JASR Volume 1, Issue 1: Supporting the Well-Being of University Students

Welcome from the Editors

Welcome to the inaugural issue of the Journal of Applied Self-Regulation. We are thrilled to embark on this scholarly journey dedicated to exploring the intricate mechanisms and profound implications of Shanker Self-Reg®.

In this journal, we aim to provide a platform for cutting-edge research that advances our understanding of self-regulation from diverse perspectives. Whether investigating the 5 steps of Shanker Self-Reg, examining the five domains of stressors, or exploring the socio-cultural factors shaping our self-regulatory capacities, our goal is to foster interdisciplinary dialogue and promote rigorous inquiry into this fundamental aspect of human nature.

As editors, we are committed to maintaining the highest standards of scholarship and fostering a supportive and inclusive academic community. We welcome empirical studies, theoretical analyses, methodological innovations, and integrative reviews that contribute to the advancement of knowledge in the field of self-regulation.

We invite researchers, practitioners, and students alike to join us in this exciting endeavor. Together, let us delve into the complexities of self-regulation, uncover new insights, and pave the way for a deeper understanding of human agency and flourishing.

Thank you for your interest in the Journal of Applied Self-Regulation. We look forward to your contributions and to the stimulating conversations that lie ahead.

If you wish to receive updates about JASR or ASK please email anne@self-reg.ca.

Warm regards,

Sonia and Anne

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Applied Self-Regulation Knowledge is published by ASK Applied Self-Regulation Knowledge Network in Peterborough, Ontario.

Journal of Applied Self-Regulation Launched

Dr. Sonia Mastrangelo (Associate Professor and Chair, Undergraduate Education Programs, Orillia) and Dr. Anne Showalter (The MEHRIT Centre) are launching a new journal: the *Journal of Applied Self-Regulation*. The journal's purpose is to provide a platform for researchers and practitioners to share international research and knowledge about Shanker Self-Reg®.

Shanker Self-Reg is based on decades of research by Dr. Stuart Shanker distinguished research Professor Emeritus of Philosophy and Psychology and the Founder & Visionary of The MEHRIT Centre, Ltd (TMC). Through TMC that research continues and grows in its application through the work of CEO Dr. Susan Hopkins.

"Self-regulation is the ability to remain calmly focused and alert during times of stress, and this knowledge can be applied to a multitude of situations," says Sonia.

The first issue of the journal, to be published in the Spring of 2024, includes a compilation of conference proceedings from the Applied Self-Regulation Knowledge (ASK) Conference that took place at Lakehead University Orillia last May. The conference focused on improving the mental health of post-secondary students, and included contributions from faculty members, graduate students, and mental health professionals.

The *Journal of Applied Self-Regulation* will be part of the ASK (Applied Self-Regulation Knowledge) website.

Overwhelmed Students/Overwhelmed Staff and Faculty: Personality Disorders in University Students

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Abstract

Some of the most challenging students for university personnel are those who present with personality disorders. I will highlight how to identify those students who might have personality disorders and will address some of the common challenges. Often these students evoke powerful emotions, interpersonal conflict, dysfunctional alliances, boundary problems, impasses, and they are at high risk for attrition. Methods for addressing these challenges and treatment options will be discussed. Gaps in university mental health services for this population will also be addressed.

Personality disorders (PDs) are "prevalent, disabling, costly," and cause significant suffering for self and others (Conway et al., 2017, p.1000). As a result, early identification and intervention are essential for effective management and treatment. Research has demonstrated that the prevalence of PDs in university students is as high or possibly higher than the general population. Whereas the general population has a lifetime prevalence of approximately 15% (American Psychiatric Association, 2013), university populations have demonstrated prevalence rates ranging from 16% to 32% (Blanco et al., 2008; Eisenberg et al., 2013; Meaney et al., 2016; Sinha & Watson, 2001). In fact, Blanco et al.'s study found that personality disorder was the second most prevalent disorder (17.5%), after substance use (20.37%) among university students. Yet, research has demonstrated that PDs are often under- recognized and under-diagnosed in university populations (Conway et al., 2017; Kaess et al., 2014; Laurenssen et al., 2013). Lack of knowledge about the onset of the disorder, concern about the potential for stigmatization, apprehensiveness about how the recipient may respond to the diagnosis, and the reluctance to diagnose personality pathology in youth are factors that may contribute to the failure to identify or diagnose personality disorders in university students (Conway et al., 2017; LeQuesne & Hersh, 2004; Hersh, 2015; Paris, 2007).

Support for the importance of identifying those students with PDs is provided by the empirical and clinical literature that has repeatedly shown that this population is difficult to manage and slow to change. Students with PDs are at increased risk for self-harm or completed suicide (Allebeck et al, 1996: Goodman et al., 2012); premature drop out, treatment ruptures, or impasses (Marziali, 1992); have longstanding social dysfunction (Rutter, 1987); have a poorer response to psychosocial or pharmacological treatment compared to those without personality disorders (Busch & Sandberg, 2014; Hersh, 2015; Hoglend et al., 1993); have high rates of co-morbidity (Levy et al., 2014); and elicit negative countertransference (Gazzillo et al., 2015).

There are some signs and symptoms that can screen for personality disorders in university students. In general, those students with PDs often manifest significant malfunction in three core areas: interpersonal functioning, coping mechanisms/defenses, and affect regulation (Diamond et al., 2022; Fleischer, 1998; Pincus & Wiggins, 1990).

While they are usually not dysfunctional in all aspects of their lives, important aspects of their social functioning, and their ability to cope with stress and regulate their emotions are usually compromised, resulting in significant distress for self and others. The result is that their capacity to love, work, and/or enjoy life may be restricted.

There are some common markers for identifying personality dysfunction in the university population. In sum, the student's inner turmoil is often manifested in many aspects of their academic life and interpersonal arena. Poor, inconsistent academic performance, and performance below the student's capabilities are associated with personality pathology (Kaess et al., 2014). Chronic lateness, absence, attrition, disruptive classroom behaviours, and ongoing interpersonal conflicts are common (Cleary et al., 2012). They may exhibit extreme reactions to negative evaluations and may demonstrate dysfunctional relational patterns with faculty, manifested, for example, in excessive politeness or hostility, passive-aggressive behaviours, oppositionality, or withdrawal (Kernberg et al.,1989). Outside the university, relationships may be unstable and longstanding conflict with their family of origin is common. Repeated hospital emergency room visits, suicidality, and disparagement of other helping professionals or faculty are typical signs of personality pathology (Goodman et al., 2012). Students with PDs often have difficulty managing stress and tend to use maladaptive coping methods including substance use, self-cutting, sexual acting out, disordered eating, withdrawal into fantasy, excessive internet use, and/or pornography addictions.

Unfortunately, students with PDs often lack self-awareness or insight about their disorder and tend to fail to take responsibility for their contribution to their problems; they may come to the attention of mental health professionals due to the distress that they have caused others (Kernberg et al., 2009). In general, university students with PDs display enduring repetitive dysfunctional patterns of behaviour, and they may respond inappropriately to relatively innocuous stimuli (Marcus, 2017).

Students with PDs include a wide spectrum of individuals, with differing levels of impairment, co-morbidity, coping skills, insight, and treatment outcomes. Personality disorders are categorized on A, B, or C spectrums (American Psychiatric Association, 2013). Those students on the cluster A or B spectrum, who exhibit externalizing behaviours (e.g., self-harm, hypersexuality or substance use) or odd behaviours (e.g., paranoia, odd speech, appearance, or beliefs) (American Psychiatric Association, 2013) may be more readily identified for mental health problems. However, university personnel need to be on the lookout for those students on the cluster C spectrum, who are usually quieter, more anxious or withdrawn, and their difficulties may be manifested in perfectionism, self-criticism, procrastination, dependency, insecurity, low self-esteem, or indecisiveness (Stone, 1993). These students may function better and create less turmoil compared with students on the cluster A or B spectrum; however, they suffer and are at risk for negative outcomes.

It must be emphasized that this list of markers for screening for personality pathology does not definitively make a diagnosis, and these signs and symptoms could be associated with other disorders. For example, students who have psychotic disorders often have significant social impairment. Learning disorders can negatively impact academic performance, social functioning, and self-esteem (Bellak, 1983). Aspects of post-traumatic stress disorder or dissociative identity disorder can resemble personality pathology (Berzoff & Darwin, 1995; Gottlieb, 1997). However, students with any of these disorders

may have comorbid personality disorders (Diamond et al., 2014). The point is that when screening for personality pathology it is important that other issues and diagnoses are considered, as part of a comprehensive assessment and treatment planning.

To manage PDs effectively, early identification is critical for two reasons. First, faculty, and staff need to identify this population so that they can ensure that they receive appropriate mental health services. And second, they need to be able to manage their behaviour to promote optimal academic achievement and personal growth.

Perhaps the biggest challenge that university personnel face when they encounter students with PDs is associated with managing their countertransference and the student's transference (Betan et al., 2005). These students evoke powerful negative emotions and maladaptive responses, and these reactions can serve as a both useful tool and/or impediment to helping these students. As a tool, the intensity of the response alerts the recipient to the possibility of personality dysfunction and can help them to better understand the student. As an impediment, these reactions can impair their relationship with the student, and negatively impact their teaching and contribute to negative outcomes.

Students with PDs often display inappropriate reactions to those people who are in positions of authority, such as university personnel. They may display intense negative global reactions (transferences)-especially when they feel criticized, disappointed, or frustrated (Kernberg et al., 1989). Idealization may be followed by devaluation and these swings may occur daily or over the course of the semester. The student's response to others repeats elements of their past relationship history; however, they often lack awareness that something from the past is being acted out in the present. And university personnel are often at a loss to make sense of these reactions that are sometimes manifested, for example, in unwarranted complaints against faculty or requests for unreasonable accommodations. Faculty and staff often get trapped into dysfunctional dynamics and may find that they behave or speak in uncharacteristic ways. Splitting among the team members, resulting in unhealthy alliances between faculty factions, or inappropriate professor-student alliances may result in team conflicts (Green, 2018). The chaos in the student's internal world may get unknowingly acted out among the faculty and staff.

Unusual, atypical emotional responses to students-albeit overly positive, or negative, alerts the faculty, staff, or therapist to the possible presence of personality pathology (Colli et al., 2014). For example, faculty may experience strong negative emotions, such as excessive anger, dread, fear, hate, or disgust toward the student, resulting in arguing, avoidance, or punitive behaviours. Or the student may trigger an excessively positive reaction, that can be manifested in over-identifying with them, liking them too much, siding with them against colleagues, or boundary-crossing. Often these students get "under their skin," and it may feel like they invade their internal world, as demonstrated when they enter their dreams (Brown, 2007; Marcus, 2022). Because these students have a history of dysfunctional relationships that get compulsively played out in the present, these same dynamics inevitably occur with university personnel. And because students often use splitting and projective identification among other lower-level defenses, they create turmoil among staff and students.

There are steps that faculty, staff, and mental health professionals can take to develop a more productive working alliance with students with PDs. Perhaps the key beginning step is education for university personnel about personality pathology (Ebrahim et al., 2016; Spektor et al., 2015). This knowledge enables university personnel to

understand the student and maintain greater objectivity. For example, university personnel can use their emotional response to the student for insight into the student's emotions. Students with personality dysfunction may unconsciously get others to feel what they feel by projecting their intolerable emotions into them (i.e., projective identification). Students who have difficulty processing their own emotions, such as anger, frustration, or depression may induce in others intense rage, frustration, or helplessness. The professional's response to the student mirrors aspects of the student's own experience. Understanding these mechanisms can contribute to greater empathy and emotional distance-resulting in less reactivity and a more optimal response. Managing negative countertransference effectively is associated with better therapeutic outcomes (Hayes et al., 2011).

