denying the experience of the self and others and focusing only on the context. The fourth stance is “irrelevant,” in which one acts as if everything is fine with the self, others, and the context, lacking connection with all dimensions of human being. More recently, Lee (2008) has expanded the “irrelevant” stance of communication to “avoidant,” which includes the withdrawal and irrelevant patterns. On the other hand, Lee emphasizes that “congruent communication, or straight communication, reflects a match between verbal and non-verbal messages, and a consonance in word, affect and meaning. Congruence is a choice

at a conscious level based on awareness, acknowledgment, and acceptance of self, other, and context (Satir et al., 1991; Lee, 2008). These communication aspects are important for my research project since ongoing interaction in the workplace affects the self in relation with others, the context, and one's aliveness. The four aspects of incongruent communication indicate a loss of connectedness with some or all aspects of a person's life, and therefore, a loss of congruence.

### **Congruence and Somatic Energy**

Fernald (2000) wrote an article entitled "Carl Rogers: Body-Centered Counselor." In his article, he emphasizes the similarities between Carl Rogers and Wilhelm Reich, who is known as the father of body-oriented psychotherapy, and his belief that Rogers was a body-centered therapist. In some of Carl Rogers's work, quoted in Fernald's article, he calls human beings the *human organism*. Carl Rogers believed that we human beings are a living whole organism. He believed that when we tap into the living organism, we reconnect with the source of the natural movement that propels us toward healthy actualization. Rogers also believed that the self is integral to what he called organismic experiencing. My understanding of phenomenology is that I will tap into the organismic experiencing of some of my interviewees when attending to their lived experience with empathy, genuineness, positive unconditional regard, and accurate mirroring.

### **Congruence in the Workplace**

As noted previously in this section, when a literature search on congruence and the work place was undertaken, nothing was found on the construct of congruence from

the perspective of growth, change and transformation as conceptualised by Satir and Lee. It would appear that congruence as a process has not been studied in the context of work. On the other hand, congruence from another theoretical perspective has been researched for decades. Even if these theoretical approaches are not relevant to this study, it is important to acknowledge their existence.

Indeed, an abundance of literature examining congruence in terms of the fit between one's personality type and environment type has been published (Gottfredson & Holland, 1990). Much of the research on congruence in the last fifty years has focused on demonstrating the relationship between personality type and environment type and how this relates to "satisfaction, stability and achievements" in the workplace (Meir, 1993, p. 70). Hewlin (2003) wrote an article about how our organizations reward a façade of conformity, which is incongruent with what one knows to be truth and how one wants to appear. Hewlin (2003) emphasises that "psychological and emotional distresses are outcomes to façade reaction" (p.1).

Several authors quoted in Hewlin (2003) concluded that dissonance between felt and expressed emotions created emotional exhaustion as well as psychological and emotional distress. For instance, when people experience incongruence between who they are and who they perceive they need to be, they experience fear, anxiety and threat. In that perspective, several authors such as Covey (2004), Zand (1997), and Bushe (2001) wrote books about the workplace for a more general audience. In their own style and in plain language, they each emphasize that knowing oneself from within is the cornerstone of clear relationships and well-being in the workplace.

It is interesting to note, before conducting this study, that congruence in the workplace seems to have been studied mainly from the perspective of personality and job-fit. On the other hand, it is noteworthy that several books have been written for a more general audience showing that when there is dissonance between the current experience of an employee and how that person perceives that he or she ought to feel, the result is distress. My hope is that the literature on the somatic, spiritual and theological aspect of congruence as well as the four dimensions and communication aspects will be informative when conducting the study. In some respects, interviewing teachers about the meaning they give to their experiences of congruence and aliveness is a creative and exploratory endeavor and I am very curious as to where it will lead.

### **Change and Growth in the Workplace: Other Theories and Constructs**

Prior to this study, as mentioned earlier in this section, very little literature was found on congruence in the workplace from a perspective of change and growth. On the other hand, when the qualitative thematic analysis was completed, four themes were revealed which directed me to other sources of literature. Glesne (2006) emphasizes that data collection suggests new directions for other relevant sources of literature, and that throughout the study, new literature may be integrated as needed. Based on the lack of literature on congruence and teachers, interviewing teachers about the meaning they give to their experiences of congruence and aliveness was a creative and exploratory endeavor.

## **Chapter Two: Methodology**

### **Research Question**

My interest in congruence has continued to grow even though I'm not a school teacher anymore. Indeed, my question is, "What are teachers' lived experiences of aliveness and congruence in the workplace?" In using phenomenology as a methodology, my intention was to tap into the meaning teachers give to their life stories in relation to the phenomenon of congruence, to understand how they construct their sense of self and how their experience of congruence is hindered or enhanced in the social, cultural, ideological, and historical context in which they are immersed. My theological theme, which has psycho-spiritual relevance, is how one is supported in moving toward connectedness with self, others, one's flow of energy, the cosmos, and the context of the workplace.

### **Philosophical Framework**

Phenomenology, as a methodology, is suitable for addressing my research question given that I am interested in knowing people's lived experience and the common meanings they attribute to their description of congruence in the workplace. Indeed, Todres & Holloway (2006) emphasizes that in a phenomenological description we do not focus on what is, but on the meaning people give to their life experience in relation to a phenomenon (p. 230). Moreover, they suggest that the phenomenological approach offers both a philosophical and methodological framework.

Phenomenology, which comes from the philosophical research tradition, emerged in the early twentieth century. Todres & Holloway (2006) emphasize that "the promise of

phenomenology was that human beings could be understood ‘from inside’ their subjective experience, which could not be adequately replaced by any external analysis or explanation” (p. 224). The point of this approach is to humanize our understanding of a phenomenon. This is done by asking interviewees if they have had an experience of the phenomenon studied, how and in what context it happened, and what it was like for them.

Husserl, particularly, was first credited as a significant founder and “built on earlier philosophers who wished to describe human experience as the valid starting point of philosophy” (Todres & Holloway, 2006, p. 224). In order to understand and describe the participants’ lived experience of a phenomenon, some key concepts need be considered. These will be covered in the following section.

### **Key Concept 1: Essential Structure**

Phenomenological research begins by collecting examples of a phenomenon in everyday life. Husserl called these life experiences “the lifeworld”, and other phenomenologists speak of “lived experience” (van Manen 2006). When phenomenologists present their findings, they look for common themes among cases studied that are typical of a certain context. The term for this is “essential structure”. In my research, as stated before, I had a small pool of four participants. For that reason, I do not propose to uncover the essential structure of teachers’ experiences of the phenomena of congruence. In order to reveal the essential structure of the phenomenon of teachers’ experience of congruence, further research would need to be conducted with a larger pool of participants. Van Manen (2006) argues that the goal of phenomenological research is “the fulfillment of our human nature: to become more who we are” (p. 12). While I was

not proposing to find the essential structure, I engaged with the data through careful listening and imagining. The hope is that the findings may contribute to teachers' fulfillment of their human nature and that it will shed light on who they are.

According to van Manen (2006) and Romanyshyn (2007), discovering the essence is a caring act of imagining the properties, qualities, differences and sameness of a phenomena. Van Manen (2006) says that we must ask for "...what something is and without which it would no longer be what it is" (p.xv). Van Manen (2006) also argues that, "We want to know that which is most essential to being" (p.5). While writing the results and discussion chapters, I recalled that I wrestled with the sameness and differences of the essence of the four themes that I discovered. Indeed, finding the essence of the four themes was a caring act. I needed to tolerate and trust the experience of feeling ambiguity and anxiety when seeing all the parts and not seeing the whole.

### **Key Concept 2: Bracketing**

Another important concept in phenomenological research is "bracketing", which means suspending one's preconceptions so that a phenomenon may be studied with "fresh eyes". I became curious about the phenomenon of congruence when I was working as a teacher in different capacities. Indeed, in my career as a teacher, I struggled with what I used to perceive as a lack of congruence within the institution and among leaders in schools. Therefore, I embarked on this research with what Husserl (quoted in Langdrige, 2007) calls the "natural attitude". The natural attitude is manifested when we live our lives taking for granted our assumptions and worldview without being

critical. Van Manen (2006) says that if we try to “...ignore what we already know we may find that our presuppositions persistently creep back into our reflection” (p.47).

For that reason, van Manen (2006) emphasizes that it is “better to make explicit our understanding, beliefs, biases, assumption, presupposition and theories” (p.47). Accordingly, Langdrige (2007) argues that in phenomenology, we attempt to be aware and critical of our own assumptions. In addition, as we become aware of these assumptions, we continue our reflection in the hope that different perspectives and phenomena that were initially hidden by the natural attitude will be revealed. Langdrige asserts that this kind of awareness and attentiveness, combined with conversation with peers about our analysis, augments the vigor of our comprehension and helps us discover the essence of a phenomenon. For that reason I will examine two approaches that were helpful in acknowledging my bias in this particular study.

**Acknowledging bias: enmeshment and soul work.** When I was in the process of analysing the essences of my participants’ lived experience, I recalled at one point feeling enmeshed in the story. I couldn’t see beyond my own experience of congruence as a teacher. When I became aware of my biases, I acknowledged them and accepted my struggle with not seeing the hidden phenomena behind my natural attitude. Most importantly, I slowed down the process and I consulted with peers.

Romanyshyn (2007) describes phenomenological research as “soul work”, since the aim is to return to what we know when we reconnect to the nature of what is hidden behind our daily existence. He speaks of the mourning we suffer when we can’t name what is hidden behind our everyday assumptions. He says that “phenomenology begins with our entanglement with the perceptual world, the world that makes sense as we sense



it” (p.88). My enmeshment with my participants’ experiences did trigger a sense of mourning and anxiety because I felt a gap between their account of “what is” and my ability to imagine and name the essence behind it.

Romanyshyn (2007) says that as we rediscover how to look mindfully at the world in which we are entwined, we come “to know with awareness those bonds that tie us to our existence” (p.88). Langdrige (2007) says that the vital goal of phenomenology is “...the fulfillment of our human nature: to become more who we are...” (p. 12).

Therefore, as I was attending to my natural attitude, I also intended to let my soul reveal other images. And yet both van Manen and Romanyshyn speak in their own way of the challenge of honoring the essence of experiences when it comes to describing it with language. With this awareness in mind, I have tried to elucidate, to the best of my capacity, the teachers’ lived experiences of congruence.

**Acknowledging bias: listening to the somatic experience.** Another of my biases is that part of careful listening is attending to the participants’ body and observable verbal and non-verbal somatic experiences. Therefore, as stated in my introduction, I paid attention during the interviews to my participants’ somatic experiences. Indeed, Kurtz (1985) says, “I don’t trust the words as much as I trust what I see and hear. So we borrow that reliance on the body as an expression of mental life.” (p.4). Martin Buber (1958), the existential philosopher and early intersubjective theorist, quoted in Resnick (2004), says that “each individual ‘bodies forth’ the other. Whether one evokes the loving-other or the withdrawn-other often depends more on non-verbal cues than on words” (p. 57). Resnick (2004) says that if words and body language do not correspond to each other, one must be informed by what the nonverbal message is communicating. Rogers (1961, p. 130, quoted

in Fernald, 2000) says that transformation always involves the body, having “obvious physical concomitants”. Some of the physical loosening can be “moistness in the eyes, tears, sobbing, sighs, and muscular relaxation” (p. 174). In my interviews, I attended to both the loosening and the contraction that the body conveys, and I have tried to discern when and if it was appropriate to mirror what I observed in the here and now.

To repeat, the phenomenological approach suited my research project because I was interested in people’s inner experience of congruence and the meaning they give to it. Phenomenology offers an appropriate philosophical and methodological framework.

## **Method**

### **Sample Selection**

The teachers in my sample work at elementary and junior high schools. Given that I have worked most of my career in educational institutions, I have a good understanding of the overall aspects of the organization. Therefore, I found the four participants through communicating and emailing previous colleagues who are involved in different capacities within the educational system. These colleagues were able to suggest some names of teachers who were interested in being interviewed for this research. These potential participants were contacted and given a brief introduction to the study. Over the phone, we agreed that I would give them a call in a few days to confirm whether they were still interested. When I got a commitment from them we agreed on a time to do the interview.

**Sample characteristics.** Amber is a female with 26 years of teaching experiences and is 59 years of age. She teaches Grade 3 half time and counsels students for the remainder of her time. She is Caucasian, and English is her first language. She is teaching

in a public school in the Edmonton area of Alberta. Gilles is a male with 23 years of teaching experience and is 46 years of age. He teaches science in a public junior high school in the Edmonton area of Alberta. He is Caucasian and French is his first language. Renée is a female with 19 years of experience, and is 51 years of age. She has been teaching Grade 1 for several years in a Catholic school in the Edmonton area of Alberta. She is Caucasian, and her first language is French. Victoria is a female with 12 years of teaching experience and is 60 years of age. She teaches French in a junior high school in the Edmonton area of Alberta. She is Caucasian, and her first language is French. In terms of ethical issues, the ethical principles of St. Stephen's Theological College were followed. The project description, including all questionnaires, was reviewed and approved by St. Stephen's College's Ethics Committee. Participants, as mentioned previously, were fully briefed prior to their participation and were required to give informed consent as to the nature of the project. Participation was completely voluntary, and participants were free to withdraw at any time.

