

**THE TEACHING COATS PROJECT:  
EXPLORING THE THREADS OF OUR TEACHER IDENTITIES  
THROUGH ARTS-BASED RESEARCH**

by

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## Abstract

In a discussion of teacher identity in *The Courage to Teach*, Parker Palmer (2007) shares this metaphorical Hasidic tale: “We need a coat with two pockets. In one pocket there is dust, and in the other pocket there is gold. We need a coat with two pockets to remind us of who we are” (p. 113). Inspired by the powerful imagery and meaning of these words, the author of this study created “The Teaching Coats Project”, an arts-based professional development activity for teachers, which she used as the basis for this research.

The Teaching Coats Project involved study participants in making their own “Teaching Coats”; these were blank white lab coats that teachers transformed with personally chosen elements such as imagery, text, memorabilia, and symbolic objects. Participants creatively expressed aspects of their professional journeys and teaching philosophies on their Teaching Coats, analyzing their choices and deepening their self-awareness through the process. Each Teaching Coat evolved and was examined as a wearable mixed media collage representing a teacher’s identity.

The central questions of this study included: What are the ways teachers interpret the task to create their own Teaching Coats? And what stories do teachers share in making and discussing the meaning of their Teaching Coats?

Using an arts-based narrative inquiry methodology, this research emphasized a/r/tography practices and the author’s autoethnographical account of her experiences both creating her own Teaching Coat and facilitating the project with three other teachers. The author introduced the concept of a Teaching Coat to



participants during one-on-one interviews and invited them to continue creating their Teaching Coats in their own time over several months. During follow-up interviews, participants discussed the features and meanings of their Teaching Coats and shared reflections on their creative processes. The data collected included participants' stories, written statements, interview transcripts, and photographs of Teaching Coats.

The data was analyzed around a central theme of teacher identity and explored through five interrelated themes: teacher identity as a contextually embedded and co-constructed social phenomenon, teachers' need for self-awareness, the complexity of clarifying boundaries between one's personal and professional identity, teacher authenticity, and transformation.

This study offers a rationale for how The Teaching Coats Project, as an example of an arts-based professional development opportunity, may foster teacher identity by providing a framework for independent exploration and/or participation in a practice-based community of inquiry.

## **Preface**

Ethics approval for this research study was obtained from the University of British Columbia Behavioural Research Ethics Board as a minimal risk study, under UBC BREB number: H11-02805.

The author, Tiffany Poirier, published a version of this paper online with additional information, photographs, and video on her website:

[www.teachingcoats.com](http://www.teachingcoats.com)

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### **To the Teachers of The Teaching Coats Project...**

I want to thank all the teachers who contributed to this project by making a Teaching Coat, offering advice or reflections on the process, and/or sharing the project with others. It is an honour to explore and create with you.

### **To My Students and the People of All Ages with Whom I Work...**

You teach me more than you know. I am fulfilled because of this great privilege to work with you.

### **To My Family, Friends, Colleagues, & Classmates...**

What we share are my greatest treasures. You are a part of me—your words, your actions, and your ways of being.

To my husband Robin, you and our son are my world. This project happened because you support, trust and believe in me, and you understand the importance of what Virginia Woolf calls “A Room of One’s Own”—Even though I know you don’t know what that means, I imagine upon reading this you will indulge my explanation, laugh and say, “*Room of one’s own?* Honey, you have taken over the whole *house!*”

Thank you for making space for my projects, for letting my Teaching Coats work spread out and colonize our home for many months. I now return our shared space: the dining room is cleared of fabric scraps, papers, books, and markers, and we can have a lovely dinner for once *on the table*.

And to James, my son and Earth, moon, and stars: I wish for you the courage and opportunity to explore the corners of your universe, discover and make your own meanings, and feel and share love. Baby boy, I have loved to watch you already reveling in play with dirt and with rocks—

*may your pockets always be filled  
with both dust and gold;  
may you see, feel, and never forget  
the miracle you are.*



## Dedication

*For you, teacher—  
for the work you do,  
the gifts you share  
and  
for who you are.*

# Prologue

## The Fog

It's spring of 2011. I'm cradling my beautiful sleeping baby boy in a rocking chair by the window and considering the haze of the morning. Inside we are warm, mother and child together in our precious little world. I imagine with pride the loving portrait we frame to the larger world outside. A neighbor on the street looks up and notices too. She gives a wave and a knowing smile, passing by with her kids on the way to work and school. I wonder, how many people also live a story like ours? How many people bring home a long-awaited child, with hearts so full they could burst, and want to know how to savour each sacred moment? And how many people—in being, loving, and working all at once—struggle to see clearly amid the pressure system of their complex lives?

I'm in a fog.

I hold my child closer and kiss his perfect forehead, while in my own head the molecules condense. Behind the serene eyes I keep for my son, my mind barrels like a transport truck on a deadline. As a first-time mother, a classroom teacher, and a master of education student, I'm trying to see, steer and hold together a multi-compartmentalized life. I hear the pieces crashing into each other around me, and what can I do? It's an existential Tetris with questions falling at a graduating pace:

*Who am I in these fragmented bits?*

*How do they fit together?*

*Who is this new me?*

*Am I much different*

*from the old me?*

*Am I many different people?*

*How do these identities*

*intersect, or*

*collapse?*

*How can I give my child,*

*my students,*

*and my studies*

*the best*

*of myself...*

*when I'm s—t—r—e—t—c—h—e—d*

*across different places?*

*What boundaries*

*should I draw?*

*Where do I find*

*answers?*

*How do I stay in focus*

*in the bigger picture?*

In my baby-free hand is the reading assignment for my next university class,  
Maxine Greene's exquisite piece, "Wide Awakeness and the Moral Life." I find the

timing to face an article about “wide awakeness” rather ironic—right now I can’t keep my own eyes open. Greene’s words fall away as I sink into a dream.

*Through the keyhole, I see a child. I open the door, and a little girl enters with the chilly air. She appears scruffy with dark hair in knots and a yellow sweatshirt with holes chewed at the cuffs—she could be me at the age of nine years old.*

*“I lost my key and can’t go home,” the girl announces, brushing past me into the foyer.*

*Suddenly I become aware I must be dreaming. This child is indeed my childhood self. Eye to eye with the child I used to be—my heart is overwhelmed. Intrigued and afraid of disturbing this paradox, I accept the situation without question and hang up the girl’s backpack.*

*When I ask the child about her lack of a coat in such cold weather, she flushes embarrassed, claiming she never had one. A vision flashes in my mind. I know the truth: the girl’s coat wasn’t as nice or expensive as the other kids’ coats, so it got stuffed it in a tree on the playground.*

*The girl sits on the entryway bench and kicks off dirt-caked boots in the direction of the wall, scattering debris.*

*“Where are your parents?” I ask hopefully.*

*“Dad died. Mom works late.” Her eyes hollow. I feel like an idiot. Of all people, why don’t I know what to say to comfort her? I stand awkward and silent, like so many other adults I remember.*

*But the child knows there are better things to do.*

*Pushing past me down the basement stairs, she runs and I follow. Next the girl is in my walk-in storage closet; she is on the floor with an album of photos from my teaching career. Crouched down, the girl leans into the various scenes as her fingers trace images of colourful classroom art displays, students' projects, celebrations, and field trips. She points to a photo of some grade seven students and me. We are wearing costumes and silly expressions, gathering around a table of baklava, pita and hummus, and plastic wineglasses of grape juice.*

*"Why are these kids wearing bed sheets?" the child asks, a smile forming.*

*"Togas...it was a party to learn about the philosophers in Ancient Greece."*

*"Must have been fun!"*

*Next she tugs off of the shelf a bag of twelve white bed sheets I had acquired from a hotel housekeeper; behind them she discovers a cream-coloured crocheted tablecloth my grandmother made. Swinging it over her shoulders like a cape, she asks, "This is pretty lace, may I have it?"*

*"Yes, you may."*

*"Where'd you get it?" she asks, surprisingly captivated as I explain the history of the piece. Next, she pulls out and opens a small floral-print box filled with lapel pins I never wore.*

*"U.B.C.," she reads, pressing her thumb over the gilded university logo. Looking back up at me, she asks, "Can I have this too?"*

*"It's yours." I smile knowing what it will mean to the girl someday.*

*"And these ones?" She bargains, gingerly cupping in her hands the remaining pile of clanking metal school logos, treating them like jewels.*

*I survey the pile: "UVic Philosophy, Canadian College of Performing Arts, International Association of Philosophy for Children at Montclair University...Yes, you can have all of these."*

*"But how about this good pin that looks like a boot?" The child presses on, certain she has found the limit of what I will share. She must know this pin is sacred. After all, it was the last present my father gave me, on the last night I saw him, when he was on break from his firefighting training.*

*"This pin...I'll keep for myself. It's a very special treasure."*

*"A special treasure?" she challenges, "Then why did you put it away in a closet?"*

*I pause now—this is the same kind of question I used to ask of my mother. My mom kept much of our family memorabilia out of sight. She would say that sometimes our treasures and memories are personal. Not for display. Some treasures you put away in boxes because they make you sad, and you need to move on. Some treasures, she'd reason, we should take out when the time is right, and we feel we are ready.*

*So, why did I put my own treasures away? I guess there was just so much of it, I couldn't process its meaning, and as I tell the girl, "I put these things away because I wasn't using them."*

*"But why not use them?" She contests, "Don't they matter to you? I like hearing about them very much."*

*"Yes, but you're—"*

*"Just like a student in your class?" she interrupts.*

*"Yes." I suddenly see how this child is like so many of the students I teach: the ones who ask endless questions about the clothes I wear, the trinkets on my desk, and*

*the food in my lunch. It seems these students want to know more about me, perhaps to see if I am real...someone they might want to be like.*

## **Awakening**

My baby stirs, and I lean forward. I marvel at his tiny eyelash rows that flicker open and closed until at last he's awake—astonished by the world.

“What is this place?” he wonders, in the baby language in his mind. “And who are you, lady?” he demands of me through an adorably tough baby brow. Soon his gaze finds focus and softens in recognition, and I melt with him in coos and smiles.

He has my eyes, people say. It makes me wonder, does he also see the world like I do? And does he see me measuring up as his mother?

Who am I to my child? Who am I *now*?

At the very least, I know that perpetually questioning who I am has itself has become a part of me. Such is the joy of having an identity: we gradually awaken to the motion of consciousness and continue rolling like a malleable ball of Playdough through time and space, picking up various traits, beliefs, feelings, etcetera.

When I signed up for a master of education degree in leadership, I hoped I might pick up a few skills as a leader. And if I found I was not good enough to lead others, I hoped to learn enough to lead myself. In 2009, I had lost my first baby, my daughter, at five and a half months pregnancy—with her, I lost myself too. So when I began graduate studies, it was for distraction and a way to move on. I needed to create a sense of purpose and take focus off my sadness and worries.

My main worry back then was this question: Did I spend years teaching and adoring other peoples' children, only to remain myself empty, feeling deprived of

motherhood? From the year and a half after the loss of my first child, my soul ached. Still I held hope.

To survive during this time, I compartmentalized.

To survive, I kept teaching.

To survive, I got up every day and threw myself into work.

In any spare time, I climbed for the top of every university class, polishing the details of every assignment like my life depended on it because, in a way, it did.

Did it work? Perhaps—I survived and hope transformed into the beautiful child I now held in my arms. And although there was a universe of demands clattering away in my mind’s periphery, I would remain strong knowing I would sort it all out eventually. After all, I had survived through harder times before.

Now at last, I am a mother. I am a teacher. And I am a student—and I have work to do! So I reach for the assigned article due for my next class and read aloud to myself and my son Maxine Greene’s opening quote by Henry David Thoreau, “To be awake is to be alive.”

“Did you hear that, sweetheart?” I ask, introducing my baby to academia, “If ‘to be awake is to be alive’...then I think we better check Mommy’s pulse!”

“We must learn to reawaken,” I read on, “and keep ourselves awake, not by mechanical aides, but by an infinite expectation of the dawn...”

Reading further, I smile knowingly as Greene recalls Albert Camus’ poignant line, “Everything begins in that weariness tinged with amazement.”

Yes, indeed, this is exactly how I feel.



# Chapter 1: Introduction

## The Inspiration

After reading Maxine Greene's article "Wide Awakeness and the Moral Life," I felt it was time to take stock of my work as a teacher and to see how my professional identity fit into the greater picture of who I am. It is easy to assume we know who we are; but when we get down to try to explain it, we may begin a questioning process that feels like an unraveling. Yet, standing at a crossroads as a new mother, a teacher, and university student, I had to take that chance. I was going back to work soon and needed to clarify my sense of purpose. I found renewal in the words of Parker Palmer in his book *The Courage to Teach*. Palmer (2007) writes:

I once heard this Hasidic tale: 'We need a coat with two pockets. In one pocket there is dust, and in the other pocket there is gold. We need a coat with two pockets to remind us of who we are.' Knowing, teaching, and learning under the grace of great things will come from teachers who own such a coat and who wear it to class every day. (p. 113)

The passage moved me. The concept of a coat that holds sacred symbols in its pockets twirled through my imagination. The metaphor was so beautiful that I wanted to take it a step further. I imagined the power and meaning of actually wearing a coat with talismans of dust and gold in the pockets; this might energize and inspire me throughout the teaching day.

"Yes, I *need* a coat like that!" I thought, "And I can *make* it myself!"

## The Idea

Reaching for a pencil and a fresh notebook, I jotted down questions and ideas and sketched plans for what I would call my *Teaching Coat*. What would it look like? What stories would it tell?

### ***Q. How do you make a Teaching Coat?***

*A. It's an open-ended creative project.*

I would start with a blank white lab coat—my *tabula rasa*— and adorn it with meaningful symbols. I could write on it inspirational quotes and reflections and attach teaching memorabilia and metaphorical objects to make it unique and personal.



**Figure 1.1: Transforming a lab coat into a Teaching Coat**

### ***Q. What is the purpose of a Teaching Coat?***

*A. It's a way to explore and share one's teacher identity.*

I envisioned my Teaching Coat as a collage of my professional identity. It would reflect my ongoing self-reflective journey as a teacher: my experiences, inspirations, goals and visions as a teacher. Using imagery, text and symbolic objects, my Teaching Coat would embody my teaching philosophy as tangible, wearable artwork. Creating my Teaching Coat would be a professional development exercise, the product of which I could share with others. My Teaching Coat would be a statement of who I am and a way to reach out to others in relationship building. It could be a provocation for dialogue and perhaps the inspiration for a unique way my students and colleagues might engage in their own process of identity discovery.

***Q. What are immediate practical uses and benefits of a Teaching Coat?***

*A. Personal growth; connecting with, role modeling for and inspiring students; building community and empathy in the classroom*

Even before it was fully formed in my mind, I was in love with my idea of The Teaching Coats Project. My hunch was that the process of creating my Teaching Coat would be transformative in my current juncture. Lately I had been feeling in a fog, detached from the seemingly disparate pieces of my life. Now I was energized in the belief that the process of making my Teaching Coat would help me understand the relationship between my professional and personal identities, two things I perceived were distinct but interrelated.

And with whom would I share this coat? First of all, my son would be with me as I would discover the Teaching Coat process—he would be at my side as I gathered and sewed together materials and objects of special meaning. I would use this creative process as time together to tell him stories of the life I lived before he

arrived. Next, I would introduce my students to my Teaching Coat—I imagined how fun and dramatic it would be on the first day back to school to sweep through the classroom door like a wizard in my magical, self-tailored garment. Beholding the blaze of colours and multiple dimensions of the storied cloth, the students would wonder, “Who is this character?” And like a matador with an irresistible a cape, I would find students drawn in with questions about the origins of the unusual fabric art piece. Perhaps the children would gather in a hushed circle to examine the artifact, while I told of the meanings and stories behind each feature and attached treasure. This is how the Teaching Coat would help present to students who I am as a teacher and begin to establish an atmosphere of self-discovery and community learning in our class. The Teaching Coat would be a catalyst for a rich discussion of identity and a segue into the first project of the year: students could make their own Learning Coats!



