

Mothers and Mothering throughout the Life Course

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Poetic Inquiry: International Doctoral Students' Roles as Digital Learners, Educators, and Mothers during Lockdown

The COVID-19 pandemic, a global crisis of unprecedented scale, caused widespread upheaval and significantly affected international doctoral student mothers (IDSMSs) worldwide. Due to visa and travel restrictions, some IDSMSs began their doctoral work in their home countries in different time zones with limited connectivity and resource access. Others in the United States used digital devices to coparent their children and support significant others. In this article, we describe how we used an interpretive approach, notably poetic inquiry, to delve into the experiences of six IDSMSs from Egypt, Pakistan, Ukraine, Bangladesh, Palestine, and Botswana. Our found poems, a product of this unique methodology, provide educators with a nuanced and enlarged understanding of how technology eased and challenged IDSMSs' roles as mothers, digital learners, and educators during an extended lockdown. Higher education institutions (HEI) committed to creating inclusive spaces can use the found poems to ignite interdisciplinary, cross-sectoral dialogue about how to meet the needs of this underrepresented and underserved population. This article will also aid qualitative researchers interested in exploring poetic approaches for data analysis and representation.

Introduction

The World Health Organization declared COVID-19 a pandemic in the spring of 2020 after it spread worldwide. In a few days, academics and students accustomed to the traditional face-to-face teaching and learning model had to adapt to the new standard: remote teaching and learning via web-conferencing systems like Zoom. Travel restrictions during the pandemic thwarted international students' plans to begin their doctoral programs in the United States (US); they began coursework from their home countries via video

conferencing systems like Zoom at odd hours, with unstable internet connections. Although scholars have documented the experiences of international graduate students during the pandemic, they have yet to study the experiences of international doctoral-student mothers (IDSMs) under multiple COVID-19-induced lockdowns during the 2020–2021 academic year. In an increasingly polarized and inequitable society, we need research methods that foster genuine listening, build empathy, and humanize others. With this end in mind, we used poetic inquiry to gain insight into six IDSMs' use of technology as mothers, digital learners, and educators during the pandemic. Poetic inquiry enabled us to be “alert to words and the worlds of others” (Glesen 29).

In the first part of the article, we describe the scholarly literature that informed the design of this study. Next, we acknowledge our minoritized position in the US, which shaped how we collected and interpreted the data. In the methodology section, we describe our rationale for using poetic inquiry, an arts-based research methodology (ABR), to analyze data and communicate research results artistically as found poems. We hope these found poems amplify the voices of the six IDSMs and engage readers in authentic, interdisciplinary, and cross-sectoral dialogue about this underrepresented and underserved population. We also hope these poems ignite a conversation about how educators and community members can partner with IDSMs to create more inclusive universities in this postpandemic world and in times of crisis.

Literature Review

Several strands of scholarly literature informed the study design and mode of inquiry. In this section, we briefly synthesize research that describes the experiences of international graduate students (IGSs) and IDSMs during the pandemic. We also synthesize pre- and postpandemic literature that describes these IGSs' and IDSMs' use of technology to parent, learn, and teach online.

International Students during the Pandemic

The COVID-19 pandemic presented new challenges for international students. Many scholars have used quantitative (Chirikov and Soria 6; Mok et al. 7; Van de Velde et al. 114) and qualitative approaches (Mokbul, 77; Phan 350; Phu 242) to describe these challenges. Ka Ho Mok et al. (7) note that the pandemic decreased and shifted the mobility flow of international students, while Igore Chirikov and Krista Soria show that undergraduate and graduate and professional international students in the US were critically concerned about maintaining good health during their studies, managing immigration and visa issues, and having financial support (2). Other scholars report that

pandemic evoked in international students a severe state of anxiety (Feng et al. 252) and heightened social and psychological distress (Al-Oraibi et al. 8). Fewer scholars, however, describe how international student mothers' (ISMs) marital status and role as parents (Bhatti et al. 440:6; Phan 350; Phu 242) affected their academic, social, and emotional/mental well-being during the pandemic.

