

***Applying the Shanker Self-Reg Framework®: Supporting the Mental Health and Wellbeing of an International Woman Graduate Student Transitioning to Canada during the COVID-19 Pandemic***

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*Introduction*

International Women Graduate Students (IWGS) face challenges to their mental health and wellbeing given the multiple types of barriers that become stressors in their lives while registered and aiming to complete a graduate program. In the context of the impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic, women postgraduate students experienced a larger impact than previously reported (Dai & Arnberg, 2022; Fridani et al., 2020). Such barriers for women who enroll as international students create stressors in the different, often conflicting demands. This paper shows how our presentation of the implementation of *Shanker Self-Reg*® at the Applied Self-Reg Knowledge Conference helped the authors/participants working in post-secondary institutions reflect on their lived experiences and find the convenience of drawing timelines to analyze, respond to, and manage stress.

The *Shanker Self-Reg Framework*® provides a neuroscientific definition of self-regulation as the body's reaction to biological, emotional, cognitive, social, and prosocial stressors encountered in daily life. Through the five steps of reframing behaviour, identifying stressors, developing individual strategies to reduce stress, enhancing stress awareness through reflection, and restoring energy, individuals maintain their self-regulation, thereby improving their resilience and overall wellbeing. Dr. Stuart Shanker has written extensively on the *Self-Reg Framework* and we invite readers to review Dr. Shanker's contribution to the current conference proceedings.

*Researcher Positioning*

Claudia Flores Moreno is mother of a child in junior elementary who graduated from Pedagogy, a general degree in education in Mexico that allows for specializations - such as education research, teacher or work-place training, but not elementary classroom teaching. Claudia had previous experience as an international student completing an MA in Education in London, United Kingdom. After acquiring work experience in the UK and upon return to Mexico, she became a late mom and embarked into the field of child protection and mental health issues as a mother and as a consultant. Before applying to the Joint PhD in Educational Studies at Lakehead University, she discovered *Shanker Self-Reg*® readings and attended a conference in Mexico City where Dr. Smith-Chant presented. Claudia had an interest, but not experience, in conducting autoethnography,

and thus, when co-authoring the chapter (Flores Moreno et al., 2023), she faced the challenges of representing the life experiences that resemble those faced by IWGS reported in the literature, particularly of women who were postgraduate international students at the time of COVID-19.

Meridith Lovell-Johnston is a former elementary and secondary school teacher whose main area of research is early literacy acquisition. As such, Meridith is a relative newcomer to *Shanker Self-Reg*<sup>®</sup>, having been introduced through her joint research with Dr. Sonia Mastrangelo. Meridith and Sonia co-supervise Claudia in her doctoral work. As co-supervisors, both Meridith and Sonia have a responsibility to support Claudia's academic progress. In terms of the current study, Meridith's experiences are not the primary focus in the autoethnography, which was constructed from Claudia's experiences and interpretations. Thus, it is mostly Claudia's perspectives that are presented throughout this article and the book chapter upon which it is based (Flores Moreno, Mastrangelo, & Lovell-Johnston, 2023).

### *Materials and Methods*

Our study employed a critical autoethnographic methodology (Morton, 2021; Phan, 2021) wherein the authors, primarily Claudia, critically analyzed their experiences throughout the period encompassing July 2019 through January 2022. Claudia gathered and reviewed all written communication between herself and her co-supervisors during the period including emails, texts, and *Whatsapp* messages; as well as reflected on conversations held via *Zoom* and in person. Claudia arranged the communications data chronologically in the form of stages according to events occurring in her academic and personal life. These stages represented her responses or reactions to expected and unexpected pressures from family responsibilities, the PhD program, the immigration process, and COVID-19 restrictions.

Claudia consulted with her co-supervisors to revise the material and Meridith proposed drafting a timeline. Claudia then coded the data by identifying themes and explanatory text excerpts that described the events or pressures happening at each stage of the timeline. She wrote an extended personal narrative with her reflections around each of the events and then organized events into six longer time periods. Many of the events within each time period were interrelated. A second round of coding was applied to the narratives wherein Claudia utilized the five-domain framework from *Shanker Self-Reg*<sup>®</sup> to identify biological, cognitive, emotional, social, and prosocial stressors arising from each timeline event. She then worked with her co-supervisors to share critical reflections and identify her progress at each stage within the five *Self-Reg*<sup>®</sup> steps. At the same time, her supervisors reflected retrospectively on their own strategies employed at each stage to help Claudia reframe her responses to the events and to co-regulate Claudia in the face of unprecedented stressors she encountered throughout the period prior to and during the transition to settling in Canada for doctoral studies.