Figure 1.2: An example I created of how student's Learning Coat might look.

As natural pairing for my Teaching Coat, like ying and yang, the students' own exploration making Learning Coats would help them learn about and express who they are as students. Throughout the school year, we could add to our respective coats, discussing and reflecting on the meanings made in process. These coats would be our personal totems.

The next level would be to engage with the Teaching Coat and the Learning Coats as a way to build our supportive learning community. Perhaps students would begin to see one another's lives unfolding like these works of art in progress. When carefully briefed and invited to try on one another's coats in circle time, students might feel like they are glimpsing into one another's worlds—this could be a part of learning perspective-taking and a doorway to developing empathy.

***Q. Who should make a Teaching Coat?***

*A. It can be a professional development activity for any teacher.*

When I first started sharing the idea for The Teaching Coats Project with other teacher friends and family, it sparked rich conversation. I would ask teachers, "If you had a Teaching Coat, what would it look like?" The responses were so varied and inspiring that they often sent me back to work on my own Teaching Coat with even greater enthusiasm and new insight. As more teachers got word of the project, more became intrigued and asked how to get involved.

Wanting to explore and facilitate The Teaching Coats Project with others on a larger scale, I began to outline a teachers' professional development program around the Teaching Coats concept. I thought the project would work well in a workshop, retreat, or university course setting as a unique opportunity to foster

teacher identity. I envisioned that as we explored the project, we teachers might learn about who we are while recording our meanings in the cloth of Teaching Coats we could analyze and share.

***Q. What are the long-term benefits of a Teaching Coat?***

*A. Increased self-awareness, potential for greater teacher authenticity, and clarification of the boundaries between one's personal identity and professional identity.*

Over time I saw how the Teaching Coat process contributed to increasing my own transparency and reflexivity as a professional. Occasionally I thought wearing my Teaching Coat might make me feel silly or too vulnerable, and I knew the roots of these fears needed to be understood. Because students only feel safe when we are *real* with them, to be a great teacher I would have to “wear my heart on my sleeve” to an extent. At least with a Teaching Coat, I would have taken time in advance to know my own heart. I would make sure that my Teaching Coat was a thoughtful, authentic symbol of my professional identity revealing only those personal topics I felt comfortable sharing and which would add value to students’ learning.

***Q. What challenges/opportunities surface in making and sharing a Teaching Coat?***

*A. Opportunity for clarifying the boundaries of professional identity versus personal identity, and demonstrating courage.*

Going deeper into the project, I faced this question: *What is too personal or sacred to share in a public way at work?* I also wondered: *Which facets of my*

*personal identity would I want to share in some professional contexts but not in others?* Through reflection, I found that my Teaching Coat, which was becoming like my “professional uniform”, was the perfect symbol to express the movable boundary between my personal and professional identity. After all, a Teaching Coat, like any coat, can be put on to go to work, but taken off when arriving home. And as teachers living in both private and professional worlds, we daily negotiate between the two and our Teaching Coats “track in the mud” from both places. I found it fascinating to examine how the ways our Teaching Coats are both *made* and *lived in* provide valuable critique of our teacher identities.

Some people wonder, “Won’t teachers feel silly wearing a Teaching Coat?” My answer is, “Probably—and how wonderful!” How wonderful for students when a teacher courageously role models that the classroom is a safe place, a place to take creative chances and to be one’s self.

***Q. How can a Teaching Coat compete for relevancy in the 21<sup>st</sup> century?***

*A. Making and sharing a Teaching Coat is a unique multi-sensorial, multiple intelligences learning experience for both teachers and students.*

In a technology-driven 21<sup>st</sup> century, we may wonder why anybody would be interested in a Teaching Coat? After all, it’s not a gadget with simultaneous capabilities for Wi-Fi, web browsing, photo, video, voicemail, text message, and apps. When students are bombarded daily with a flurry of advertising for smart technology, how could a Teaching Coat capture their attention? Why should teachers make Teaching Coats to explore and share their teacher identities, when they can make blogs or websites with the same intention?

Perhaps on the surface, a Teaching Coat is not as “21<sup>st</sup> century” as other things. It seems rather folksy with its roots in textile traditions, its pockets filled with dust and gold, and its decorations of bric-a-brac in a homemade fashion. Yet there is something raw and deeply human about a Teaching Coat that speaks to its value for both teachers and students.

Indeed, we can explore and share our teacher identities in a myriad of ways—and we should. A Teaching Coat is an option for a live, multi-sensorial, multiple intelligences learning experience that, for some teachers, may be a professional development activity that excites and challenges them, and that delivers understandings they might not find otherwise.

More than mere brains in vats plugged into a “Matrix” of sorts, teachers and students are embodied, sensory-oriented beings who crave learning opportunities that acknowledge this fact. No matter how plugged in we become, humans will always seek tangible experiences that feel *real*, that they can see, touch, hear, smell, and taste—a Teaching Coat speaks to us on these and other levels.

Fittingly, when I came to understand the true value of my Teaching Coat for my students and myself, I experienced it not only as an intellectual understanding, but as a visceral revelation. I discovered my Teaching Coat’s meaning and value while dyeing, ironing, sewing, and writing reflections on the fabric. The value came to me in the physical process of flipping through old photo albums and unpacking dusty boxes of memories in the hunt for treasures to add to my Teaching Coat.

Ultimately, each student and teacher of the 21<sup>st</sup> and any other century decides what is relevant, what reaches them, what is meaningful and what inspires



them. I believe the power of a Teaching Coat is decided in the moment we feel it speak to us. Insofar as this project can help us to see, create and share who we are, a Teaching Coat is as meaningful, alive, and relevant as the life we breathe into it.

### **The Teaching Coats Project: A Research Study**

The Teaching Coats Project began as an idea for a professional development activity in which teachers would create their own Teaching Coats, conducting arts-based research into their professional identities. Wanting to explore more deeply what might occur in this process, I made The Teaching Coats Project the focus of this qualitative study. The central questions of this research were: What are the ways teachers interpret the task to create their own Teaching Coats? And what stories do teachers share in creating and discussing the meaning of their Teaching Coats? Including myself, four teachers participated in this study by creating and dialoguing about their Teaching Coats. Expressed as an arts-based narrative inquiry, the research explored teacher identity through analysis of the study participants' Teaching Coat artworks, interviews and narratives. Discussion of the data revealed a central theme of teacher identity, which is explored in this paper through five interrelated themes: teacher identity as a contextually embedded and co-constructed social phenomenon; teachers' need for self-awareness; the complexity of clarifying boundaries between one's personal and professional identity; teacher authenticity; and transformation.

## Chapter 2: Exploring the Literature

*"Books serve to show a man that those original thoughts of his aren't very new at all."*

-Abraham Lincoln

With over seven billion people on the planet at present and many more in human history, it seems the odds are that whatever I think, someone else has already thought of it—this drives me nuts.

I want to have an identity, to know myself as a unique being, to come up with something new, to be an inventor, an innovator, and an independent mind. But life as a both a student and teacher trained me to me feel obliged to footnote my very existence. And if we think about it philosophically, it's pretty hard to know where the stuff of other people ends and where our own stuff begins. We are like threads embedded in a greater fabric.

Still, I dream that one of these days I will stop unwittingly reinventing other peoples' wheels and have what I can clearly hold up as my own original thought. Towards this end, a masochistic habit I developed early as a songwriter and then an education writer was to plug all of my fresh song lyrics, article headings, and book titles into Google—it's amazing how unoriginal one can feel by online search engine standards. Like a Vegas gambler, I persist in punching each hard earned new thought into the internet—the slot machine of ideas—usually to discover my "original" thought preempted several years ago by some bestseller on Amazon, an indie band in Ireland, or an edu-blogger in San Francisco.

But one fateful day, my luck changed.

For the first time, I envisioned and phrased a concept in a way that produced “no results” when searching the web.

Exhilarating!

The oracle of the internet decreed that “Teaching Coat,” “Teaching Coats” and “The Teaching Coats Project” were officially uncharted territory! Drop anchor, buy the domain name! I’ve discovered the last unclaimed idea!

This little moment was a humbling victory in my mind. I had reached the edge of a universe and could journey on if I carved a new path. What a learning opportunity! But what a *pain* when it came time to write the literature review portion of my research paper!

“No one understands,” I complained to my impressed imaginary audience. “How can the university *possibly* expect me to do a ‘literature review’ on Teaching Coats when I *invented* Teaching Coats!”

Clinging to a note I had found that a formal literature review may play a minor role, or may not even occur, in some narrative research (Creswell, 2008, p. 516), I believed I would do just fine without one.

But soon I realized that tackling the project on my own put limits on it, and I hungered to see where this project might fit in a broader context. And to be honest, my resistance to reviewing literature largely stemmed from my confusion about where to begin. Did I really know what The Teaching Coats Project was about?

After a little reflection and dialogue with others, I found I was facing not a desert, but a vast ocean of literature support—my problem now was that I didn’t know where I should dive in!

As my understanding of The Teaching Coats Project came into focus in the course of the research, themes emerged that I would follow like Alice down the rabbit hole. Every corner of my home became awash with books and photocopied articles stacked and highlighted as I voyaged outwards in many exciting directions.

Unbeknownst to me, The Teaching Coats Project I conceived had its own identity, one with ancestry in rich and diverse traditions. The more research I did, the more I saw how The Teaching Coats Project was supported by and had a place in several communities of thought and practice. Indeed, there was no book on “Teaching Coats” that I could cite for my research paper, but what I did find was varied literature on philosophy-steeped fabric and arts traditions, for example, quilting, collage, punk rock jackets, and Tibetan prayer flags. As well, I learned about narrative inquiry, arts-based research and a/r/tography methodologies. The thread I would stitch the entire project together that came up time and again in the literature was the thread of *teacher identity*.

### **Central Theme: Teacher Identity**

In this research, this central theme of *teacher identity* was inspired by Parker Palmer (2007) who expresses that in teaching we ask questions of *what*, *how* and *why* but that “seldom, if ever, do we ask the ‘who’ question—who is the self that teaches?” (p. 4). Palmer argues that knowing oneself “is as crucial to good teaching as is knowing [one’s] students and [one’s] subject” (p. 3). He makes a passionate case for teachers to develop self-knowledge as valuable process in itself and because “we teach who we are” (p. 2).

Who am I? It's amazing how huge a three-syllable question can be, isn't it? This question is tantamount in complexity to another powerful, pint-sized query, "What is the meaning of life?" Even as a philosophy-lover myself, I have found that reflecting directly on who I am can cause an existential headache. My temptation when answering the question of who I am is to first stumble through superficial details like name, gender, and social roles until words fail and the exercise feels like trying to put an ocean in a paper cup.

Likewise, the question of who I am *as a teacher* can be confusing, intimidating and exhausting. This is what I found when I was asked to write my "teaching philosophy" for a university assignment. Yet, rather than making us feel like failures before we begin, shouldn't the task of defining who we are as professionals be an *affirming* exploration? So why is the task so hard?

A big part of the challenge teachers face in understanding their teacher identities could be that grasping to even understand the term "teacher identity" is like aiming for a fuzzy, moving target. Teacher identity is not universally defined (Beauchamp & Thomas, 2009, p. 176), and where it is defined in the literature, it is often referred to as something that is both a *product* and a *process*, something that is non-static, changeable, dynamic, and shifting over time (Beauchamp & Thomas, 2009, p. 177; Chong, 2011, p. 230).

Teacher identity is multi-dimensional and there may be many paths to how we come to understand and define the concept. In a review of the literature, Catherine Beauchamp and Lynn Thomas (2009) note that the concept of teacher identity has been recently explored through numerous methods and lenses,

including examination of the ways teachers reinvent themselves, teacher narratives, teacher discourses, metaphors of practice, and contextual factors (pp. 175-176). In seeking to understand and define teacher identity, Beauchamp and Thomas (2009) name the challenge and need for support:

One must struggle to comprehend the close connection between identity and the self, the role of emotion in shaping identity, the power of stories and discourse in understanding identity, the role of reflection in shaping identity, the link between identity and agency, the contextual factors that promote or hinder the construction of identity, and ultimately the responsibility of teacher education programs to create opportunities for the exploration of new and developing teacher identities. (p. 176)

Whatever teacher identity is and how we ultimately define it, most of us seem to understand intuitively it is a thing of deep value to which we must attend and that must be fostered. It is widely acknowledged that this should happen in both teacher education programs as well as in the workplace (Beauchamp & Thomas, 2009; Goodnough 2011). Based on her longitudinal research study designed to improve initial teacher preparation programs, Sylvia Chong (2011) concluded that

if not nurtured carefully, the study has shown that [teacher identity] can deteriorate or diminish. A strong sense of personal and professional identity will strengthen novice teachers' understanding of the demands and nature of the teaching role. This process is best not left to chance, and should be nurtured in supportive contexts. (pp. 230-231)

So how might we nurture teacher identity? How does a supportive context look? Karen Goodnough (2011) emphasizes the value of action research that promotes an “inquiry stance” that fosters *teacher agency, collaboration, reflection* and *embeddedness* through practice-based inquiry (p. 83). Likewise, John Trent (2010) cites Varghese et al. (2005) to highlight the need for participatory, practice-based exploration:

A comprehensive understanding of becoming a teacher requires attention to both ‘identity-in-discourse’ and ‘identity-in-practice’. ‘Identity-in-practice’ describes an action-orientated approach to understanding identity, underlining the need to investigate identity formation as a social matter, which is operationalised through concrete practices and tasks. (p. 154)

The Teaching Coats Project arose from a desire to actively engage teachers in exactly these types of explorations of teacher identity. Participants in the program grapple with the deeply personal questions of *who am I as a teacher? How do I know these things about myself? And in what ways will I express who I am as a teacher, for myself and with others?* In addressing these questions myself by making and reflecting on my own Teaching Coat, and in dialogue with the participants in the study, I found five themes emerged related to teacher identity. These themes, discussed in more detail through the research in Chapter 5, include (a.) teacher identity as a socially constructed, contextually-based phenomena, (b.) teachers’ need for self-awareness, (c.) teachers’ need to reflect on boundaries between the personal and professional self, (d.) definitions of teacher authenticity, and (e.) self-learning as transformation.

## Chapter 3: Methodologies and Reflections

This research, expressed as an arts-based narrative inquiry, explores The Teaching Coats Project, which is a professional development activity for teachers. Through the process of making Teaching Coats, teachers conduct their own arts-based research into their professional identities. Clarifying a methodology for this research was a unique journey in itself.

### **Why *this* project? Why *this* way?**

Choosing to follow the path of The Teaching Coats Project as a research study was not a pragmatic or rational decision on my part. It was more like my heart saw a sprite at the edge of a wood and leapt in wildly after it. My “researcher brain” had to work to keep up. To continue the analogy, I would say that mapping a clear methodology for this research was something I did only once I came out on the other side.

When I encountered a growing and flourishing arts-based research community in the middle of my journey, I felt relieved to be able to give a name to the magical place I had been exploring on my own. When I learned others had travelled in these regions and also believed in them, it felt like a homecoming.

“You’re not alone in what you are doing...” assured Dr. Carl Leggo, a poet and professor I had sought out to supervise the second half of my research. “Arts-based research is a thriving, well-established field and has been for quite some time now.” Relevant to my research with The Teaching Coats Project, he listed numerous references for inspiration and support, including the works of Elliot Eisner, Tom



Barone, Patricia Leavy, Sandra Weber, Rita Irwin and others. As he pulled off a shelf a thick new volume, Sage Publication's *Handbook of the Arts in Qualitative Research*, I took it as a welcoming into a hitherto secret world.