Several steps were necessary for completing this qualitative inquiry. The first step was to develop an interview schedule that brings forth experiences of congruence and aliveness within teachers' stories that match the definition I have offered in this study. The interview schedule can be found in Appendix B. For this phenomenological inquiry, it was imperative to compose the questions in such a way that they elicit peoples' lived experience and the meaning they give to it. Secondly, the questions were constructed to allow participants to narrate their own accounts so that, ideally, authentic ideologies around the cultural, economic, and historical context would come forth without prompting. For that purpose, I conducted some trial interviews with friends and

colleagues to test out my research question. When I began asking what excited them about their work and what took away from their excitement, vivid accounts of congruence came forth quite easily.

Finally, I conducted four in-depth interviews that lasted between 55 and 90 minutes per participant. The interviews were conducted in English. The four interviews were located in an educational institution in a counselling room. Part of the data that I was examining was the non-verbal expression of the participants. Therefore, I recorded the participants' voices and videotaped the interviews. This material has been securely stored as per ethics requirements.

**Transcription.** The interviews, as stated earlier, were transcribed by someone who was hired so as to augment the accuracy of the transcription, as English is not my first language. A contract was signed with this person to ensure the confidentiality of the participants. Following the interviews, it became clearer that I wanted to follow van Manen's (2006) three methods of approaching the data. Van Manen recommends that we select two methods from among the three that he offers (the wholistic reading approach, the selective approach and the detailed reading approach). I selected the wholistic reading approach and the detailed reading approach. In the following, I will describe the step-by-step process that was taken to analyse the data.

### **Wholistic Reading and Listening**

I began the analyses of the interviews by doing wholistic reading. In this first step, for each interview, I read the transcription of the interview and listened to each recording. The aim, at this stage, was to formulate one sentence that would capture the text as a

whole. I did this for each interview. As I listened over and over to each interview, my intention was to stay close to the participants' words and to embody their essence. Although I was not successful at formulating one sentence, I narrated one wholistic paragraph that captured the essence of each interview – that is, one that synthesized in simple sentences the main attributes of the speaker's lived experiences. Most importantly, this procedure (modified from wholistic sentence to wholistic paragraph) from van Manen (2006) helped me to begin embodying the data. At this stage, I was looking at the data from the perspective of looking at the whole, which is important in phenomenology (van Manen 2006). The following is an example of a wholistic paragraph taken from interview one. Furthermore, a description of the other wholistic paragraphs may be found in Appendix C of this document.

Table 1

*Example of a Wholistic Paragraph from Interview 1*

Once a teacher always a teacher. I felt *a call* to be a teacher as a young child. When I turned 40 and my son 19, I felt an eminent *pulse* that time had come for me to complete my B.Ed. I soon moved to another province and I began my venture towards what I experience as a *vocation*, "teaching."

I keep being fascinated and transformed in my relationship with "these hormonal strange creatures" that are named teenagers. One aspect of my teaching that excites me is the fact that students are at a *significant life transition*. Therefore it is with *mindfulness that I am partaking in my student's becoming*.

Some days, I feel I am like an actor and I have to put on an act to

motivate and mobilise the kids. And yet soon after I begin my show, I notice that this is *who I am, a spirited mentor in reciprocal respectful relationship*.

### **Detailed Reading Approach**

Secondly, I proceeded to undertake a detailed reading approach. As mentioned before, I did not write the transcription of the interviews. For that reason, as a second step in the analysis, the detailed reading approach was favoured. First, I read the transcript of each interview several times. The purpose of this step was to stay close to the participant's words as long as possible. Therefore, I read the transcript carefully and rewrote what each sentence or sentence cluster was describing. I purposely rewrote in detail what the participant was describing but without the repetitions and expressions. I stayed very close to the words of the participants so as to appropriate the stories myself. While undertaking the detailed reading approach, I moved away from trying to capture the whole, and my perspective was drawn more towards the different parts.

Table 2

*Example of the Detailed Reading Approach*

Meaning Units	Transcript
<p data-bbox="391 646 821 747">1. I feel that the interview is a valuable way of teaching others.</p> <p data-bbox="391 940 740 1010">2. Sharing about my teaching is a good thing</p> <p data-bbox="391 1121 740 1190">3. Sharing about my teaching is a good thing</p> <p data-bbox="391 1780 821 1850">4. I love discussion in the classroom.</p> <p data-bbox="483 1854 821 1883">5. I like when a student is</p>	<p data-bbox="868 499 1487 642"><b>J1:</b> So Yvonne, I'm just wondering how you're feeling right now knowing that we're going to be doing an interview about your teaching.</p> <p data-bbox="868 684 1511 827"><b>V1:</b> Um, I have no problem. I feel that if no one ever shares anything about their teaching that you're missing out on an opportunity to teach someone.</p> <p data-bbox="868 869 1403 938"><b>J2:</b> Ah, okay. So you see that as a contribution.</p> <p data-bbox="966 980 1235 1010"><b>V2:</b> As a good thing.</p> <p data-bbox="966 1052 1386 1081"><b>J3:</b> Okay, as a good thing. Okay.</p> <p data-bbox="966 1123 1235 1152"><b>V3:</b> As a good thing.</p> <p data-bbox="868 1194 1500 1373"><b>J4:</b> Okay. So I'm going to ask you to just take a moment and just think of a time in your teaching when you feel really energized, really excited, very motivated, you feel lots of vitality. Just take a moment to think about that.</p> <p data-bbox="966 1415 1101 1444"><b>V4:</b> Okay.</p> <p data-bbox="966 1486 1289 1516"><b>J5:</b> You have a moment?</p> <p data-bbox="966 1558 1081 1587"><b>V5:</b> Yes.</p> <p data-bbox="966 1629 1091 1659"><b>J6:</b> Okay.</p> <p data-bbox="868 1701 1507 1883"><b>V6:</b> I uh, I like discussions in the classroom. I love discussions, but I like it when it seems that a student has had an epiphany. You know, I've said something and all of a sudden I see a hand go up and it's not a student that</p>

<p>having an epiphany</p> <p>6. Sometime, I get afraid that a student might not get the right answer because in my heart, I want him to succeed.</p>	<p>usually gives an answer or asks a question or answers or whatever and puts his hand up and sometimes I'm afraid he's not going to give the right answer because I want it to be right for him. And I think when a student can come up with something that surprises me. Uh, I like that. I like that.</p>
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Writing the four wholistic paragraphs and then doing the detailed reading allowed me to look both at the whole and at the parts. This back-and-forth process is very important in phenomenological research.

**Meaning clusters.** In this phase I read over and over all the data that I had captured from the detailed reading. I printed two copies of the detailed reading document. Next, I sat in a big room and had on the floor a large piece of paper that was about one meter by two meters. I had a pair of scissors, and as I read through the detailed reading document, I began to cut sentences or sentence clusters to regroup them on the large paper. Gradually, as I regrouped the data on the paper, I created titles that became meaning clusters. I wrote these titles with a pencil so that I could easily change the title of the meaning clusters. I played with this collage for a while before gluing on the paper the sentences that were grouped under different meaning clusters. It was a fluid process of interacting with the data that was engaging me with the whole and the parts.

In creating this collage, I intended to stay close to the participants' words. For that reason, in this phase, each meaning cluster was formulated in the form of an "I" statement as per Greg Madison (2005). For example: "I take too much upon myself; I have grown over years of experiences and my life is better and easier." One collage was completed for each participant. Every time one collage was finished, I transcribed the



different meaning clusters of each participant to a word document. Table 2 presents an example of what this step looks like when it is categorized.

Table 3

*Example of Meaning Clusters from Interview 2*

<p><b>R2.1 I take too much upon myself.</b></p> <p>R44.1: Maybe I was too self-centered. I don't know but I took too much upon myself.</p> <p>R45: When a child was unhappy in school I thought I was responsible. Instead of thinking about all the other children being happy, or that maybe nobody likes school in his family or that he may have a learning disability. Moreover, maybe he did not sleep well.</p> <p>R46: I realize now that there are many other factors and that I was just a very, very tiny part of it. And I used to take things much too personally and not only in school. It was probably like that in my life in general.</p> <p>R47.1: When I used to think I was responsible.</p>
<p><b>R2.2 I have grown over years of experiences and life is better and easier.</b></p> <p>R41.1: I have grown these last five and six years.</p> <p>R42.1: It feels good. It feels so much better to be able to face things and say: "C'est pas de ma faute". I might have a part but it is not a catastrophe and it is not the end of the world. I am able to look at the situation with more objectivity. Life is so much better, it is easier. It makes such a big difference. It is a big relief. It is a relief.</p> <p>R43.1: I have felt much better in the last five and six years.</p>

**Meaning unit generative themes for each interview.** At this stage of the analysis, I felt confident in moving away from the participants' words. Therefore, I moved away from "I" statements and formulated meaning units with more generative psychological terms (for example: "self-care: A process of care that needs to be honored in its own time"). In this phase, I continued to keep the data for each interview separated. The following is an example from interview number two.

Table 3

*Example of Meaning Unit Generative Themes: Interview 2*

<b>M.U.G.T;R2.1: Self-care: A process of growth that needs to be honored in its own time</b>
R2.1 I take too much upon myself R2.2 I have grown over years of experiences and life is better and easier. R2.3 I felt too down and too undermined to seek help
<b>M.U.G.T;R2.2: Conscious awareness of the impact of leadership</b>
R2.7 Someone in a position of superiority has more impact on me. R2.9 The way the principal related to me made me feel incompetent and that I was in wrong. R2.13 When a principal acts decent and normal I can trust his leadership. R2.14 The impact of a negative principal almost destroyed me as a teacher.
<b>M.U.G.T;R2.3: The impact of social support</b>
R2.6 I had angels even when I felt so overwhelmed and under conditions of hardship. R2.8 I experience support staff not working towards same goals as frustrating. R2.10 Being recognized in the midst of difficulties makes me feel good and keeps me going. R2.12 Support from colleagues, hugs from kids and their excitement about learning kept me going even in the most difficult time.
<b>M.U.G.T;R2.4: Recognition, affirmation, confirmation</b>
R2.4 Having confidence in myself and being acknowledged gives me energy and keeps me going. R2.5 I am moved by my students' accomplishments and their own happiness about their successes. R2.11 I learned as a child to respect authority, to be a hard worker and get personal satisfaction from work well done and knew that a job well done would eventually be acknowledged. R2.15 I always manage well even in the most difficult situations. R2.16 I am now able to say I am a good teacher R2.17 I feel good knowing that I did the best job that I could

**Meaning units that incorporate the four interviews.** In this step I identified three meaning units for the four interviews. Underneath each meaning unit I regrouped themes that are from all four interviews. At this point I was still trying to capture the essence of the four interviews as a whole. The “essential structure” of teachers’ experiences of congruence is induced from the four participants. However, in this phase, the data had been reduced significantly and I was open to some themes being revealed. I pondered and studied this data for some time, navigating from the whole to the parts. Finding the themes was a long process. I kept seeing the parts and struggled to see the whole. The following is a reduced figure of the data which eventually pointed to some themes that elucidate my participants’ experiences of congruence.

Table 4

*Example of First Step: Meaning Units that Incorporate the Four Interviews*

1. Recognition, affirmation and confirmation: Process of Growth, Meaning and Belonging
Knowing oneself as hardy and capable
Students reciprocating their empathy and commitment
2. Leading in a engaged and engaging way
Co-engaging in and from a core place
Co-creating relational human being
Tapping into one’s inner reservoir
Challenge and capable
3. Choosing and responding from a place of awareness
Striving to protect and sustain one’s vitality

Reaching out in a transparent way brings ease and efficacy
Reaching out to self-care
Self-care: A process of growth that needs to be honored in its own time.
Conscious awareness of impact of leadership
I am hardy and capable of choosing
Consistent, conscious awareness of getting entangled in the work place creates a movement toward aliveness, congruence and meaning
My personal history has a direct impact on my work life

#### **Four Themes**

As I was staying with the above process, I still felt that I had not yet tapped into the essence and I honored this knowing. At this point I kept reminding myself of my research question: “What are teachers’ lived experiences of aliveness and congruence in their workplace? What meaning do they give to their lived experiences of aliveness and congruence in the work place?” As I “stayed” with the question and their stories, I eventually identified four themes that I sensed honored all four participants.