IDSMS during the Pandemic

Forbes reports that doctorates awarded to students on temporary visas surged from 17.5 per cent in 1987 to 29.9 per cent in 2017. Evidence shows that many international doctoral students are mothers raising their children in the US. Others parent from a distance (Zhang 441). While there is an abundance of studies examining academic (Doyle et al. 4; Schriever 1962), mental and emotional wellness (Abetz 77; Box 1; Phan 349; Schwab 7), and social interaction (Phu 241) of mothers working on their doctorate, little research explores IDSMS' experiences either before (Phu 241) or during the pandemic (Phan 338).

Learning, Teaching, and Parenting during the COVID-19 Pandemic

The scholarly literature confirms that the pandemic further exacerbated the digital divide. PWC Prasad et al.' study, conducted before the pandemic, suggests that the learning experiences of students from Asia, Africa, or the Middle East may differ significantly from those in the US. Tala Michelle Karkar-Esperat, who used a mixed-method approach to study students enrolled in online, asynchronous classes in an American public university, notes that "students faced challenges with English language proficiency, isolation, instructors' lack of experience, and a lack of motivation to study in online classes" (1722). Evidence shows that international students' exposure to online and hybrid courses was more limited than some of their American counterparts (Han et al.167; Prasad et al. 92). Countries that previously regarded the internet as a complementary or supportive tool had to use it, and remote instruction, as the fundamental tool for delivering education when the pandemic began in March 2020 (Al Lily et al. 2; Aladsani 198). Yesul Han et al. reported that during the pandemic, "international students' learning may have been more affected than domestic students, potentially further aggravating educational inequalities" (166). Their phenomenological study of the online learning experiences of seven IGSs from six countries reveals that students' emotional challenges during the pandemic stemmed from being away from home and family. They experienced emotional turmoil because leaving the country was "too risky" (171). They found the need for in-person interactions with instructors and peers challenging and appreciated online

breakout sessions that allowed them to interact with other students.

Learning how to teach effectively online during the pandemic posed a significant challenge. Amit Mittal et al.'s survey of 222 university faculty members in the US found significant differences in faculty members' feelings before and after conducting classes through online teaching (20). Educators who had never taken an online course had to learn how to teach online and hybrid courses during the pandemic, navigate unfamiliar digital tools, adapt lesson plans for remote delivery, and maintain student engagement in an environment characterized by distance and isolation (Johnson et al. 6; Mittal et al. 20; Ramlo 244–46). Susan Ramlo analyzed thirty-six statements from faculty participants to describe their subjective viewpoints about the move from face-to-face (F2F) instruction to online instruction due to the COVID-19 pandemic. Her participants reported frustration with their ability to best support their students in the online format. Nichole Johnson et al. surveyed 897 faculty and administrators at 672 U.S. institutions and found that most faculty changed their assignments or exams when transitioning to the new delivery mode (9). The primary areas where faculty and administrators found a need for aid were related to student support, greater access to online digital materials, and guidance for working from home. This study provides an early snapshot of efforts towards teaching and learning continuity at a large scale and offers some insights into future research and practice.

Before the pandemic, ISMs often used video conferencing for supplementary online or hybrid instruction. However, with the onset of the pandemic, technology took on an even greater significance. In addition to its instructional purposes, it became a vital tool for these mothers to connect with their home families, especially during the pandemic when their spouses and children lived in their home country. They used video conferencing systems, such as Zoom, FaceTime, and Facebook Messenger, on their computers and phones to support and sustain their family relationships (Zhang 441).

Several scholars have documented IGS and IDSMs' experiences with remote instruction and parenting before (Kibelloh and Bao 467) and during the pandemic (Murad 12; Wiederhold 437). Mboni Kibelloh and Yukun Bao examine international female students' perceptions and behavioural intentions towards e-learning as a tool for resolving overseas higher education and family strain (473). They used face-to-face interviews with twenty-one female international students enrolled in classroom-taught degree programs at a university in Wuhan, China. The findings reveal that e-learning makes it easier to balance study with family and is more feasible in terms of saving time, money, and energy. However, key concerns include poor and costly internet connectivity in developing countries, a perceived negative reputation, as well as a lack of face-to-face interaction and a lack of motivation in an online environment. In her conceptual paper, Brenda Wiederhold discusses

how technology, such as Zoom, made it possible to continue some semblance of business as usual during quarantine, allowing people to move their lives online while keeping physical distance to stop the spread of the virus. However, using technology never comes without a few bumps, as Wiederhold explains: “Aside from mechanical malfunctions and networks struggling to handle increased traffic, people are now beginning to recognize a new phenomenon: tiredness, anxiety, or worry resulting from overusing virtual videoconferencing platforms” (437). There appears to be a dearth of literature that describes how IDSMSs used digital devices to parent their children during the pandemic.