When faculty or staff can take a step back and monitor their response, they are more likely to be able to actively listen, while empathizing, supporting, and affirming the student. Appropriate structure, boundary setting and limits, including delineating clear expectations and rules, and confrontation provide important containing and holding functions (Caligor et al., 2009). Punctuality, reliability, and structure help to develop the alliance. When ruptures or impasses inevitably occur, university personnel can demonstrate that disagreements can be worked through (Marziali & Monroe-Blum, 1994). While faculty members or staff are not expected to be psychotherapists, the ability to maintain their composure, during conflict or emotional storms, can help to emotionally regulate the student. University personnel can provide auxiliary ego functions that the student may be lacking. Students identify with mentors and ideally over time they can take on functions that formerly were provided by others (Shafer, 1968). In addition, new positive experiences with university personnel can help to challenge rigid dysfunctional relational templates and may contribute to healthier styles of relating.

Consultation with colleagues, supervision, and personal psychotherapy can be helpful for university personnel to help them cope with this challenging population. Often staff struggle alone with these difficult students, and they may feel relieved to find out that other staff have had similar reactions. Since PDs display repetitive maladaptive behaviours, similar themes emerge with different staff and faculty (Marcus, 2020). A coordinated and consistent response helps to contain the student. Faculty and staff responses to the identified student inform personality pathology screening (Betan et al., 2005). When other university personnel have similar responses, this corroborates that the reaction is more than just the individual's idiosyncratic response to the student's personality. Colleagues can support each other.

Faculty or staff may benefit from pursuing their own psychotherapy, as clients with PDs can trigger intense conflict in others about their own childhood, trauma, or current psychic conflicts. Psychotherapy can help university personnel better understand their reactions to the student and help them develop more adaptive ways to manage the student's behaviour. Personal psychotherapy can be especially helpful for university staff who provide mental health services to students (Åstrand & Sandell, 2019).

Referral to appropriate mental health resources for students who have possible PDs is a critical role for faculty, staff, and mental health personnel. University personnel are in an ideal position to identify those students requiring mental health services and can use their relationship with the students to facilitate their entry into treatment. Particularly during high stress periods such as exam periods, or when major assignments are due, students with PDs (and students in general) are more likely to have crises, sometimes

requiring emergency services, and/or their other symptoms are likely to escalate (Cabaniss, 2016; Linden & Stuart, 2020). Clients with PDs may be more amenable to getting professional help during crises and university personnel can use this opportunity to refer them to university counselling services and other appropriate resources (Blanco et al., 2008).

Contrary to popular opinion and myth, treatment for people with PDs is effective (Leichsenring & Rabung, 2008; Lilliengren et al., 2016). However, there is a consensus in the empirical and clinical literature that PDs require longer term more intensive treatments and/or specialized treatments (Koss & Shiang, 1994; Leichsenring et al., 2013: Turr & Andreatta, 2014). Traditionally, psychoanalytic therapy or psychoanalysis have been the treatment of choice for personality disordered individuals (Keefe et al., 2019; Levy et al., 2014; Lilliengren et al., 2016). However, recent research has indicated that some time limited forms of group treatment (e.g., dialectical behavioural therapy, or interpersonal group therapy) (Linehan et al., 2006; Marziali & Monroe-Blum, 1994) and individual therapy (e.g., cognitive behaviour therapy, cognitive analytic therapy, transference-focused therapy) (Chanen et al., 2008; Diamond et al., 2014; Rossouw & Fonagy, 2012; Westen, 2000) may provide an effective and parsimonious form of treatment for PDs. Whatever form of therapy is used, this is a challenging population to treat effectively.

Often university students' first point of contact for mental health services is the university counselling centre. Unfortunately, most university counselling programs are not disorder specific. Research has indicated that most university mental health services are short-term (Gallagher, 2010; Jaworska et al., 2016), with the mean number of sessions being 5.5 (Rando & Barr, 2009). The common approaches mirror the mainstream popular contemporary treatments-which are often cognitive behavioural, mindfulness, solution-focused, and strength- based (Conley et al., 2013; Lees & Deitch, 2012). Universities offer a variety of different mental health services, including psychoeducational, peer support, triage, health promotion, movement-based, pet therapy, crisis intervention or supportive treatments (Linden & Stuart, 2020). While all these services are potentially useful, the difficulty is that the option of longer-term therapies, insight-oriented treatments, and treatments targeted toward a specific disorder are largely missing (Cabaniss & Holoshitz, 2019). The recent introduction of the stepped care model in Ontario universities is an important attempt to match students to the appropriate treatment (Nair & Otaki, 2021). However, to my knowledge, there are no university counselling programs in North America aimed specifically at students with PDs (Laurennsen et al., 2013).

If the PD is not identified or targeted, the student may not receive the appropriate referral and/or stay in treatment long enough to be referred to the more specialized treatments that tend to be most effective at addressing their longstanding, complex problems. If they do not receive appropriate treatment, there is increased risk of therapeutic impasses, premature termination, failed treatments, recidivism, frustrated clinicians, and hopeless students (Dunley et al., 2016). And even if the practitioner does the screening and makes the appropriate referral, given the paucity of long-term treatment and the growing demand for services, they may be placed on a lengthy waiting list, resulting in higher risk of attrition (Wampers et al., 2018). Also, there is a dearth of research on treatment programs and outcomes and prevention programs for university students with PDs (Laurennsen et al., 2013). University programs need to develop more flexible treatments and creative programs for their students with mental health disorders in general.

Despite the challenges faced in working with university students with PDs, the university setting offers an ideal opportunity to engage these students in treatment. Because the students are often relatively young, and are in a period of transition, their personality may be more malleable. Although some personality pathology, such as borderline personality may sometimes burn itself out or be ameliorated in middle or older age (Stone, 2016), personality defenses rigidify and dysfunctional behaviour tends to become more stereotyped with advancing age (Bangash, 2020; Gleason et al., 2014). The university life phase provides an ideal opportunity to help students move beyond a developmental impasse, challenge their dysfunctional patterns, fortify healthy coping methods, and to revive their growth potential.

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Lights! Cameras! Action Research! Self-Reg in the Spotlight for Pre-Service Teachers' Wellbeing

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Introduction

Acadia University's School of Education in Mi'kma'ki, Nova Scotia, hosts just over 200 pre-service teachers in the Bachelor of Education program. All of these students take a course (conducted over 10 classes) that invites them to explore the various elements of healthy learning environments. One of these elements is their own well-being as future teachers. The teaching profession is well known for being stressful (Gluschkoff et al., 2016; Simon & Moore Johnson, 2015), additionally being a university student involves navigating many and varied stressors. How do universities prepare future teachers to understand stress, the brain-body response to stress, and personally prepare themselves for this demanding profession?

Acadia's pre-service teachers explore their own personal wellbeing and self-regulation through a mini action research project as part of their Healthy Learning Environments coursework. Students learn about their own self-regulation (management of energy and tension) in preparation for being teachers who have the capacity to effectively coregulate others (students, families, and colleagues). Their action research projects connect the Self-Reg learning from class (Shanker & Hopkins, 2020) to a personally meaningful aspect of their own life; one that might potentially support or improve their wellbeing.

Materials and methods

A prerequisite for conducting the mini action research project is developing students' understanding of the brain-body response to stress. Shanker Self-Reg (Shanker, 2020; Shanker & Hopkins, 2020) provides a rich foundation for this. After conceptualising what stress is and how it can be growth-promoting as well as debilitating, students learn about the Thayer energy and tension matrix (Thayer, 1996), the triune brain (MacLean, 1990), various stress responses (Porges, 2007), 5 domains of stress (biological, emotion, cognitive, social, and prosocial) and 5 Self-Reg practices (reframe, recognize, reduce, reflect, and restore) (Shanker, 2013). Metaphorically, this supports students to develop the lens through which they observe and experience their own (and others') behaviours (Figure 1).

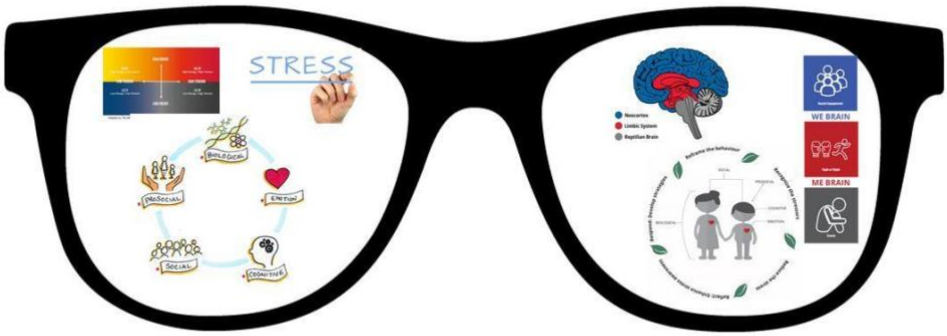

Figure 1. Metaphorical Self-Reg lens

After exploring foundational concepts, step one of the action research process, students engage in designing a personally relevant mini action research project. This process has seven steps:

1. Clarify Self-Reg theories
2. Identify a problem/ issue/ personal area of focus
3. Create a research question
4. Collect data
5. Analyse data
6. Report results
7. Take informed action

Data collection commences once students have a question that reflects their wellbeing focus and connects with Self-Reg theories discussed in class. Many students choose to spend up to a week collecting data before they make any changes, then continue to collect data as they enact some kind of change. Up to 3 weeks of data is collected, then analysed. Students conclude by reporting their results and writing an informed plan of how they want to move forward based on what they learned in their mini action research.

Results

The personal nature of this assignment inspires a rich diversity of topics. Some students know immediately what they want to focus on, others take a while to decide. Sometimes students actively avoid topics (for example: smoking or gaming) as the stress associated with investigating these is too great. One student, who was struggling to think of a focus, came to see me. From our conversation, she identified a time management and productivity problem she was experiencing due to the stressors of university work expectations. She shared, “Every morning I wake up extremely worried about school and because of this, I panic about the amount of work that I’m supposed to do and end up shutting down rather than being able to cope and get work done. I also experience immediate panic and shut down when I don’t understand things.” Her question connected to our learning about the Triune Brain (the red brain was dampening blue brain functions, resulting in a state of freeze and overwhelm). She was curious about organisation (executive functioning) and how it impacted her energy and tension. Other student examples included juggling family responsibilities around university course work expectations, physical wellbeing, nutrition, personal tech use, and sleep.

Students' research questions linked their personal focus to various theories from class. In the following examples theories represented include: the Thayer energy and tension matrix, various domains of stress, coregulation, and Step 5 of Self-Reg – restoration.

- Student A: "Will making a physical calendar lower my stress surrounding school?"
- Student B (mature aged student who is a father of two): "Will a Sunday activity of preparing meals for Tuesday and Thursday nights reduce tension and stress related to coming home late 2 nights a week after classes; and does the meal prepping activity itself function as a stress-reducing activity?"
- Student C: "Will adding ~30 minutes a day of moderate exercise help regulate my feelings of floodedness and dysregulation in the afternoons?"
- Student D: "Will eating a healthy breakfast have an effect on my energy, stress level, and mood?"
- Student E: "Will creating a schedule for my daily phone use help me stay on task (reducing tension), give me more energy, and limit my biological stressors?"
- Student F: "Will unplugging from technology (i.e., for social media, watching shows, phone calls, texting, schoolwork etc.) for 30 minutes to unwind before bed support faster sleep and a higher quality of energy with less tension throughout the next day? Will this, in turn, affect the number of stressors experienced?"

To give an example of a complete action research project, I will summarise Student F's project. Student F's question above derived from the problem she described as follows:

> "My mind is and has always been constantly in motion. When I lie down at the end of a day, I do not unwind, letting go of daily happenings. Those moments before sleep are frequently spent replaying my days, the good and bad, over again. This seems to be exasperated when I am working directly before sleep or busy on my phone before turning off my light. Sleep either comes slowly (sometimes hours), or when it does come, and I awake the following morning, I have low energy and feel my mind has not been still all night but in continuous motion."