Table 5

#### *Four Themes that Emerged in All Four Interviews*

Four themes
Struggling and striving to regain equilibrium
Seeking acknowledgement
Leading in an engaged and engaging way
Approaching teaching as a calling

The four themes appeared to give all four participants a sense of meaning and purpose in their career, as well as being a catalyst for growth. The implications of these themes will be considered in the discussion chapter.

### **Validating Data**

The validation of the data was a concern through all this research. One aspect of the validation was naming my biases at the beginning of this project and attending to them throughout the process. I attended to my biases in several ways. One approach was to consult with a colleague's student who had had some experience writing a thesis based on a phenomenological approach. This colleague had never been a teacher and when I felt enmeshed with participants' stories, she was valuable at helping me to see other perspectives. Moreover, I participated in a thesis writing group, as well as meeting regularly with an academic who had expertise in phenomenology.

When I was coding and categorising the data, I also consulted with an expressive art therapist who had some experience with phenomenology. This experience allowed me to stay in the liminal space and to let the patterns emerge rather than imposing my viewpoint. And then, regular discussions with my supervisor also offered different perspectives and, I believe, solidified the validity of the analyses of the data. Following these lines of inquiry four broad themes emerged.

Another important aspect of making a research project valid is the ability to be attentive to the writing. Van Manen (2006) and Romanyshyn (2007) argue that a researcher must constantly struggle and yet strive to tell participants' stories. A researcher recounts the stories in a way that reveals both his or her understanding of their life world as well as

the meaning they give to their experience of the phenomenon. Descriptive phenomenological research is required to tell the stories in ways that “evoke. . . understanding through language that in a curious way seems to be non cognitive” (p.xviii, van Manen, 2006).

In order to validate the writing of this thesis, a colleague who is a registered psychologist has agreed to read my chapters and collaboratively discuss them. This colleague became the imaginary target audience for whom I was writing this thesis. I also consulted with a writing advisor within an academic institution as well as continuing to consult with an academic from the college, and I sought validation from my supervisor. These consultations also nourished me with words that I hope have enabled me to describe more authentically my participants’ stories. But most importantly, Janesick (2000) argues that “staying close to the data is the most powerful means of telling stories” (p. 389). I would argue, as demonstrated in this section, that staying close to my participants’ words was the cornerstone of my research.

## Chapter Three: Results

### Participants' Responses to Interview Questions

When participants were asked to tell stories about what excited them in the workplace and what took away from their excitement, they had a great deal of information to convey. I did not assume that they consciously knew what depleted or enlivened their excitement, but when asked they could respond promptly.

It is interesting that all four participants were able to name easily what depleted or enlivened their excitement in the work place. The following table portrays a summary of the key aspects of what excites and depletes them in their work place.

Table 6

#### *Factors that Contribute to and Take Away from Excitement*

What excites teachers?	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Students being engaged in learning</li> <li>• Knowing I make a difference</li> <li>• Motivating students so they experience the joy of being engaged in learning</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Mentoring student teachers</li> <li>• Student teachers getting hired</li> <li>• New teachers choosing me as a mentor</li> <li>• Learning something myself</li> <li>• Helping kids with learning difficulties succeed</li> <li>• Impacting kids' self-esteem</li> <li>• Developing personally and professionally when responding to challenges</li> <li>• Connecting with each child</li> </ul>
What takes away from the excitement?	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Not having a voice in decisions</li> <li>• Provincial exams and preparing for tests given by external entities</li> <li>• Too many meetings</li> <li>• Uncooperative parents</li> <li>• Teachers who talk about your students</li> </ul>	

- |   |
|---|
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Unrealistic workload and no breathing room</li> <li>• Dept. of education that dictates program changes</li> <li>• Not having the necessary tools</li> <li>• Unsupportive administration</li> <li>• Teaching outside your domain of expertise</li> <li>• Feeling divided between students' needs and administration expectations</li> </ul> |
|---|

When participants were asked about “what excites them and what takes away from their excitement,” many stories about the phenomenon of congruence came forth (Table 6). From these stories, as explained in the previous chapter, four themes were revealed: struggling and striving, seeking acknowledgement, leading in an engaged and engaging way, and approaching teaching as a calling. In the following section, each theme will be described and supported by relevant parts of the transcriptions.

### **Theme 1: Struggling and Striving to Regain Equilibrium**

In listening to lived stories of what excites or depletes participants in the workplace, I began hearing the first theme: they *struggle and strive to find their way back to balance*. By this, I mean that they continue to explore their situation and make sense of it. As they do so, they seem to lose, for a while, their sense of solidity. In retrospect, they will say things like: “I felt inadequate; I should have gone on a sick leave; I thought my principal wanted me to have a heart attack; I had no confidence; I felt vulnerable to admit my struggle.” There was an essence of feeling quite vulnerable. And yet, as a researcher, I observed that they were striving to get back to balance and to a state of being in which they felt excited and connected to themselves while responding to their work situation. Hence, they seemed to have an unquestionably strong desire to understand what was happening to them and to make things better knowing that there are no clear solutions to



their struggle. The insight they all shared with me is that at some point one has to accept how things are. Then one will find a way to empower oneself and look at difficult situations in a new way.

Some difficulties and constraints still remained within participants' work environment, but it appears that the process participants went through helped them to change and adjust as individuals. In fact, these participants took me beyond the struggle that they lived in their work situation, revealing a process that moved them back to aliveness and excitement. What I mean by balance is that they experienced, once again, more harmony inside themselves, with others, and with their work situation. To illustrate this second point, I will present the experiences of two participants, Gilles and Amber.

**Gilles on the theme of struggling and striving.** Gilles was trying to make sense of his situation and could only reason that the principal was setting him up for failure so she could get rid of him. This statement demonstrates how disturbed and confused he was feeling when his principal assigned him nine different courses to teach, none of them in his area of training or in his strengths. He tried desperately to understand the reasons behind the behavior of his administrator:

- “[I]t’s nice when a principal thinks about you as a human being and a highly valued resource” (G33.4, p. 17).
- “I’m a Math-Science major...; the students love when I teach Science. I love teaching Science.... Now, they’re giving me Phys. Ed. instead.... [W]hy...[do] people run you that way?”(G33.8-13, p. 18).
- “I think she wanted to test me. I cannot see anything else in there. I don’t know what was in her mind.” (G33.14, p. 18).

- “I question the motives of my administration” (G35.1, p. 19).
- “[T]hat year I felt set up.... She wanted me to change schools.... I

think I was a threat to her” (G38.1, p. 21).

Within this struggle that he was facing, Gilles persisted in making sense of his difficult situation. As illustrated in the above verbatim, he imagined all types of possible scenarios, and his agitation was escalating.

Eventually, he reported that he had an important network of support. Moreover, he also recognized that the genuine support of his wife and his colleagues as well as deep friendships, sustained him when he was struggling at work: “*I was talking*” (G38.2, p. 21). “[*Y*]ou share the burden...; that’s a tremendous...strength” (G39.1, p. 21).

Once Gilles reached out for support from family members and colleagues whom he trusted, he also recognized some limitations and constraints in his professional situation that were out of his control. In a sense, he began to accept the context in which he operated and its limitations, and those of others such as administrators: “*I trust that they do the best they can and it’s their job*” (G35.4, p. 19).

Another step of the process that appeared to help Gilles find some balance was re-examining his struggle and looking at it differently: “*At least I’m not teaching English*” (G33.17, p. 18). “[*Y*]ou always do the best with what you have and that you can. So...you get creative” (G33.19, p. 18).

And so Gilles began identifying where he had some ability to change and improve his situation. Once a year, all teachers respond to a district survey in order to provide feedback about the leadership of their administrators. Responding to the survey gave him

a sense of power, and he believes that such surveys can result in changes; and they did so in his situation. Naturally, this is when Gilles' discourse in the interview changed from a feeling of being quite aggravated by the situation to feeling that he had a voice and could still achieve positive changes: “[O]ne year...I expressed my high frustration with my assignment” (G37.1, p. 20). “And, next year, I had in fact a way better assignment.... [Y]ou’ve got a voice” (G37.3, p. 20).

Even when Gilles felt undermined by administrators, he did not lose his sense of knowing that he was a competent, well-intended individual. He moved from feeling agitated and helpless with regard to his difficulties at work to finding a way to have a voice. His way of looking at the situation continued to develop. Above all, his ability to reach out for support was very beneficial in helping him to see his strengths as well as areas where he might need to gain insights and make some changes. His ability to look at himself and accept feedback from others helped him:

[I]’ve always worked really hard. And it was instilled...through sports and through...my family values and stuff like this. So I give a hundred percent...I work hard. And I think I deserve...the reward (G40, p. 23).

Central to Gilles' process is his ability to recognize his strengths as a person and the source of those strengths. For one thing, his sense of confidence and competence has developed throughout his life. For that reason, he also believes in his ability to make choices and to be confident about them. He also recognizes that difficulties are part of life and that he has always had what it takes to face any situation in his life. His acceptance of the nature of life seems to ease his struggle. Unquestionably, he has a tangible sense of being able to succeed in making good choices in challenging situations:

[T]hings happen; sometimes you have to suffer...and you always have a choice to quit.... I can change my situation. I'm in charge. And that's the way I see my life. I always have a choice to make...and I live well with my choices. Difficult people...that's part of life (G37.4, p. 20-22; G39.3, p.22).

To summarize, Gilles initially felt quite distressed and bitterly tried to make sense of a situation that did not make sense for him. Then he acknowledged that seeking support helped to ease his struggles. Consequently, he was enabled to look at things differently and more objectively. He began accepting the limitations of people within his institution and regained a sense of control over himself and his struggle. In particular, he reconnected with his ability to choose wisely.

If Gilles' story revealed that a focus on personal strength and actions is a good way to move towards congruence, the response provided by the second respondent, Amber, points to the importance of accepting and working with external factors that one cannot control.

**Amber on the theme of struggling and striving.** Amber is very aware that certain aspects of teaching deplete her energy. For example, she struggles with the practice of giving students in the same grade the same Provincial Test, despite the diversity of the programs within the same grade level: *“[I]t's an external...entity that doesn't know those children that is coming...and saying you have to do this in this particular way”* (A34, p. 14). As she told this lived story, I sensed her energy shattering. This is when I also observed myself in the interview and when reading the verbatim, not seeing things clearly anymore. Amber was in a rut and kept repeating the same story of helplessness: *“[T]hat's where you end up with...a lack of congruence...; there's a sense*

*of frustration because as a teacher you don't wanna do it but if you don't it's going to reflect on you professionally"* (A36, p. 15).

She had had misgivings towards certain policies of the School Board and of the Department of Education. The list of stories in which she identified discrepancies in the system is quite long. For example, she feels that the institution claims to support children with special needs, but this is not reflected in the way it assessed and provided resources. As she speaks of what she perceived as a lack of congruence in her teaching context, Amber was also very aware that she did get trapped in her narrative and felt diminished: *"[T]hey're saying one thing, we support it, but they're not following it through. [T]he teacher who genuinely cares about those kids tries to shoulder...the needs of that child. There's a feeling of inadequacy"* (A39, p. 1). *"It's a helpless feeling"* (A40, p. 18). There was a tension building inside Amber. She was experiencing some form of split. Every day she was in relationship with these students whose progresses were being hindered by these standardized tests or lack of resources, and yet, she feared that her students not succeeding would damage her reputation.

Eventually, Amber acknowledged that many attempts had been made to address some of her issues, but nothing had changed yet. She was aware that even if 28 children were doing well in her class, this one child whose needs weren't being met, would weigh on her shoulders and drain her energy: *"[Y]ou've got one child where you're running into lots of road blocks. And that's going to really weigh on your mind"* (A42, p. 19).

As she faced these barriers and felt their weight, I sensed that something was beginning to shift internally for Amber. She stopped arguing with the discrepancies of the external context. Instead, she seemed to allow herself to agree that this was the way

things were for the moment. Above all, she gained a new perspective and readjusted her goals for students. As a result, the density of what she carried seemed to soften:

[S]ometimes you need to reframe your expectations for the child.... [I]f you can reframe in your own mind what that child really needs, then sometimes that can take some of that...feeling of guilt or...burden away and then you can start seeing it again in a more positive way (A40, p. 18; A41, p. 19).

Amber now recognized that the teachers have the authority in their classroom, and that when things get difficult in one's teaching environment, "*your colleagues are tremendous support.... [T]hey understand you.... [W]e have team meetings which I think are great.... [I]t's the moral support of your colleagues, it's...ideas...approaches*" (A45, p. 21). She realized that colleagues can be a great resource. Amber also recognized that throughout her career she had had really supportive administrators who had helped her develop both personally and professionally. Naming the support she had had throughout her career seemed to contribute to her striving toward balance.