Guided by theoretical and methodological gaps in scholarly literature, this chapter is based on data from a larger qualitative study exploring IDSMSs’ academic, social, and emotional wellbeing during the pandemic. We focus explicitly on a cross-section of interview data that describes how six IDSMSs transitioned to online parenting, learning, and teaching during the pandemic.

Method and Modes of Inquiry

We used a qualitative approach to collect and analyze interview data collected between spring 2020 and spring 2021. This section describes our positionality, the study’s design, and the data collection and analytic procedures.

Collective Positionality Statement

It is common knowledge that the academy fosters feelings of isolation in some and fierce competition in others. Women of colour (WoC) often lack institutional support and service responsibilities encroach on work-life balance (Gutierrez y Muhs et al.). Crystal (author one) is a middle-aged Pakistani American who came to the US as an international student twenty years ago. She is a first-generation immigrant and a full professor at a research university in the US. Ragia (author two), who took a class with Crystal in the spring of 2020, is a youngish Egyptian married woman on an F1 visa. She is raising three children independently while working on her doctorate in the US. Our shared experience as international students and WoC fuelled our interest in designing this qualitative study exploring IDSMSs’ experiences during the pandemic.

Purpose and Research Question

We used poetic inquiry, a vibrant ABR methodology, because it privileges the voices of both participants and the researcher. We wanted to move the reader “affectively as well as intellectually” (Prendergast 546). This approach offered a novel set of data generation, analysis, communication, and engagement methods that amplified the voices of our participants: six IDSMSs. We used the interview data to craft found poems in response to the following research

questions: *How did technology facilitate or constrain IDSMS as (a) learners, (b) educators, and (c) mothers during the pandemic?*

Sampling Method

We used purposeful sampling procedures and the snowball approach (Creswell 262; Edmonson and Irby 80) to recruit participants who:

1. were citizens of a country other than the US;
2. were women enrolled in doctoral programs in the US for at least three or more consecutive semesters in spring 2020, fall 2020, and fall 2021;
3. held F1 visas; and
4. had children between the ages of 1-30 in the US or their home country.

We consciously tried to select interviewees of different races, ethnicities, and countries at various stages of their doctoral programs.

Instrumentation

We employed multiple steps to establish the face validity of the interview protocol (Allen et al. 159). We used Bridges's transition model for change and Goode's theory of role strain to guide the design of our research and interview questions. Next, Crystal, an international faculty member, created the interview protocol. We revised the protocol based on feedback from an IDSMS and two international faculty members who raised young children during the pandemic. The final version of the semistructured interview protocol included a warmup section and fourteen open-ended questions organized into three sections: Getting to Know You, Pandemic Experience, and Transition and Strain. We used this protocol first, followed by a follow-up interview a week or two later. We based the follow-up interview questions on gaps we identified through preliminary data analysis.

The Rationale for Using Poetic Inquiry

Even though poetry as a form of research has yet to be a central topic of educational research, we chose this approach for several reasons. First, poetic inquiry allowed us to group participants' voices to explore IDSMSs' lived experiences during the pandemic. Second, using "creativity and deep engagement" (Brown et al. 258) with the interview data allowed us to pay close attention to IDSMSs' language, deepened our reflexivity as researchers, and promoted the efficiency of qualitative expression. This article also adds to the limited ABR in doctoral education.

Data Collection and Preliminary Analysis

Crystal, previously an international doctoral student, interviewed Ragia, who is an IDSM and participant researcher. Following this, Ragia interviewed the other five interviewees twice via Zoom. She then edited the transcripts generated by Zoom. In phase one, Crystal watched the video recording of each participant's first interview and took notes on a re-storying table. Following this, she created a list of questions for each follow-up interview based on identified gaps. Ragia used the table and follow-up questions to guide the second semistructured interview with each IDSM.