This student collected 5 days of pre-change data followed by 9 days of data post change. She used the Thayer Matrix and 5 domains of stress for daytime and pre-bed/pre-sleep data as well as the sleep app 'Pillow' to collect sleep specific data (see figures 2 and 3).

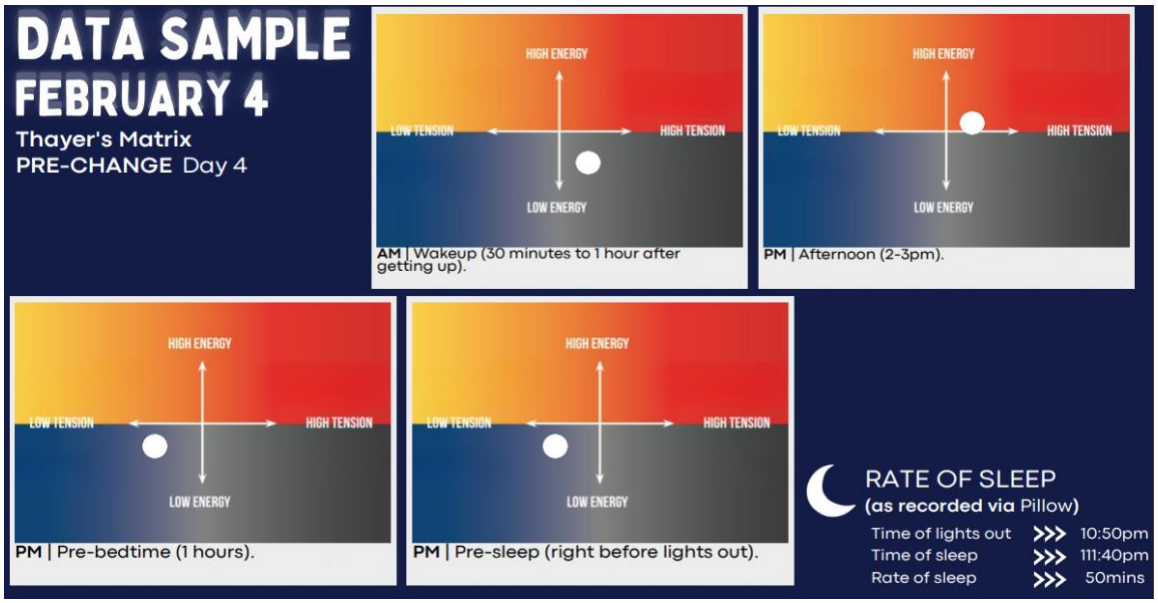

Figure 2. Student F pre-change data sample

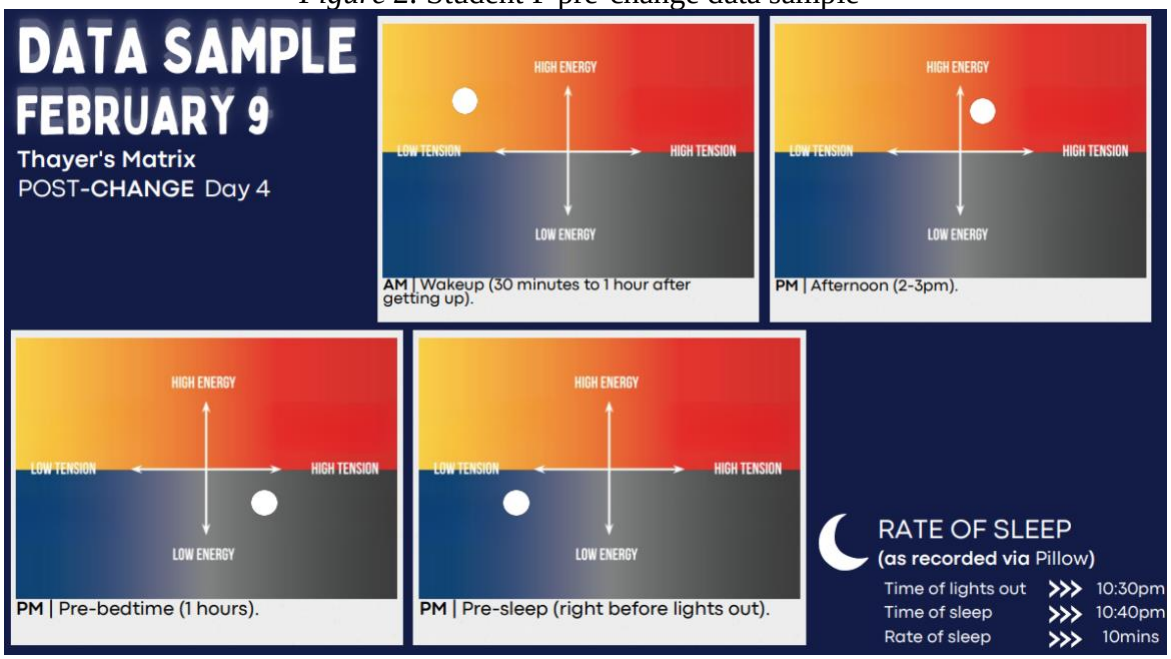

Figure 3. Student F post-change data sample

Data analysis showed a change in rate of sleep and patterns and trends for energy and tension (see figures 4 and 5).

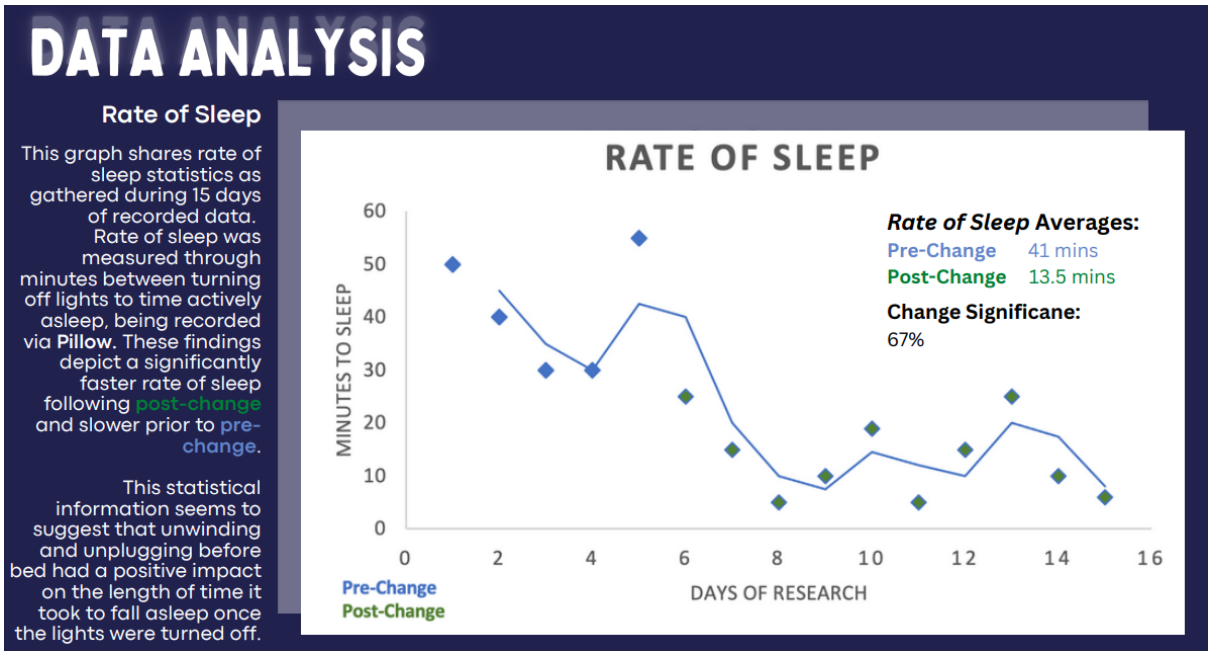

Figure 4. Student F data analysis for rate of sleep

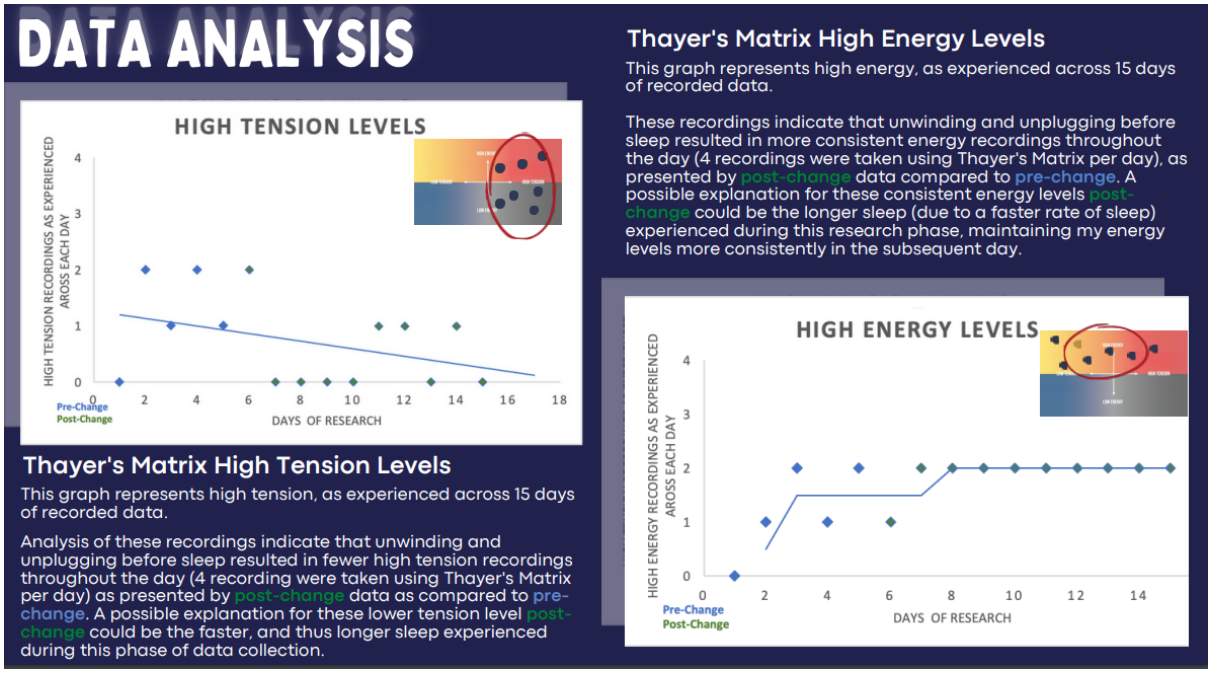

Figure 5: Student F data analysis for energy and tension

Student F's results suggested that unplugging from technology (i.e. social media, watching shows, phone calls, texting, schoolwork) for 30 minutes to unwind before bed supported a faster rate of falling asleep, a higher quality of energy with less tension throughout the next day, a positive change in energy and tension levels from pre-bed to pre-sleep, and fewer stressors across the 5 domains. Based on the data she had collected and analysed, her informed plan indicated an intent to maintain this new practice due to the positive wellbeing outcomes she experienced.

Discussion

Many students experienced similar moments of enlightenment as they collected and analysed their data, like those described by Student F above. They also experienced the stress of making change (sometimes requiring self-control) and how this was easier when in a high energy, low tension state and virtually impossible if in a high tension, low tension state. For a few students, the time frame was too short to see significant change or make possible claims, while for others, this was an insightful research project into their own wellbeing.