As she began talking about reaching out to her colleagues and acknowledging the good support of administrators during her career, she recognized that reaching out had been a positive experience stretching back to when she had been a child back in elementary school:

[M]y reaching out to the teachers and having the teachers respond to me in a positive way ultimately impacted on the fact that now, as a teacher...I reach out to my colleagues.... [A]m I not also reaching out to my students too? (A50, p. 23).

Subsequently she recognized that in order to reach out, she needed to be willing to make herself vulnerable. Above all, she had to admit to some of her struggles and ask for help: “[I]t’s also willingness to... *expose yourself to vulnerability. And by doing that...you can get...some of the greatest successes*” (A51, p. 23). On the other hand, she was aware that many teachers, including herself, question whether admitting their struggle would reflect negatively on them as professionals:

[I]t takes courage...there’s...a feeling that you should be competent. You should be able to handle this situation. You are a professional. And, so when something goes less than perfectly you feel...I’m not a good teacher. Am I a failure?... [I]s that admitting...that you’re less than a professional? (A48.2, p. 22).

And yet, her experience had demonstrated that when she admitted her struggle and asked for help, that it was the beginning of a solution to her difficulties. Another nuance that Amber brought in terms of having the courage to admit one’s struggle, is the need to have a good sense of self: “*You have to have... a good sense of yourself to be able to reach out to those people*” (A48.3, p. 22).

Both Gilles and Amber experienced their struggle as quite aggravating. Initially, Amber repeated herself several times about the struggle with bureaucracy (“red tape”). I also initially felt helpless and entrapped in hearing her situation. Eventually, she acknowledged that the institution did make some attempt to improve this particular situation. And yet, she is aware that she is feeling somehow split between the daily needs of students and the expectations of the institution. After a while, she began reaching out, and again was fearful that admitting her struggle could negatively reflect on her. On the other hand, she was aware that it took some courage and a good sense of self to reach out.

She can trace the origins of her strength and her courage to when she was in elementary school. Primarily, as far back as she can remember, reaching out to others had always been positive. This process helped Amber to look at her situation differently and more objectively.

To summarize this first theme, I want to reiterate that all four participants told stories of struggling and of striving to regain balance. As illustrated in their responses, participants initially lost their sense of solidity and felt quite vulnerable. And yet, as they faced their struggles, a process seemed to unfold. This process of struggling and striving appeared to move them away from feeling depleted to once again experiencing more aliveness.

### **Theme 2: Seeking Acknowledgement**

Unquestionably, in their lived stories, all four participants expressed their desire to be acknowledged by others and noted how great it makes them feel, especially when administrators notice their strengths and their good work. This desire to be acknowledged seems to create great dissatisfaction when it is not fulfilled. The fact that they want to be recognized by others in their work context shows that they care about the different relationships they have, and the impact these seem to have on them. They appear to care about having a place among others in the work place that feels good.

In the same way, they emphasized the importance for them to acknowledge others and especially their students. This strong desire for acknowledgment does seem to contribute to their own individual growth and their sense of belonging and meaning in their work place.



**Renée and the theme of acknowledgement.** Renée, for example, felt that any kind of acknowledgment is an affirmation that she was in the right profession and that she was doing a good job. It impacted positively on her desire to continue. She also recognized that as a teacher, one can be quite isolated in one's classroom and that being acknowledged by others outside of the classroom felt good:

[I]t just gives me the satisfaction that I'm doing...my job well.... [I]nside I really appreciate it. I...feel really good when somebody...confirms that what I've done is...good..... [I]t makes me want to continue.... It... confirms that I'm in the right position and that...what I'm doing is right so that... gives me more incentive...to work hard and...to continue doing what I'm doing.... [I]t just makes me feel good. (R6, p. 3; R7, p. 3-4; R8, p. 4; R9, p. 4)

In addition, Renée experienced positive feelings when parents expressed their disappointment about her not being one of their children's teachers. She also met other parents whom she had taught when they were kids themselves: "*[A]nother thing that really touched me is when...they had good memories of being my grade three class and they were happy that their kids would be having me as a teacher... That makes me feel great*" (R74, p. 29).

However, Renée's sense of well-being at the beginning of her career depended mostly on being positively acknowledged by parents, students and administrators. She reported that working for the public made her quite vulnerable to feeling destroyed by any comment, as she would take it as criticism. And yet this strong desire to be acknowledged and approved of by external sources eventually moved her inward. This

desire appeared to have moved her to a place where she began acknowledging her own self as a competent teacher.

She recognized that it took many years, but now she has more confidence in herself and believes in her abilities. Her vitality seems to have been impacted positively as she has grown to experience a more solid sense of confidence and competence. It follows that she now experiences a higher level of energy: “[I]’ve grown up” (R41, p. 19). *“It feels good. It feels so much better...life in general is much better...it’s easier.... It makes a big difference...it’s a big relief”* (R42, p. 19). *“[A]fter all these years I’m able to say...I know that I’m a good teacher, that I do a good job”* (R36, p. 17).

Unquestionably, Renée will always cherish acknowledgements from others and the fact that she feels enlivened by their comments. However, she no longer depends on these external acknowledgements to feel competent and confident. She is more skilled at looking for evidence in her work context to confirm that she does an excellent job:

I know that I can spend the night, sleeping overnight in a camp.... I know that the parents trust me, that the children trust me, and that I’ve accomplished my job...and then student teachers seem happy.... I’ve had...two student teachers who were hired in our school.... [T]hey asked me the following year to be their...mentor...because they wanted to continue having my support, so it’s another way of saying (R38, p. 18).

As Renée moves from her desire for external acknowledgement to acknowledging her own assets as a competent person, her aliveness and her excitement vis-à-vis her work seem to expand. In fact, she says that it is probable that she does as much work as she used to do. By comparison, the difference is that

she experiences more energy and ease, since she does **not** look for approval and external acknowledgement.

**Amber and the theme of acknowledgement.** For her part, Amber related the story of a student who had left the elementary school where she taught to go to a junior high school. This particular student came back to the school to let Amber know that the next day she was doing a run in her honor:

[I] thought...that's pretty meaningful.... I've touched her. Our lives have connected.... [T]hat was kind of special...even though they've gone and they've left your class, and you're no longer officially responsible for them, they still hold you in their heart (A14, p. 5).

This gesture of acknowledgement was very significant to Amber because the connection she made with this student is the one she intends to make with all of her students. Furthermore, she twice survived the type of cancer that the run was organized to combat. Knowing that even when students leave, the connection that was created is often reciprocal, and that the students may come back to honor her, gave meaning to Amber's work.

**Gilles and the theme of acknowledgement.** Throughout Gilles' interview, it was clear that he knows that he is a good person, and that he feels confident about the fact that he can make choices at any time. He knows his strengths and how they impact students positively: “[S]tudents love when I teach Science. I love teaching Science” (G33.8, p. 18). Gilles acknowledges his strength and how it impacts students' learning and motivation. The year that his principal asked him to teach

physical education instead of Science, he certainly felt that his strengths were not being acknowledged, and it was a very stressful year for him.

Gilles attaches importance to having support from others, and he appreciates how it contributes to his well-being: “[I] have a very strong network of friends...very strong colleagues.... [T]hat’s a tremendous...strength” (G39.1, p. 21). Gilles also has appreciation for the support of colleagues who have credibility in his professional milieu. He cherishes their encouraging and honest feedback, and is aware that they have contributed to his personal and professional development: “[S]ometimes you might be...thinking that you’re doing the right thing and not... When you’re being affirmed by people that you respect, and also by people that are respected” (G40, p. 22). Overall, Gilles acknowledges his personal assets and the genuine support of others that respect him enough to be able to challenge him when he needs to progress in certain areas.

**Victoria and the theme of acknowledgement.** Likewise, Victoria recognizes that it means a lot to her to be acknowledged by her colleagues, but that not being acknowledged by the people in leadership positions does deplete her: “If you’re not acknowledged, it can be tiring” (V100, p. 20).

In the interview, Victoria often stated that what excited her the most and brought her the most happiness was her work in the classroom with the students. Her responses made it clear that she knows the students respond well to her, and that she engages them in the learning process. And yet, she is aware that she is isolated in the classroom, that students do not tell her directly what they appreciate, and that others are not seeing the great work she does in her classroom: “Thank you. Thank you. Because the kid never told

*me that” (V102, p. 20). For that reason, it means a lot to her when others report to her the positive things that students have said about her classroom. “[T]his year I’ve been told a couple of times that some students have said good things about me so it comes back to me. I find that important” (V101, p. 20).*

On the whole, Victoria values being acknowledged by others in her professional milieu and most importantly by the leaders. She acknowledges that she has something to contribute as a person, and she cherishes her relationship with all her students.

In summarizing the responses related to Theme 2, we can observe how all the participants expressed their desire to be acknowledged and how the lack or presence of this acknowledgement impacted positively or negatively on their aliveness in the workplace. In their desire to be acknowledged for the work they do, they showed the ability to notice a variety of ways in which they felt acknowledged.

### **Theme 3: Leading in an Engaged and Engaging Way**

All four participants revealed in their lived stories an ability to maintain a relationship with themselves, with colleagues, with students and their parents in their everyday tasks. Teachers are engaged and engaging when in the here-and now; they persevere even when things get tough with parents, or administrators, or students, or bureaucracy.

Teachers are engaged and engaging when they realize that they have had struggles and that as a result of that they have grown professionally and personally. And this growth happens in their work environment as they reflect upon their personal experience and as they engage in relationships with students, parents, administrators, etc.

In considering this theme, I have also observed a greater energy component. Being engaged also means that they notice the quality of energy and vitality they feel in their body under different circumstances.

I used the word 'leading' because all four participants choose to be involved and engaged in a way that demonstrates a willingness to go over and above the minimal expectations and responsibilities. They are willing to create and face unease in their work situation by daring to be engaged. In order to illustrate this theme, I will tell the lived stories of Gilles and Amber.

**Gilles and the theme of engagement.** As an example, I would like to share Gilles' experience of dealing with unmotivated and disruptive students. First of all, he phoned the parents to inform them of their children's behavior and he asked for their support. He knows that the parents have supported him because their children are currently behaving better in class. You would think that a Junior High teacher would settle with a class of well behaved students. Not Gilles!

This was not good enough for Gilles: “[T]hey’re not engaging in learning yet.... They have to do more” (G26, p. 13). I observed that it took leadership to get them involved, and yet, he had to be willing to cope with the hostility that initially arose: “[T]o exert control...that demands lots of energy...” (G25.1, p. 14). Gilles says that he sometimes feels that what he is doing must be very irrelevant to his students and that they appear to feel as if they are in a jail: “[T]o control the students or deal with their lack of energy -- it’s tough” (G25.2, p. 14) And yet, despite the difficulties and challenges, he chose to take the high road: “[A]s a teacher you have a big part...in the leadership and in the success of the class” (G25.4, p. 14). Gilles is willing to go the extra mile because he

knows it is worthwhile for both him and his students: “[I] know I’m making a difference so I have the joy of knowing that [I]’m not getting them off the hook. I’m not letting them walk away” (G27, p. 15). This is where Gilles goes the extra mile, because not letting teenagers walk away from experiencing the satisfaction of being engaged in their learning is not a small venture: “[I]t’s my job.... [S]o I have the satisfaction of doing this, I know I am making a difference, but man, it is tiring” (G28, p. 15).

The overall essence of this lived story is Gilles’ knowing that if he persists in trying to ‘get his student hooked’ they will then have a positive experience, that of knowing that being engaged in learning does give them satisfaction. And once they experience that process, Gilles’s job is much easier.

Gilles says that planning a great lesson gives him lots of satisfaction. He perceives teaching as an act of nourishing his students: “[I]t’s like cooking a great meal” (G12.2, p. 5). He says that now his philosophy is that the art of teaching is not so much about what you teach but what the students have learned. And he knows when they are engaging because he can observe it and it is palpable: “[W]hen I see the student being engaged, emotionally, passionately...it gives me great satisfaction” (G12.3, p. 5-6).

It is likely that teachers are engaged and are engaging because it gives them great joy when their students reciprocate by being involved. It is something that is happening in relationship with the students: “[T]hey are with me. I have great joy about being with them as well. I’m committed to them but it’s nice to see a commitment back” (G8, p. 4).

Gilles works hard to get a commitment from his students because it does enliven him: “[W]hen I see my students committing and giving a hundred percent of themselves.. [t]hat gives me great joy” (G10, p. 5). Gilles puts lots of effort into leading his students in

activities that are engaging, and he receives lots back when they do get ‘hooked’:

*“[S]tudents...have a zest that they bring to you....They’re real, and...they’re excitable....*

*We can make them excited about learning. It’s fun”* (G16, p. 7).