Computer-Assisted Data Analysis

In phase two, we used NVivo, a qualitative research software, to code the data and engage in typological, interpretive, case, and cross-case analysis (Hatch 152–91). Next, we used structural coding, recommended by Johnny Saldaña (152) and matrix queries to categorize units of data into comparable segments. This approach enabled us to explore IDSMs' commonalities, differences, and interrelationships between and across their roles as digital learners, educators, and mothers. We regularly engaged in memoing, bracketing, and peer debriefing (Edmonson and Irby, 80) to enhance the trustworthiness of our data analysis.

Arts-Based Analysis and Poetry Writing

In phase three, we shifted from traditional analysis to poetic inquiry, an ABR approach, to further explore, understand, and represent the data and “bring into view some of the more nuanced elements of participants' experiences while maintaining an individual level of analysis” (Loads et al. 340). Our found poems, often referred to as “vox participare” (Prendergast 545), represent participants' lived experiences (Loads et al. 340) as learners, educators, and mothers during the pandemic. We share Sandra Faulkner's view that poetry “embodies experience to show truths that are not usually evident” (211), opening our research to new understandings. We began poetic inquiry by reflecting on the meaning and connection of data organized under different codes. We identified, extracted, and saved data related to the three categories—learner, educator, and mother—to a shared Google Doc. We independently used participants' words within the data to craft poems portraying meanings and connections. We paid close attention to the parts of the narratives that include conflicting or contradictory elements. We were inspired to write some poems focussing on single participants; others combined participants' voices with our own to facilitate an appreciation of the presence of both parties in the completed analysis (Glesne 203). In some poems, we used participants' voices unchanged. We took artistic license with others, modified word order and punctuation, and blended participant and researcher voices. We discussed our preliminary drafts during peer debriefing sessions. As connections became

apparent, we reordered words in each poem. Finally, we edited the poems, ensuring that they speak to the complexity of the data. To preserve authenticity, we intentionally left linguistic errors intact. We rearranged the words across multiple stanzas to powerfully express critical themes in the data.

Participants

Six IDSMS enrolled in two doctoral programs in the US took part in this study. All participant names are pseudonyms. Fatima, a forty-two-year-old Palestinian, Anastasia, a thirty-one-year Ukrainian, and Naledi, a thirty-four-year-old Botswanan, had stayed for their doctorate after completing their master's degrees in the US. While Fatima and Anastasia lived in the US with their spouses and children (five and two, respectively), Naledi's two children lived with her mother in Botswana. All three had teaching assistantships at the time of this study. Travel restrictions during the pandemic compelled Farah, a forty-seven-year-old Pakistani, Marium, a forty-one-year-old Egyptian, and Shapla, a thirty-seven-year-old Bangladeshi, to begin their doctoral coursework online via Zoom in their home countries. After completing her first semester of doctoral coursework in Qatar, Marium relocated to the US with her children, aged twelve, eight, and six. Farah and Shapla relocated to the US after completing two and three semesters, respectively. Farah's children were old enough (aged twenty-seven, twenty-five, and twenty-three, respectively) to be left behind in Pakistan. Shapla left her ten-year-old daughter with her spouse and mother in Bangladesh.

Found Poetry

Each IDSMS experienced the pandemic differently. We organized the poems in this section based on the three research subquestions. The poems in each section elevate our participants' voices to the fore and highlight interview data in an evocative and aesthetically rich manner. We encourage the reader to read each poem aloud to gain the full effect. At the end of each section, we present commentary on participants' struggles and triumphs.

How did technology facilitate or constrain IDSMs as learners during the pandemic?

Overwhelmed and Dis/connecteD

(Farah and Shapla)

Doctoral admission

Visa restrictions

New people with different accents

Will I survive the doctoral journey?

Low bandwidth

Different time zone

Six hour long synchronous sessions at night

Will I survive the doctoral journey?

Orientation program

Countless documents

But no VPN

Will I survive the doctoral journey?

A new way of learning

Digital textbooks and many applications

On a learning management system

Will I survive the doctoral journey?

Kaleidoscope

(Mariam, Shapla, and Farah)

Learners

From the east

And the west

Like bits of colored glass

We came together in a beautiful

Symmetrical geometric design

First, on WhatsApp,

Then, on Zoom,

Happy Hour!

Digitally connected in spring

Together, we created beautiful optical illusions.