Until this point, I had struggled for the language to express to other parts of my university what I was trying to do with my research with The Teaching Coats Project. As a right-brained, artsy type in my core and a trained actor, I had spent a lot of my life amused by playing the roles needed to successfully *pass* in left-brained societies. Still, I want to play *myself* sometimes. I believe there is a particular need to support our multiple intelligences expressions in a master of education program in leadership, but often I found learning exercises in my program delivered in two dimensions. From my experience, I gathered that designing multi-modal, experiential learning experiences for the university classroom setting was either not understood or seen as too time-consuming, too expensive or not important. In my studies I heard lip-service paid to creativity, but I sensed a hidden curriculum.

*How to become an educational leader:*

*write an academic paper,*

*with data in charts and graphs*

*and footnotes to other people*

*who have proven what they know*

*by publishing articles, with data in charts and graphs*

*and footnotes to other people, ad infinitum—*

*Oh, you want to learn to be creative, do you?*

*Feel free...to add a jpeg or two.*

I got the feeling that because I am a right-brained teacher and because I signed up for an M.Ed. degree over an MA, I was to be treated as just a *tourist* in academia; I perceived a message that I should hurry up to get back to my station as a ready-made educational leader by side-stepping Pandora's box of messier research explorations. I was encouraged to "fit in" with the left brains and focus my research on something straightforward, controllable, buttoned-up, and "scientific" looking. Perhaps my feelings towards this directive are aptly expressed through the visual created by my project: graffitied white lab coats, stained with resistance and bleeding our teacher identities.

I wanted my research work, like my teacher identity, to flow and feel authentic. When it came time to decide a direction for my final research project, something that would absorb vast amounts of time, I would commit myself to nothing less than something that had the potential to be beautiful, meaningful and a multi-dimensional expression of educational leadership. The Teaching Coats Project I was creating felt like my perfect fit.

Still, from the very beginning and throughout the research I swatted at questions in the shadows: Why *this* project? Why *this* way? Why work through the arts in a fabric medium of which you have no technical knowledge or experience? Why work in *fabric* for a project in *educational leadership*? Why not pursue a more traditional path that would be *easier to explain to others* at the university? Why not put your head down into an elegant quantitative study that would neatly contribute *easily assimilated data* to the canon of "real knowledge"? Why take on this project that is *big, confusing, and potentially unresolvable*? Why take this on now when you

also have *responsibilities* to your new baby, other university courses, work and providing for your family? Why not join a pre-established research group of friendly colleagues with a clear trajectory and enjoy responsibility for only a fraction of the research responsibilities? Why not follow a simpler route that would take *less time, less money and less physical, mental, and emotional effort*?

I heard these questions asked over and over in voices of some professors, classmates, family and even my own fears. The fact that I persevered with the sometimes fuzzy, inarticulate visions of what would become The Teaching Coats Project, while at times feeling dismissed as an odd duck “goofing around with arts and crafts,” I believe is a testament to the support leant to me in the past by a few mentors. At some point in my own history as a student, I was reached by a teacher who led me to see how art may possess knowledge, and a teacher who nurtured my courage as an artist, a teacher who taught me I could raise myself up by standing on the shoulders of giants, and a teacher who cheered me on as I scaled the hardest mountain of my creative life.

So why *this* project? Why *this* way? To answer these and other questions that stalked me like wolves from the shadows during this research, I had one simple answer. This project happened in this way *because my heart was calling me*.

## **Searching for a Methodology**

*“Art is science made clear.”*

-Wilson Mizner

As a novice researcher, I first experimented to see if my vision for The Teaching Coats Project could fit into the more limited range of methodological

categories occurring around me in my university department. I wondered which aspects of my research could focus on *measurability, proof, or generalizability*? I experimented, inventing a “science” of Teaching Coats:

*There will be four Teaching Coats measured in the scope of this research. The measurements will range...in size?...from small to large? The proof of their value can be shown by a formula such as:*

$$\text{Teaching Coat (T)} = \text{Value (V)} = \frac{\text{Meaning (M)} \times \text{Expression (E)}}{\text{Intention (I)}}$$

But the experiment proved reductive and absurd. My experience of the work didn’t make sense when funneled narrowly this way. Yet the failure of this experiment in clarified a direction for my journey. I believe it would serve me later as a reminder of the importance of patience when encountering open ends and loose threads in the research process. I would try to remember to resist the temptation to impose on The Teaching Coats Project an unnatural structure and instead let it become what it needed to be.

Initially it was inconvenient that what my participants and I discovered would not be disembodied to fit neatly into tables, charts, diagrams, and words. Yet attempting and failing to constrain the expression of the project in this way tipped me off and shone glimmering hope that the work was developing a multi-dimensional or transcendental quality I once boldly dreamed it might.

A wonderful teacher I once had transformed my thinking by showing me how metaphor can access ways of knowing otherwise invisible. I loved thinking about how my Teaching Coat metaphor transcended other ways of expressing my teacher identity. I see my Teaching Coat as the ultimate piece of research data—the ideal

*field text* (Creswell, 2007, p. 55). My Teaching Coat casts a me-like silhouette I can trace, and the act of creating my Teaching Coat was like giving birth to a kind of “embodied knowledge”, which helped me gain perspective from a distance. The “embodied knowledge” was something tangible I could feel when I wore the Teaching Coat around me. Ruth Leitch describes “embodied knowledge” with reference to Derry’s (2005) work, as “a way of knowing that goes beyond the intellectual, logical and rational mode of thinking that has been traditionally defined to include ‘emotions, culture, physical sensation and life experiences’” (2006, p. 552). I believe this is the way my Teaching Coat teaches me.

A key question for participants in this research was: “Who are you as teacher?” This can be a complex question to answer. I had to admit that even the Teaching Coats and our dialogues about them might not be able to capture and represent the whole story of any one teacher’s identity. Teachers’ own truths speak in different tongues; but going into this project I believed, based on my own past experience, that the arts could offer perceptible translations. Elliot Eisner (2006) discusses Susanne Langer’s (1957) account of art as “feelings and emotions that the artist knows; his insight into the nature of sentience, his pictures of vital experience, physical, emotive and fantastic” (p. 91) and adds that

such knowledge is not expressive in ordinary discourse. The reason for this ineffability is not that the ideas to be expressed are too high, too spiritual or too anything else, but that the forms of feeling and the forms of discursive expression are logically incommensurate. (p. 7)

I believe the essence of our most exquisite discoveries and truths can never be captured by any research methodology. Instead, they are perceptible *in moments of being, in intentions, and in exchanges*. So far, the best way I know how to communicate about the “ineffable” is to translate through the languages of the arts.

## **Blending Methodologies**

After designing The Teaching Coats Project to support participants in reflecting on their teacher identities, I learned that the methods employed were aligned with what the literature describes as **arts-based research** and **a/r/tography** methodologies. In studying the processes of four teachers, including myself, who used arts-based research and a/r/tography methodologies to make their own Teaching Coats, I express the research within an **arts-based narrative inquiry** framework. The final research is explored through my **autoethnography** to provide context for the intent and development of the project and in an effort towards reflexivity as a researcher.

## **My Lens, My Autoethnography**

*I am like a videographer, out to discover and share the story of The Teaching Coats Project. I set up to record in the places Teaching Coats may emerge. I angle my camera towards the action, focusing my lens on the study participants—on what they make, say, and express through the modalities they choose. I review our footage and invite feedback on what is recorded. Like a curator, I gather and present the images and stories that I believe inform and resonate. I don't know for sure how the final*

*movie will play, and while my angles are reflexive, I am not objective. My lens seeks to zoom in on the beauty and meaning the Teaching Coats offer.*

Before understanding and choosing the appropriate methodology for this study, I had to step back and admit the scope of my bias in approaching researching The Teaching Coats Project. As the project's creator, a participant within the research study, and a researcher all at once, I acknowledged I was inextricably personally invested and seeing the project through an *appreciative* lens. Without naming this bias, the research would be as trustworthy as calling someone's mother for a job reference. Still, although biased, sometimes the people closest to us can shed light on aspects of ourselves otherwise unseen. I hoped that by acknowledging my bias in my research, I could harness the power of my personal connection to it and share deeper insight as an insider to the project—after all, who better to give a traveller a tour around a foreign land than a native dweller? Still, I knew my enmeshed position would bring with it certain limitations I wouldn't be able to see.

I learned about *reflexivity* in my university studies and deeply believe this to be an important goal both for teachers and researchers. My research process was influenced by the words of Hammersley (2003):

Researchers are always part of the social world they study; they can never step above it in order to gain an Olympian perspective or move outside it to get a 'view from nowhere.' It is taken to follow from this that they should continually reflect on their own role in the research process and on the wider context in which it occurs. This kind of reflection should guide the course of research; and in writing up their findings, it is argued, researchers ought to

give a detailed account of the research process so as to allow readers to judge their findings in context. (para. 1)

As teachers and researchers we need to acknowledge the angle of our lenses. Our biases impact our practices. Indeed, endeavoring towards reflexivity is what I had hoped The Teaching Coats Project as professional development would be all about. So I reasoned I would research in the same manner and spirit as advocated by the project itself: I would personally engage and answer questions through an art-making process, allowing understandings to flow through in a combination of words, images, artworks, and organize, present and discuss the product of the explorations as a kind of artwork itself. This was my attraction to exploring the research as an arts-based narrative inquiry within my own autoethnography.

In the abstract of “Autoethnography: An Overview”, Ellis, Adams, and Bochner (2011) define autoethnography as

an approach to research and writing that seeks to describe and systematically analyze personal experience in order to understand cultural experience. This approach challenges canonical ways of doing research and representing others and treats research as a political, socially-just and socially-conscious act. A researcher uses tenets of autobiography and ethnography to do and write autoethnography. Thus, as a method, autoethnography is both process and product. (para. 1)

In reporting on this research through writing my autoethnography, I knew that I would need to constantly draw lines between what I was writing for my own *process* and what would be useful to share with others as the *product* of that



process. I ended up with hundreds of pages of *process* in the form of journaling, and it was an extraordinarily difficult task to go back to evaluate and rework portions for highlighting in the research. Yet therein lay the value of the narrative research methodology. Through selection, analysis and evaluation, I saw my chicken-scratches on notepads transformed into communicable meanings.

Discovering autoethnography for the first time in the process of researching The Teaching Coats Project, I came to understand better Stacy Holman Jones' (2005) description of this methodology as "a balancing act...autoethnography writes a world in a state of flux and movement—between story and context, writer and reader, crisis and denouement. It creates charged moments of clarity and change" (p. 765).

### **Arts-Based Research**

*"All art is autobiographical. The pearl is the oyster's autobiography."*

-Federico Fellini

"Arts-based research", a term Elliot Eisner coined in the 1990's, is a growing field of inquiry that took root in the 1970s when the practices of artists and art critics began to influence the processes of educational research (Sinner, et al., 2006, p. 1226). This methodology "incorporates the processes, forms (or structures), and approaches of creative practices in academic scholarship" (Sinner, et al., 2006, p. 1226) and emphasizes the "aesthetic experience" to deepen the discovery process (Eisner, 2006, p. 9). Shaun McNiff (2007) offers a definition of arts-based research as

the systematic use of the artistic process, the actual making of artistic expressions in all of the different forms of the arts, as a primary way of understanding and examining experience by both researchers and the people that they involve in their studies. These inquiries are distinguished from research activities where the arts may play a significant role but are essentially used as data for investigations that take place within academic disciplines that utilize more traditional scientific, verbal, and mathematic descriptions and analyses of phenomena. (p. 29)

The goal of arts-based research, which can encompass narrative and other multiple modes of expression, is non-traditional. The goal is not to make knowledge claims or achieve validity and reliability, but to review phenomena “that have come to be perceived or conceived of in a manner that is usual, conventional, or orthodox” (Barone, 2010, p. 44). Fels and Irwin (2008) explain the how arts-based research may involve increased reflexivity on the part of researchers and participants:

[Arts-based research] calls us to question who we are as researchers, as educators, as citizens, and how we have come to understand our own positioning and responsibilities in constructed realities that situate us within our own communal and academic endeavors...Arts-based research calls us to question, to interrupt, to disrupt, to create, to inquire, to reflect, and to engage in meaningful ways, so that we might begin to offer new ways of engagement and understanding to our students, our educators, our communities. (para. 13-14)

In *Method Meets Art: Arts-Based Research Practice*, Patricia Leavy (2009) describes the many advantages of arts-based research work. The arts, she writes, “at their best, are known for being emotionally and politically evocative, captivating, aesthetically powerful and moving. Art can grab people’s attention in powerful ways” (p. 12). Leavy describes a quality of *immediacy* that the arts offer; she explains how qualitative researchers may access through arts-based methods certain information, understandings and experiences otherwise inaccessible and which are particularly useful in research projects that aim to describe, explore or discover (p. 12). Diverging from traditional methods, arts-based research often emphasizes *process* as opposed to *product*, (p. 12). Offering short term and long term benefits, the immediacy and process-orientation of the arts all contribute to why researchers exploring identity choose arts-based methods (p. 13).

### **A/r/tography**

*“Art is not a thing; it is a way.”*

-Elbert Hubbard

A/r/tography is a form of arts-based action research that is, as Rita Irwin (2010) describes, “concerned with possibilities rather than probabilities” (p. 42). Irwin describes the forward slashes in a/r/tography as representing the bringing together of both the arts and writing (graphy), as well as signifying the interconnected parts of the artist, researcher, and teacher (educator/learner), explaining that they “are contiguous representations of identities colliding, merging, and separating as the dynamics of a situation are revealed” (p. 42). A/r/tographers,

she explains, “do not separate theory, practice, and making, preferring to use all three ways of knowing in complementary or even contradictory ways” (p. 42).

I see the teachers who undertake the journey of making their own Teaching Coat as being a/r/tographers. The community of inquiry that we created in this research exhibits what Irwin (2010, p. 42) lists as the commitments of an a/r/tographic community:

<b>Commitments of an A/r/tographic Community</b>	<b>A/r/tographic Elements of The Teaching Coats Project</b>
(1.) a commitment to a way of being in the world	Participants must undertake an arts-based self-reflective process to examine their identities and experiences as educators
(2.) a commitment to inquiry	Participants must examine their identities as educators through art-making and reflection
(3.) a commitment to negotiating personal engagement within a community of belonging	Participants must determine their own paths to designing their Teaching Coats; they discuss their experiences in The Teaching Coats Project; their discussion participates in and contributes to establishing a Teaching Coats Project community.
(4.) a commitment to creating practices that trouble and address differences	Participants must make decisions about what to express of the complex challenging aspects of their identity (beliefs, experiences, motivations, etc.); they may discuss tensions in these decisions with others; in some cases, participants wear their Teaching Coats in their places of work to elicit responses.

**Table 1: The Commitments of an A/r/tographic Community; A/r/tographic Elements of The Teaching Coats Project**

## **Narrative Inquiry**

*Stories are how we think. They are how we make meaning of life. Call them schemas, scripts, cognitive maps, mental models, metaphors, or narratives.*

*Stories are how we justify our decisions, how we persuade others, how we*

*understand our place in the world, create our identities, and define and teach social values.*

-Patricia Rutledge

Stories are everywhere, told in all the ways humans communicate. The vehicles people have used to convey stories have been historically diverse, from the ancient cave drawings to modern personal blogs and many ways in between. For example, stories are expressed through modes of representation including written, oral, image-based, dance, and musical. Webster and Mertova (2007) make the case for the importance of narratives as integral to the human experience:

People make sense of their lives according to the narratives available to them...We all have a basic need for story, for organizing our experiences in to tales of important happenings...Narrative should not be looked upon as separate from real life, but as forming meaningful connections to that life. (p. 2).