On the other hand, Gilles feels a quality of energy that he has not experienced before in teaching: *“[T]he joy that I have this year does not come out of seeing the students engage. It’s not a response joy. It’s a joy that I bring to work with me. [I] really feel...a release...of joy in the spirit realm.... It’s a force... I sense it...I feel good”* (G49, p. 27).

Before, Gilles’ excitement came from seeing the students engaged. Now, he is still engaging them, and he feels great joy from that reciprocal way of relating. But he comes to school with that joy inside himself and notices himself joking more with staff and students.

Furthermore, as Gilles comes into the school with this felt joy, he also notices that he is more capable of allowing the students to have their own excitement: *“I let the kids be loud for three periods so far this year just because I know they enjoy being loud. [I]t was not part of me before”* (G48, p. 26-27). Gilles feels joy no matter his students’ outcome. Moreover, his capacity to allow them to be themselves demonstrates that he can relate truthfully in the moment; this is part of being engaged.

Unquestionably, what gives Gilles the most excitement in his work is getting the students to engage. And yet he knows that he can’t take student engagement for granted. Therefore, he takes on the leadership and does not let his students get away from that joy of knowing that learning brings excitement whenever you fully involve yourself. I admire



Gilles' sense of leadership and his commitment to his students. Being enlivened by the students' has made his efforts worthwhile.

**Victoria and the theme of engagement.** Victoria is another Junior High teacher, and what excites her most is seeing her students learning. She feels very engaged and involved in her student's life because she feels that she contributes substantially to their current experience: “[W]hen I see them learn. I feel...goodness.... I have the power to do this” (V61, p. 24). And yet, she knows that this power needs to be used carefully since adolescents at this stage of their life are very malleable, and you can impact their future: positively or negatively.

She is very excited about taking part in a significant transition in her students' life: “I find it incredible. It's a gift because I'm able to partake...in building these humans, these strange creatures” (V63, p. 63). She likes to kid around with her students about their hormones. She is very enthused about working with these hormonal teenagers. And her way of engaging with them is to relate with them, as she too is hormonal: “[I] tell them...I'm in menopause...and you're a teenager...so our hormones are really flying everywhere...so let's live with that” (V65, p. 14). She is relating with them as a human being living life as it unfolds.

Victoria says that she loves learning and is quite comfortable being in a situation where she does not know something. Being curious and excited about the unknown is part of the joy of learning and of being a teacher for Victoria: “[W]ow I don't know what's going on in my class at 100 percent all the time and that's ok” (V7, p. 2).

Victoria appreciates that one of her strong assets is her abundance of energy and her passion for teaching: “[A] lot about teaching really excites me” (V20, p. 4). She is

aware that her vitality and passion do rub off positively on her students even with subjects that most students dislike: “[I] even enjoy teaching verbs” (V22, p. 4). “[B]ut I have a passion for languages and I can teach French and English and have any kid interested because if the person in front is passionate and I have a lot of energy” (V23, p. 4-5). Throughout the interview, there is a sense with Victoria that she knows that she is in her element with teenagers and that in return students embark with her on the journey, and get excited about what is not normally interesting.

Victoria does look forward to parents’ interviews since she hopes to learn more about some of her students. She understands that every student has his own culture. Therefore, meeting with parents often helps her identify various ways of reaching out to a particular child: “[H]e likes this, this sort of stuff... Oh, well, okay, maybe if I bring that in, it might interest him” (V103, p. 21). Above all, Victoria has an appreciation for every child and does not want to leave anyone behind. She makes it a practice to seize any moment to make a child feel unique and successful: “[I]f they say something that’s completely wrong but it’s funny, I can sort of build on that mistake, talk about the comedian in him.... We discovered that he was funny” (V70, p. 15).

For example, Victoria is aware that lack of acknowledgment from others drains her energy. When she is aware of what drains or enlivens her vitality and excitement, it demonstrates that she is present to what she is experiencing at that moment in time.

Being present to the immediate experience shows involvement and engagement. That ability to be in the moment may explain why Victoria sometimes feels that teaching a certain concept may tire her out as some students might be disinterested. And quickly she becomes an animated actress and soon she discovers she is being herself: “[I] love

*teaching. I love being in front of the class.... So I can be an actress in front of the classroom, and the kids love it.... They'll remember what I'm teaching....You have to have fun"* (V32, p. 7).

In this last quote, Victoria may not be explicit about her energy, but it emanates. It seems that her awareness about how she feels in the moment contributes to expand her energy positively.

In sum, both Gilles and Victoria were involved with and mindful of their own experiences and the ones of their students. They both felt excited and energized when leading their students through engaging and meaningful experiences. Both felt an increase of joy and vitality as they engaged. This parallels the experiences of the two other participants.

#### **Theme 4: Approaching Teaching as a Calling**

All four participants speak clearly of their excitement about teaching and how it seems to fulfill them. All four of them speak of struggles they have had at some point in their career. And two participants have contemplated the possibility of leaving their profession at some point in their career. Similarly, another participant says that when the time comes that she does not enjoy teaching anymore, she will leave.

Whether they are outspoken or not about having contemplated the possibility of leaving their profession, they all seem to reiterate their passion and desire to keep teaching in spite of the hardships. Their involvement manifests itself as strong leadership in their role as teachers.

This strong conviction that they are meant to be teachers, that they belong to their profession, and do well, seems to enliven them and help them to keep striving in a profession that is challenging at the best of times. Some of them even speak of experiences in childhood and adolescence that were leading to this professional path or preparing them for their leadership role.

**Victoria and the theme of teaching as a calling.** Victoria tells the story of when she was a child and pretending to be a teacher: *“I used to practice doing tests and giving them to my grandparents”* (V37, p. 8). When her son was 19, she left her province to go to another one to complete her B.Ed. degree. She felt a strong impulse to act on what she had always wanted to do: *“I figured if I didn’t do it then, I would not do it at all, and that made me really panic because I always felt that’s what I wanted to”* (V35, p. 8).

Victoria feels that she has strong teaching characteristics that show up even when she is in public and not teaching: *“I see somebody looking very lost, I’ll go up to the person and help”* (V124, p. 26). She is still enjoying teaching and is over 60: *“I feel I have lots of energy for my age”* (V84, p. 17). She reported that when she no longer experiences joy in teaching she will leave the profession.

Unquestionably, she feels that teaching is a vocation: *“[I] always felt that’s what I wanted to do”* (V35.2, p. 8). *“[I] knew”* (V35.1, p. 8). *“[T]eaching is a vocation...it’s part of you”* (V122, p. 26). *“There was never any question about it”* (V36, p. 8).

Victoria has lots of energy and passion when she is teaching, and she says she has to have fun. Most importantly, teaching is a calling for her: *“[I] feel everybody was meant to do a certain job and mine is to teach”* (V32, p. 7).

Victoria's lived stories show evidence throughout her lifespan that she believes teaching is a calling. Most important, her excitement and curiosity about her students keep her enlivened, and she still loves her occupation well into her sixties.

**Renée and the theme of teaching as a calling.** Renée tells the lived story of when she felt very vulnerable at some point in her personal and professional life: “[I] suppose I should’ve taken the time to... seek help” (R55, p. 22). She felt undermined by her principal and began wondering if she were ever meant to be a teacher: “[I]t was my whole questioning of my career” (R60, p. 24). “[I] was convinced that I was the one who was... incapable of teaching” (R64, p. 2). Even in her state of vulnerability, she actually could say that she loved teaching and still found sources of excitement. “I didn’t want to quit. I love teaching and I didn’t wanna quit” (R57, p. 23).

An aspect of Renée’s teaching seems to give her energy and encourage her to forge ahead even during difficult times. This aspect is the support of adults, such as parents and colleagues: “[T]he... other... teachers were... supportive but... the parents had a large role” (R73, p. 29). Most importantly, the joy she felt with the students is the energetic source that carried her through the difficult times, and it was a constant reminder of why she was a teacher: “[S]atisfaction is mostly with the children.... They... leave you at the end of the day with a hug.... And that’s probably what kept me going when things were tough in those days. Because I didn’t give up” (R72, p. 72).

To sum up, Renée experienced hardships in her career and felt vulnerable, but when she looked at these feelings, it caused her to reiterate that she loved teaching and that leaving the profession was not the solution. The support and acknowledgement that

she experienced with colleagues, parents, students and student teachers kept her enlivened in and committed to her career.

**Gilles and the theme of teaching as a calling.** Gilles finds that as a teacher he plays a significant role with students even when he is not teaching the curriculum. This knowledge seems to contribute to his excitement and to his ability to continue to strive in his profession: *“I feel very valued as a teacher. I know I impact the life of my students.... I’m making a difference and that gives me great satisfaction”* (G14, p. 6).

Gilles, when he experienced difficult time in his career, contemplated the possibility of leaving the career: *“[I] always have a choice to quit.... And I live well with my choices”* (G37.4, p. 20). Gilles says that he knows that he belongs in the teaching profession: *“I’ve made a choice to become an educator. And I, I commit to my education. I’m not a quitter”* (G40.2, p. 23).

Gilles, has been in the profession long enough to have experienced some struggles and adversity. Gilles took a sabbatical last year, and since he came back he is aware that he is experiencing a feeling of joy within himself in a way he never felt before. He feels enlivened by this joy. After all these years of teaching experience and of having a fulfilling one year away from it, he once again asserts knowing that he is meant to be a teacher: *“[I] always have the conviction that I was doing the right thing.... I know that I belong there.... I feel really well about being there. And I feel I have to be there”* (G46, p. 26.2).

For Gilles, part of being passionate about his profession is knowing that there is hard work to do, all the while being totally enlivened. *“[I]t’s not gonna be necessarily*

*easy.... There's work to do out there.... I feel really good about being there"* (G46.3, p. 26).

Finally, Gilles' stories were proof that he is in his element while teaching, He continues to feels valued and that he is making a difference. Moreover, through his entire career, he had many other opportunities to leave because of difficulties or other aspirations that came his way. With clarity and confidence, he reiterated that he makes a difference and belongs to this profession. Above all, he experienced an increase in the quality of joy and vitality he has while teaching.

**Amber and the theme of teaching as a calling.** Amber has been teaching for over 30 years. It follows that when she talks about teaching, she is very passionate and often is moved to tears when telling stories of students she has connected with. Amber still recalls that her grade 2 teacher wrote in her report card that she would become a social worker. Her response to this memory was: *"I don't know what I had done to prompt that; there must have been something in my basic nature that was out there"* (A24, p. 10).

Amber says that when she was making career choices, she was considering several helping professions: *"I like to help other people"* (A24, p. 10). She believes that experiences such as having to help looking after an older sibling with diabetes and the example of her mom being very involved in the community caring for others, influenced her career choice and gave her the necessary assets for her profession. *"I was expected to look after him quite a bit even though he was an older brother...was that part of it...? My mother was a very compassionate, warm and loving person as well...who really*

*dedicated a lot of her life to helping other people, and so I had that role model” (A24.3, p. 10).*

Amber chose to teach because she cares about what is best for the students. Throughout the interview, she demonstrated her desire to connect in a genuine way with each student and to open doors to success for them. She feels stressed when she experiences road blocks that prevent her from opening these doors that would make it possible for these children to succeed. And yet, as she tells the stories of what keeps her excited in her teaching, she does demonstrate that no matter what the situation is, she always finds a way to resolve the problem and find new light within the context: *“I think people that go into the teaching profession... truly care about the kids.... And we come across road blocks.... Those are the things that are preventing us from finding that door to open for the children” (A28, p. 11).*

At last, her desire to help students and connect with them in a genuine way is without a doubt what still fulfills her after 30 years of teaching. It follows that when she talks about teaching she is very passionate, and is often moved to tears when telling stories of students she connects with. The transcription of Amber’s interview illustrates the anguish she sometime feels when facing road blocks. Beyond that anguish is a grounded, compassionate and genuine person who is very excited about her vocation.

To summarize Theme 4, all participants, in spite of their struggles, expressed certainty about being in the right profession. In fact, as they experienced adversity or stumbling blocks, that seemed to strengthen their yearning to be there. All of them have been in the profession for over fifteen years, and yet, they are feeling enlivened by their work.



## Chapter Four: Discussion

As the participants' lived stories revealed, maintaining a sense of excitement and aliveness is a core aspect of congruence. It is also an important aspect of successful teaching, and of a vibrant teaching career. Accordingly, the findings of this study shed light on how four dedicated teachers maintained or restored their sense of excitement in their careers. These findings also point to an important conclusion: that congruence is not a permanent state that one attains. This is also in accordance with Tillich's (1952) claim that we have an original essence which we strive to express, and yet it is human nature to experience estrangement. Congruence is much more a *process* that requires a constant balancing and rebalancing of factors to regain one's equilibrium and vibrancy to overcome estrangement from our essence and its expression in the world. Moreover, this study reveals how congruence operates in the daily lives of teachers who appear psychologically healthy and resourceful.