We laughed

We talked

We dispelled our fears about tests and

statistics

We made memories

Happy Hours Behind the Screen

(Mariam)

When taking my first courses behind the laptop screen
Shielded, protected
Safe in the country that embraced me for eleven years
In my daughter's room, sitting at her desk,
I felt connected

Happy hours with my cohort, separated only by computer screens
Giggles resounding across the globe
Secrets shared with people we had never seen in person,
Secrets we never dared to say in class
Wine, coffee, and lavender tea
I felt connected

Distant and Fuzzy

(Naledi)

On Zoom, we connected with mates but were disconnected, too.
We were connected with instructors yet disconnected
Everyone seemed distant; everything seemed fuzzy.

The class dynamic has changed.
Were we connected?
Were we disconnected?

We attended Zoom classes.
We talked ... we laughed.
However, everyone seemed distant.
Everything seemed fuzzy.

Everyone in their own world
Their own bubble
So close,
Yet so far.

The Digital Cocoon

(Mariam)

Nervous and anxious at first....

...new culture

...new experiences

...new people

Safe and warm in my digital cocoon.

...Free to stay silent

...Free to speak

...It wasn't bad at all

Expert or Novice?

(Shapla)

I was a confident schoolteacher, an expert in my content area

... But an unsettled novice in doubt when taking my online classes

I was the expert who taught teachers how to manage online teaching during the pandemic

... But a novice student who feared Zoom classes and online learning

Where did the confident teacher go?

Has she gone forever? Will she ever return?

Death

(Fatima)

I am struggling

The loss of my brother in Gaza affected me severely

He was killed by a rocket

He left four young children behind

It is hard to come back to academic life

The trauma

I cannot describe it in words

I am

...paralyzed

...struggling

...cut

...distracted

When I try to focus on my dissertation

I get distracted and don't want to continue.

Mobile devices and video conferencing systems played a compelling role in the IDSMs' lives during the pandemic. Marium, Farah, and Shapla constantly used their phones, laptops, and Zoom from their respective home countries, Qatar, Pakistan, and Bangladesh. Initially, they needed technology to facilitate the application and visa procedures, which became even more difficult during the pandemic and a source of immense stress. When visa restrictions prevented them from travelling to the US, they used Zoom to join their classes. The American education system, in general, and online instruction, in particular, were brand-new experiences for Farah, Marium, and Shapla. Farah and Shapla described their angst when they started coursework in their respective countries ("Overwhelmed and Dis/connecting"). They did not experience what Vikram Ravi describes as a "first-level digital divide" (244) because they had access to the internet and mobile devices. However, they experienced a "second-level digital divide" (244); they needed more support in using what they had. They sometimes found the support and accommodations their professors and universities provided overwhelming.

Conversely, doctoral instruction via Zoom evoked many positive feelings in Marium. She enjoyed connecting with her peers via Zoom ("Happy Hours Behind Screens"). She welcomed having a safe space to think, reflect, engage, or be silent ("The Digital Cocoon"). Marium, Shapla, and Farah also enjoyed connecting with other doctoral students and professors via Zoom ("Kaleidoscope"). Naledi's perception of online instruction was different. She observed a disconnect as a doctoral student and teaching associate ("Distant and Fuzzy"). Two of the IDSMs went through an existential crisis as learners. Shapla's transition from an experienced professional to a learner was challenging ("Expert or Novice?"). Fatima had a challenging time going back to her dissertation after the tragic and unexpected death of her brother ("Death").

How Did Technology Facilitate or Constrain IDSMs as Educators during the Pandemic?

Between Two Worlds

(Fatima)

Online teaching enriched my experience
 I could work while my kids were around
 Hearing their joy during classes
 Being a part of it, too
 In between two worlds
 A world of academia
 And a world of laughter
 I felt connected

Safe Online

(Anastasia)

The virus was killing newborns and older adults alike
 Rich and poor
 Man and woman
 Online teaching kept me and my baby safe
 It kept her away from the horrors of the outside world
 The horrors of the virus
 Killing people
 Without a hint of mercy
 It kept me near my bundle of joy
 I was comfortable
 I was protected
 Online teaching kept me and my baby safe

Administrator's Quest

(Farah)

COVID-19 wreaked havoc
Fourteen-hour days
Exhaustion
Isolation

Rules
Regulations

Struggling daily to meet
...The ministry's demands.
...Parents' demands.
...Teachers' requests.
...Students' needs.