Narrative inquiry is a research methodology that deals in the making and analyzing of stories. Susan E. Chase describes this methodology as both flourishing and “a field in the making” (2005, p. 651). She presents narrative inquiry as a subtype of qualitative inquiry that is “characterized as an amalgam of interdisciplinary analytic lenses, diverse disciplinary approaches, and both traditional and innovative methods—all revolving around an interest in biographical particulars as narrated by the one who lives them” (p. 651).

To paraphrase Natasha Wiebe (2009) who references Creswell (2008) in describing the key characteristics of narrative inquiry, these typically include: (1.)

flexibility in the development of the research; (2.) emphasis on the experiences of an individual over that of group; (3.) life experiences described through story structure; (4.) coding of field texts (such as interview transcripts) for themes; (5.) restorying data around specific themes, settings, or chronology; (6.) collaboration between the researcher and others; (7.) the researcher learning from research participants; and (8.) writing that exhibits a literary nature in that it may, for example, be engaging, persuasive, and or make use of literary conventions.

I like Jerome Bruner's (1990) explanation of narrative analysis as "how protagonists interpret things" (p. 51). This reminds me of how in my own narrative research I am both protagonist and author, simultaneously living in, constructing, and sharing my world. I believe researchers may draw important conclusions through narrative as they live-write-read and then relive-rewrite-reread—continually zooming in and out, growing in and enriching their perspectives.

### **Bringing It All Together: Arts-Based Narrative Inquiry**

*"A writer should write with his eyes and a painter paint with his ears."*

-Gertrude Stein

As a methodology, narrative inquiry is a genre encompassed by arts-based research (Leavy, p. ix, 3). Conversely, arts-based research is presented as a type of narrative inquiry (Mello, 2007, p. 214). In reflecting on how the narratives of this research grow from both the Teaching Coats and the discussion of these artworks, I chose to identify this research as an *arts-based narrative inquiry* to acknowledge what I believe are the vital contributions of both the visual arts and narrative arts. Mello (2007) defines arts-based narrative as follows:

When art is applied in narrative inquiry as a part of the method, as a way of composing and gathering field texts, it is considered to be the base of the whole research process. In this case, art is the beginning of everything. That is why I call it arts-based narrative. (p. 214)

A picture may speak a thousand words, and likewise the wordsmith may summarize a thousand pictures in a single word. In my research with The Teaching Coats Project, I found both narrative and arts-derived imagery to be like yin and yang in the discovery process; I found the study participant and I could often rely on one form of expression when the other form failed to express what we intentioned.

Understanding that narrative inquiry “rests on the assumption that we as human beings make sense of random experience by the imposition of story structures on them” (Webster & Mertova, 2007, p. 3), I was further inspired by Carl Leggo’s [2008] invitation to see the opportunity of the artist and writer in rendering meanings:

The mundane events of our lives *are* already stories, but they are only invested with significance in the ways they are told. Just as the artist represents a still image of the ocean rolling onto a beach, the writer holds a moment, or part of a moment, in order to draw attention to it. (para. 6)

I found it especially valuable in my own process of making my Teaching Coat to explore applying narrative structure to my Teaching Coat’s artwork and features *as a way to derive more powerful meanings from them*. I often found that even the most abstract elements of my art in my Teaching Coat, when I challenged myself to impose a story on them, revealed deeper meanings. This was a strategy I carried

into supporting others in creating their own Teaching Coats. For example, I asked myself, “What could be the story behind my decision to layer blue and green tones on the background of the front side fabric?” By attempting to conjure a story for the presence of the colour, I transformed what I thought was simply a matter of aesthetic preference. Telling a story revealed connections to a memory of a time I swam in a river fighting the current until I discovered I could get where I needed if I learned to “go with the flow”. In storytelling mode, I was able to then push a step further to connect the story to illustrate an inspiring Zen principle. Through the act of creating narrative, a seemingly random feature of my Teaching Coat emerged with a special meaning.

In many instances of this research study, for myself and the study participants, this kind of Rorschach Test approach to analyzing the art and stories of our Teaching Coats was an enjoyable creative challenge but also fruitful in a personal sense. In the research I found the provocation to “*Tell the story of feature x*” elicited the richest explanations of meaning. Through arts-based narrative inquiry with my own Teaching Coat, I experienced how personal artwork and stories together can express the fabric of our identities; I saw how even seemingly irrelevant details in the fabric of identities may actually reveal our powerful truths.

## **The Participants, The Procedures**

The participants in this study included myself and three other teachers currently working in the British Columbia public school system. Our teaching experience backgrounds included placements in a broad range of subject areas (math, science, arts, history, physical education, arts, etc.) and grade levels from



kindergarten through grade twelve.

As a participant in this research, I engaged in self-interviewing as an ongoing process through journaling, which formed the basis for the autoethnographical portions of this research.

I selected the other three participants using a snowball sampling method that began with sending a generic email invitation to participate in the study through an education department university list-serve. Participants were then identified on a “first-come first serve” basis. As it turned out, I had a pre-established working relationship with each of the study’s participants.

I interviewed the three participants in two private one-on-one interview sessions, either in person or by phone, with each session typically taking place between one hour and ninety-minutes.

When introducing participants to the study in the first session, I described my role of researcher as similar to that of a *facilitator*. I shared my own story of how I came to the inspiration for The Teaching Coats Project, then provided examples in the form of descriptions, photographs, and pencil sketches. With each participant, I adjusted how much time was used to describe the project based on his or her request for more examples or creative thinking prompts. I used an open-ended interviewing style, explaining to the participants that my goal as a researcher-facilitator was to employ an “empathetic interviewing” practice; Fontana and Frey (2005) describe empathetic interviewing as involving “tak[ing] an ethical stance in favour of the group or individual being studied and wherein the interviewer becomes an advocate and partner in the study” (p. 696).

Endeavoring towards reflexivity, I acknowledged to prospective participants that driving this research were my beliefs that (a.) teachers' work is profoundly important to both students and the teachers themselves; (b.) deeper self-knowledge enhances a teacher's professional practice; and (c.) being a teaching professional is an ever-evolving personal journey that often demands sharing aspects of one's personal self, a task requiring cultivation of both courage and exquisite professional judgment.

I encouraged participants to feel free to express themselves in any way they like, to trust that I embraced anything they chose to share, and that they had the right to change or retract any comments or artworks made in the process of the research before publication. During the interviews, participants shared their responses to questions, memories, philosophies, and insights derived from the "critical events" (Webster & Mertova, 2007, pp. 71-88) they believed shaped their teaching identities. Then, participants were invited and given opportunity to reveal these responses and any related discoveries through creative narratives and/or the creation of a symbolic Teaching Coat.

During the first interviews, participants were provided with a selection of materials they might choose to use to initiate creating their Teaching Coats at home after the close of the session. Between the first interview sessions and the second sessions established for discussion of finished Teaching Coats, two of the participants initiated several phone conversations about their developing Teaching Coats, while the other participant chose to work independently.

Aspects of the data creation, collection and reporting in this research reflect a narrative inquiry framework influenced by the work of Clandinin (2007) along with Bathmaker and Harnett (2010), Denzin and Lincoln (2005), Hoogland and Wiebe (2011), Lyons and LaBoskey (2002), and Webster and Mertova (2007). The data collected through interviews included combinations of interview notes, audio recordings, video recordings, photographs and artworks. Such data, capable of telling a story, I considered as “field texts” (Creswell, 2007, p. 55). I regarded each Teaching Coat created as itself the key data representing a teacher’s creative synthesis of his or her personal stories. My primary focus in analyzing the data collected was on the aspects of their Teaching Coats that the participating teachers chose to highlight.

In analyzing and interpreting the various data created in this project, I diverged from traditional narrative analysis in that I did not set out to attend to chronological information and plot unless I perceived these elements emerged naturally. In the process of “restorying” the data (Creswell, 2008, p. 516), I collaborated with each participant to discuss the themes that emerged. Together we decided how best to give a space and voice to his or her own unique Teaching Coat story, emphasizing the manner the participant preferred. I discussed the possibility with participants that they could tell their Teaching Coat story in the body of this research paper through writing a story, poem, or travel brochure, or as a less structured or informal restorying of their interview transcripts. As well, I informed participants that they could choose to have their Teaching Coat story be told

through photographs alone. I emphasized, “There is no right or wrong way to tell your Teaching Coat story, there is only *your* way.”

In a desire to present the study participants’ reflections in an authentic form, I often represented their words directly and without editing. I wanted to preserve the integrity of the participants’ expressions and original intents. This decision to include “raw” responses, I made later in the research process when I discovered I felt I did not have the right to tinker with or alter what each participant shared as a result of their own reflective process. I was inspired by the words of Carl Leggo, my research supervisor, who wrote,

...when we write the narratives of lived and living experiences, we must be careful that we do not misrepresent the complexity of the experiences by writing narratives that exclude and silence difference and conflict and confusion in a misdirected zeal to produce tidy linear narratives with appropriately happy endings. Instead we need to honour the multiplicity and meaning making and mystery that are at the heart of the searching in our research (Leggo, 1997, p. 3).

Each participant accepted the opportunity to review a draft of their contributions to this research study and submit changes, although I note that participants requested very few revisions.

This arts-based narrative inquiry is expressed through my autoethnographic account of the project, incorporating the participants’ narratives, linked through thematic analysis, and presented with photos of our Teaching Coats. I recognize as inevitable that the limits of my perspective and the boundaries set on this research

project leave unseen angles and loose ends—I hope these may be built upon in the future.

## Chapter 4: Our Teaching Coats

# Phoebe's Story:

*"Ms. Combustible"*



Figure 4.1: Phoebe's Teaching Coat (front view)

### I. Setting the Scene

*I am a high school math, science, and special education teacher. I've been teaching about eight years now. It's my second career: I used to be a customer service engineer for major corporations and I felt I wasn't contributing to the betterment of the world. I wanted to make a difference in the world so I decided to become a teacher.*

### II. Phoebe's Approach

*As soon as I heard about The Teaching Coats Project I got so excited. I think this is a very creative project and I liked how it gave me the opportunity to reflect on where I*

started as a teacher, how far I've come as a teacher, and how far I need to go as a teacher. I knew I wanted to do a tie-dye coat because I think my personality is all about neon colours. I looked online and researched companies selling lab coats and I ordered a style I liked. While I was waiting for it to be delivered I went over to Michael's Art Store and went crazy buying fabric dye, fabric, special buttons, ribbons and it was so exciting. Then I was in the university bookstore and saw they had lab coats there for cheaper and since I was tired of waiting for my lab coat online, it was immediate and I picked up my lab coat right there and started working on it.

### III. Phoebe's Teaching Coat



Figure 4.2: Phoebe's Teaching Coat (back view)



Figure 4.3: Phoebe's Teaching Coat (detail)

#### IV. Phoebe's Meanings

*I enjoyed putting my whole teaching career into perspective. It made me realize that everything I've done in the past is a part of what kind of teacher I am today. It also made me think about where I want to go as a teacher and what I want to accomplish in the future. It was a wonderful treat to just be able to think about what I am doing instead of mechanically going through the motions of teaching.*

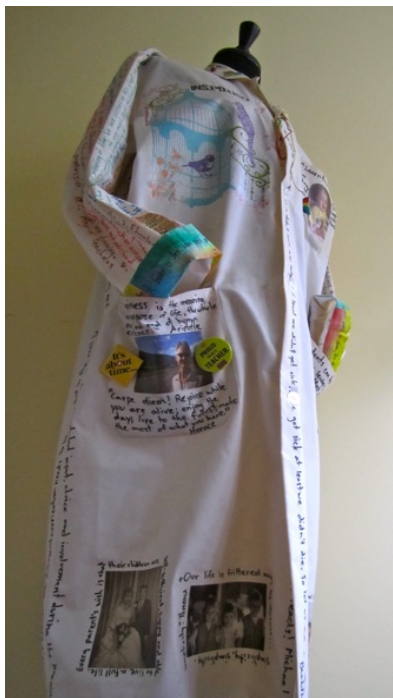
#### V. Phoebe's Next Chapters:

*I will be wearing it to school after spring break. I will wear it with pride... My kids know me, I plan on having them add to the Teaching Coat things they see about me that I haven't even considered and I am looking forward to this... I love feedback from students and I'm really excited about having them participate in creating my coat because my identity is about how they see me.*



# Denyse's Story:

## *"My Inspiration Coat"*



**Figure 4.4: Denyse's Teaching Coat (front view)**

### **I. Setting the Scene**

*I am a 49 year-old female teacher who has been working in the public system for 18 years. I have worked mainly with intermediate grades 4 – 7 in most subject areas. I have worked with regular K-7 schools as well as a Traditional School, a Middle School and a Distributed Learning School. I have a bachelor's degree as well as a TLITE (technology focus) diploma from SFU.*

*I hadn't wanted to be a teacher. Teaching was not my original goal. Most adults in my family seemed to end up in teaching. I recognized teaching as a new path when in my late 20's, after having my own children. Seeing an elementary school as a parent made me want to get into education*

*because I realized how incredibly important it is. I didn't want a "job," I felt that I needed to be involved in work that developed the potential in children. There was a particular "light bulb moment" that involved a Max van Manen book. The quote said, "I experience my children as living hope. Hope has activated me." At a particularly hard time, this quote gave me a reason to carry on.*

*Once I decided, I have wanted no other career.*

*While lots of fun and very rewarding, teaching is often hard for me, a painfully shy person. I am more comfortable in small groups and do not enjoy "leading" or being on "stage". I found it hard to get my own education. First I dropped out in Gr. 11. Between money problems and trying to raise kids, getting my university courses completed and then career going, was hard. Trying to do it as a single parent made it even harder. Often my priorities were juggled and not well. Other hard things included very challenging schools, students and their parents. There were times I found so demanding that I thought it might be impossible to endure.*

*My teaching coat is my "Inspiration Coat". My coat is a visual of the things that have kept me going in the struggles. It contains metaphors for goals and motivations for my career. In particular, my teaching coat reflects the people I love and the ideas that motivate me most.*

## **II. Denyse's Approach**

*I started making the coat in October 2011 by researching and collecting the inspirational quotes and documents. I then printed them and posted them around my current teaching space. I left these up for many months, living among the powerful words, almost like a molecule of water in a Dr. Masaru Emoto experiment. Some of these ended up on the coat, some not. Next I got a lab coat from my science teacher husband. It was a bit stained. I thought that was appropriate in a humorous way: teaching is messy, and one can't avoid being marked up in the process. As well, it was great to get it from him as so much of my later career has become entwined with his career.*

*Finally I collected artifacts that became the metaphors for my life. Even the color was changed to take on an appropriate meaning. For example, I dyed the coat off-white beige - which seemed appropriate for me, kind of a happily beige person.*

### III. Denyse's Teaching Coat



Figure 4.5: Denyse's Teaching Coat (detail)

### IV. Denyse's Meanings

- The birdcage with Inspire is like my title page for the coat. It both articulates the Inspiration theme and reminds me how teaching "freed" me in so many ways.
- All the people in the pictures are family with carefully selected quotes around them. These are all the people who have either got me, or kept me, on track.
- My teaching philosophy was developed with lots of time and thought about 6 years ago. I take it very seriously.

- The rhinestone broach was my mother's. I have very early memories of it as the most beautiful thing I could imagine.
- The Dewey quote reminds me of my own belief that most learning disabilities are teaching disabilities on the part of the school. This means it is vital to personalize learning.