The literature review presented earlier suggests that research on congruence has focused mainly on increasing the understanding of different forms of dysfunction such as couple relationships, family systems, gambling issues, and childhood trauma in women. In this chapter, I will emphasize how a group of four resourceful teachers working within a challenging profession seem to live congruently even as they struggle and strive. Then I will demonstrate how the construct of congruence (Lee, 2002b, 2012) relates to my findings. I will emphasize how teaching is conducive to congruence, i.e. a life process filled with growth and interconnectedness.

### **Research Question and the Four Themes**

My research question was “What are teachers’ lived experiences of congruence and aliveness in the workplace?” Pre-testing of my question prior to interviewing participants revealed that most people did not know what I meant by congruence. In seeking a way to conceptualize it clearly, I assumed that an aspect of energy or excitement is implicit in an experience of congruence. Therefore, when I asked my four participants to tell stories about what excited them in their workplace and what took away from their excitement, they had a lot of information to convey. When asked, they promptly identified what depleted or enlivened their excitement. This questioning appeared to help them tap into stories from which I derived the four themes described in the preceding chapters.

These four phenomenological themes relate to the ways in which teachers sustain their sense of excitement, vitality, and zest as well as their sense of integrity as whole persons. The following themes, as we saw, describe the essence of the participants’ lived experience.

Theme 1: Struggling and striving to regain equilibrium;

Theme 2: Seeking acknowledgement

Theme 3: Leading in an engaged and engaging way;

Theme 4: Approaching teaching as a calling.

Themes 2, 3, and 4 flow from Theme 1. Therefore, struggling and striving could be understood as the roots and the trunk of a tree from which emerge three strong branches that create a whole. Indeed, a solid tree is one that lives through storms and yet remains whole and vibrant. One of the branches is the desire to be acknowledged,

understood and validated as well as teachers' desire to share empathy and understanding with their students. This theme reveals how important it is for teachers to participate in the lives of others and to have others participate in their lives. Their desire to be fully engaged in relationships with their students, and to engage them in turn, is what contributes most to their excitement and to their sense of having been called to teaching. To remain engaged was their way of striving. And when they continued to strive and struggle, their sense of being called to teach was reinforced.

### **The Construct of Congruence**

According to Lee (2009, 2012), the construct of congruence includes four dimensions: intrapsychic, interpersonal, spiritual-universal yearning, and intergenerational awareness and connections. These dimensions are like four different entry points from which people can explore their experiences.

### **Participants' Experiences of the Four Dimensions of Congruence**

When things happened that threw the participants in this study "out of kilter" in their teaching, they engaged in Theme 1: that is, they grappled with different ways to achieve equilibrium. Exploring their experiences, no matter from which point of entry, seemed to create a movement towards greater vitality, authenticity and a sense of integrity as a whole person. Some participants eased their struggle and continued to strive by talking to others and by reaching out for social support; this is part of the interpersonal dimension. Others regained more vitality by connecting with their desire to be accepted

and validated as people and as professionals; this is part of the universal-spiritual yearning dimension.

Some respondents, by contrast, regained equilibrium by taking notice of what enlivened them or what depleted them. The desire to reconnect with one's zest and vitality is also part of the universal-spiritual yearning dimension. Other participants became more aware of strengths or entanglements that they inherited from their family of origin, and how these phenomena influenced them negatively or positively in the present; this is part of the intergenerational dimension of congruence. Others became more aware of their perceptions, feelings and beliefs, realizing how these internal processes diminished or expanded their energy. Being aware and mindful of what is happening inside oneself is part of the intrapsychic dimension. As I mentioned previously, all four dimensions are interrelated, and when participants were mindfully attending to their struggles through these dimensions, this process created a movement towards greater congruence. In their struggle, all four participants eventually moved toward greater equilibrium by entering one of the four dimensions.

### **Participants' Experiences of the 4 As of Congruence**

As they struggled and strove to regain equilibrium, the participants also appeared to go through a process that Lee (2009, 2012) has operationalized in terms of the *four As of congruence*. Although I will be describing it in a linear way, the process tends to be more fluid, non-linear and interactive. When participants took time to *attend* (an A of congruence) to their experiences – paying attention to what they were feeling and sensing, and not denying their discomfort – and to gain more *awareness* (another A of

congruence) of their symptoms and internal dynamics, they began to *acknowledge* (another A of congruence) their triggers and achieved more clarity about the complexity of their difficulties within themselves in a given moment, with others, and with their shared context.

When they engaged in this process, they seemed to *align* (another A of congruence) themselves once again with a state of equilibrium. Alignment is the opening that occurs when one attends to discomfort or a certain malaise, gains awareness of it and acknowledges triggers and their roots (Lee, 2002b). A more detailed and integrated illustration of this process, and of the 4 dimensions of congruence, can be found in Appendix D, which relates the complete lived experience of Renée.

### **Pursuing Congruence: The Benefits of Struggling and Striving**

In sum, then, when participants moved through the process of the 4 As of congruence, new insights and actions emerged. They reported taking more risks and allowing themselves to become more vulnerable, and this in turn nurtured more authentic relationships and a greater sense of their own aliveness. I turn now to considering each of these outcomes in more detail.

### **Authentic Relationships**

As an example of moving towards more authentic relationships, two participants reported growing as they became self-reflective and shared their experiences with others. Another participant stated that because of a fear of being perceived as incompetent, it took a good sense of self to admit one's struggle as a professional. However, this participant realized that when she did admit her struggle to others, it was usually the starting point for resolving difficulties. Branford et al. (2000) emphasized that "Learning involves making oneself vulnerable and taking risks" (p. 195). Likewise, Fewster (2010) has argued that as we take the risk of expressing our authentic self in relationships with others, we are more likely to experience the liberation of self. Indeed, these participants did allow themselves to be vulnerable, and attending to this was liberating; it helped them to grow and to become more authentic, more integrated, and more congruent.

### **Aliveness and Spirituality**

When participants stayed with the process of the 4 As and connected with all four dimensions of congruence, they experienced a change in their energy. They went from being tired to feeling that they had more energy. Satir, quoted in Lee (2002b), emphasized that "the human being possesses an inborn spiritual base and sacredness" (p. 69). Moreover, Lee (2002b) calls attention to the fact that within us we have a self that has *spiritual roots*. Often when participants connected with what was happening inside them, they made a more authentic contact with their self. This emotional experience of *self* seemed to connect them with the human yearning that "*propels the growth and healing process*" (p. 68). When they explored their experiences through the lens of the 4

As and entered one of the four dimensions of congruence, they gained a certain solidity and expansion of their sense of self.

This accords nicely with Lee's observation (2009) that "congruence is the alignment of one's inner experience with how one lives in the world" (p. 11-12). Unquestionably, all participants, in their process of struggling and striving, acknowledged themselves, others, the context and their history. This changed how they felt and lived in her world. In Lee's terms (2009), they were "living in awareness with the depths and prompting of one's spirit" (p. 11-12). In essence, many reported that they probably worked as hard as they used to, but they did so on the basis of a different internal experience. As a result, they now experience more ease and energy in their work than they used to. Lee (2009) says that when one lives more congruently, "it creates an openness and fluidity in the way one attends to people and situations" (p. 11). In effect, the four participants, in attending to their own process through their careers, attest that they have changed and that now they feel more authentic, open and energized in how they respond to work situations.

### **Other Aspects of Congruence: Context, Relatedness, and Human Yearnings**

In the previous section, I illustrated how the four participants went through the process of congruence and tapped into the four dimensions as they are described by Lee. Congruence, however, is a rich and multifaceted concept. In this section, I will elaborate on some other key aspects of the construct that this study seems to highlight, and make reference to various applications of Satir's work on congruence by other authors. Since this study was done in the context of the workplace, and more specifically among

teachers, some references to other literature will be integrated when necessary to further clarify the concept of congruence as it applies to the workplace.

### **Congruence and Context**

Satir et al. (1991) assert that to communicate and to respond to life situations in a congruent manner is a choice. They emphasize that it must be a conscious choice “based on awareness, acknowledgement and acceptance of self, other, and context, and of being in charge of self” (p. 73). The teaching context is, to say the least, multifaceted. On one end, there is the community of the classroom which entails relationships with teachers, students and parents. But at the same time, there is the community of the school, its leadership, and the Department of Education, all of which add to the complexity of the professional context. As the four teachers progressed towards rebalancing and congruence, they were aware of some aspects of the disconnection they were experiencing with self, others and their professional context.

This “disconnect” relates in part to the challenge of maintaining a healthy professional context. Satir et al. (1991) emphasize the importance of being in a healthy context in order to grow. Three of the four teachers in this study likewise reported that at some point in their careers, they felt that the school context was not healthy because of its type of leadership. Yet all four also suggested that the classroom context, which still has its challenges, has helped them grow both personally and professionally.

These benefits stem in part from the fact that the classroom is where teachers feel that they have the most control, and that it is where they feel most excited and energized. This awareness helped the teachers to relate to their students in a way that fostered



mutual trust and respect. Being mindful of their own experiences and needs made it more possible for them to attune to their students and to make the necessary adjustments in the here-and-now. This is in accordance with the claims of Satir et al. (1991), who reported that in order to relate congruently with others, one needs to sort out one's own experiences.

### **Congruence, Relatedness and Human Yearnings**

Within a healthy context, human relationships play a key role. Congruence, indeed, is all about relatedness. It is about being connected to self, others and the context in spite of difficulties and differences. The four teachers in this study developed an awareness of their desire to be in relationships that acknowledged and confirmed both self and others. This awareness helped them to discover or rediscover the meaning, purpose and excitement of their profession.

All four teachers were exceptionally engaged with their students, as well as engaging them. In fact, when they experienced difficulties in their career, their relationship with their students was what sustained them most. This relationship, to be sure, was not necessarily easy. Many students were difficult to reach and to engage. And yet, teachers in this study took the high road; they struggled and strived to engage their students by trying to know them, to understand them and to explore different ways of reaching them. Spencer et al. (2004) argue that cultural-relational theory “asserts that psychological health and vitality are linked with participation in growth-fostering relationships with others” (p. 353). Teachers in this study were most excited and

enlivened when they were participating in meaningful ways in their students' lives and witnessing mutual growth.

Why did this occur? Bullough and Pinnagar (2009) report that teachers in their connection with students “become more firmly connected to the world and more present within it, which is to say more fully alive” (p. 250). They are aware that their careers involved great ethical and moral implications, and regard their interconnectedness with students with great care; this attitude is an important aspect of congruence. This produces satisfaction and personal rewards – a kind of “eudemonic happiness.” Wong (2011) notes that such happiness results from a “lifestyle characterized by the pursuit of virtue/excellence, meaning/purpose, doing good/making a difference, and the resulting sense of fulfillment or flourishing” (p. 70).

**Human yearnings: a creative source.** These potential benefits can be understood in more nuanced (and more spiritual) terms by considering the power of human yearnings. According to Satir et al. (1991), our yearning to be fully connected with self, others and our life force is stronger than the constraint of a context. Indeed, Freeman (2000), quoted in Bullough and Pinnegar (2009), emphasizes that Aristotle believed “that the human substance is shaped toward the state of...well-being, the state of *flourishing* as a human” (p. 244). Unquestionably, I believe that when I observed my participants continuing to strive and to be engaged even as they struggled, it was that human state of wanting to flourish and to be fully alive that I was tracking. To this end, Bullough and Pinnegar (2009) concluded that the experience of engagement is like “an active organism in search of a goal that is not yet accomplished” (p. 245).

Indeed, the goal that kept teachers in their profession and enlivened them most was nourishing their spirit and that of their students. Satir et al. (1991) say that the first step in any possibility of developing hope and growth is to contact the human spirit. For these participants, this reward of growth and flourishing does not come easily. It takes time, courage, and the ability to take risks and to be vulnerable. Most importantly, in teaching it takes the adeptness to be present to both self and the professional role with regard to the other, another important aspect of congruence in the work place (Kahn, 1992).

Sayle (2002) says that the process of congruence and transformation happens when one takes the risk *to be fully human*. All teachers experienced a positive transformation when they became aware of their vulnerability, accepted it, and took the risk of staying in connection with themselves and others. The determination of participants to be enlivened in their professional role, and particularly in regard to relationships with their students, sustained the teachers in spite of other external aspects of their professional context. Accordingly, Tillich (1952) affirms that struggles can turn one towards courage, which helps one to discover and rediscover one's human essence. These four individuals were struggling and striving to live out the essence of being a teacher.