Setting schedules.
Designing online instruction.
Monitoring social media.
Expanding our network.

Trailblazing

(Shapla)

New positions, new possibilities
Thrilled to be
 a teacher,
 an academic
 a coordinator,
 a doctoral student.

New positions, new possibilities
Enthusiastic about
 designing
 directing
 training teachers from morn till midnight

New positions, new possibilities
Afraid to
 Leave the familiar
 Leave my family!
 Embrace the unknown

Technology, in general, and online instruction, in particular, played an influential role in the lives of these IDSM educators. The experience was positive for Fatima, Anastasia, and Naledi, who gained familiarity with the US education system before the pandemic while doing their master's degrees. Their experience was limited to in-person instruction, so they needed familiarity with online instruction. For Fatima and Anastasia, in the US, the pandemic and online instruction proved to be a cloud with a silver lining. "Between Two Worlds" and "Safe Online" capture the immense gratitude they felt. Anastasia overcame fears about protecting her unborn child from COVID-19 when she was allowed to teach online ("Safe Online").

Farah, Shapla, and Marium kept their day jobs while working on their doctoral degrees from their respective home countries. While this ensured that they would have a steady source of income, it also challenged them in diverse ways. Farah's trials and tribulations illustrate how she was answerable to many supervisors to ensure that the K-12 schools she managed ran smoothly ("Administrators' Quest"). Even though the number of work hours in the day multiplied for Shapla, she revelled in the excitement of a new position and possibilities ("Trailblazer"). Both carried out these new and ever-increasing responsibilities alongside their doctoral coursework.

How Did Technology Facilitate or Constrain IDSMs as Mothers during the Pandemic?

Tethered to the Phone

(Farah)

They are all adults; they can take care of themselves.

I am finally free to focus on myself!

Yet...

I am tethered to the phone multiple times a day...

Comforting,

Supporting,

Advising.

Letting Go

(Naledi)

I haven't seen my kids since August 2019

Yes, I parent by video call.

What is the point in yelling at them when they are miles and miles away?

...I let them know I love them.

...I try to provide what they need.

...I protect myself from the virus because I must return to my kids.

I do not want to be seen for the last time

....in a box

The Quarantined Juggler

(Mariam)

Have you washed your hands?
Are you wearing your mask?
Put on your gloves!
That is not a challenging task!
A mother's job is never done!

Chromebooks not working?
What should I do?
Why is my son sleeping?
While his teacher's on Zoom.
A mother's job is never done!

When COVID-19 wraps its arms around me
I hide inside my room.
Working on countless assignments
With only books and my laptop to keep me company
A mother's job is never done!

Stay away from us, Mommy!
Why did you bring us here?
Take us back to Daddy...
I don't like it here.
A mother's job is never done.

Virtual Graduation

(Fatima)

I am a mother of five children who are always busy.
The pandemic brought them closer, and we were together.
I enjoy having them around.
Cooking,
Playing,
Relaxing, and more

However, I missed my eldest's graduation.
I couldn't see my son with a graduation cap and gown!
I missed the moment I had waited all my life for!
The virtual graduation was not the same.
This was a disappointing moment for us all.
The disappointment brought us closer.
We were in this together.

Once again, these IDSMs relied heavily on technology to execute their role as parents. Farah and Naledi, both single mothers, used digital devices to parent their children in Pakistan (“Tethered to My Phone”) and Botswana (“Letting Go”). While their phones and laptops were a source of joy when they connected with their children, they were also a reminder of opportunities lost. Both experienced immense guilt because they could not be with their children in person. Marium contracted COVID-19 a couple of weeks after arriving in the US. She had to parent her three children alone; her husband had to return to their place of employment in Qatar. “The Quarantined Juggler” highlights the emotional turmoil Marium experienced as a parent without a support network. “Virtual Graduation” gives voice to some of the simple pleasures Fatima experienced with her children during the pandemic. It also describes how her son’s virtual graduation ceremony sullied this joy.

Limitations of the Study

Even though this study lies at the emic end of the emic-etic continuum, readers should transfer these findings to similar contexts, with caution. We minimized some of the limitations inherent in qualitative research studies by using NVivo, a qualitative research software for typological, interpretive, case, and cross-case analysis (Hatch 152–91). During the poetry writing phase, we used structural coding, recommended by Saldaña (152) and matrix queries. We further enhanced trustworthiness by engaging in continual discussion and peer debriefing (Edmonson and Irby 80) during each phase of the data collection and analysis stages. Ragia’s dual role as participant and researcher increased the participants’ willingness to be vulnerable during the interviews. It also increased the authenticity of the poems.