### *Results*

Within Claudia's stages represented as a timeline of events (Figure 1), we (Claudia and her supervisors) include the time period categories presented in the published chapter, as well as a seventh time period that extends past the end of the published chapter (Flores Moreno et al., 2023). The Joint PhD in Educational Studies

program at Lakehead University commences classes each year in July. It was originally intended that Claudia and her family would arrive in Canada in the early summer, 2020; however, this was not possible since the Canadian government closed the border to international student travel. Instead, Claudia commenced the first doctoral class, *Doctoral Seminar 1*, a class that normally takes place in person during a highly compressed three-week term, online from Mexico with daily synchronous lectures over *Zoom* and the additional requirement for asynchronous discussion posts on the *Desire to Learn* platform. She completed the second course, which is typically taught asynchronously, while also in Mexico, before pursuing a leave of absence due to financial and personal constraints until she was able to travel to Canada in July 2021. Since the leave of absence put Claudia out of sequence in her program, she moved out of sync with her doctoral cohort by over half a year. She resumed coursework in January 2022 with the third course, a directed study with her co-supervisors. All the decisions along the way, helped Claudia to manage her stressors and successfully make progress in the program.

Figure 1. Claudia’s Doctoral Timeline



Claudia wrote 30 brief narratives outlining the circumstances and key events that occurred in the months leading up to the start of her PhD and the first two years of her program, from which these categories emerged. Most of the key events and identified stressors are included in Table 1. Although some of these events and stressors were expected as part of the doctoral program (i.e., preparing a research proposal, taking synchronous and asynchronous courses, and interacting with supervisors and other faculty and students), some of the challenges are unique to international students, such as securing visas and study permits, moving to a new country, and acclimating to a different way of life. While many Black, Indigenous and People of Colour (BIPOC) experience

discrimination in Canada, international students have added exclusions such as language proficiency, and lack of awareness of cultural codes and systems (eg. to access a rental outside campus), that make them a target of more vulnerabilities. Women international students in postgraduate education then face barriers that may remain invisible and represent discrimination ( e.g., having childcare for in-person intensive courses). Yet, within Claudia’s narratives were additional hardships such as financial, biological, emotional, and social. These were extreme challenges that stemmed from the global pandemic and the policies enacted in response by both the Canadian and Mexican governments.

Table 1  
*Timeline Narratives and Key Stressors Experienced*

Timeline Category	# Narratives	Key Events for Claudia from Narratives	Stressors Experienced
Planning Doctoral Studies	6	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Attended parenting Summit in Mexico City (Drs. Shanker and Smith-Chant)</li> <li>• Attended Self-Reg Summer Symposium (Canada)</li> <li>• Initial Meeting with Drs. Mastrangelo and Lovell-Johnston (Canada)</li> <li>• Sonia invites Claudia to write a book chapter proposal (Mexico)</li> <li>• Contracting Dengue fever</li> <li>• Writing research plan</li> <li>• Acceptance to PhD program</li> <li>• Preparing to move to Canada: quit jobs, homeschool child, begin immigration process</li> </ul>	Biological Cognitive
Stuck in Mexico	4	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Pandemic declared</li> <li>• Family isolation at home</li> <li>• Uncertainty, watching daily updates</li> <li>• Establishing daily routines in isolation</li> <li>• Visa offices close</li> <li>• Canadian border closure</li> </ul>	Emotional Social
Starting a PhD Online	3	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Online course with heavy workload and tight deadlines</li> <li>• Other IWGS asked to withdraw from program</li> <li>• Building rapport with faculty</li> <li>• Major financial pressures (household)</li> <li>• Migraines and fatigue</li> <li>• First phase of study permit approved</li> </ul>	Biological Emotional Cognitive Social
Online Studies / Hardship	12	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Succeeding in asynchronous course</li> <li>• Lack of feedback/empathy from other students</li> <li>• Supportive rapport from professor</li> <li>• Financial hardship, new immigration rules, uncertainty</li> <li>• Co-regulating homeschooling experiences as a mom</li> <li>• Applied for Leave of Absence</li> <li>• Generating income with few hours of online teaching</li> </ul>	Emotional Cognitive Social