### **Congruence as a Process Throughout the Life Span**

As teachers grew through their profession, they began to connect more deeply with their ability to be generative (Erickson, 1964, p. 131). They felt that being a teacher was more than a job; it was a creative expression of who they are in essence. In their

interconnectedness with students they were moving towards others and forming their identity, as well as that of their students. Moore (2008) emphasizes that our spirit at work ‘longs for some sort of manifestation of who we are’ (p. 39). Indeed, participants in this study felt that they were expressing their creativity by nurturing present and future generations. Teachers who stay in the profession will continue to struggle and strive. The nature of their struggles, however, is likely to differ depending on the time period in their career. To approach their struggles by looking at the situation through the different lenses of congruence could contribute to their vitality and continue to empower them in their ongoing choices and development through their career.

### **Implications for Teachers and Administrators**

Teachers in this study reported that their profession is both challenging and exciting. And when they attended and gained awareness from both their negative and positive experiences, they commented that they developed both personally and professionally. Hence, moving toward growth felt most rewarding to them. For that reason, discovering excitement in the possibility of growing as a human being in this profession appears to be essential, as teachers are in a constant relationship with self and others while responding with awareness to the context. In that sense, the process of congruence is relevant to a profession where members are called to transform themselves throughout their career. Accordingly, Kashdan and Breen (2007) argue that positive and negative experiences are part of the fabric of life. These authors also make the point that people who do not avoid difficult experiences report having greater subjective well-being and less distress. The struggling and striving is part of facing difficult experiences.

Teachers may therefore develop their personal and professional resources as well as their social support to assist them in integrating their positive and negative experiences throughout their careers.

However, teachers may easily become entangled in and fatigued by many aspects of the system that they perceive to be incongruent. While they acknowledge the difficulties of the context and strive to have a voice, they may be mindful of not losing sight of what aspects of teaching are most rewarding and enlivening. For example, teachers often feel drained by the lack of acknowledgment that they experience from their supervisors. This is an aspect of their context that they find difficult to accept, and it tends to drain them of energy. On the other hand, when they become aware of many other ways in which they are acknowledged they seem to regain a sense of empowerment and meaning. In order to achieve this, teachers may endeavor to explore what saps their energy or what enlivens them while updating their perceptions, beliefs and goals so that they may feel congruent.

One aspect of teaching that may be exhausting is when students are not being engaged. And yet, all four teachers reported that in the end it was always worth the effort of persisting to engage students. Research about flow (a concept formulated by Csikszentmihalyi, 1990), points to the fact that both engagement and intrinsic motivation are the two factors that create an experience of flow among teachers (Bakker, 2002). Interestingly, Bakker also argues that teachers' flow leads to more creativity on their part and consequently to students' flow which enlivens them. Teachers may consider developing new goals and skills throughout their careers so that they go on being engaged and motivated.

Administrators need to recognize that teaching is fundamentally about relationships. Accordingly, the interconnectedness of the classroom context with students is what gives most meaning to teachers' work and it is what enlivens them. School administrators need to be mindful that the tendency to standardize evaluations and increase accountability should not be achieved at the cost of fostering a relational context of mistrust and disrespect (Bullogh & Pinnagar, 2009). Bakker (2002) makes several points that school administrators also need to take into consideration. First of all, beginner and senior teachers need to be supported and empowered toward setting long-term professional goals in a context that will foster their growth throughout their career. This will not only help to sustain their vitality but will also ensure they will stay in the profession. In addition, in order to retain teachers and sustain their motivation and vitality, administrators need to be mindful of the balance between challenges and resources. Above all, if they want to contribute to teachers' sense of congruence and aliveness, they need to foster a culture of understanding, acknowledgement and validation since teaching is about being engaged in relationships.

### **Conclusion: My Journey with Congruence**

I remember, years ago, becoming quite fascinated with the lack of congruence I perceived among administrators in my field. I thought that my study would point to why we have this lack of congruence and to solutions helping to remedy it. Today, I realize that I was pointing my finger at others who were administrators, and at the context. I was convinced that if only something within the context could be improved, my life as a professional would be better. The difficulty was that I did not see any other option to help

me feel congruent but to attend to the incongruence within the system. As a result, I felt disempowered and quite exasperated and disillusioned with some aspects of the teaching context and chose to leave.

All four participants in this study also reported that what takes away from their excitement and sense of aliveness is a lack of acknowledgment from administrators as well as the decisions made by school administrators that impact the daily life. A contribution from this study is the understanding that some lack of congruence is a given within any professional context. Naturally, a challenge in this profession is how teachers acknowledge the difficulties of their context while responding to them in a way that sustains their sense of congruence and aliveness. That said, we do need to attend to how institutions are managed, because management style does impact workers' wellbeing (Wong, 2011). But this study focused on how four teachers struggled and strived to sustain their sense of congruence and aliveness. Congruence is more of a personal process about how one stays present and how one responds to what is happening in the moment. In particular, this study showed that congruence for teachers is not a permanent state that they can expect to attain, but rather an ongoing process of struggling and striving to rebalance. Congruence in this study was a process that procured growth, meaning and aliveness to participants.

The results of this study cannot be generalized as the interviews were limited to four participants, mostly women. As well, the subjects were all experienced teachers who had been in the profession for over 10 years. Nevertheless, the findings of this study point to the fact that congruence is a dynamic process that one moves away from and towards while struggling and striving to be realigned. The process of congruence may also be

used for fostering personal and professional growth in the workplace. Further research could be done to explore the phenomenology of congruence in the workplace and its relationship to work satisfaction and well-being. A training resource could be developed to facilitate congruence in the workplace.

This phenomenological study elucidated how four teachers sustained their sense of congruence and aliveness by focusing on relationships in which they are engaged and are engaging others, as well as being mutually acknowledged. Struggling and striving while responding to negative and positive experiences helped them rediscover, throughout their careers, that teaching is a calling.



## Appendix A: Consent Forms

### Information Letter and Consent Form

Who am I?

My name is Josée Ouellette and I am a student in the Master of Arts Pastoral Psychology and Counselling Program at St. Stephen's college. This research that I am conducting is a partial requirement to obtain my degree.

What is the purpose of my study?

My research question is: **What are teachers' lived experiences of aliveness and congruence in the workplace?** The study that you are to participate in is concerned with issues surrounding this question. As a researcher, I am genuinely interested in hearing teachers' lived experiences of what *sustains* or *depletes* their **energy, vitality, excitement** and **motivation**. I am interested in hearing what precedes an experience of congruence or incongruence, what the actual experience is like and what issues arise from it.

The significance of this qualitative research is that it may add new insights to what enhances teachers' productivity, creativity and contribution and what prevents or causes professional burnout, alienation and loss of spirit among teachers. Another contribution of this research is that it may empower clinicians to help teachers fine-tune their ability to discern what depletes or sustains their whole being in their profession. Participants may have an increased awareness of these processes.

What could be potential discomfort for the participant?

Participating in in-depth interview may make you feel vulnerable about some of the personal content that could surface. I will provide you with resources for counselling, if need be, to address any psychological issues that might come up from the interview.

What will your commitment look like?

As a participant, you will take part in two in-depth interviews that will last approximately 45 minutes each. As well, a debriefing meeting to validate the results of these interviews will be undertaken. Video recording equipment will be used to collect the data.

How will I protect your confidentiality and anonymity?

Appropriate measures will be taken to ensure that your responses are completely confidential and anonymous. Your name will not be used in the dataset. You will only be identified by initials once the verbatim data has been transcribed. The data will be kept in a locked file cabinet in my home office during the project and for eight years following the completion of the project. Furthermore, pseudonyms will be used in any published reports.

What are your rights as a participant?

You have the right to opt out of the research without penalty at any time, to be provided with the material or to ask for any personal data to be withheld. As a participant, you give permission for the data to be used for the researcher's master's thesis in the MAPP Program, for conferences and for articles and academic papers.

Who will the information from the interview be available to?

As a participant, you also give your consent for the researcher to hire *an assistant with professionalism and sensitivity* in regards to *confidentiality to transcribe word for word* the videotape of the in-depth interview. You as a participant agree that, in order for the research to have credibility and to be validated, the researcher needs to share the verbatim interview with her supervisor and two other colleagues in the field. As a participant, you may ask at any time for the names of anyone involved with your confidential information.

How will the findings from this study be used?

Findings from this study will be use for my Master's thesis in the MAPPC Program, for conferences papers and presentation, and for publishing articles, book chapters, and academic papers which could be in paper or electronic versions.

## Participant Consent Form

An In-Depth Exploration of  
**“What are teachers’ lived experiences of aliveness and congruence in the  
 workplace?”**

Researcher:

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e-mail: [bonnie@xxx.ca](mailto:bonnie@xxx.ca)

-----Detach and return bottom portion-----

I consent to participate in the study

(Printed Name)

Date

(Signature)

I consent to have the interview videotaped.

(Printed Name)

Date

(Signature)

I consent to debrief to validate the researcher’s finding and interpretations.

(Printed Name)

Date

(Signature)

## **Appendix B: Potential In-Depth Interview Questions**

- Describe an experience of excitement about teaching?
- How would you rate your energy on a scale of 1 to 10?
- What precede this kind of experience?
- What is it like?
- What issues arise from it?
  
- Describe an experience that takes away your excitement?
- How would you rate your energy on a scale of 1 to 10?
- What precede this kind of experience?
- What is it like?
- What issues arise from it?

### Appendix C: Wholistic Paragraphs

Renée:

Even when things were difficult both personally and professionally, I did not want to quit teaching because I love it. What kept me going was my relationship with students, parents and colleagues.

Currently, I teach in a school where my colleagues and our principal are very supportive of one another. In essence, we could even cry together. Sometimes, I am moved to tears when I witness how happy students are with their accomplishments. This is what kept me going the most when I felt unsupported by one of my principals. A parent showing support or appreciation keeps gives me energy. Once, I had a mom and dad that I both taught when they were kids. They went out or their way to make sure that I would teach their child, since they remembered having a very positive experiences in my class. This could make me feel old, but mostly it makes me feel great and generative.

In the past, when a problem was brought to my attention, I used to go out of my way to rectify the situation and to convince everyone that I was a worthy person. Now, I realise that I am as committed and innovative in my teaching as I used to be. Indeed, I do as much as I used to. The difference is I have more energy. Most important, I do what I do from a place of confidence and choice not to convince anyone about my worth.

As a child, I learned to take pride in a job well done and did not expect to be lavish with praise. Although, I knew that a job well done will eventually get recognised. I also learned to respect rules and authority and perhaps this made me vulnerable under poor leadership, but mostly it has made me a really responsible professional. As a child, I also learned not to dwell on my feelings. This might have been one of the factors that kept me from going for counselling when things were so difficult both at home and at school. And yet I feel that my upbringing also made me a very resilient person under tough situations.

Working with the public made me vulnerable to feeling criticised. But my career has also allowed me to grow as a person. I now can say I am a very good teacher and a hard working person. I have always managed to do well no matter what the

*(continued next page)*

Amber:

In elementary school, my teacher wrote in my report card that I would be going into a caring profession. I became a teacher, because I care about children and what gives me most joy in teaching, is when I reach out to those that are most difficult to get through.

I have learned in my first year of teaching that you do not always know what the entry way for connecting with one child is. But you must keep looking for it and when you find it, do not let it pass. I experience great joy from this.

What excites me is to allow every child to experience meaningful success. I can have 24 children in one class doing well and one student not experiencing any success in any area and that one student that has the most struggles will be weighing on my mind. I can say that over the years, what has consistently given me most joy is connecting and finding a genuine door to success for those that struggle the most.

As a teacher I must have the courage to take risk and make myself vulnerable by honestly saying things as they are. Such as admitting that I want to help one child but I do not know how. When I describe a situation as it is and not worry about appearing competent then this is when things begin resolving, no matter how many road blocks are in my way such as difficult parents, no other professional support, the curriculum, the Provincial Achievement Test etc.

Reaching out have been a positive experience for me as early as when I were in elementary school. Despite much 'red tape' and lack of support from the system, there are resources that I tend to reach out for on an ongoing basis. These resources are colleagues, team meetings, the principal, students and parents.

Parents do not necessary trust me to begin with. I must give them evidence that I am trustworthy. Even difficult parents most times when they feel that I care about their child and want the best for that child will turn around. Relating in a genuine way to students, parents, colleagues, and my principal have empowered me to grow and

*(continued next page)*

Gilles:

I have made a choice to be an educator. Even when I felt most alienated and depleted with the impact of poor leadership, I did not quit. I am not a quitter. I have learned from my family of origin and being involved in sports to work hard and ethically to focus on what I choose to do.

Education is not about what I teach, but what the students learn. My '**Joy**' does not only come from a class of students that are well behaved but from seeing students engage emotionally, intellectually, physically and being passionate about learning.