Epilogue: Reflections and Recommendations

We interviewed each of the six IDSMs to gain insight into their academic, social, and emotional wellbeing during the pandemic. We examined a cross-section of the larger dataset to explore how they negotiated their roles as digital learners, educators, and mothers during the pandemic. While computer-assisted data analysis with NVivo helped us code the dataset, run a wide range of queries, quantify the data, and aided us in identifying the most significant volume of experiences, the context disappeared, and we lost some of the valuable elements of the narrative. We successfully recovered some of this when we engaged in poetic inquiry. This approach helped us identify shared values within and across interviews. In this section, we discuss the messiness of poetic inquiry, the creative and imaginative understandings of what it means to be an IDSM during the pandemic, and the themes and

intersections of systemic inequality in higher education. We also encourage future education researchers to consider adopting an ABR methodology.

Even though poetic transcription partially represents IDSMS' experience, it brought a different range of elements to the fore. In line with other arts-based approaches, making sense of mess and complexity allowed us to pay attention to complexity and gain insight. It helped us to recognize and make explicit some of the more conflicted or contradictory elements in participants' narratives and explicitly draw attention to their fragmented and interpretative nature. The found poems hold themes of change and transformation. The IDSMS who participated in this study cycled between what Gillies and Roger describe as the "holding-back and joyful/stretching-myself states." IDSMS felt isolated, alone, anxious, and helpless when they were in the hardship and holding-back state. In the "joyful/stretching-myself stage," they feel supported and inspired by like-minded peers. Interestingly, these states were not mutually exclusive.

Hardship and the Holding-Back State

The poems "Overwhelmed and Dis/connected," "Expert or Novice," "The Quarantined Juggler," and "Disappointed" portray a cognitive-affective state characterized by the lack of agency, heightened fear and anxiety, depression, and the urge to disengage. These poems evoke the image of being stuck in a nightmare, powerless to escape. Encountering barriers and obstacles everywhere, IDSMS felt a desperate sense of inertia, which gave way to panic and powerlessness. Each IDSMS needed something different. Initially, Farah and Shapla had more difficulty transitioning to remote instruction than the others. They were limited not just by prior experience but also by limited connectivity and time zone fatigue.

Faculty can enhance IDSMS' learning experience and avert unpleasant outcomes in several ways. Doctoral programs can ascertain IDSMS' needs by conducting a needs assessment before coursework to gauge their digital maturity so that they can personalize the support they offer. Given that digital literacy is ever-changing, faculty must continue to familiarize themselves with IDSMS' digital issues while they are taking an online course in their home or host country. Depending on whether they are experiencing a first- or second-level digital divide, they may have to accommodate IDSMS differently. Farah and Shapla did not experience a first-level digital divide: the need for access to the internet or digital devices. They did experience a second-level divide: the need for additional training and technical support to harness the pedagogical benefits of the digital technologies they possess (Ravi 244). Consistent with the findings of other scholars, some of these IDSMS preferred verbal communication over written communication (Han et al. 165). They also needed more time to contact their instructors for help (Han et al. 165). Faculty

can use the principles of universal design to differentiate instruction by content, process, and product. IDSMs with young children, like Marium, need support systems that can help them adapt and thrive in their new environment. Program directors can address this need by connecting IDSMs like Marium with community members who can fill that need. They should also make childcare services more accessible so that IDSMs can take advantage of the library, counselling services, and the research lab. Travel restrictions prevented Anastasia and Fatima from travelling to care for family members in their home country after the loss of a loved one. Anh Ngoc Quynh Phan expressed similar sentiments in her autoethnography (70). Faculty can ease the stress of IDSMs who are dealing with grief due to the death of loved one or stress in general, by encouraging them to utilize the counselling center. They also need to make additional accommodations to help IDSM thrive.