Here are the responses from three students for whom the action research project revealed promising practices that supported or improved their wellbeing. Student A, whose research question explored the effects of a physical calendar on university work related stress, concluded: "There is no doubt in my mind that I will be using daily, weekly, and monthly calendars in my future career. Through this week I was more productive, less stressed, and overall, my days were easier and more enjoyable." Student B reflected: "Having prepared meals helped alleviate stressors in a number of ways: It allowed me to quickly address my children's biological stressors (feeling hungry);" This student also reported, "It freed up time to allow me to spend time with my children, coregulating to support balancing energy and tension; and, it created time to help them with their homework before they were too tired."

Student E, who asked, "Will creating a schedule for my daily phone use help me stay on task (reducing tension), give me more energy, and limit my biological stressors?" reported:

> "The basic answer to my initial question is yes, reducing my phone use will help limit biological stressors. However, I ended up learning more about the root of my tension and my own preferred Self-Reg strategies than I expected! I want to work on replacing time spent using my phone, with strategies from the Self-Reg toolkit like self-care, relaxation, exercise, visiting friends…)"

While most students gained insights into their questions, some, as indicated above in Student E's statement, found unexpected learning as well. Embodiment of self-regulation was afforded through the combination of learning about Self-Reg and its underpinning theories and then applying this learning to something of personal significance. Pre-service teachers had an opportunity to experience and reflect on their own states of energy and tension, stressors across various domains, and growth-promoting practices that support restoration. What they learned could be applied immediately to support their wellbeing as university students, but also gave them a foundation for considering the importance of their own wellbeing once they graduate and head into the teaching profession. The literature describes the stress teachers experience every day, so how are we preparing our future teachers to understand and navigate this successfully in their University programs? From my work with pre-service teachers at Acadia university, I have witnessed students learning about and applying Self-Reg through action research and I see it holds great promise for this important work.

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Teacher Candidate Well-Being in the Lakehead Faculty of Education, Orillia

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The *Operation Happy to Be Here* (OH2BH) project aims to centre the experiences of Professional Program students while enrolled in the Faculty of Education at Lakehead University. Among its goals is to establish a sense of their well-being, including (a) the mental health issues (anxiety, stress, worriedness, etc.) they cope with during their time in our program; (b) what contributes to their disconcerting circumstances; and (c) what individual, institutional, and structural interventions might serve as appropriate responses to student wellness concerns.

OH2BH, in operation since 2018, is based on several theoretical foundations, including the importance of democracy and student voice in education (Bron & Veugelers, 2014), a focus on each student's social and intellectual growth (Tinto, 2012), and the centrality of an ethic of care in teaching practices (Noddings, 1984). The project draws upon a variety of data collection methods, ranging from straw polls, focus groups, student assignments, and other feedback-generating mechanisms, but its hallmark research instrument is a questionnaire administered annually in the consecutive education Professional Program. In our most recent survey, 103 students (18%) at the Orillia campus completed the 114-question instrument between February 27th and March 13th, 2023. Student responses from the survey have been transcribed verbatim in the present article to best preserve the authenticity of student voice.

What mental health issues are our students experiencing?

For the benefit of comparison, several questions in our annual questionnaire were drawn from a nationwide survey of the Canadian Mental Health Association (CMHA) which tracked the wellness of all citizens in Canada (Policy & Research, 2023). One of these parallel questions asked, "In the past two weeks, how frequently have you felt worried, nervous, anxious, or on edge?" In our student sample, almost half of our students (43%) said they felt this way *every day*, while another 15% felt so on over half those days. Nine out of every ten students felt some of these emotions at least once in that period (Figure 1).

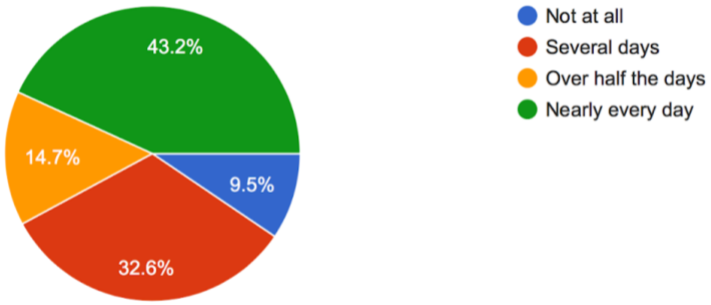

Figure 1. In the past two weeks, how frequently have you felt worried, nervous, anxious, or on edge? (n=95)

Nearly identical findings emerged when students were asked if they had trouble relaxing (Figure 2).

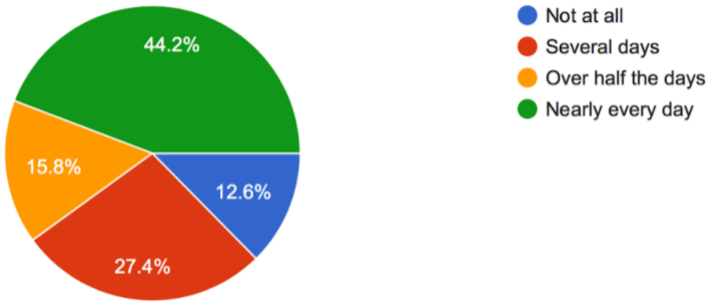

Figure 2. In the past two weeks, how frequently have you had trouble relaxing? (n=95)

These levels of distress are well above those of the general Canadian population described in the CMHA study, a comparison that we have unpacked in greater detail elsewhere (Pluim & Hunter, 2021). Not only are mental illness rates high among our students, but many of them also endured physical illness during the school year as well. For instance, less than one-third (29%) of our sample said "not at all" when presented with the statement, "I got sick this term and it affected my ability to fully participate in the program". By contrast, the majority of our students responded with either "over half the term" or "several weeks", or, as over half (57%) replied, "several weeks" (Figure 3). These findings underscore that physical wellness emerges in combination with mental wellness to impact students' full participation and the corresponding academic outcomes during our relatively short-term (9-week) program.

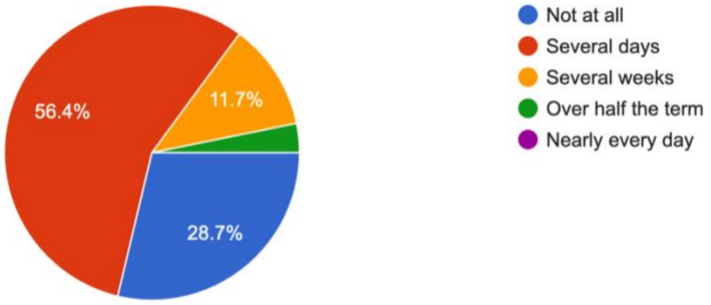

Figure 3. I got sick this term and it affected my ability to fully participate in the program. (n=94)

Constraints to Student Wellness

To better understand what contributes to student well-being and anxiety, further questions in the OH2BH survey enabled the research team to disentangle what students find unsettling as they complete our program. The OH2BH data shows that four major concerns stand out: Two relate to our students' personal circumstances (lasting pandemic issues and financial stressors), and the other two appear to be instigated by features within the program experience (excessive workload, and assessment issues). In what follows, these matters are explored in greater depth.

a) Personal circumstances

Students' personal and domestic circumstances emerge as significant factors affecting their wellness during our program. For one, despite being almost a year removed from the pandemic, numerous students spoke of the lockdown's lasting implications. As one student explained:

> *Since contracting Covid-19 last year, my short-term memory and lung capacity have been significantly impaired. I have also lost practice at developing sustainable routines and habits, and struggle to maintain my mental health. All of these things at one time or another have impacted my educational experience.*

> Another student described the prolonged physical effects they experienced during the pandemic:

> *Due to isolating so strongly over the past few years my immune systems is weakened. … I attribute my illness this year to classes in Orillia. I got covid twice this year and was sick several days of class time. This caused me to miss classes.*

The lingering impacts of Covid-19 on our teacher candidates suggest that a return to pre-pandemic wellness conditions has been slower than anticipated. Recent CMHA data similarly notes that even as social spaces in our country began to re-open by late 2022, it took most Canadians much longer than that to acknowledge the end of the pandemic (Assessing the Impacts of COVID-19 on Mental Health, 2022).

For many of our students, financial strain also contributes to chronic distress during their university experience. With rising tuition costs, unprecedented barriers to affordable housing, soaring food prices, and the considerable living and academic expenses needed to sustain their participation at school, students must find ways to manage these costs. Most of our students opt to balance part-time work while they take their university courses; Indeed, in 2023, a full two-thirds of our student body (67%) held at least one part-time job on top of their classes, while over a quarter (28%) worked *two* jobs while attending their courses (Figure 4).

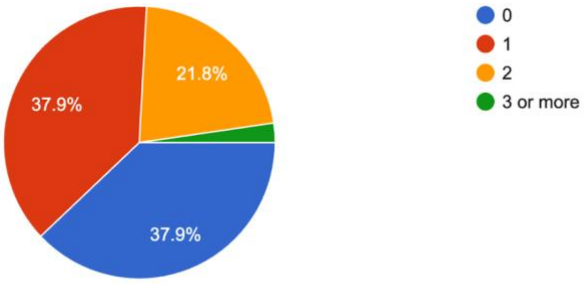

Figure 4. How many current paying jobs do you have outside your education? (n=87)

Some students, both those with and without part-time jobs, receive a loan from the Ontario Student Assistant Program (OSAP) to support their enrollment in our program. Within our program, nearly three-quarters (74%) of our sample received funding from OSAP this year to enable their academic studies (Figure 5). Others, in confidence, have shared that they *would have liked* to receive OSAP, but were denied this funding due to the amount of their parents' or spouse's incomes, ***despite*** not receiving financial support through those relations.

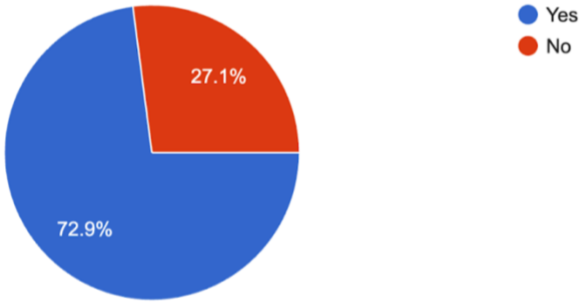

Figure 5. Did you receive OSAP (Ontario Student Assistance Program) to enroll in Lakehead's B.Ed. program? (n=85)

Among the other associated costs our students incur include living expenses such as food, transport, and housing. Given the relative proximity of our Orillia campus to many cities in Muskoka, Bruce County, Huronia, and Southern Ontario (including the Greater Toronto Area), many of our students choose to commute from their homes while attending Lakehead to offset the cost of a short-term rental in Orillia. Our findings revealed that less than one-third of our students (22 of 71 responding) live in Orillia during the school term, and most choose to commute, sometimes up to one hour or more. Taken together, as Lakehead graduate student Matthew Boucher argued in his Master of Education portfolio, the financial strains that students experience in our program, coupled with the associated responsibilities that students take on to be able to fund their schooling experience (such as part-time jobs), often lead to distraction, limits in focusing, and even problems in self-regulation, as well as other wellness problems (Boucher, 2021).

b) Programmatic aspects

Beyond students' personal circumstances, the OH2BH data also illuminated several features of our program that our students find unsettling. One recurring issue is the overall workload that students sustain through their enrollment in the program. When asked what advice they would give to incoming students, certain respondents said, "Prepare yourself for the workload", and "Consider if [you] have the time to commit to the workload." Although the amount of coursework is not an uncommon issue for many university students to lament, the host of course responsibilities required in our Professional Program routinely emerges as a point of dissatisfaction for our students. This workload can be attributed to the overall number of courses necessary to complete the program, the number and rigour of assignments in each course, and the overall breadth of content necessary to develop competencies as a teacher. Here I will focus on the first of these concerns.

In the OH2BH questionnaire, students mark a clear distinction between the number of courses they are taking, and how many courses they feel would be optimal for their learning. While some students needed eight or nine courses to satisfy their degree requirements, most students were taking seven courses at the time of the survey (Figure 6).