Another level of joy that I am experiencing this year does not come from seeing the kids engage in their learning or being engaged with them. It is within me despite the circumstances of the day. I feel joy within me every morning when I wake up. **I come to school with that Joy** that comes from the realm of the Holy Spirit. That Joy makes me feel empowered, strong and gives me vitality and happiness. That joy is effortless and it feels like looking at the sun after a long stay of clouds or feeling the energy of health after being sick for a long time.

Teaching is also about growing in wisdom as a person and keeping both my students and I in the flow of self-realisation as whole being.



### **Appendix D: Participants' Experiences of the 4 As of Congruence**

As they struggled and strove to regain equilibrium, the participants also appeared to go through a process that Lee operationalized as the four As of congruence. Although I will be describing it in a linear way, the process tends to be more fluid and non-linear. When participants took time to *attend* (an A of congruence) to their experiences and gain more *awareness* (an A of congruence), they began to *acknowledge* their triggers and achieved more clarity about the complexity of their difficulties within themselves, with others, and with their shared context. When they engaged in this process, they seemed to *align* (an A of congruence) themselves once again with a state of equilibrium. To clarify this process of the 4 As of congruence, I will briefly define each element in relation to the experiences of all the participants and then, more specifically, to the undertakings of Renée, one of my interview participants.

#### **The First A: Awareness**

First, as they stayed present to what they experienced, participants became aware of their symptoms and internal dynamics. For example, Renée became aware that every time her principal called her to the office she felt sick to her stomach; she began doubting herself and thinking that she was not a good teacher. When one of her students often cried in kindergarten, she used to think she was the source of the problem.

### **The Second A: Attend**

Secondly, participants chose to attend to their situations by talking about them and paying attention to what they were thinking, feeling and sensing. They were not denying the discomfort that they were experiencing or running away from it. For example, when Renée attended to her discomfort and stayed with it, she became aware that a past experience was impacting her present relationship with the new principal as well as her well-being.

### **The Third A: Acknowledgement**

As participants became more aware of the impact of their struggle and attended to it, they began to acknowledge the sources of the struggle within the context, in relation to others and to themselves. For example, Renée acknowledged that in her family of origin she had learned to respect authority and to work hard. This gave her a good work ethic. And yet, with one principal who seemed to be unpredictable, and around whom teachers appeared to be “walking on eggshells,” she struggled to assert herself. In this process of attending and becoming aware, she also acknowledged that she used to help out a lot on the family farm, and she recognized that she was not lavished with praise. And yet, she remembered that when she was finally recognized by her dad for her good work, it meant a lot to her. At some point in her struggle, she wondered whether the fact that she was rarely complimented in her childhood resulted in poor self-esteem. Moreover, she became aware that she mobilized much of her energy in the hope of being appreciated and seen as a good teacher by others. She acknowledged that focusing her energy towards the outside world seemed to deplete her more, rather than enliven her.

### **The Fourth A: Alignment**

Alignment is the opening that occurs when one attends to discomfort or a certain malaise, gains awareness of it and acknowledges triggers and their roots (Lee, 2002). In Renée's case, she acknowledged that she engaged in certain behaviors in the hope that she might be seen as a good teacher; this demonstrated that she was gaining internal awareness of the *intrapyschic dimension*. These internal expectations connected her with the first aspect of the Universal-Spiritual dimension, which Satir described as a *yearning* to be loved, accepted, validated and confirmed (Satir et al, 1991). As she spoke of her internal desire to gain approval, she noticed how this way of relating exhausted her. She actually began to connect with another aspect of the Universal-Spiritual Dimension, which Satir called our universal-spiritual *connection to a 'life force'*. Not only did she become aware of her need to be loved and accepted, but she also became aware of how that desire impacted her flow of energy.

As she stayed with her struggle, Renée was actually striving to regain balance. She acknowledged that her tendency to strive for approval from others could have roots in the fact that in her family of origin she had not been lavished with praise. But at the same time, she examined this more deeply and became curious about this fact and the impact it had had on her. As a result, her interpretation of her personal history seemed to expand. Consequently, Renée appeared to realign with her family of origin, as she considered that they had taught her to work hard and ethically. The fact that she was not lavished with praise taught her to monitor and to assess her own quality of work, and to take satisfaction in doing good work. She now reframed this part of her history as strength. Thus, internally, she acknowledged herself. When Renée acknowledged aspects

from her family of origin, she was connecting with Lee's *Intergenerational Dimension*  
(2009, 2012

## **Appendix E: Related Studies and Constructs**

Stairs, Galpin, Page, & Linley (2006), quoted in Stairs and Galpin (2010), have defined engagement as “the extent to which employees thrive at work, are committed to their employer, and are motivated to do their best, for the benefit of themselves and their organization.” Stairs and Galpin (2010) went on to say that “this definition places the experience of ‘thriving at work’ at the heart of the approach” (p.158).

### **Happiness & Positive Engagement**

Stairs and Galpin (2010) also have commented that few organizations are interested in the concept of happiness at work. However, these authors believe that happiness research could provide suggestions as to what makes employees engaged at work. For that reason, they have developed a model of positive engagement at work that integrates both the construct of engagement and happiness at work. Their model has three core dimensions: enjoyment, challenge and meaning. They emphasize that these three dimensions “together form the positive experience of happiness” (p. 160), based upon Seligman’s (2003) three pathways to general happiness.

**The three dimensions of positive engagement at work.** I will give a brief description of each of the three dimensions of ‘positive engagement’. The attributes of the *enjoyment* dimension are that the “employee enjoy their work and experiences positive emotions (e.g., joy, enthusiasm, contentment, interest, etc.) in the course of, or in relation to, their work” (p. 160). The attributes of the *challenge* dimension, according to Stairs and Galpin (2010), are feeling “stretched by their work and developing through it” (p. 161). The nature of challenge offers some balance to enjoyment. Challenge in this

model also refers to the experience of flow. In having challenges and stretching one's skill, one is totally absorbed in the task in a "non-emotional way". In this flow, the employees acquire highly satisfying experiences that they tend to report after the fact rather than during task performance. These experiences are characterized by high productivity and a sense of achievement. However, in order to reach such a peak experience one needs to have the skills to successfully meet the challenge. If there is a balance between challenge and skill, one will grow. Stairs and Galpin (2010) commented that "challenge plays a key role in facilitating personal growth" (p. 161).

Csikszentmihaly (2002) wrote that "in this growth of the Self...lies the key to flow activities" (p. 74). Huta, Park, Peterson, & Seligman (2003), quoted in Stairs and Galpin (2010), commented that research points to the idea that it is those individuals who "*work on developing their skills and potential who are more satisfied with their lives*" (p. 161). The third dimension of positive engagement is *meaning*. Stairs and Galpin (2010) described meaning as when "the employee has a sense of meaning and purpose in what they do, and a belief that they are serving something bigger than themselves" (p. 161). Research indicated that one-third of employees view their job or career as a '*calling*' *i.e.* "*seeing it as fulfilling and socially helpful and not just when they have jobs that are socially desirable*" (Stairs and Galpin, 2010, p. 161). There is strong evidence that people who find meaning in their work are more engaged.

### **Psychological Presence at Work**

The research on Positive Engagement led me to the concept of Psychological Presence at work, as developed by Kahn (1992). While other researchers looked at 'why' people are engaged at work, Kahn became curious about the factors that enhance or

hinder psychological presence at work. Kahn's research (1992) evolved from both the organizational and clinical psychology literature, in particular psychotherapy and, more specifically, family and group therapy. Kahn (1992) was aware that much of the prior research in this area had focused on factors of motivation, job characteristics, etc. His contention was that the heart of this research had not evolved much since Taylor (1911), who saw 'workers as machines'. This view is of a machine of energy that can be turned on and off, "tapping people's stores of energies and directing those energies in effortful flows toward the achievement of organizational goals" (p. 321).

As Kahn (1992) emphasized, "Other concepts have not been advanced that focus on what enables the depths of workers' personal selves to come forth in the service of their own development and that of their organization" (p. 322). From this perspective, Kahn (1992) developed a concept of Psychological Presence at work which consists of four dimensions: being attentive, connected, integrated and focused.

**The four dimensions of being psychologically present at work.** The first dimension, *being attentive*, involves noticing what is happening with oneself, with others and their shared context. Kahn (1992) emphasized that it means moving towards others rather than away. Secondly, *being connected* means having empathy for others and being able to put oneself in the other person's shoes. It also means feeling "joined with someone or something outside themselves" and experiencing a "mutuality of connections" (p.326). Rogers (1958), quoted in Kahn (1992), stated that people also experience "*the sense of giving and receiving in relating with people or engaging in process*" (p.326). Thirdly, *being integrated* means that one brings forth different dimensions of self that are both personal and role related, including the physical,

intellectual and emotional aspects of self. One experiences wholeness rather than withholding parts of the self or being fragmented. Fourthly, being **focused** means being immersed in the task relating to the role performance, the situation and the relationship in the here-and-now. Miller & Rice, (1967) quoted in Kahn (1992), emphasize that being psychologically present “thus means maintaining the integrity of the person and the integrity of the role simultaneously” (p.328). Miner (1987), quoted in Kahn (1992), argued that “people with high growth needs are more likely to be psychologically present” (p.333).

### **Flow and Teaching**

Czikzentmihalyi (1996) said that teachers “generally fail to teach how exciting, how mesmerizingly beautiful science or mathematics can be, they teach the routine of literature of history rather than the adventure” (p.125). Plato, cited in Czikzentmihalyi (1996), said that “the important task for a society was to teach the young to find pleasure in the right objects” (p. 124). Indeed, Czikzentmihalyi (1996) said that teachers who are passionate about their topic, and who teach within their strengths, are more likely to be creative and to engage students.

**Flow and teacher’s vitality.** Bakker (2004) conducted research on music teachers and Flow, using the three dimensions of flow from Czikzentmihalyi (1990), i.e., self-absorption, enjoyment and intrinsic motivation. Bakker (2004) concluded that Flow among teachers will sustain and increase their aliveness. In addition, Schaufeli and Van Dierredorck (2000) believe that creating a context for teachers to be in Flow would be an antidote to stress. Bkaker (2004) concluded that “the more Flow experiences music



teachers reported, the higher the frequency of comparable experiences among their students. This finding is in line with emotional contagion theory (Hatfield et al., 1994), and is one of the first demonstrations in the field of research” (p.38).

Bakker (2004) reported that as the Flow experience crossed over to their students, teachers’ intrinsic motivation increased. Indeed, Bakker (2004) established that teachers’ intrinsic motivation is the most significant factor in students’ experience of flow. For that reason, he believes that teachers with more intrinsic motivation tend to be more creative in delivering learning activities that engage students.

Bakker (2004) established that creating a context in which teachers’ experience of Flow can be attained will lead to growth and realization of goals, and finally, will sustain and help to retain senior and beginner teachers. Bakker (2004) believes that in order for educational organizations to be able to foster the flow experience, they need to understand ‘the balance of skill/challenge and job resources’. Bakker (2004) brings light to what it means to have a balance of challenges (job demands) and skills. He defines skills in two different components, i.e. personal resources and job resources. Personal resources include “skills, self-efficacy, and self-esteem”; and job resources include “performance feedback, autonomy, social support and coaching” (p. 38).

## **Grit**

Duckworth, Quinn and Seligman (2009) define Grit as “perseverance and passion for long term goals” (p.541) and this despite hardship. Duckworth et al. (2009) also discuss numerous studies along the theme of being called to teach and make the following points. They say that one in five teachers leaves the career within five years.

Moreover, they reported that those teachers who burn out and stay in the profession tend to “reduce their effort and involvement” (p. 540). According to these studies, 86% of the new teachers that were interviewed said that considering the challenges of today’s teaching career only those with a “true sense of Calling should pursue” (p. 540).

Duckworth et al. (2009) reported that “grittier individuals work harder and longer in very challenging setting than did less gritty peers” (p. 544). This study also theorizes that “sustained effort despite adversity” could have a positive impact on performance as these people, in persevering, amass skills over time. In fact, this research shows that grittier people, over time, tend to become more successful than peers who initially are more talented and gifted.

These sources of literature that were found after the thematic analysis was completed are relevant to the construct of congruence of Satir and Lee. However, an important distinction is that these sources have been particularly developed to understand and explain what makes people flourish and be engaging in the context of work. As the construct of congruence has not yet been studied in this context, it is valuable to be familiar with literatures that are grounded in work situations. Positive engagement at work, psychological presence at work, flow and grit all indirectly emphasize similar components of congruence. These approaches to congruence focus on being present to self, others and context in a way that sustains one’s life purpose and excitement. Although only psychologically explicit at work, the approaches attend to factors from one’s history that may interfere with being present and congruent at work.

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