		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Parental illness, care, death, and grief</li> <li>• Loose COVID management policies in Mexico</li> <li>• Study permit approved</li> <li>• Preparing for international move as a family</li> </ul>	
Leave of Absence	n/a		
Settling in Ontario	5	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Travel to Canada with pandemic restrictions</li> <li>• Experiencing discrimination</li> <li>• Learning about life in Canada and procedures</li> <li>• Lack of support outside campus; cultural shock</li> <li>• Lack of social networks; connecting with neighbours</li> </ul>	Biological Emotional Cognitive Prosocial
Directed Study Course	n/a		

Figure 1 and Table 1 present a snapshot of key events for Claudia; however, there was certainly much more happening in her personal and academic life during this time. Throughout the roughly 33 months of the timeline events, Sonia and Meridith sought to support and co-regulate Claudia from afar through a variety of media including text, voice, and video, and help her to navigate university policy and procedures, the doctoral transition, and other challenges that arose along the way. Within the chapter (Flores Moreno et al., 2023), Claudia identified examples of times where she was able to reframe and identify stressors, reflect on how her self-regulation was being impacted, and develop strategies to help lower her stress in an environment of constant change, uncertainty, and imminent threats to the health and wellbeing of herself and her family. At the time of completing writing the chapter, roughly a year after settling in Canada, Claudia identified that she was approaching the fourth stage of *Shanker Self-Reg*<sup>®</sup>; reflecting on her self-regulation in the context of the events she had experienced.

### *Discussion*

When Sonia approached Meridith about presenting at the *Applied Self-Reg Knowledge Conference*, she immediately thought about inviting Claudia to co-present about our recently published book chapter. Preparing for the presentation gave both Claudia and Meridith new perspectives on: the framing stages that Claudia experienced to present, both student and supervisor responses to different events occurring during the first two years of doctoral studies, and to the relationship between =co-supervisors and student. Accordingly, we present our key insights from reflecting on Claudia's transition to doctoral studies and life in Canada during the pandemic, looking at where we are at now in the summer of 2023, and also, where we are headed.

### *Insights*

*Insight 1: IWGS contend with pressures and stresses stemming from multiple roles and identities: graduate student, scholar, Latina woman, immigrant/temporary resident of Canada, carer, mother, wife, daughter, advocate, and many more.*

The autoethnographic narratives that Claudia compiled for analysis helped reflect her life experiences of holding various roles and added another layer that included the perspectives and experiences of an international student. Despite the fact that Claudia had

been an international student in the UK at an earlier age, her role as mother and wife at a different stage in life meant that she was facing most stressors for the first time. Claudia was able to build on her academic skills and professional experience to successfully advance in her scholarly work, particularly in the first two courses of the doctoral program. Reframing the stressors at the beginning of the pandemic with the support of her co-supervisors helped Claudia to have permanence in her program. As a Latina mixed-raced woman, Claudia was expected to provide child care and care to her elderly parents while engaging with her academic life. However, the lack of employment after not transitioning to Canada when she first expected to do so and the different management of the COVID-19 pandemic in her home and destination countries posed exceptional challenges for Claudia. Caring for elderly parents in Mexico was a situation of extreme stress with helping them deal with the healthcare system, but homeschooling her son was a practice that helped her restore her energy. Reducing the stress of the many barriers and exclusions while holding different roles was a great challenge, and the conversations with her co-supervisors helped her succeed. Once settled in Ontario, although Claudia was aware of the reconciliation process that Canadian society had recently started, being unaware of the domestic practices of systemic racism has posed significant stressors and the experience of discrimination to cope with the challenges of adapting to a new context. It is then important to look at the complex exclusions that women international students face in postgraduate education, to support them in reframing the stressors while validating their lived experiences.