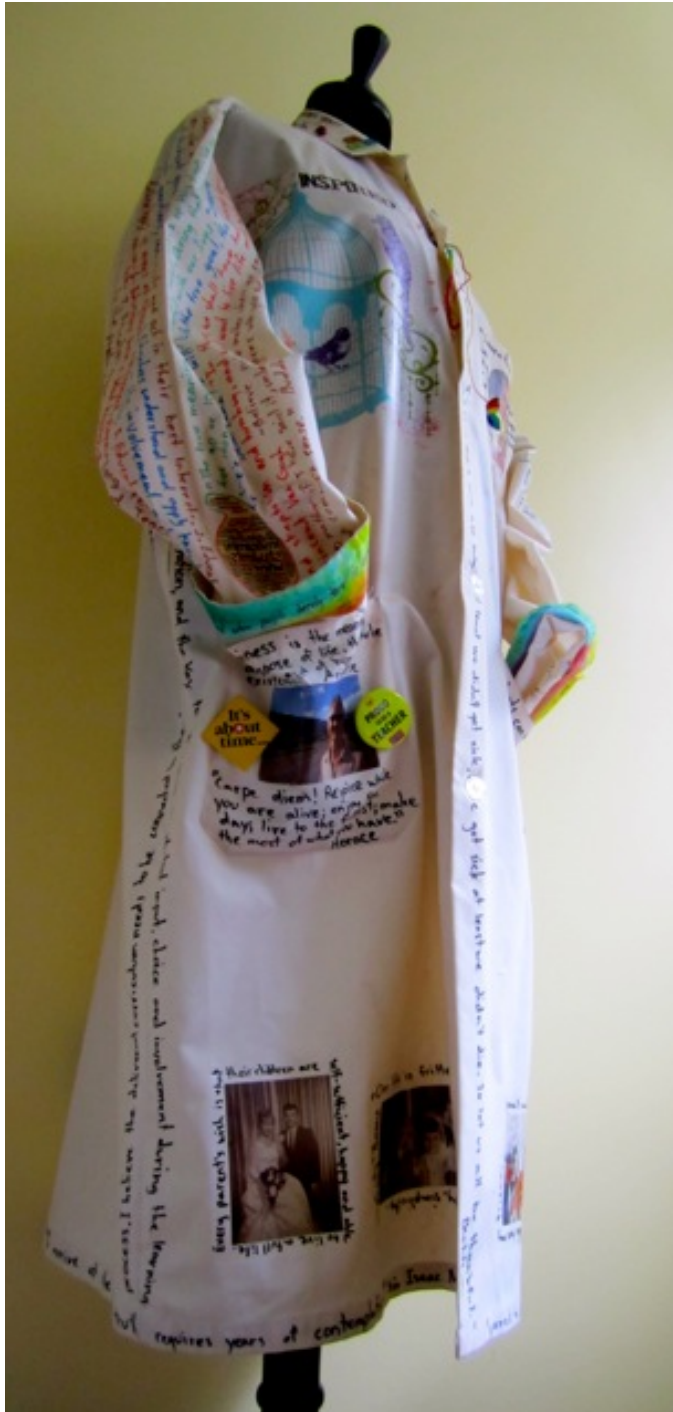


Figure 4.6: Denyse's Teaching Coat (side view)

- "This I believe" statement on the sleeve is a middle school statement created by the Middle School Association. A year ago, I took it on as my own and have a signed version. It particularly relates to my perspective on teaching adolescents.
- My "happiness" pocket has a picture of my husband and personal items that mean a lot to us. By nature a more upbeat person than I am, I rely on my husband to keep me inspired and positive.
- Various pins and meanings (SFU alumni pin-my post-secondary schooling which "opened my cage"; a CBC logo – my friend for years; a Canadian flag – I would never move from Canada).
- Baby footprints on the back reflect that my grandson is now leaving his mark on the world.
- The heart on the inside reflects my own introspective and private nature.

- *The backwards apples on each sleeve contain the mirror image of my teaching philosophy. The unexpected symbolism and benefit of the accidental error of printing the image backwards is that I can see my own philosophy best when I find myself reflecting.*
- *Various quotes about leadership remind me about my current role in my school and considering my age and stage of career, they inspire me to keep getting better and better at that aspect.*

## **V. Denyse's Next Chapters:**

*Teaching is a battle between time and energy. Teaching is about developing the “hope” in children. Teaching is a gift I gave to myself. Teaching is nevertheless a constant struggle.*

*Like beacons, various sources of inspiration keep me going. The images and ideas of so many are on my coat and in my heart. I do love teaching. I feel it is what I want to do. I also know how important it is, and why I should endure the down times and hardship. I also know that it has been worth it.*

*I feel good about making the coat. But yes, I do feel that, as my career has been at times, it is a bit messy. And I wish I had more skills to enhance it.*

*At this time, I am not sure whom I will share it with. The artifacts selected are incredibly powerful to me, but also very personal. While not “secret”, I wonder if I would have the ability to share their full import. My career has not been easy and sharing why the various inspirations kept me going would not be easy either. And over time I have become more and more private. This means wearing it with students may never be possible.*



# Fred's Story:

*"Education: My Life, My Journey"*



**Figure 4.7: Fred's Teaching Coat (front view)**

## I. Setting the Scene

1981	B.Sc. Microbiology, UBC
1982	Teaching Category 5: PDP UBC
1982-2001	Taught Science 8, 9, and 10; Math 8
1998	Masters of Education, University of Portland.
2002-present	Teaching Science 9 and 10, Earth Science 11.

*Sitting at the dining room table, Fred's eyes and hands are occupied with marking Science 9 Ecology exams, although his posture is angled towards the conversation happening between his wife and me on the couch a few feet away. His hand moves in rapid-fire motion across the papers.*

*He interjects comments into our conversation about teaching while working on his marking in a seamless way. He reminds me of a pilot in the cockpit, driving a jumbo jet while chatting with the flight attendant—skillfully navigating both worlds. Fred’s octopus-like multitasking talent is both natural and developed after years of wrangling energetic young science students around caustic chemicals experiments.*

*“You’ve got to be flexible, you’ve got to find time whenever it’s there...” he says of his teaching practice, adding with a smile, “hey, it’s fun!” It’s immediately apparent why Fred is beloved by his students.*

*Students come back year after year, and rave about his classroom experiments, of which there are dozens of videos on YouTube, recorded and posted by his students.*

*“Mr. Fred is awesome!” are the kind of comments reported online at a website called [ratemyteacher.com](http://ratemyteacher.com)*

*When the matter of making a Teaching Coat comes up, Fred explains, “I’ve already got a teaching coat—had it for years. A colleague made it for me, it’s got all these flames on the pocket and big clown buttons.”*

*Fred and his wife take turns explaining how the decorated lab coat became a staple item in his chemistry classroom, a kind of mascot that had been ever-present to the point of being just regular furniture of the classroom. He would wear it occasionally and lend it to colleagues as well. One time the coat was on loan to a colleague’s teenage daughter who wanted to wear it to a Halloween party.*

*“It’s pretty dirty—been hanging around the class for years, got lots of wear.” He and his wife laugh, immediately realizing how this description of the coat also speaks to Fred’s many years in the teaching profession. He is a seasoned teaching veteran known for his mad-scientist style experiments involving blowing up teddy bears with chemicals in an effort to teach and capture the attention of too-cool-for-school ninth graders. Without explosions, and without Mr. Fred, many of these students would disengage from school.*

*The conversation has ramped up now as Fred and his wife speak excitedly about parallels between the coat and Fred as a teacher. The coat, they decide, IS Fred.*

*The coat, which has been passed around to colleagues and shared with students, mirrors Fred’s generosity also apparent in the way he shares his expertly designed lessons with colleagues, the way he has mentored over seven student teachers, and in his caring and trust with his students.*

## **II. Fred’s Approach**

*“I officially started working on my Teaching Coat in February of 2012. My starting point was a lab coat decorated for me by a colleague in the mid-1990’s—it has a flame coming out of the pocket. After discussion with my wife, I decided that the coat would represent my educational journey, including activities and events that occurred throughout my career. Ideas flowed quickly: my personal education,*

teaching areas, union life, pro-d and mission statement. I finished the coat in the first week of March 2012.”

### III. Fred's Teaching Coat



Figure 4.8: Fred's Teaching Coat (front view)



#### IV. Fred's Meanings

1. A list of my schools and universities, showing my educational journey.
2. The Periodic Table: the most interesting topic in Science 9 and 10. Chemistry is the teaching area of my greatest enjoyment.
3. The Element: The name of my fictitious element I came up with derived from my last name.
4. Picture of my wife in an apple frame because she is the "apple of my eye". Being married to a teacher is "Pro-D/24-7." It facilitates constant discussion around educational ideas and strategies.
5. Example Flowing Wells: teacher mentorship also seen in the FW pin
6. My Teaching Mission Statement outlines my thoughts about my job as a teacher with respect to my students. (Refer to the mission statement.) This guides what I "do".
7. BCTF and ADTA union pins; "Proud to be teacher and member of the union." I have had many roles: vice – president, staff rep, member at large. I also met my wife at a union meeting.
8. OBE (on the sleeve) means Outcomes Based Education. This was my Master's of Education presentation. Teach and Test the outcomes. Students may redo activities and exams in order to show understanding; however they must perform correctives. The philosophy is based on: It's not when you learn, it is whether you learn.
9. School logo: My entire career will involve the schools in which I work. 1982 to retirement. At one, the mascot was the Husky, and at the other, a Panther.
10. The Flame out of the pocket, represents the idea that I am lighting a fire, sparking students' ideas and thinking. Quote: Education is not the filling of a pail, but the lighting of a fire. As well, as a chemistry teacher, I have been known to "blow things up."
11. The Earth (on my sleeve). This represents my newest teaching assignment: Earth Science 11—a whole new world of learning for a chemist.
12. Salmon Enhancement pin. I spent the 80's and 90's working on the Salmon Enhancement Community Program. It is a cause that I felt and still feel very strongly about.
13. Canadian Pin: Proud to be a Canadian.
14. A Variety of Colorful Big Buttons. A teacher is part entertainer. It keeps the students' attention.
15. Having a variety of "things" and "text" on the coat, emphasize that education is diverse.
16. "MY MISSION IS TO EMPOWER MY STUDENTS TO REACH THEIR FULL POTENTIAL AND HELP THEM BELIEVE THEY HAVE THE ABILITY TO BE SUCCESSFUL, INDEPENDENT AND RESPONSIBLE LEARNERS. I WANT MY STUDENTS TO FEEL GOOD ABOUT THEMSELVES. I WILL PROVIDE MY STUDENTS WITH A SAFE, FUN AND POSITIVE LEARNING ENVIRONMENT WHILE EMPLOYING A VARIETY OF TEACHING STRATEGIES THAT ATTEMPT TO

MEET THE VARIOUS NEEDS OF MY STUDENTS. I WILL TREAT STUDENTS WITH RESPECT, EMPATHY, AND UNDERSTANDING. I WILL ESTABLISH HIGH EXPECTATIONS IN ACADEMICS AND BEHAVIOR. I WILL FOCUS ON THE POSITIVE ASPECTS OF MY WORK, NOT THE NEGATIVES, THUS REDUCING MY STRESS LEVEL AND ENHANCING MY EFFECTIVENESS."

### III. Fred's Next Chapters

"This project was more fun and easier than I thought it would be. I learned I am proud to be a teacher. I am also proud to have taught at [my school]. I enjoy



Figure 4.9: Fred's Teaching Coat (back view)

teaching kids, and I like the material that I teach. It is paramount that a teacher enjoys the material and curriculum they teach. The process reminded me of all the educational things I have done as a teacher, in and out of the classroom. Being a teacher is more than the classroom—it is union involvement, Pro-D, community involvement. The coat reinforced the idea that I do not like change. 30 years in 2 schools, teaching mostly the same topics. 'If it ain't broke, don't fix it.' I would definitely wear my coat at work because I am happy with its end outcome. As a teacher it outlines who I am, what I believe, what I did, and what I am currently doing."

# My Story:

*“My Teacher Self”*



**Figure 4.10: My Teaching Coat (back view)**

## I. Setting the Scene

After teaching for six years in public elementary schools, I was on maternity leave and getting ready to return to work and I needed inspiration. I needed to reconnect with my “inner teacher” and have something that would get me excited to return to the classroom. Creating my Teaching Coat began a transformative journey in which I continue to encounter the teacher I am—in every thread.

## II. My Approach

At the start of this project, I went to a medical supplies store and purchased two blank white lab coats. The more expensive, fancy coat would be my “good copy”, while a second much cheaper coat would be my “draft

copy” (I pulled this one from the discount bin, finding it had a black mark on the sleeve). The “expensive coat” still hangs in my closet untouched. I guess it just intimidated me. I never felt ready to approach it because I was too afraid I would “mess it up”. The discount coat, however, felt welcoming.

It said, “Try me on! Play! Take a chance!” and so I did.

My first step was to boil a big pot of my favourite chai tea, which I often like to drink before the school day starts. After enjoying some tea, I plunged my coat into the pot and marveled as the fabric took on a rich, fragrant tan—a great way to help that first cup of tea last!

When I finally realized that this “draft copy” was becoming my “good copy”, I saw a parallel with how I create my Teaching Coat and how I create myself as a teacher in many ways. This coat has grown from something I felt was simple, marked and discounted into something complex, beautiful and meaningful, like the teacher I want to be. (On the other hand, that fancy, expensive coat remains perfectly white, but unchanged and un-evolved, like the teacher I never want to be.)



Figure 4.11: Dying my Teaching Coat with chai tea

As well, when I first started teaching, I worked hard to make my lessons “perfect” (like a pristine white coat). But over time I discovered that the real fun and meaningful learning would happen when I was able to go with the flow, feel free to experiment, capture the teachable moments, and be alert to new possibilities.

And I am happy to report that the little dark spot on the arm of this discounted, “draft copy” coat has finally found it’s place as a

punctuation mark! It is finally at home now surrounded by the inspirational quotations I wrote around it—I got the idea to write these quotations here because of that little dark spot. Isn’t it amazing how everything has its purpose?

Another powerful reminder I got from this experience is that we are more likely to create and take chances when we feel we have the permission. Stark white coats, expensive blank canvases, quiet-as-a-pin classrooms...all of these pristine things can feel intimidating for some people sometimes. My Teaching Coat inspires me to think about how I can make learning opportunities for my students that are more inviting and where students feel safe to take creative risks.



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## IV. My Meanings

### On the right arm...

On the right arm, to guide my “right” actions, are a careful selection of insightful quotations about teaching and leading.

These include the following:

*“Tell me and I forget. Teach me and I remember. Involve me and I learn.”*

-Benjamin Franklin



Figure 4.13: My Teaching Coat (right arm)

*“The greatest sign of success for a teacher... is to be able to say, ‘The children are now working as if I did not exist.’”*

-Maria Montessori

### On the left pocket...



Figure 4.14: My Teaching Coat (left pocket)

I wrote the quote that inspired the Teaching Coats Project, and at the base of the pocket, I placed silk sunflowers. These flowers are symbolic of the sun, warmth, happiness, adoration and longevity—all things I hope to be part of my teaching career.

As well, the sunflowers are a nod to the paintings of Vincent van Gogh, which I love and which have also been a source of creative inspiration. On several of the petals I wrote words of virtue such as honesty and wisdom.

### On the right pocket...

Attached is a mirror to remind me about the role of reflection in both teaching and learning. As well, when gazed upon by students, the mirror reflects back to them an image of who they are; this is a process I believe I facilitate as a teacher.

As a teacher, I am a mirror *for* my students, and I must be mindful of what and how I reflect for them.

As a teacher, I am also a mirror *of* my students, and I must be mindful of what I take on from others as a part of myself.