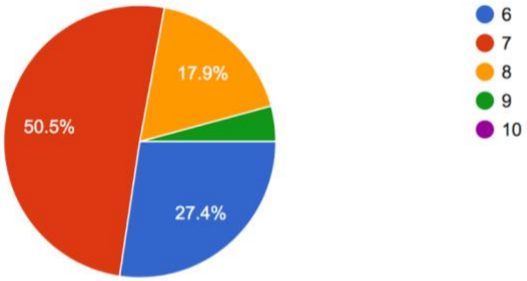

Figure 6. How many courses are you taking right now (this term)? (n=95)

By comparison, the vast majority (81%) of students suggested that five or six courses would be optimal for their learning (Figure 7).

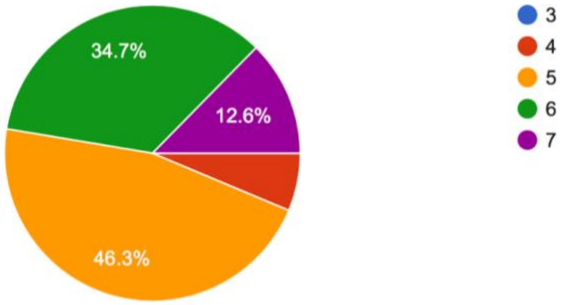

Figure 7. From your perspective, what is the optimal number of courses for a student to take each semester in the Professional Program? (n=95)

When provided with the opportunity to comment further, students contextualized their opinions against their desire to achieve in the program.

I think the optimal number of courses should be 5-6 a semester. In my first semester I was in 8 classes. I found the workload to be overwhelming, especially for a first semester when we're getting used to the program. I often found it hard to keep up with deadlines.

Another student compared our course load to other university requirements, and made connections to its overall impact:

5 per term is the recommended load for many universities, with 6 being a max. the professional program exceeds this with a standard of 6-7, with electives pushing to 8 course load. The workload is overwhelming and can interfere with students opportunities to succeed.

A related concern for students is the perceived reliability of assessment practices within and across the faculty. For example, while our program's required math exam is an important measure of our students' competence in elementary mathematics, it is also repeatedly cited as a source of much anxiety for many students. Elsewhere, our students report a degree of disparity in the assessment approaches used among the courses that they take. Although the faculty institutes certain standard grading practices, there is a considerable variety of techniques used by instructors across our education courses. For instance, consider that instructors could evaluate students using numeric grades (i.e. percentages), levels of achievement (4, 3, 2, 1), which mirror the elementary school rubric in Ontario, or via the letter system (A, B, C…). In resistance to the hegemony of standardized systems, some faculty deliberately incorporate alternative assessment strategies such as pass/fail, contract grading, peer assessment, and even ungrading. By contrast, the long-standing tradition of "bell-curving" within academia influences how other instructors conduct their assessment. Taken together, this unevenness results in a sense of frustration for students and relatively few students—barely a third (34%)—agree that grading reflects their effort in their courses (Figure 8).

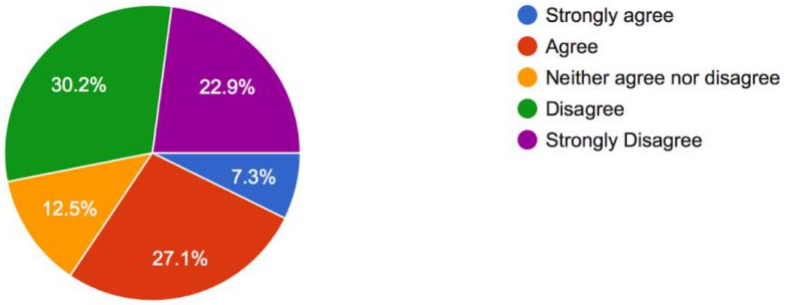

Figure 8. I feel that grading reflects the effort that I put into my assignments. (n=96)

Those students seeking a high standing in our program tended to be the ones who provided further explanation. This student, for example, lamented on the strict adherence to the bell curve:

I am a perfectionist and an over-achiever, and am used to receiving grades in the 80s/90s. So, having course instructors tell us that we would not be receiving

> *more than a 75 was completely disheartening. It did not matter how much effort I put into assignments, I always received the same percentage grades which made me lose motivation. If it was simply a pass/fail system, I think there would be much less pressure and cause for upset.*

Of course, decreasing the motivation for our students to excel is precisely the opposite outcome we would hope for our students in our feedback and assessment processes. This respondent, for instance, elaborated on how assessment affects their effort:

> *Marks have been bell curved and students have been told that class averages cannot be high. Once I heard this, I stopped putting in effort in my assignments as I clearly do not feel valued with regards the amount of effort I put into my assignments. I should be fairly evaluated on my work, not based on the criteria of marks being bell curved.*

It follows that students experiencing different grading practices across a large number could be quite distressing for them. These programmatic concerns frequently exacerbate the personal wellness issues already experienced by students, as the stress of the program is layered on top of students' existing home life circumstances. As one student shared, "I was working but could not continue on top of Lakehead's workload." Clearly, a comprehensive response to student wellness is needed, considering a full range of inputs by students, instructors, the education faculty, the full university, and provincial/federal policy.

c) Responding to the Student Wellness Crisis

Given the extent of wellness issues experienced by our students, interventions can, and are, be(ing) implemented from multiple standpoints: from individual students and instructors, to the institution, to the support structures in our society. At one level, students can exert their individual agency to prioritize their own wellness. They take their own initiative to ensure balance in their lives, maintain positive social relations, ensure healthy outlets and physical activity, practice mindfulness, and develop strong executive functioning. Students can draw on the many supports provided by the university, such as those provided through Lakehead's Student Health and Wellness department. They can also profit from wellness strategies taught in their courses, and access outreach programs and counselling services provided outside of Lakehead.

At another level, many instructors in our Faculty of Education currently foreground wellness in their course structure and online pedagogies. Many faculty regularly use stress-reducing practices such as mindfulness-based interventions during their classes, pre-course check-ins to get to know their students, and outdoor or physical alternatives to stationary, in-door learning. Our program administrators have also adapted their course structures to include blended learning to reduce the exhaustion of commuting, and many instructors embed flexibility in assignment options (such as "passion projects") and provide students with choices for the grading schemes of their assignments. All these individual initiatives go a long way to foster the well-being of our students and to create a healthier learning environment.

However, I would argue that much more can be done at the institutional and societal levels to enable a healthier, happier, and more sustainable experience for students during

their educational journeys. Clearly, the overwhelming workload that students experience can be reduced through a more tightly orchestrated program, either within our existing courses by paring down assignments or reducing redundancies between them, or, by reducing the overall number of courses required during each semester; a feasible consideration given the flexibility of the accreditation requirements of the provincial regulating body (Ontario College of Teachers, 2017). While the knowledge, skills, and competencies we could provide for new teachers appear to be infinite from the perspective of zealous instructors supporting novice students, more content does not necessarily result in better outcomes when added workloads ultimately detract from meaningful learning. In the long run, an ethic of care guiding the curriculum and pedagogies of our program should remain at the foundation for our program excellence (Noddings, 1984).

Similarly, course assessment is never as straightforward as it seems from a student's perspective. University instructors may be teaching multiple courses, hundreds of students, multiple assignments, limited instructional support, and operate in a relatively short time frame, must reliably perform these assessments and evaluations. Yet, several solutions exist to ease these tensions for students. For one, I would argue that these complexities of and possibilities for assessment could serve as an opportunity to introduce future teacher to not only their pros and cons but also the imperfections of any grading system. Further, part of inspiring future educators is impressing upon them that the journey of lifelong education should be at least as much based on *internal* rewards as on any single *external* mechanism. This is not to say that we can expect students to fully accept varied and even conflicting approaches to assessment, as years of standardized tests, numerical grades, and immediate feedback condition learners to a narrow view of assessment. Of note are the frustrations of those students who expend much effort to produce high-quality outputs, only to confront an unreliable assessment system. Undoubtedly, a certain degree of predictability, transparency, and standardization across the faculty is equally important as good practices and to ease these student anxieties.

Finally, a great deal of student stressors can be attributed to the drastically shifting societal conditions of recent decades, especially in terms of the Canadian and global political economy. For example, the share of government funding to Canadian universities has dropped by more than 30% in the past several years. In 2019, governments were funding less than a quarter (24%) of universities' expenses, compared to 83% in 1982. In Ontario the government subsidizes $7,425 for each post-secondary student, far less than the national average which stands at $12,930 per student (OCUFA, 2022). Naturally, this lack of social funding must be made up elsewhere, with rising student tuition filling much of this gap. Clearly, student pressures can also be attributed to these changing economic circumstances, which require different responses than the personal and programmatic concerns discussed above.

Related expenses for students are also on the rise worldwide, most notably as of late being housing expenses. In Canada, rental fees continue to set records, with the average Canadian per-month rental cost for August of $2,117 (Rentals.ca September 2023 Rent Report), making that choice for students increasingly prohibitive. Rising inflation affects other costs and global stressors such as the climate crisis cannot be discounted. Thus, the activist work of lobbying policymakers for better social, economic, and educative conditions must be among the responses to ameliorate students' expenses at university.

Conclusion

Despite the end of the Covid-19 pandemic, Lakehead students in the Faculty of Education Professional Program continue to move through our program with proportionately high degrees of anxiety. The OH2BH initiative has illuminated certain factors that impact our students' well-being during their time in the program, including personal situations of financial strain and lingering pandemic issues, and program causes such as an overwhelming workload and frustration with assessment approaches. As a caring community, Lakehead faculty need to continue to prioritize our students' wellness. And while university students should employ strategies to sustain their own well-being during and after their time at university, we also must think more deeply about how, together we can drive institutions and societies to enable the conditions that will improve student wellness in a sustainable, life-long manner. Programmatic benefits of healthy and happy students have been widely demonstrated: these students are more engaged, enthusiastic to learn, and satisfied with their journey. They are also more likely to contribute to the academic community during and after their stay in the program. But more importantly, cultivating healthy, motivated, and inspired students must remain a moral imperative for faculty in educational communities.

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Creating a community of safety: Classroom tools and techniques

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Abstract

This paper is for post-secondary instructors and is about creating a community of safety in the classroom. The majority of this paper will focus on elements of my classroom teaching that help students to feel comfortable and ready to learn. This includes routines with which to begin class, tips for developing effective reading lists and assignments, and ways to develop community and friendships among students, whether teaching in-person or online.

Thank you for your interest in this topic. This paper will share different tools and techniques that I use in my classes to create a community of safety for students. One theory that is important to consider at the outset is about cultural safety. BIPOC (Black, Indigenous, people of colour) students often do not feel safe in post-secondary classrooms (Bear Spirit Consulting, 2007). One reason for this is that education was used as an agent of colonization for Indigenous students for over a hundred years in Canada (Ward, 2016). Another reason is that non-BIPOC instructors often set a tone that makes white students feel comfortable, but can exclude BIPOC students (Bear Spirit Consulting, 2007; Whitinui et al., 2021). One obvious example is asking a BIPOC student "No, where are you from?" when they answer Richmond Hill to your first request. Racism can also be more subtle but noticeable for BIPOC students. LGBTQ2S+ students can also feel unsafe in classrooms, whether because of the environment created by the instructor or due to bullying from other classmates (Harvey, 2012).