*Insight 2: Mentors, such as graduate supervisors, can support IWGS to identify their stressors and use co-regulation strategies to help their students identify and work to reduce their stress. While this might take more extended provision to students, it shows how the Shanker Self-Reg Framework® promotes social justice in post-secondary education.*

The support Meridith and Sonia offered as co-supervisors to Claudia as an international student, was structured differently from what would traditionally be offered to graduate students. However, these were unprecedented times and the mentorship and support model also needed to evolve to support Claudia during the unforeseen challenges she faced. Sonia's work with *Shanker Self-Reg*® proved to be invaluable in helping the co-supervisors to tailor our response to Claudia's challenges and structure support in ways that were intended to help co-regulate her and help her to develop strategies to maintain mental health and wellbeing. Typically, we would support students through primarily cognitive/academic challenges associated with their programs, such as: assistance with developing topics, research and writing strategies, as well as with academic content and procedures. Sometimes we provide emotional support/encouragement and sometimes assistance with navigating the social norms of academic institutions. In Claudia's circumstance, she was facing many more stressors across all five domains, and traditional supports and regulation mechanisms such as community interaction were not available due to isolation protocols and online learning. Developing the analysis of data framed as a timeline gave us the opportunity to reflect on our experiences and contextualize them so that we could see the progress Claudia has made over the first two years of her doctoral program.

Meridith became Chair of Graduate Studies and Research in the Faculty of Education on July 1, 2020, just as the federal government announced that international



student travel was non-essential, except in cases where students were already enrolled in programs and were traveling back from abroad. It was a very chaotic and uncertain time, and particularly difficult for international students who could no longer secure visas (such as Claudia), or who attempted travel and were turned back before entering Canada. Our graduate programs, which were approximately two thirds online prior, became 100% online for the next two years. Program disruption was severe for most international students, and following the international trends over COVID-19, it was even greater for women students. Synchronous courses, which are better suited for language, academic immersion, and the possible support through empathy built in relationships, were moved to *Zoom*, but time zone differences meant that international students were often taking courses in the middle of the night. Asynchronous courses, which are helpful when students are in different timezones, are challenging for international students working in their non-native languages or who are accustomed to different pedagogical structures and who expect building on the contact of relationships. The amount of written work (i.e., discussion posts), increased by a large degree, which is challenging for English learners and, as well, it is more difficult to build a cohesive sense of community online. Claudia's situation required creative problem-solving; especially in the use of regular email/video communication to navigate university and program policies, and in pursuing the leave of absence when online study became untenable for her.