### On the collar...



Figure 4.15: My Teaching Coat (collar)

I wrote the word “authenticity” around the collar. The collar wraps around my neck and below my voice box, which is a place where my intentions join with sound to become words; I want to remind this place to act from a place of authenticity. *What does it mean to be authentic with my students and colleagues? What has this meant for me in the past? What does this mean for me today? What will this mean for me in the*

*future? My Teaching Coat is a meditation on these questions.*

### Lining the inside...



Figure 4.16: My Teaching Coat (lining)

An elaborate piece of crochet lace, handmade by my grandmother forms the part of my “Teaching Coat” that is closest to my skin. Attached to it inside is a selection of personal photos of myself and family to remind me of where I come from. Photos of myself as a young child remind me of how it feels to be a student. Photos of my parents and grandparents remind me of my first teachers. A photo of my son reminds me of the sacredness of each child and that each of us is somebody’s child.

Intending this weaving for use as a tablecloth, my grandmother bestowed it upon me along with its story. The story was of how she worked for hours weaving, stretching, and turning yards of web-like thread until it was complete and doing so with the help of my grandfather.

To me, the lace and its story always seemed too sacred to bring out; therefore, like so many other sacred things, this beautiful artwork has spent its recent life locked away unused, unseen, and “safe” on a shelf. But I must be brave. I must dare to let peek out into the light a glimpse of what I hold sacred.

And I must reflect on those web-like threads, which connect and embed me in something larger, more beautiful and durable than I imagine. I did not come from nothing...I am wrapped in history. These are lessons I want to share with my students.

### On the front, right side...



Figure 4.17: My Teaching Coat (front, right side)

Autumn leaves symbolize a time for “back to school” and harvesting learning, and this collage on the right hand side of my “Teaching Coat” creates a special, nature space around me from which my “teacher within” can emerge naturally. These leaves represent my love for nature, reminding me of my

favourite network of trails through the densely wooded “Watershed

Park” near my home. This is a place where I often walk with my dog for relaxation and reflection. I go to nature to feel recharged and hatch new teaching ideas. The spaciousness and connectedness I feel in nature is something I want to carry with me throughout my day in the classroom.

### On the front, left side...

I sewed a patch with “The Starfish Story” by Loren Eiseley in the location that is over my heart. The story reads as follows...

*One day a man was walking along a beach when he notices a boy picking something up and gently throwing it into the ocean. Approaching the boy, he asked, “What are you doing?”*

*The youth replied, “Throwing starfish back into the ocean. The surf is up and the tide is going out. If I don’t throw them back, they’ll die.”*

*“Son,” the man said, “don’t you realize there are miles and miles of beach and hundreds of starfish? You can’t make a difference!”*

*After listening politely, the boy bent down, picked up another starfish, and threw it back into the surf. Then, smiling at the man, he said...*

*“I made a difference for that one.”*

This story is dear to me for some many reasons. For one, as educators we sometimes feel overwhelmed by the immensity of the task ahead of us: there are so many lessons, so many students, and so little time. This story reminds us to stay focused on what we can accomplish and to know that it does matter.



Secondly, the story reminds me of how at times I am like the man in the story and my students are like the young boy with so much wisdom. As a teacher, I learn so much from the young people in my practice—I want to be alert and sensitive to what my students have to share.

Thirdly, this story is a powerful counterpoint to the “drop in the bucket” fallacy that we can’t make a difference for others or for this planet as one single person. We can. And we do. This story reminds me of that.

### On the left arm...



Figure 4.18: My Teaching Coat (left arm)

At the top is a star, which illustrates the “Starfish Story” on the front left side, but it is also accentuates the pinnacle of “Bloom’s Taxonomy” of learning objectives. Put forward by Benjamin Bloom, this hierarchy encourages teachers to understand the task of teaching as more than just delivering facts. Teachers must assist students in moving up through all of these stages, which include REMEMBERING, UNDERSTANDING, APPLYING, ANALYZING, EVALUATING, and CREATING. The last three, analyzing, evaluating and creating are “higher order thinking” tasks. These are the most demanding—and often the most rewarding ways of learning. As well, to give options for the “CREATING” level, I have written in shadow tones in this area dozens of creative “products of learning” including the following: essay, collage, script, project cube, board game, mosaic, puzzle, crossword, drawing, interpretive dance, and many more.

### On the back, left side...

I list the steps I came up with for my students to help them more easily envision and create their own “Personal Interest Projects”. Very often we have big ideas and goals, but they can seem overwhelming. So it helps to remember the Chinese proverb that a journey of a thousand miles begins with a single step and that we can break big projects into smaller steps. The following steps may occur in a linear fashion, these steps may happen concurrently or they may be revisited during a project. At the start of this research process and throughout, it helped me to refer to this framework.

### On the back, right side...

I like to share with others the notion of “Multiple Intelligences”: Existential, Naturalist, Interpersonal, Intrapersonal, Musical/Rhythmic, Visual/Spatial, Logical/Mathematical, Bodily/Kinesthetic, Verbal/Linguistic. This multi-modal theory of intelligence put forward by Howard Gardener has impacted the way I understand learning and how I design learning in my classroom. I believe it is important for students to explore their own styles of learning and then for me as a teacher to provide learning experiences and assignments that will challenge these areas. I want this list of intelligences close to me as a reminder, as an instructional point, as a symbol for what I believe. I also believe there is more development to be done on this theory. Just as Naturalist and Existential intelligences were added after Gardner’s initial presentation of this theory, I believe there should be a tenth intelligence based on what I have experienced with my students: Humouristic Intelligence!

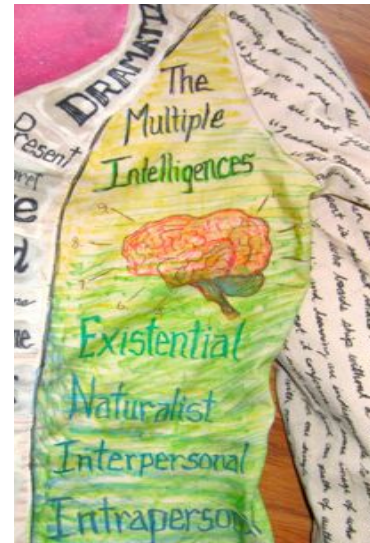


Figure 4.19: My Teaching Coat (back, right side)

### In the left pocket...

Here I keep a pair of eyeglasses coloured with a red marker to reflect my optimism. On the lenses of these “rose-coloured glasses” is written: *How to See the World*. As well in the pockets I keep a magnifying glass scored with a bold reminder to “EXAMINE”. As a teacher and a learner myself, I don’t want to become complacent in my knowledge. I don’t want to simply receive truths, I want to examine things for myself. I hope I can model this analytical way of being for my students. Socrates, one of my favourite philosophers, is credited with saying that the unexamined life is not worth living. I envision using this special magnifying glass as a prop to accentuate that point in a fun, dramatic way.



Figure 4.20: My Teaching Coat (inside the left pocket)

### Inside the pockets...

At last, the idea that inspired this whole project: I placed a small glass bottle of dust in one pocket and “gold” (sparkles) in the other. Sometimes when people are nervous, or self-conscious when speaking in public, they don’t seem to know what to do with their hands. They may fidget, wave them wildly, let them hang like logs on the sides of their bodies, or tap their fingers.



Figure 4.21: My Teaching Coat (gold and dust)

Now, I will have a great place to rest my hands if I should ever need one. The first time I wrapped my fingers around the bottles of gold and dust in my pockets, I was amazed at how well my talismans worked to help me feel connected and grounded.

### And so much more...

And there are some special details that are just for me, that cannot and should not be explained...details that are all just a part of the magic of my own special Teaching Coat.

## IV. My Next Chapters

In this process of making, reflecting on and discussing my Teaching Coat, I believe I came to see my teaching identity.

In this process of thinking about myself as a teacher, I also thought about myself as a young student. Back then, school could be a place of both great comfort or great pain. School was a place of powerful inspiration when I felt connected and demoralizing isolation when I felt my identity—my past, my background, my learning style, my ways of giving and expressing—were not understood, valid, respected, or equal.

Who I am as a teacher now is partly inspired by thinking about the girl I used to be, and I am driven me to create the kind of classroom atmosphere where she and any child would feel accepted and nurtured. I teach to right the wrongs of my past. I teach to carry forward to others the gifts I have been given and cannot imagine living without. When I take stock of my life’s work, I ask, how would I feel as a child in my own class? What would I want to see in a teacher? What do I want to know of that teacher?



A hand is holding a piece of fabric that has been transformed into a collage of words and phrases. The words are written in various colors and fonts, some in bold and some in a more casual script. The words include: CREATE, ANALYZE, PLAY, EMPATHIZE, REMEMBER, PREPARE, DEFINE, GROW, EMPOWER, DISCUSS, MOTIVATE, THINK, VOICE, SENSE, CRITIQUE, ACHIEVE, BALANCE, DEFINE, COOPERATE, CHALLENGE, SYNTHESIZE, COMMUNICATE, NURTURE, PRESENT, LIVE, LEAD, SUPPORT, THE, PLE, DENCES. The fabric is decorated with a large red heart and colorful patterns. The background is a solid orange color.

The Teaching Coats Project was a project rich and open-ended enough that I felt I could live inside for a while. I plan to continue building on it and sharing it for the rest of my life, for myself, and for others. Just as I felt when I first entered the teaching profession, I felt with working with others in support of creating their own Teaching Coats is what I was meant to do.

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This story makes me laugh thinking of my husband wrestling a coat, but it also strikes a chord with me. I feel it speaks to something I began to suspect towards the end of creating my Teaching Coat: through this process I have breathed my life into my Teaching Coat to the point that I believe it has taken on a kind of ontological status of its own. Yet I don't mean that in a sci-fi, artificial intelligence way. Rather, I have imagined my Teaching Coat standing in for me in my absence—perhaps on display with my photograph like at a celebration of my life when I pass on. When people look at my Teaching Coat, I want it to remind them of a teacher of integrity, who deeply cared for, believed in, and had fun learning with her students, who was creative and never stopped looking for answers.

It has been powerful for me to look forward and then plan backwards the legacy I want to leave. My Teaching Coat is a symbol of the person I am, but also the person I hope to become, and for whom I hope to be remembered. It gives me comfort knowing that even when I am no longer around, perhaps my Teaching Coat will be—passed down to grandchildren who will make sense of its mysterious features in their own ways.

But even once my Teaching Coat has frayed its last thread, I take comfort knowing that the meanings, the lessons and the memories it held and clarified for me, made me a better teacher in my time and the impact of this may live on forever in the minds and hearts of my students.



Figure 4.23: My Teaching Coat (front view)

## Chapter 5: The Discussion

**thread** [thred]:

**noun:**

1. a fine cord of flax, cotton, or other fibrous material spun out to considerable length, especially when composed of two or more filaments twisted together.
8. that which runs through the whole course of something, connecting successive parts: *I lost the thread of the story.*
9. something conceived as being spun or continuously drawn out, as the course of life fabled to be spun, measured, and cut by the Fates.
11. **threads**, *Slang.* clothes.

**verb:**

12. to pass the end of a thread through the eye of (a needle).
13. to fix (beads, pearls, etc.) upon a thread that is passed through; string.
14. to pass continuously through the whole course of (something); pervade: A joyous quality threaded the whole symphony.
15. to make one's way through (a narrow passage, forest, crowd, etc.).

## Embedded Threads

*Teachers construct their teacher identities  
within context, in an ongoing creative process.*

When I first began making my Teaching Coat, I worked alone. I assumed figuring out who I am as a teacher was a purely *introspective* task—something I might accomplish if I could take time out and get away from it all. Later I reflected on this choice to *create myself by myself*, and it brought to light something about my philosophical orientation that was worth re-evaluating.

Through making my Teaching Coat, I found that I had to acknowledge that who I am is deeply affected by the world around me—and that I could view this as an *empowering* rather than disempowering fact.

In earlier academic life as a philosophy undergraduate, I had never met an advocate for post-modernism who could rightly explain the view in a way that resonated with me or even made sense. Grouping post-modernist philosophy with social constructionism, the idea of the self as a “social construct” created in and contingent upon social relations (Frazer, 2005, p. 873), I dismissed both wholesale. I think I rejected these ideas most forcefully because I felt they were injurious to my individuality and hope that each person has an essential *essence*, or persisting *soul*. From my perspective at the time of beginning my Teaching Coat, it seemed logical to search for my teacher identity, the essence and soul of my inner teacher, all by myself.

I still do not believe that *all* of who I am is socially constructed, but I have to admit I have seen first hand how a *dimension* of who I am—my teacher identity—is continually being created in the process of my interpreting and responding to the contexts in which I work. I believe that flowing from my core identity is my teacher identity, as a co-constructed projection. Consistent with social constructionist views, I saw how in establishing my teacher identity there were “value-free foundations or sources of knowledge” (Frazer, 2005, p. 873), and that everything I believed as teacher was vetted through my perceptions of the demands of the profession and expectations and needs of the people with whom I work.

*But of course, one might challenge, you are a professional doing a job so you have to think this way.* Yet, this was a transformation in thinking for me as I previously assumed I exerted sole force on shaping my teacher identity. Previously, I thought I had greater free will in determining my teacher identity. Previously I thought any socially constructed or modified aspects of my teacher identity were purely my choice. Now I saw I was socially *embedded* as in escapable fact, just as Weber and Mitchell (1995) express: “Our stories are not only our own personal accounts; we live embedded in biographies that are simultaneously personal, cultural, institutional, and historical” (p. 9).

Looking back at how I created my Teaching Coat I realized that even when I pulled back to explore my teaching identity alone, I was never truly alone *in my mind*. I inevitably would imagine my students and their parents, my colleagues, our school and community while making my creative choices. I wondered, *how might people respond if I add this feature? How will others perceive the placement of certain*



*objects? What could I alter to make this Teaching Coat better fit our school?* Thinking constantly of the social implications was not something I tried consciously to do; it was natural, compulsive.

Imagining the presence of others and their hypothetical responses directed the choices that shaped my Teaching Coat and rightly so. After all, a teacher can only be a teacher *in relationship* to a student. This relational element, along with the moral demands of the position and psychological fact that teachers are social beings, all dictate teaching professionals must not and cannot behave as though working in a *vacuum*. As study participant Phoebe put it, “Teachers need to operate within the social norms. If something is not within the social norms, then [teachers] really can’t do it...teachers are held to a higher moral standard than other people.”

Perhaps I had little choice but to create my Teaching Coat and teaching identity *from within a context* and *for that context*. While this revelation does incite a degree of existential claustrophobia, it does not disturb me to the same degree as would discovering the absence of free will in my core identity for two reasons: (1.) I believe it was my free will that led me to enter and continue to work in the teaching profession; and (2.) as a teacher, I don’t want to be like a tree that falls alone in a forest unheard—so I have to see and admit that I am a part of a forest and that I have roots. This reflection, I found offers me comfort, a feeling of belonging, and a deeper sense of power and responsibility.

In the process of making my Teaching Coat, I paused to consider how the expectations on me as a teacher control and limit my expression. But I was able to imagine my Teaching Coat, my teacher identity, as like a patch embedded in a

greater quilt. It is still *my* patch, and so I have some freedom to be creative, so long as I am respectful of the context in which I am embedded: I may choose my own colours and designs and decide to blend in or contrast. There are boundaries and limits around my teacher identity and some are pre-established, but others I establish myself.

I get it now: my Teaching Coat, like my teacher identity, is embedded in a greater fabric. I am a contextually bound professional; I create my teacher identity within boundaries. To describe the impact of this realization for me, I would call it *transformative*.

### **Pulling Threads**

*To foster the development of teacher identity,  
we must support teachers in creating  
their own communities of inquiry.*

Recognizing my teacher identity as embedded, I gained greater perspective on it especially once I began dialoguing with other teachers about identity through The Teaching Coats Project. In retrospect, discussing with other teachers about how our teacher identities were expressed through our Teaching Coats was the richest part of the whole experience—these were the moments I felt most alive. It was magical being aware and *present* in the moments of *co-creating* myself as a professional. The quality of insights and feelings generated in this collaborative process were powerful. Sharing the journey of perpetual inquiry, we found that collaboration enhanced the metacognitive, meaning-making, creative and emotional

aspects of our individual explorations. Working together brought contrast and dimension to my thoughts, and pulled unseen issues to the surface.