Instructors need to consider how to create an environment that is respectful of BIPOC and LGBTQ2S+ students. There can be tension in creating this environment. Instructors want to create an environment where Q/BIPOC students feel welcome and where non-Q/non-BIPOC students feel safe being new to a topic, and admitting when they've made a mistake. Sometimes, when talking about racialized topics such as misconceptions about Indigenous people, the questions posed by naïve non-BIPOC students can make BIPOC students feel uncomfortable, and thus have the potential to unfortunately also create an unwelcoming environment for BIPOC students. When discussing issues of race, culture, sexuality or gender identity, a fine line must be walked where both Q/BIPOC and non-Q/non-BIPOC students feel safe. The best way to create a culture of safety for all groups is to make yourself vulnerable, admit when you've made a mistake and allow students to make mistakes, while setting clear limits. The following paper will look at tools and techniques that I have used to create a community of safety in my post-secondary classrooms.

Beginning of each class

I use some rituals at the beginning of each class to set the tone and create a learning environment. These routines are usually done every week. They help signal to students that

they are to let go of what they were previously engaged with, and to be present in the moment of our class. The repetition of these rituals, at the beginning of class each week, helps to create safety with the element of predictability that emerges once students get used to the routines.

I have used several routines for both in-person and online teaching. One of my favourite rituals that is appropriate for both types of instruction is a *Mindfulness moment*. These can be very simple, and involve deep breathing, a guided visualization, or a breathing exercise, such as *box breathing*. I often use a three-minute timer for these exercises, so that I do take up too much class time. Feedback from students about these moments is overwhelmingly positive. Students have told me that they appreciate the *Mindfulness moments* as it helps them to "decompress" and recognizes their well-being.

Another class ritual for the beginning of class that can be very meaningful is reading some poetry to students. For instance, I taught an environmental studies class and read some nature-based poetry at the beginning of the class each week.

Showing a music video related to the class topic is another pre-class routine that I have used. For instance, in an Indigenous education course that I taught, I would show a music video by an Indigenous musician each week, related to the week's theme.

For in-person classes, I do a ritual that involves reading through the attendance list. However, instead of just listening for someone to respond, I look around and make eye contact with each student. I say "hello" or "good morning" to each one, taking the time to make them feel welcome. Students have told me that they like the attendance routine because they feel acknowledged and received. They appreciate that I take the time to greet each one of them. This ritual does not take very long and helps instructors to learn students' names.

The previous greeting ritual is obviously not possible with online, synchronous teaching. In fact, when I do attendance in a Zoom-based class, I do it when students are on break or in breakout rooms. Doing attendance in a Zoom-based class can be a waste of everyone's time. For Zoom-based classes, I have another ritual for greeting students. I call it a *Chat check-in*. I invite students to type into the chat how they are doing at the moment. Once students have responded, I read the chat aloud and make comments about student's responses. This allows students to engage as they feel comfortable. Many students do not feel comfortable speaking while in the "whole class" Zoom room. By allowing them to use the chat, more students feel comfortable engaging and writing their check-in. By reading it aloud, every student's response becomes part of the group's experience. Students say that they feel cared for with the *Chat check-in* because I genuinely want to know how they are doing.

Beginning of the semester

I teach a first-year class in Environmental Studies. The first few weeks of class we focus on learning the skills that students need to be successful in university. We cover how to write an essay and how to use the library. In the future, I'd like to also cover citation skills and basic group work skills. For essay writing skills, I teach students about writing a clear introduction, thesis statement, body paragraphs and conclusion. Giving students the tools to successfully complete the course can help them feel more prepared to do well in the class, and can help them feel more comfortable.

For library skills, we use a three-part technique to get them familiar with using the library. One tool is a library assignment. It involves typing specific words into the search engine and then answering questions based on these results. Our librarian created a ten-minute video about accessing different library tools from the website. Students are encouraged to watch the video *before* they complete the assignment. Finally, students are asked to come up with a question for our librarian. When he visits the class, they will ask him their question and get credit for doing so. These questions cover anything from research skills, to bibliographies, to popular movies that the library stocks. Students report that this focus on library skills has helped them with all of their other courses, and gave them the skills they needed in their University careers. Preparing students can help give them a sense of relieve that they do belong in post-Secondary education.

I also teach a very advanced, professional year Education course, in a topic that some students have little experience in: Indigenous education. In the first week, we activate prior knowledge by going over some of the various terms that are used in Ontario for Indigenous people. For each term, I have students access prior knowledge. They get into groups of three to five and have a piece of chart paper and markers. They write about each term recording the discussions they have based on my questions on the terms. My questions include: What does the term mean? Who does it refer to? Who uses the term? Is the term appropriate for a professional classroom setting? They are encouraged not to use any research to answer the questions.

Even though every student enters this class with a different knowledge level about these terms, this teaching method means that every student learns something -usually from another student. Tackling the major terms of the discipline in the first week allows students to feel more comfortable and less scared about saying the wrong thing.

Throughout the semester

One thing that helps connect students to the learning is an instructor telling stories about themselves. Revealing personal details creates an authentic connection between a teacher and the students. There needs to be some boundaries, however, and an instructor needs to be careful about what they share with students. Telling stories about your pets and your children are two ways to begin. I also feel that queer instructors that are in a safe community can come out to their classes.

Another important technique is to use an informal tone. A stiff or formal environment can make students uncomfortable, which can cause them to shut down. One way to create an informal atmosphere is to admit your mistakes. You can do this in the form of conceding errors you have made with the class, course outline or assignments. Another way to do this is to tell stories about yourself where you have made a mistake. Students have told me that they find it powerful for me to acknowledge this and that it felt like I was learning alongside them. This made them feel more comfortable with making mistakes and admitting that they do not know everything.

Along with this technique, is the act of making yourself vulnerable. This can be done by telling vulnerable stories, or letting students notice if you tear up in the middle of teaching something. Admitting vulnerability can actually show your strength, not your weakness. When I had a guest Elder come in and speak to my class, I thanked him for his sense of humour and told him that it was refreshing because I don't feel that I am very funny. At the end of the semester, a student told me that this moment stood out to her

because she did not think it was true. However, being honest and vulnerable led to a memorable moment for her!

Ongoing Activities

I think that one of the most important tools for creating a safe space is to change the format of who is talking in class. Instead of constant lectures, moving the desks around and having students talking with each other is a powerful tool. It is also making a statement that students will be learning from each other, not just the instructor. While I do give lectures, using a slide deck and speaking in front of the class, the majority of the classroom time is spent with students discussing content with each other. When possible, I will use experiential learning games and activities, as well as role-playing games.

Some classes I take outside in the first week to do icebreaker activities. I will also lead icebreakers indoors as well, to help students to get to know each other better. I tell students that one of the goals I have for them is that they make friends. Even though students complain about it sometimes, I use groupwork in every class that I teach. There is no better way for students to get to know each other than by doing groupwork.

For online learning, I use breakout rooms in every class, in order to get students talking with each other. Students seem to feel a lot more comfortable talking in breakout rooms than they do in the big online meeting rooms. As one of my teachers said "the voice that people most need to hear is their own" (J. Macy, personal communication, 2017). This is the ethic I model my classes on. I think that people will truly learn a concept only if they are able to discuss it with others. In some cases, calling on students may help draw them out. However, I find it can put them on the spot and make them feel uncomfortable, so I let students come forward on their own.

Another ongoing element throughout the semester is to honour the accommodation needs of students. This includes any accommodations needed before the form is actually received. It can be difficult sometimes, to remember to use closed captioning when showing a video, or modifying quizzes so that some students get extra time. However, it is really important for students that their accommodations are honoured. Another tool that I use to keep students engaged in the course is to send out weekly reminder emails about the week's assignments and readings. This is especially important in online classes, but can also help with in-person classes.

Assignments

I recommend using Universally Designed Learning principles for assignments. This means designing your courses so that all students can find a way to engage due to the variety of options. This can include, for instance, having students submit artistic work, video or podcast, or as well as more traditional forms like essays. It is important to prepare students adequately for what is being asked of them. This can be done by making sure that they have the skills to complete any assignment. An exemplar is an example of exactly what you are looking for from an assignment and can really help students. Giving them the choice of whether to work alone or in a group is also a good idea. Giving students time to work on group projects in class is very helpful as well. Finally, being very clear about what is being asked of students can help them to be more successful-so include rubrics that are very specific about what they need to do!

Readings

Readings can be overwhelming for many students. In my experience, most students do not complete all of the readings, and many students do not complete any of them. For this reason, it is very important to choose readings that will be meaningful to them. The first two weeks of readings are the most important selections of the semester. They will set the tone for whether students will do the readings or not for the rest of the term. If students do the readings, but then are not asked to engage with them in class, then it will seem like wasted time for them. If students do not do the readings, but then get asked to talk to their peers about the readings, they are most likely to do them the following week.

In terms of assigning readings, make sure to use a manageable set of readings. Ten pages a week is fine for a first-year course, but more than that can become unmanageable for students. Instructors should make sure to pick readings that are well written in that they are easy to read, engaging, and enjoyable. Sometimes non-academic works such as newspaper or online articles might be more compelling than journal articles, especially for a first-year class. Podcasts and videos can also promote student engagement. There should still be a few academic articles in a first-year course, just not every week. For an upper year class, twenty to thirty pages a week is all that is needed. If instructors assign more than this, then students may not be able to do all of the readings. Instructors should try to find readings that are practical. For instance, in education classes, readings that contain example lessons for teacher candidates are very helpful.

Difficult Content

Having taught Indigenous education for 12 years, I know that it has the potential to be a difficult topic for students. Some students are very passionate, or have Indigenous ancestry themselves, while others are completely new to the topic, and scared of saying the wrong thing. Furthermore, some of the content can be very difficult, such as residential schools, missing and murdered Indigenous women, girls and two-spirit people, and the deaths of Indigenous young people in Thunder Bay. I approach this material by including trigger warnings before presentations, and telling students that they can leave the classroom at any time. For in-person discussion on difficult topics, I make sure that students can access tissue paper if they need to. There is always the phone number of a helpline at the end of a presentation.

For teaching about residential schools, in particular, I tell students about my *Cycle of teaching sad things*. This involves showing a diagram which demonstrates the emotional landscape that students will go through over the period of class that day. When I teach this material, the class starts out with a high affect, having entered the class and engaged with the everyday opening routines. I then show a music video that introduces the topic, which can be quite intense, and might plunge the group into a sadder situation. Next, I use a slideshow to teach some of the basic information about the residential school system. We then discuss the video and slideshow and also at what age students learned about this system. At this point, students are quite sad from the material that was introduced and are in the middle of the diagram, near the saddest point. I then show a video of some survivors discussing their experience in residential schools, as well as how they have moved forward towards healing.

Towards the end of this class, we then switch gears and use an art project to process our feelings on the topic. We cut out small orange, paper t-shirts and write or draw messages for survivors on them. This art project also helps to lighten the mood and gives students an outlet for their sad feelings. Sometimes we play music. I find that this art project brings student's affect back up to a place where they are ready to go back out into the world. Most arts-based intervention will work in this situation. In the past I have had guests come in and share some hand drumming music at the end of this class. I believe that as instructors, we should take responsibility for the emotional situation of the students we are teaching.

Self-Care Day/Week

Towards the end of the semester in some of my classes, I run a class or a week of classes devoted to discussing *Self-care*. Using *Self-care* as opposed to a deeper topic such as "mental health" allows the class(es) to be relatively lighter, and focused on students helping themselves. I share a story that lightly touches on my own mental health journey in my undergraduate experience. I get students in pairs and ask them to share some personal stories around the following themes: someone who has inspired or mentored them and a challenge that they have overcome. We discuss how the stories we share should be like a feather that lifts someone up, rather than a rock that pulls the listener down. We also watch some videos on *Self-care* from celebrities.

At the end of this class, each student shares their own personal *Self-care* strategies, which is always a highlight for me. There are many diverse suggestions. Students talk about baking, nature walks, doing their nails, and boxing! Students are also assigned with completing 30 minutes of self-care time to themselves in a practice that is either new to them, or is one they have not practiced in a while. The reflections that come from this are always insightful.