*Where are we now? Where are we going?*

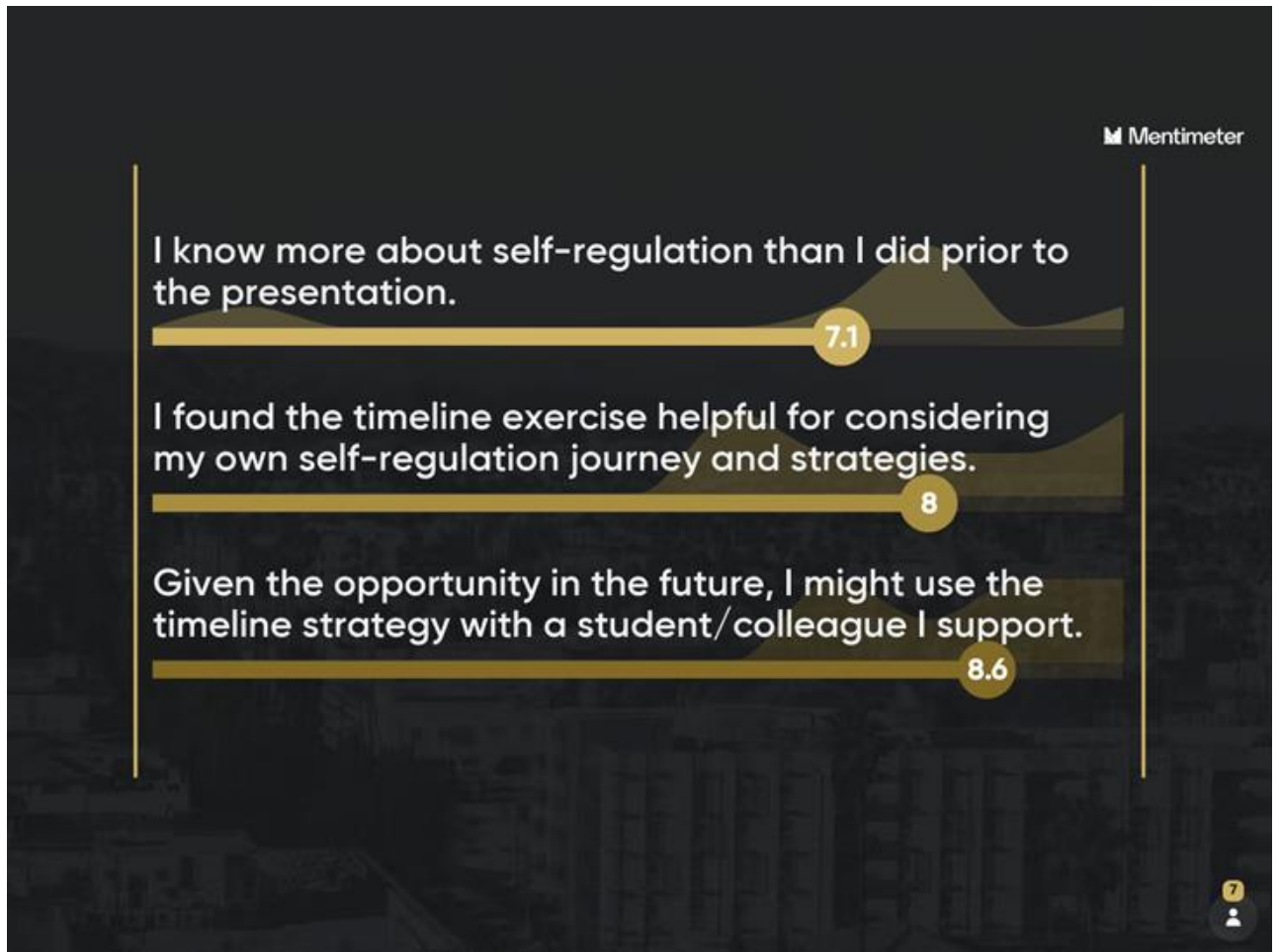
Claudia has successfully completed all doctoral coursework for the Joint PhD in Educational Studies program and is transitioning to the completion of her comprehensive portfolio, while continuing to manage stress. Last summer, Claudia was hired as a research assistant to support our SSHRC-funded *Partnership Engage Grant* with a community partner that supports adults with intellectual disabilities, and thus, Claudia has developed a research relationship and defined a potential site for her doctoral study. Based on their experiences as co-supervisors with Claudia throughout the pandemic, Meridith and Sonia established a weekly *Zoom*-based research discussion group for all graduate students they jointly or separately supervised to help support students' goal-setting and progress towards completion of the research components of their programs (M Ed or PhD). Overall, students who participated in the voluntary discussion group have reported finding it helpful for refining their research ideas and navigating the research process. The benefit of this practice is in providing individual support to IWGS together with domestic graduate students and helping to keep them engaged in their programs during an often isolating post-pandemic period.

#### *Final Remarks and Recommendations*

In conclusion, we highly recommend that IWGS and their supervisors use and reflect on the *Shanker Self-Reg Framework*® steps in their lived experiences for instance, by charting stages and including a possible timeline of events or narratives that are not linear. We also recommend that supervisors support graduate students to identify their stressors across the five domains in order to develop strategies to reduce their stress and improve their self-regulation and wellbeing. In this way, supervisors are also able to succeed in supporting students. The *Shanker Self-Reg*® framework was helpful in assisting Claudia and her co-supervisors to contextualize the stressors and provide a

hopeful outlook towards restoration. In such a way, the implementation of the *Shanker Self-Reg*® approach by Claudia and her co-supervisors secured her permanence and progress in her doctoral program. Participants in our presentation/workshop, who were given the opportunity to develop and analyze their own lived experiences in the mode of a timeline, largely agreed that the strategy would be helpful in supporting them or their graduate students in similar circumstances (Figure 2).

Figure 2. Presentation Feedback from Mentimeter



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