*Teacher identity is a complex fabric we weave together  
with many threads seen and unseen.*

If we pull at a loose thread, what happens? Sometimes the line is short, self-contained, and we can brush it away. Some threads we trim off, patch over, accept, ignore, or find creative ways to integrate with the whole. Other threads we pull only to discover the extent of their interconnectedness as they jerk tension in the surrounding fabric, threatening an unraveling.

In addition to the notion of the embeddedness of teacher identity, four thematic threads emerged that compelled me with their complexity, interconnectedness with one another, and their saliency as noted by all research participants. These themes may be named broadly as self-awareness, boundaries of identity, teacher authenticity, and transformation.

### **Self-Awareness**

*Teachers need inspiration and opportunities  
to deepen self-awareness—  
both for the benefit of themselves and their students.*

As a part of exploring their teacher identities, participants in The Teaching Coats Project were invited to grapple with questions that had the potential to lead to greater self-awareness, particularly with respect to their motivations and the moral dimensions of their professional practice. They were asked: Who are you as a teacher? Why do you teach? What beliefs guide your practice?

Often as teachers we assume we know the answers to these questions, yet struggle to find just the right words in response. Three participants in this research discussed remembering their struggle to write their own “Teaching Philosophy” statements to fulfill course requirements as a part of teacher training. All of the study participants expressed feeling at times tongue-tied when put on the spot with questions of a personally philosophical nature. When confronted with these questions, I too have been tongue-tied at times, or, conversely, I found spoke so much that I in fact said very little of meaning.

So why might intelligent, caring teachers who behave as though motivated by a noble force find it hard to succinctly express who they are, why they teach, and what they believe? Perhaps the seemingly simple questions of teacher identity are hard to answer *because* we feel they matter so deeply to us: we want to be thorough; we want to be accurate; we want to speak meaningfully.

And certainly we need the in-demand commodities of focused *time* and *space* to nurture the self-awareness that brings about a sense of teacher identity. And we need this time and space for self-awareness, not just once at the beginning of our careers, but all through out our careers because our teacher identities evolve.

For this reason, beginning my own evolving Teaching Coat was so useful for developing the self-awareness needed to clarifying my teacher identity. As teachers, we are called to make thousands of small and large decisions each day. I have seen how the greater self-awareness I developed through creating my Teaching Coat has helped me to not only continue making decisions more consistent with my core

beliefs, but to make them more efficiently, and with a clearer, more articulate rationale that I could share with others—an act which has educative value.

Developing greater self-awareness, particularly with respect to the moral dimension of teaching and living, is something Maxine Greene (1978) likens to “wide-awakeness” in her work *Landscapes of Learning*. In discussing the value of “wide-awakeness,” Greene references philosophers Alfred Schultz who talked of “wide-awakeness as an achievement” and Henry David Thoreau, who argued that “to be awake is to be alive” (p. 42). She makes the case that this form of self-awareness in a teacher has innumerable pedagogical value, especially given that “the young are most likely to be stirred to learn when they are challenged by teachers who themselves are learning, who are breaking with what they have too easily taken for granted, who are creating their own moral lives” (p. 51).

One study participant, Denyse, reflected on her process of becoming more self-aware through the course of her participation in the project:

Making my Teaching Coat has been on a small scale, what my whole teaching career has been about – trying to keep the bigger picture of what I do before me, trying to be more positive, and attempting to be as open as possible while at the same time trying to keep what should be private just that. I don’t expect or want to share everything, but the extreme value of the profession demands that the connections be built around what is key. After my Teaching Coat was finished, I realized that is what I had been doing while creating it. My teacher identity has become more explicit through this process.

## Boundaries of Identity

*“Art consists of limitation. The most beautiful part of every picture is the frame.”*

-Gilbert K. Chesterton

The Teaching Coat metaphor reminds us that we are involved in creating and co-creating our teacher identities that, in a way, belong to others as much as they belong to us. When part of who we are belongs in a sense to another, it is vital that we can draw distinctions between this co-owned aspect of self and our other aspects of self.

A useful pondering on the Teaching Coat metaphor was the fact that a coat is something that can both be *put on* and *taken off*. My Teaching Coat is not a straightjacket: I choose to wear it. Having a Teaching Coat suggests to me that I have the option to wear or take off my teaching identity at the appropriate times. I have some control over delineating boundaries for where and when to wear this coat and this identity.

Another issue related to boundaries of identity that participants in this research discussed concerned how much to share of their *personal* identities at work. Participants in the study were asked to imagine wearing their Teaching Coats in public and to think about how the prospect of sharing their Teaching Coats would affect their choices of both what to include and how to include it. A key question discussed was, *What is too personal to share in a professional context?* As distinct from their teacher identities, participants spoke frequently of a notion of a “true identity”, “real self” or “personal life”, or “true self”. As well, all participants

emphasized a need to consciously create such distinctions as a part of being a professional and adhering to job expectations and social norms, but also because of the need to protect one's privacy and guard one's feelings. There can even be an element of artistry in the judgments teachers must make to establish boundaries. Phoebe explained, "I think it's important that some of the things and memories we create we keep for ourselves. As teachers, I see us as actors, and we choose what we want to show and how we want to present ourselves."

One participant spoke of a time she questioned how much to share from her personal life when a distressed teenage student asked her about her thoughts on miscarriage because her mother had just experienced one. This participant was still struggling to decide what her best action would be given all of the contextual details.

This participant's story moved me as I recalled my own decision to switch the schools in which I worked after losing my baby late in pregnancy during summer vacation. I made the decision because I felt I wasn't prepared to return to face the inevitable questions from the young children who knew me. Over the previous months—without invitation—students watched my growing belly with excitement, surprising me with baby name lists they wrote during recess, asking questions, and otherwise seeking to involve themselves in this detail of my personal life. It was a detail that I tried but could not hide for long. When I felt the heartbreak of loss, I wished it to belong to me alone. But I was embedded. I could not draw the kind of boundary around my pregnancy I would have wanted.

Pregnancy challenged me to reflect more deeply on boundaries of identity because never before in my life would it have seemed acceptable for students or

colleagues to touch my stomach in the workplace. Yet once I was pregnant, I found people treating my belly as public property, reaching out to touch it, and drawing conclusions about my life. When one nine-year-old boy returned from a Family Life lesson with the P.E. teacher, he posed a question he didn't realize crossed a boundary, "Hey Teacher, you have a baby in there, does this mean you've had sex?"

Boundaries of identity must be established—it is a crucial part of leadership and a crucial part of a teacher's daily work. While some personal details of our lives we can and must keep private, other details announce themselves against our will. Yet if we are self-aware and prepared, we can better respond in situations that test the lines we have drawn between our personal and professional identities.

During her interview session, Phoebe emphasized the role of discernment and good judgment in establishing professional boundaries:

I think that teachers need to go with their gut instinct. They don't need to answer every question a student will ask—they just need to be comfortable with what they say with the student. And what I'm comfortable saying might not be the same as what another teacher is comfortable with saying.

In creating our Teaching Coats, we may find the process conjures memories, feelings, and beliefs we hold sacred, and we have the opportunity to make decisions about whether to share these things and in which circumstances. One participant in the research noted that in creating her Teaching Coat she initially wanted to record on it her feelings about the current tense negotiations between the teachers' union and the government. She later changed her mind explaining, "Other people might



not agree with my point of view, and it's a very personal thing, and not something I want others to see."

The question of boundaries is especially important in the technology-driven 21<sup>st</sup> century as many teachers' identities seem to extend beyond their physical bodies and onto the internet. Many teachers, by personal choice and as a part of their work, have increased social networking presence on blogs, discussion forums, Facebook, Twitter, LinkedIn, Wikis, and other broadly reaching media (Ferriter, Ramsden, & Sheninger, 2011, p. 1-2). New technologies contribute to shrinking privacy for all, and there is also a noticeable cultural relaxing of attitudes around the boundaries between private and public (Sullivan, 2006); both of these facts may shift where we perceive boundaries are and lead to confusion about what teachers can and should share of their identities. Blurring of the personal-professional lines is well acknowledged as a major ethical consideration for teachers in cases where online activities undermine a teacher's reputation, authority or the appropriateness of teacher-student relations (Ludvigsen, 2011, p. 15-16).

However, there is growing discussion about how teachers may harness new media in their practice as a way to communicate their thoughts and connect in an immediate way with larger numbers of students, parents and colleagues; by doing so, teachers may help build relationships and present as more authentic professionals (Ferriter et al., 2011, pp. 9-10). The world wants teachers who create balance, drawing boundaries around their personal ways of being that are appropriate and professional, but that are not so rigid so as to eclipse the humanity of the teacher.

A Teaching Coat offers a useful metaphor and beginning point for teachers to directly examine their own boundaries as professionals. In setting professional boundaries, by choosing to share certain aspects of their personal selves while excluding others, teachers form the boundaries of their teacher identity. Done well, the establishment of professional boundaries appropriately guards a teacher's inner life, while at the same time allowing for their students and colleagues to experience them as *authentic* professionals.

### **Teacher Authenticity**

*What is teacher authenticity?*

*What is its value?*

*Why does it matter?*

Teacher authenticity is a concept related to teacher identity that is difficult to define. In this research, teachers were challenged to create their Teaching Coats as expressions of their own definitions of teacher authenticity. Participants in this study commonly described teacher authenticity as being about making the conscious decision to share aspects of who they are with their students, to let them glimpse into their worlds. And it was reported that sharing their personal selves in this way helped build rapport that could be a starting point for learning.

Denyse shared that she keeps on her desk a picture of a cat she no longer owns simply because she found for years that this picture offered a window into her life that her students appreciated. She believed it was valuable to share carefully chosen details of her personal identity, explaining, "I get a lot of mileage of this

picture of Patches—kids love pets, and she was a really beautiful cat...this is my way to share a bit of who I am and begin to develop a relationship with students.”

When asked to define what being an authentic teacher looked like for her, Phoebe shared,

I like to build relationships with students. [Teaching] is less about the material or the curriculum; it’s about getting to know the students, and finding out about what’s important in their lives, and I want to know how I can take those interests and hopefully help them learn something along the way. [When it comes to teacher authenticity] number one is humour in my class. And Coco Cola. I always joke that I love Coke Slurpees, so a lot of my jokes and examples in class are about them. So for instance, in math we looked at problems where if a Coke Slurpee spills, how much waste do we have, etc. I always use that theme of Coke through out the year. And kids know if they’re late I’m going to joke, “Oh, were you at the 7-11 buying me a Coke Slurpee?”

Denyse and Phoebe describe how sharing with students even small details, such as owning a cat or liking Coke Slurpees, is a gesture of openness or authenticity, which is a step towards the trust needed to build healthy student-teacher relationships which enhance learning.

*But how much do we need to share for students to experience us as authentic?*

*And beyond speaking of our lives, what other factors may contribute to expressing ourselves as authentic teachers?*

Although it is generally accepted in the literature as an important phenomenon, the notion of teacher authenticity remains relatively under-researched (Kreber et. al, 2007, p. 22). Existing literature on teacher authenticity tends to concern what the term is commonly understood to mean and the phenomenon's value in practice and impact on student learning. For example, Cranton and Carusetta (2004) explain authenticity as "a multifaceted concept that includes at least four parts: being *genuine*, showing *consistency* between values and actions, relating in such a way so as to *encourage others' authenticity*, and living a *critical life*" (p. 7). Similarly, Brookfield (2006) identified indicators of teacher authenticity as including: (a.) *congruence* between a teacher's words and actions; (b.) *full disclosure* of a teacher's criteria, expectations, agendas, and assumptions that guide her practice; (c.) *responsiveness* of a teacher in tailoring teaching to students' learning needs; and (d.) a teacher's presentation of *personhood*, which is marked by a "perception students have that their teacher is a flesh-and-blood human being with a life and identity outside the classroom" (pp. 7-11).

Asking if one's own teacher identity presents as authentic can happen in the process of making a Teaching Coat. This is a valuable question because its answer has personal, social, and pedagogical implications.

## **Transformation**

John Trent (2010) discusses how transformation is a central theme in the teacher research movement and that teacher identity is seen "as a process of 'becoming' in which teachers fashion and refashion identities as they confront and

adapt to varying perspectives, such as those of schools, students and governments” (p. 154).

Transformation is an exciting notion for me as one exploring identity formation. I wondered, *by what mysterious processes do people transform into teachers who are in touch with their teaching identities, self-aware, authentic, and clear in the boundaries between their personal and professional worlds?* As the research participants and I explored The Teaching Coats Project, this question emerged and was answered for me in glimpses—in the magic that happened through engaging in and discussing our arts-based research and discovering ourselves as a/r/tographers.

Yet, I do not feel it is my place to argue that The Teaching Coats Project *transformed* the participants in this study. I never directly phrased a question for the participants asking if The Teaching Coats Project transformed them. As the project designer and researcher, that question I believe would have crossed a boundary as a researcher; I wanted participants to feel safe exploring the project and not feel because of our relationship of exchange they were obliged to provide kindly testimony.

As well, the word *transform* is culturally loaded and negative for some, conjuring images of lowly caterpillars emerging from cocoons as butterflies. Such a metaphor, and meaning of the word as related to the word *reform*, does not fit what I view occurred in The Teaching Coats Project. I never viewed the participants in this study, or any teachers for that matter, as caterpillars, but rather as established butterflies. The “butterflies” who participated in this research reported enjoying the

occasion to soar to a broader view of the contributions they make and reflect on the beauty of their wings.

During the follow-up interviews, each participant in the research articulated value in different aspects of their coat creations.

As Denyse expressed, “Once I got into actually making my coat, it became a meditative act: quiet, thoughtful, and peaceful. It was a true reflecting time.”

Phoebe mentioned the value for her specifically in the arts-based element because, as a technology, science, and math teacher, exploring her Teaching Coat helped her she said, “to go to the other side of my brain and create for a bit.”

Fred emphasized the benefits of the social aspect on his reflective process:

Doing the project with another person (my wife) made it more interesting, as we could compare thoughts and ideas as we went through the process.

Constant discussion allowed more thought about what to add...it was interesting to ask my colleagues for school logos. I had to explain about the coat and now they want to see the coat.

The theme of transformation initially earned its place in the discussion of this research when I found myself using the word in a few places, frequently with respect to my own discoveries and I wanted to explore the idea further. I am still discovering how this theme fits in with The Teaching Coats Project.

Cranton (1992) explains that transformation may be judged to have occurred if we feel that our assumptions and perspectives, and behaviours have changed. In this sense, I myself freely admit, that parts of my process in The Teaching Coats Project have inspired many little transformations in how I see my teacher identity—

and much credit is due to the “butterflies” I observed and had the pleasure of interviewing. I will speak for only myself in saying my Teaching Coat process was indeed a cocooning and emerging into a clearer world in which I saw how my teacher identity works as a part of a greater ecosystem.

Teachers everywhere are in the midst of their own transformations, discovering their own teacher identities, setting their professional boundaries, and becoming evermore self-aware and authentic through a myriad of creative personal ways. The Teaching Coats Project may offer something to this process; it is an invitation to teachers to acknowledge and magnify the self-reflective work they are already doing in their everyday professional lives.