At the end of the term, I give students a chance to reflect on what they have learned from the course, usually in the form of a talking circle. Students sometimes share artistic projects with the class at this time. I also make sure to get student feedback on the course, so that I can improve on the course for the following year. I usually have students fill out an anonymous online survey, so that I can get specific feedback on the different elements of the course. Each year, the course improves from the feedback I receive. That is all that I have prepared for you. Thank you for your interest in this work. I hope that this helps you improve your post-secondary teaching. To reach me, email amthomso@lakeheadu.ca.

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Trigger warnings may not be enough: Cultivating a trauma-informed classroom

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Abstract

In 2014, a US college created a policy requiring faculty to provide trigger warnings for students sparking a heated debate across North America regarding the need for, and efficacy of, trigger warnings in higher education. We present the findings of our study on the opinions of students, professors, and trauma survivors in higher education regarding the use of trigger warnings in classrooms and discuss the need to be more intentional about supporting students and their mental health. A broader discussion about integrating trauma-informed practices in higher education will be presented with experiences, ideas, and approaches to supporting student mental health.

Key words: trigger warnings, trauma-informed, teaching, post-secondary

The term trigger warning is often used interchangeably with "content warning" – warnings that have long appeared at the onset of television shows, movies, on video game covers, and on the covers of magazines or reading materials. These content warnings are intended to alert the viewers or readers of content that contains graphic violence, sexuality, nudity, or offensive language, which may be inappropriate for younger audiences or may cause some upset or distress. The contemporary definition of a trigger warning is, "a statement at the start of a piece of writing, video, etc. alerting the reader or viewer to the fact that it contains potentially distressing material (often used to introduce a description of such content)" (English Oxford Living Dictionaries, 2017). The concept of being triggered is rooted in the after-effects of traumatic events, such as a sexual assault, where the trauma survivor reexperiences the trauma in some way when something triggers a reminder of the trauma experience (e.g., the scent associated with the person who committed the sexual assault). The formal use of trigger warnings appears to have originated in online feminist sites that deal with traumatic material that may trigger strong negative emotional and psychological reactions in trauma survivors (Jarvie, 2014). Trigger warnings in academia became more prominent in 2014 when a US college created a policy requiring faculty to provide trigger warnings for students (Davis, 2014; Jarvie, 2014). This action sparked controversy across North America regarding the need for, and use of, trigger warnings in higher education.

The post-secondary education trigger warning debate occurred predominantly in two opinion-based US higher education news journals that provided the data for the study we conducted and published (George & Hovey, 2020). By the time that this study was completed, and the trigger warning debate no longer dominated higher education media, attention appeared to be shifting toward the topic of student mental health in general. The

onset and duration of the COVID-19 pandemic appeared to have a tremendous impact on student mental health. Students of all ages were feeling the impact of not being in the classroom, not socializing with friends, and experiencing screen burnout (Toombs et al., 2022). As post-secondary students have returned to in-person classes, balancing mental health concerns and navigating the after-effects of the pandemic in the classroom has inspired us to re-examine our study findings that originally sought to clarify the purpose and proposed utility of trigger warnings that had been debated within higher education.

In this paper, we consider the application of trauma-informed approaches to teaching to address some of the themes concerning student mental health needs that came out of our trigger warning findings more effectively. We begin with an overview of some of the literature that contributes to the intersections of student mental health needs, post-secondary academic learning and teaching strategies. Next, we provide a summary of the key findings from our trigger warning study, specifically those relevant to the after-effects of the pandemic in the classroom. We then discuss trauma-informed principles and apply trauma-informed practice as a universal approach to student mental health and promotion of mental wellness in the learning environment, while situating the use of trigger warnings within this broader context. Examples from our teaching and classroom experiences illustrate how trigger warnings and trauma-informed approaches in teaching have been effective with social work students.

Background

Research on the experience of, and response to, an overwhelmingly negative event or series of events such as childhood sexual or physical abuse or violence (Public Health Agency of Canada, 2018), suggests that educators can assume that many of their students are entering higher education with their own trauma histories. In a sample of US college students, 70% reported that they had experienced at least one potentially traumatic event in their life (Cusack et al., 2019). A similar study with graduate social work students found that approximately 77% had one or more *adverse childhood experience* (ACE), and between a fourth and a third of students had four or more ACEs (Butler et al., 2018; Gilin & Kauffman, 2015). These rates are higher than those reported in the original ACE study for a middle-class adult sample (Felitti et al., 1998), suggesting, among other possible interpretations, that past trauma may be more common in students engaged in certain fields of study, such as social work, than in the general population.

Students often experience trauma during their tenure in higher education. For example, Statistics Canada (2019) found that 71% of Canadian post-secondary students surveyed reported witnessing or experiencing unwanted sexualized behaviours in a post-secondary setting. Exposure to trauma may even occur as a direct result of educational requirements; for instance, students may be exposed to trauma directly or indirectly while completing field placements, conducting research, or through materials included in course curriculum (Butler et al., 2017; Carello & Butler, 2015; Didham et al., 2011; Goodwin & Tiderington, 2022; Knight, 2019). Among social work students, exposure to trauma-related content in classroom materials has been linked to reports of experiencing fear, helplessness, or horror in response to these materials and/or the recalling of upsetting thoughts and feelings from their own histories (Butler et al., 2017). In addition, adverse experiences during social work field practicums have been linked to disturbances in sleep, eating, concentration, substance misuse, and anxiety (Didham et al., 2011).

At the time that we conducted our study (George & Hovey, 2020), there was minimal research about using trigger warnings to help students manage their responses to emotionally challenging materials. However, authors reflecting on teaching sensitive topics were acknowledging the trauma experiences that some students may bring with them into the classroom and discussed the responsibility of educators to ensure a safe environment to teach sensitive topics (e.g., Cunningham, 2004; Durfee & Rosenberg, 2009) or prepare students to engage meaningfully with difficult course material without blindsiding them (e.g., Carter, 2015). Some authors were also grappling with how to use provocative materials safely to provoke thought, challenge students, and keep them interested (e.g., Nolan & Oerton, 2010).

Deciphering the Trigger Warning Debate: Summary of Key findings

Our *Deciphering the Trigger Warning Debate* study (George & Hovey, 2020) set out to determine the most commonly held opinions by the academic community in the online reader discourse regarding the use of trigger warnings in higher education classes. We conducted a content analysis of 1,573 reader comments posted by 710 people from 20 trigger warning-based articles between March 2014 and October 2015 from the Chronicle of Higher Education (CHE; 12 articles) and Inside Higher Ed (IHE; 8 articles). We found that 64.2% of the commenters, who represented professors (44%), students (almost 3%), or unknown identities (54%), had a clear position of either for (23.7%) or against (40.4%) using trigger warnings. The majority of professors and students represented within the sample came from the humanities, social sciences, and law; none identified as being part of a social work faculty. Of the total sample comments, 762 comments were identified as contributing to the debate and resulted in the following four major themes:

1. *Participation and learning in the classroom* (17% of comments) – Several within our sample expressed that such warnings equip trauma survivors by helping them to manage their emotions in class, giving them a choice about whether or not to engage with certain materials, and helping them to prepare to engage in class, as illustrated by this quote: *I would be useless for the purposes of the discussion, my heart would be racing, I'd want to be invisible, and hope no one would notice me, and I would probably hardly hear what was being said. If I knew the topic was coming, I can really contribute to such a discussion* (Student Survivor; George & Hovey, 2020, p. 12). Some felt that trigger warnings are not the answer to address the complex needs of survivors.
2. *Support for trauma* (17% of comments) – There was disagreement in the sample about whether trigger warnings were being requested as a means of catering to students who are offended or if they are being implemented to support trauma survivors, as articulated by this professor's quote: *Trigger warnings make sense for people who have genuine cases of PTSD. But for those who simply want to avoid uncomfortable topics, it's gotten way out of hand*. Some indicated trigger warnings do not provide any meaningful support.
3. *Impacts on academia* (35% of comments and largest theme) – Many opinions expressed concerns that students would take advantage of trigger warnings to avoid being challenged or to lessen their workload; that they may interfere with students' growth by coddling or infantilizing them, and leaving them unprepared for life after school, as suggested by this Unknown commenter: *I guess I wonder how some of these*

people will make it through life if they can't make it through school without trigger warnings. They definitely won't get them in their daily lives (p. 9).

4. *Implications for professors* (31% of comments) – Many professors voiced concerns that it is simply not feasible for faculty to mandate trigger warnings, as it is impossible to know what topics to warn against. Some believe trigger warnings might be a good idea, although mandating them is not. Other professors challenged the concerns that students will abuse trigger warnings. This professor's comment represents one such challenge: *I choose to give the benefit of the doubt to my students… because I would rather see a few slackers slip by than penalize a student who has already been traumatized*.

In summary, mandating the use of trigger warnings was not supported; however, many comments supported the discretionary use of trigger warnings. At the time we conducted this research, there were questions about the effectiveness of trigger warnings and these questions remain. As we considered these findings, it became clear that trigger warnings are really not enough as an approach to support student mental health in the classroom.

Trauma-Informed Practice

Trauma-informed practice is a theoretical framework with roots in the social services (Harris & Fallot, 2001; Knight, 2019). It is a lens from which the professional, such as an instructor or professor, understands and works with people (Goodman, 2017); a universal approach (Harris & Fallot, 2001). Broadly, trauma-informed practice means that professionals recognize that any person might be a survivor of trauma (Brown et al., 2013). It does not mean that trauma is assumed, but rather the professional remains sensitive to the possibility of trauma. It also does not require that the professional address the trauma directly. The professional practices in a way to avoid re-traumatizing the individual (Brown et al., 2013; Goodman, 2017; Harris & Fallot, 2001; Knight, 2019).

Knight (2019) outlines five principles that guide trauma-informed practice: safety, trustworthiness, choice, collaboration, and empowerment. *Safety* pertains to ensuring both physical and emotional safety of the individual. *Trustworthiness* is achieved by professionals upholding clear consistent boundaries while supporting the individual to trust themselves. Every individual must have some *choice* in how they interact or engage with others and the professional would facilitate choice where possible. The professional would work in *collaboration* with the individual as appropriate and facilitate a process that supports the individual to have *control* over their goals, for example, and approach to achieve them. By applying these principles and using a trauma-informed approach to teaching, professors and instructors would support student mental health in a far more substantive way than simply offering trigger warnings.

Applying Trauma-Informed Practice and Trigger Warnings in the Classroom

To apply the principles of trauma-informed practice in the post-secondary classroom, the professor or instructor should be aware of traumatic events, highly stressful situations, or crises that students may commonly experience (Carello & Butler, 2015; Sanders, 2021). Here are some examples that students have reported experiencing while in our social work classes: recent sexual assault, attempts or death by suicide by friend or family member or self, overdose/serious substance use issues of self, family member or

friend, death or serious illness of a family member or friend (often grandparents), intimate partner violence in relationships, break-up of long-term relationship, acrimonious parental separation, and major mental illness of a family member or self.

As a result of these traumatic events or crises experienced by students, the professor or instructor should know and be able to recognize some basic symptoms of trauma, such as having repeated disturbing memories, using strategies to try to avoid triggers to the memories; being easily startled or irritated, having strong physical reactions; difficulty concentrating, and seeming distant or isolated (Levin et al., 2014). The instructor would understand that some classroom behaviours may be a method of coping with trauma. Some examples from our experiences include: students who are withdrawn in classroom discussion, students who have recurring crises (e.g., substance use, self-harm) that may be impacting academic success; students who are defensive in discussions or meetings; students feeling attacked or persecuted; and finally, students who leave the room during content that may be unsettling.

Cavener and Lonbay (2022) conducted a thematic analysis of student and educator feedback on teaching and learning trauma-related materials to identify trauma-informed practices that can be applied in higher education classrooms and situated these practices within the five principles of trauma-informed practice: safety, trustworthiness, choice, collaboration, and empowerment. We build on those recommendations by offering our own reflections as well as those of others within the literature.