Joyful and Stretching-Myself State

“Kaleidoscope,” “The Digital Cocoon,” “Between Two Worlds,” and “Safe Online” portray an intense sense of adventure, excitement, high agency, inspiration, and joy. The sentiments expressed in these poems originate from others and from within. The virtual and real-time interactions these IDSMs established via Zoom, FaceTime, and WhatsApp became crucial to maintaining a sense of belonging with their family and peers. The pendulum-like swing between these two states is not linear and is influenced by transitional, turning-point moments. These poems describe how personal characteristics, the institutional environment, and government policies limiting rights to security shape international student relationships. International students are a vulnerable population. They needed assistance during and after COVID-19. A commitment greater than simply attracting many students from different backgrounds is required. HEIs must show that they care for international students beyond their financial and academic contributions (Castiello-Gutiérrez and Li). Faculty and administrators must recognize that international students are not a homogeneous group; different international student groups require more attention during crises (Tonzini and Castiello-Gutiérrez 145).

The poems presented in this paper put the spotlight on IDSM vulnerabilities. This underserved population needed assistance during and after COVID-19. The impact of COVID-19 is likely to last long after the pandemic ends. Rakha Zabin recommends that HEIs should explore a post-COVID-19 vision (204). Ramlo’s study confirms that a one-size-fits-all approach to creating the best learning situations for students is not ideal; there are discipline and pedagogical issues to consider when moving in-person courses online that need to be fixed with technology. Ramlo advises administrators to understand the faculty’s instructional and mental health needs better, especially in an emergency such

as COVID-19 (257). HEIs should try to understand the social and financial support students have before and after they move to the US. To reduce feelings of stress and isolation, institutions should find a way to promote the social status of these students in the university community. Kelber Tozini and Santiago Castiello-Guiterrez recommend that HEIs “adapt academic policies in ways that favor flexible ways of learning” (145). Additionally, they could offer “flexible ways for students to enroll and earn credits even when not physically present on a US campus” (145).

Concluding Thoughts

The COVID-19 pandemic radically changed our lives. This article describes the experiences of six IDSMs enrolled in US doctoral programs and the multiple roles they played as learners, educators, and mothers during the pandemic. While the primary audience is IDSMs, who aspire to be professors, our participants’ experiences mirror those expressed by other IDSM (Phan 73), the ISMs and IGS who participated in other pandemic-related studies (Mokbul 80). Some of the poems may also resonate with American doctoral students. Our secondary audience is professors who prepare graduate and postgraduate students for the professoriate and higher education administrators. Recognizing that our secondary audience is academic, we avoided becoming a “third-world” broker by exoticizing participants’ experiences. We tried to communicate the complexity of our findings without succumbing to the temptation of reductionism. The found poems included in this article reflect our attempts to think poetically about the data and develop our poetic ear. We chose to use poetic inquiry because it disrupts hierarchies and humanizes research by centring participants’ lived experiences, evoking emotion, amplifying participants’ voices, and fostering researcher reflexivity, collaborative research, and public scholarship.

When considering a specific group or multiple groups of our intended audience, we paid particular attention to the voices that get silenced. The poems raise consciousness about IDSMs’ marginalized position in the academy. They illustrate how the six IDSMs’ access and use of technology, the number and location of their children, and employment status contributed to variability in the nature and intensity of stress, hope, and joy they experienced as learners, educators, and mothers. We hope the writing reflects our care and obligation towards the participants. We also hope professors and administrators use these poems to ignite a conversation about how educators and community members can partner with IDSMs to create more inclusive universities in this postpandemic world and in times of crisis.

Both authors found the poetic inquiry intimidating and challenging at first. As we got more comfortable with the process, we noticed patterns in the data

that we would have otherwise ignored. Crystal found new inspiration in her work as a professor and researcher by engaging in poetic inquiry, a new method. For Ragia, poetic inquiry offered a unique and valuable approach to self-reflection through metaphor, imagery, and symbolism. She gained new insights into her experiences as an IDSMM and saw them in a fresh light from different perspectives. This method also provided Ragia with more profound insights as she connected with other participants profoundly and meaningfully. This ability to shift perspectives fostered empathy, compassion, and a deeper understanding of herself and others. Ragia benefited from her role as the interviewer, as this position allowed her to recall not only the spoken words but also the subtle nuances of facial expressions and emotions of her interviewees. This added layer of sensory detail enriched her poetic compositions, providing a deeper, more textured exploration of the narratives she aimed to capture.

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