As we endeavor to create opportunities to foster teachers’ own journeys of self-discovery, looking to the literature relating to transformation can provide inspiration and the beginnings of a practical framework for programming. Mezirow (2003) is acknowledged for work in this area of “transformative learning”; this is a process Brown (2005) echoes as involving “experiential learning, critical self-reflection, and rational discourse that can be stimulated by people, events, or changes in context which challenge the learner's basic assumptions of the world” (p. 23). Cranton (2006) elaborates that transformative learning may be “rational, affective, extrarational, or experiential depending on the person engaged in the learning and the context in which it takes place” (p. 6). A key feature of transformative learning opportunities is that educators are active facilitators and co-learners with subjects (Brown, 2005, p. 23).

## Making It Practical

So if teachers seek transformative professional learning opportunities—ones that foster teacher identity through development of self-awareness, clarity in professional boundaries, and teacher authenticity—where can they look?

While some literature discusses the importance of these themes, there is much less formal research or instruction providing *practical strategies* to achieve these ends. For example, we find descriptions in the literature of the *attitudes* and *actions* of self-aware and authentic teachers, but it is harder to find replicable steps by which teachers may make the leap to adopt such attitudes or choose certain actions. We may read recommendations for teachers such as those offered by Cranton (2006) who offers a cursory list of exercises, including: keep a journal; write a blog; make a collage; or talk to others about authenticity (p. 12). We may see how these recommendations can initiate important journeys of self-discovery. However, nowhere outside of ourselves will we find an absolute definition or map for transformation. There is no perfect recipe for seeing, creating, and sharing one's teacher identity; and like making a Teaching Coat, this process can at times feel intimidating, confusing, or messy, as well as beautiful, meaningful and revelatory.

A parting question I asked participants during interviews was to share their perspectives and advice for what they saw as important to The Teaching Coats Project as a professional development activity for teachers.

Participants emphasized the importance of **supportive communities of inquiry** in teacher development. Phoebe commented,



I think number one is building relationships with people and building trust. As soon as you have those relationships and trust then you can move on to introducing new ideas that people will consider. The thing is, you don't impose change on people against their will—people have to be a part of the process.

Towards this end, Phoebe offered advice for anyone such as myself who may present The Teaching Coats Project in a workshop setting for teachers. She said that to help teachers feel comfortable and involved in the process, “[a Teaching Coats workshop facilitator] should spend time, a few minutes before the session, mingling with the teachers informally to begin working to build relationships.”

Denyse emphasized the value of **advanced preparation** and having **proper tools** for the task: “It worked so well that I gave myself lots of time to think, plan, gather artifacts, and reflect on them.”

Fred mentioned the benefit working with varying degrees of **structure** depending on one's interests and needs. He offered, “The best idea was to have a focus or title, and work from there. In this way, all the additions to the coat were intertwined.”

Participants emphasized the value of a **non-rushed atmosphere** for creative and reflective work. All participants noted that the process of making a Teaching Coat took what they found to be a significant amount of time and that this could be an inherent challenge to the accessibility of the project. Phoebe noted: “Teachers are just stretched in so many directions that by the end of the day they don't tend to have time to think in this way.” When asked about her decision to undertake the

project given the complexity of her schedule as a fulltime high school teacher, master of education student, and mother to six children, Phoebe explained:

I know I have the least amount of time of many people I know, but the thing is when you're so busy, you don't leave things to tomorrow: you either do it today or it's not done and I work in that mode. It was just important for me to work on this coat. I was just really interested in it.

All participants commented on the value of the **physical-mental engagement** involved in art-making. It was interesting that participants emphasized valuing the discoveries made while decorating their Teaching Coats by handwriting, an activity practiced less in the age of technology. Fred reported, "The handwriting enhanced the experience. It made me think more about what I wrote." Denyse called this aspect "surprisingly cathartic" and advised any future makers of Teaching Coats "to transcribe any written portions themselves, rather than get some sort of printer help (i.e. iron-on transfers, etc.). This is because the very act of slowing down and thinking during the writing is so very meditative and healing."

A useful bit of advice from my own experience that I would offer to prospective makers of Teaching Coats concerns **seeing beyond the superficial aesthetics** of a Teaching Coat because its beauty is in its meaning and functionality and in the eye of the beholder. My Teaching Coat certainly wouldn't make it on the runway in Paris or be seen on a supermodel in *Vogue Magazine*—but I don't aspire to look like a supermodel, only to be a super *role model*. In making my Teaching Coat there were many small moments when I had to sacrifice style for substance; we are faced with these choices in teaching too. For example, on the bulletin boards

outside of our classrooms we can hang the drawings created by only our most artistically skilled students, or we can hang all of the artworks to celebrate the truth of the diversity of skills and perspectives of our students.

It is important to continue **striving for reflexivity** in the process, staying alert to how anything one perceives as “mistakes” in our art-making can be analyzed for meaning and rendered into a learning opportunity. There are infinite lessons available to us in creating and thinking about our Teaching Coats. Awakening to and engaging with these lessons is an ongoing process of transformation, in which we may discover our boundaries around our most self-aware and authentic teacher identities.

## Chapter 6: Conclusions & Looking Ahead

We need new and creative ways to explore and understand our teacher identities, to challenge and perhaps even transform our thinking about what it means to be teaching professionals. We need opportunities to deepen self-awareness through independent and group-supported inquiry. We need to explore the tension at the boundaries of our personal and professional lives, make judgments about where we draw our own lines, and determine strategies for responding when we feel these lines have been crossed. We need to be careful, critical and not cut-off in a personal sense, if we are to connect to our students as authentic beings. All of this is valuable both in itself and because it contributes to effective teaching.

The Teaching Coats Project is one example of a professional development activity that draws on arts-based research methods, yet there is more we can and must do to support teachers' reflective practice through multiple modalities. Teachers, like all people, deserve opportunities to learn in their own unique ways and in their own time. And students may draw inspiration themselves by seeing their teachers as self-aware, authentic professionals transforming themselves through the learning process.

The examples of participants' creative and reflective work explored in this preliminary study speak to the program's potential as a meaningful teacher development opportunity. The Teaching Coats Project is in an early phase, like a new teacher, and it is still discovering its own identity. Through sharing the project with others and gaining their feedback, and particularly through this research, it

became apparent that more should be done to increase the accessibility of the project and to continually refine and expand The Teaching Coats Project program of offerings.

The next phase of my work in this project will be to join with others in finding more ways to reach a broader demographic and to collect and reflect on examples of what teachers create and share in the The Teaching Coats Project.

## **Challenges**

At this time, I see the key challenges for the accessibility of The Teaching Coats Project as being the following:

(1.) **Lack of Time:** Making a Teaching Coat can be time consuming, which is an inherent barrier given the time constraints most teachers face as a result of the complexity and demands of their work.

(2.) **Lack of Materials:** There is no set way to create a Teaching Coat. Yet to follow the examples described in this research, teachers would likely use materials including lab coats, fabric pens, permanent markers, acrylic paints, fabric glue and numerous other found objects. For some, the cost or lack of immediate access to these materials could be prohibitive.

(3.) **Lack of Interest or Lack of Perception of Value in Arts-based, Introspective, or Philosophical Explorations:** The arts-based element is not appealing to some teachers who dislike or feel under-confident in hands-on creative mediums. Similarly, there may be reluctance on the part of some teachers to attend to philosophical or introspective matters, for any variety of reasons. The could

include any one of the following: lack of interest, different learning or thinking style, prior unpleasant experience in these areas.

## **Opportunities**

I see opportunity to share and communicate the value of The Teaching Coats Project experience in ways that reach, not just the artistically and philosophically inclined, but also those who are not pre-disposed to seek out this type of activity. There is an opportunity to achieve wider appeal, relevancy, and accessibility of this project. I see a need for work to be done to overcome the abovementioned challenges. The following can be starting points:

### **(1.) Increase Support, Target Communications, and Streamline and Expand Offerings:**

The challenge of lack of time for teachers is complex; but a place to start is with campaigning schools districts and governments to allow for more supported and dedicated teacher professional development throughout the school year. As well, if prospective participants are informed of the benefits of the Teaching Coats Project process, then they may recognize reasons to make the project a priority. As well, some teachers may be able to make the most efficient use of their time and feel better supported in the Teaching Coats process if they have readily available support materials, such as a Teaching Coat Guidebook.

**(2.) Increase Sharing of Resourceful Teaching Coat Strategies:** The cost barriers for some teachers who many want to create a Teaching Coat may be overcome by presenting more photographic and written examples of how teachers have creatively used various inexpensive methods and materials including recycled, secondhand and found objects in the making of their own Teaching Coats. Inspiring

cost-effective examples could be shared online in the free online *teachingcoats.com* community and other forums.

### **(3.) Increase Research and Communication of the Benefits of Arts-Based,**

**Introspective and Philosophical Explorations:** When teachers are not experienced in, comfortable with or convinced of the value of arts-based, introspective or philosophical explorations, they are not likely to be initially drawn to participate in activities such as The Teaching Coats Project. However, as Shaun McNiff (2007) reminds us,

when difficulties in human experience become deeply lodged within individuals and groups, this is usually a sign that we are stuck in our ways of dealing with them. A shift in methodology can bring tremendous insight and relief. (p. 33)

This is where increased research and communication about the benefits of these activities play a role. As the popularity of any professional development activity grows, attracting more participants, the quantity and strength of the data supporting its value for participants will grow.

### **In Development**

As a part of my desire to help The Teaching Coats Project serve greater numbers of teachers, I am working on strategies to increase awareness of and interest in the project, with plans to explore opportunities through social media, web-based publication tools, downloadables, and print-on-demand technology. In development now is a more comprehensive program on The Teaching Coats Project, aimed to support individuals in self-study as well as workshop presenters who

facilitate the program with other teachers. The next phases of The Teaching Coats Project program offerings will include:

- (1.) *Our Hearts on Our Sleeves: The Teaching Coats Project*, an art book, which will include an extensive variety of teachers' reflections on and photographs of their newly created Teaching Coats;
- (2.) *The Teaching Coats Project Workbook*, which will contain step-by-step image-supported instructions and practical information related to fabric arts and mixed-media collage;
- (3.) *The Teaching Coats Project Facilitator's Manual* containing information and strategies for leading small and large group workshops covering the background, historical connections, and containing support and strategies for effective dialogue facilitation along with multimedia supports including video and audio;
- (4.) *Teachingcoats.com*, the official website of The Teaching Coats Project, undergoing expansion in the coming months to include more photo galleries, video tutorials, creative prompts, sample supply lists, templates, and recommended resources.

### **Next Steps: Teaching Coats for Social Justice**

In *That's Funny, You Don't Look Like a Teacher*, Weber and Mitchell (1995) reveal teachers' struggle for identity particularly in contemporary popular culture, arguing that "clothing can be a proclamation of resistance, a mode of innovation or becoming, a reconciliation, a desire to belong, or a surrender" (p. 62). I want to do



more work in the future to explore how a Teaching Coat may be a proclamation of resistance and a tool for social justice.

Imagine we gave teachers in a diversity of contexts the invitation and opportunity to engage in The Teaching Coats Project. This could be a way to tell new stories, draw attention to injustices, and inspire positive change in the world.

Another offspring of The Teaching Coats Project I envision is an interactive touring gallery exhibit featuring Teaching Coats curated for their social justice value. As an example of arts-based activism, these Teaching Coats would explore the medium to speak to social justice topics impacting the teacher-artists who make them. Ideally the exhibit would represent the work of teachers from a diversity of geographical regions, cultures, ethnicities, religions, sexual orientations, ages, and abilities.

Every day, teachers all over the world work hard for the good of their students, each other, and their communities, while simultaneously facing immediate and broad-reaching challenges, oppression, and inequities, including the political, economic, social, physical, environmental and beyond. What are these teachers' stories, and what might they teach us?

What might we learn from a Teaching Coat that passed through hands of a dozen Aboriginal teachers and students in a crumbling, underfunded school on a reserve in northern Canada? What would we learn from a Teaching Coat created by a transgendered teacher who was fired from his job in an Ontario Catholic school for expression his identity? What would we learn from the Teaching Coat of an inner city Detroit teacher who saw firsthand who was left in the wake of "no child left

behind”? What would we learn from a Teaching Coat worn by a teacher in an Acapulco, Mexico protest march against the rampant extortion and violence that shut down her school and hold her community hostage? What might we learn from a Teaching Coat mailed in secret by a teacher in a place that is silently screaming for revolution?

The next phase of the Teaching Coats Project will be to seek out and highlight the voices of teachers calling for social justice. In this new journey, what will The Teaching Coats Project teach us about ourselves, our students, and our world?

## Epilogue: An Invitation

Imagine  
you own a special coat  
that has the power to tell your story  
as teaching professional:  
this is your very own  
*Teaching Coat.*  
How does it look?  
Of what is it made?  
Is there dust in one pocket,  
and gold in the other  
to remind you  
of who you  
are?  
What metaphors,  
meanings, treasures, symbols,  
memories, and magic  
does your Teaching Coat contain?  
And how do you choose what to include?  
What questions and revelations emerge  
as you create your Teaching Coat?  
And when you wear it, how does it feel?  
And when you share it, what aspects do you share?

What parts of your Teaching Coat speak of the gifts

that flow from you through your work?

What parts of your Teaching Coat

do you keep for yourself?

What does your Teaching Coat

teach you and others

about the world

as you see it?

Is your Teaching Coat sewn

with the threads of who you are,

what you believe,

why you teach, and

and what matters most?

Is your Teaching Coat, like you,

more than the sum

of its parts?

What legacy do you leave

that you've sewn over time,

that you wear each day,

and that speaks on

in your silence?

Is your Teaching Coat,

like your identity,

a collage,

*a work of art?*

Perhaps now is the time

to discover your Teaching Coat:

If you look you may see it

already hanging

in your heart, in your mind,

and invisibly on your shoulders,

since the day you decided

you have *always*

been

a teacher.

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# Appendices

## Appendix A: Ethics Approval



The University of British Columbia  
Office of Research Services  
**Behavioural Research Ethics Board**  
Suite 102, 6190 Agronomy Road, Vancouver, B.C. V6T 1Z3

### CERTIFICATE OF APPROVAL - MINIMAL RISK

<b>PRINCIPAL INVESTIGATOR:</b> Michelle Stack	<b>INSTITUTION / DEPARTMENT:</b> UBC/Education/Educational Studies	<b>UBC BREB NUMBER:</b> H11-02805				
<b>INSTITUTION(S) WHERE RESEARCH WILL BE CARRIED OUT:</b>						
<table border="1"><thead><tr><th>Institution</th><th>Site</th></tr></thead><tbody><tr><td>N/A</td><td>N/A</td></tr></tbody></table>			Institution	Site	N/A	N/A
Institution	Site					
N/A	N/A					
<b>CO-INVESTIGATOR(S):</b> Tiffany Alexandria Poirier						
<b>SPONSORING AGENCIES:</b> N/A						
<b>PROJECT TITLE:</b> The Teaching Coats Project						

**CERTIFICATE EXPIRY DATE:** January 31, 2013

DOCUMENTS INCLUDED IN THIS APPROVAL:		DATE APPROVED: January 31, 2012	
Document Name	Version	Date	
<b><u>Protocol:</u></b>			
Interview Session 1 Procedures	1	November 9, 2011	
Interview Session 2 Procedures	1	November 9, 2011	
<b><u>Consent Forms:</u></b>			
Consent Form	2	January 12, 2012	
<b><u>Advertisements:</u></b>			
Email Notification of Selection	1	January 12, 2012	
Email Notification of Non-Selection	1	January 12, 2012	
Introductory Email to Listserve	1	January 12, 2012	
Email Response to Request for Information	1	January 12, 2012	
<b><u>Letter of Initial Contact:</u></b>			
Initial Contact Letter	2	January 12, 2012	

The application for ethical review and the document(s) listed above have been reviewed and the procedures were found to be acceptable on ethical grounds for research involving human subjects.

*This study has been approved either by the full Behavioural REB or by  
an authorized delegated reviewer*