Safety

Exposing students to difficult content may provide valuable opportunities to provoke thought, develop understanding of potential future client populations, and challenge them to grapple with important concepts toward personal growth; in fact, depending on the field of study, such topics may be unavoidable (Agllias, 2012; Gilin & Kauffman, 2015; Scriver & Kennedy, 2016). Instructors can create an environment that helps students prepare for and control their exposure to trauma-related or emotionally challenging content by providing trigger warnings or information about course materials in advance of engaging with the materials or information (Boysen, 2017; Carello & Butler, 2015; Cavener & Lonbay, 2022); by pacing the exposure to difficult content; by debriefing, checking in, and discussing the experience of the material presented (Carello & Butler, 2015; Cunningham, 2004); and by providing students with information about support services and other self-care strategies (Cavener & Lonbay, 2022; Gilin & Kauffman, 2015).

Practice example. As a social work student (EG) in a class with Dr. Hovey (AH), we watched a film about shaken baby syndrome that caused some upset; however, Dr. Hovey provided us a warning of the content beforehand. Although several students found the film upsetting and difficult, all but one student were able to remain in the room for the film and work through the content in a discussion afterward. A film about the holocaust was shown in separate class with a different instructor without any warning – many of the students felt ambushed by the content, and some students found the film quite distressing. In this case, the students were not able to work through the content as meaningfully and remained in an unsettled state.

Trustworthiness

Key to establishing a safe learning environment is to develop and facilitate trusting instructor-student and student-student working relationships. This can be accomplished by establishing clear classroom expectations and boundaries through discussion of the students' and instructor's hopes, worries, and ideas about the environment needed to maximize learning (Cavener & Lonbay, 2022). The instructor can acknowledge that topics explored in class may affect students based on their personal experiences and emphasize the importance of communication between instructor and student to support engagement with difficult course topics. By being transparent about what is being taught and how it is taught, the instructor can facilitate trust and reduce the risk of re-traumatization (Cunningham, 2004).

Practice example. For the past 20 years, each course I (AH) teach containing difficult content begins with a discussion of the students' hopes and worries about the course. This allows us to articulate class expectations as a group. I also take the time to invite students to reach out to me directly if they have any concerns of a personal nature and then I am able to build in subtle supports, such as a quick email forewarning of content or modifying the approach I use (i.e., pairing the student with a teaching assistant for skills practice) to ensure the content is taught and all students can participate fully.

Choice

A trauma-informed instructor helps students to maximize choice by offering them options about how they participate in learning within the limits required to demonstrate sufficient knowledge of the material being taught (Carello & Butler, 2015; Cavener & Lonbay, 2022). This does not mean offering the option to not complete assignments; rather, instructors could be flexible about the timing and process of assignment completion. Choice can also include instructors offering students opportunities to exercise basic coping strategies that help them to manage their emotional state when engaging with challenging materials or completing assignments that elicit strong emotional distress (Agillias, 2012; Gilin & Kauffman, 2015).

Practice example. As part of my regular teaching practice, I (AH) encourage students to take breaks by stepping out of the classroom as needed rather than avoid difficult content entirely, returning when ready, and then I check in with them at the end of class or by email. My social work skills courses require students to address difficult content as part of their practice component. A few students always struggle with similar issues as presented in the content. In these situations, I offer to meet with the student and try to link them to our university mental health resources (if no support is in place), review and discuss their coping strategies, adapt the practice component to be completed with a teaching assistant or supportive peer, and check in afterwards.

Collaboration

The principle of collaboration is applied when teaching challenging topics with instructor-student and student-student interactions and through continuous feedback (Cavener & Lonbay, 2022). Students do not have to engage with emotionally difficult topics alone. The previous practice examples illustrate the important role of collaboration with instructors and students to develop strategies to successfully manage difficult course content and to create a safe learning environment collectively.

Practice example. I (EG) completed my social work practicum on an Indigenous-focused child welfare team. That spring, three Indigenous youth in our care died by suicide in quick succession. A fellow student, also on the team, was enrolled in an Indigenous social work course that required her to view a film on the historical experiences of Indigenous youth in the child welfare system and write a discussion post. The instructor had given prior notice that the film would be difficult viewing. My peer approached her instructor about completing the discussion requirement on a different topic in the short-term and revisiting the film later in the semester when the tragic events in practicum were not as fresh. Trust, choice, communication, and a trigger warning about the nature of the film allowed for student-instructor collaboration to meet course requirements while acknowledging the emotional state of the student.

Empowerment

Students in higher education can be empowered to engage with topics that they may otherwise avoid when their instructors and peers normalize struggle with these difficult topics (Cavener & Lonbay, 2022). Teaching students about trauma, vicarious trauma, and secondary trauma as a means of understanding the effect of trauma on practitioners can help to interpret the experience as a natural reaction (Agllias, 2012; Gilin & Kauffman, 2015). In this process, students can be encouraged to think of this approach to learning difficult material as an invitation to take ownership of their own learning within reasonable boundaries.

Practice example. The following excerpt from an email AH received represents how support can empower a student:

> *… I just wanted to thank you very deeply for helping me out when I was feeling very down. You single handedly are the reason why I am still in this program. During those two weeks I was very close to dropping out, as I felt like I could not manage. Your assistance and support made a massive difference… you meeting with me to assist with coping skills and mechanisms to get me through the rest of the semester and year.*

This student went on to complete her Master of Social Work degree.

Conclusion

Higher education is commonly believed to be a place where students will be challenged emotionally in order to facilitate personal and intellectual growth. For this reason, some courses require that students engage with trauma-oriented materials. While trigger warnings are a potentially useful strategy to help students manage these challenges, they do not adequately support students in balancing their learning and mental health needs. A trauma-informed approach to teaching expands the support students need to engage with distressing and emotionally difficult materials and complete course requirements. It does not require the instructor to be a mental health expert, but rather be able to intervene supportively and teach with the sensitivity needed to encourage student success. This paper presented some of the strategies recommended in the literature and from the authors' research and own experiences. We advocate that trauma-related and emotionally disturbing content valuable to student learning can be effectively taught in higher education

classrooms by applying trauma-informed approaches, including the use of trigger warnings.

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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*®, 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*® 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*® 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	• Attended parenting Summit in Mexico City (Drs. Shanker and Smith-Chant) • Attended Self-Reg Summer Symposium (Canada) • Initial Meeting with Drs. Mastrangelo and Lovell-Johnston (Canada) • Sonia invites Claudia to write a book chapter proposal (Mexico) • Contracting Dengue fever • Writing research plan • Acceptance to PhD program • Preparing to move to Canada: quit jobs, homeschool child, begin immigration process	Biological Cognitive
Stuck in Mexico	4	• Pandemic declared • Family isolation at home • Uncertainty, watching daily updates • Establishing daily routines in isolation • Visa offices close • Canadian border closure	Emotional Social
Starting a PhD Online	3	• Online course with heavy workload and tight deadlines • Other IWGS asked to withdraw from program • Building rapport with faculty • Major financial pressures (household) • Migraines and fatigue • First phase of study permit approved	Biological Emotional Cognitive Social
Online Studies / Hardship	12	• Succeeding in asynchronous course • Lack of feedback/empathy from other students • Supportive rapport from professor • Financial hardship, new immigration rules, uncertainty • Co-regulating homeschooling experiences as a mom • Applied for Leave of Absence • Generating income with few hours of online teaching	Emotional Cognitive Social

		• Parental illness, care, death, and grief • Loose COVID management policies in Mexico • Study permit approved • Preparing for international move as a family	
Leave of Absence	n/a		
Settling in Ontario	5	• Travel to Canada with pandemic restrictions • Experiencing discrimination • Learning about life in Canada and procedures • Lack of support outside campus; cultural shock • Lack of social networks; connecting with neighbours	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*®; 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?

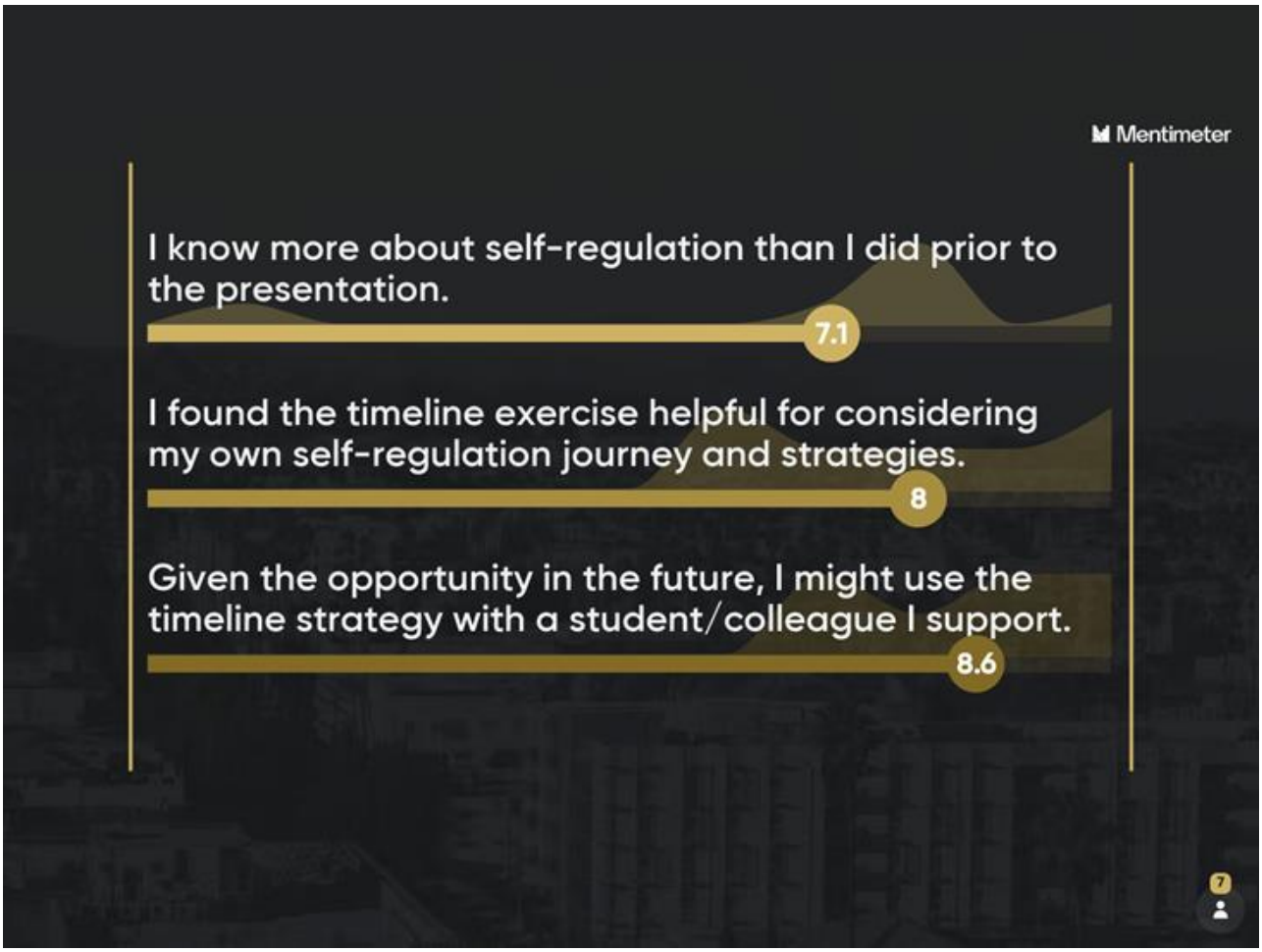
Claudia has successfully completed all doctoral coursework for the Joint PhD in Educational Studies program and is transitioning to the completion of her comprehensive portfolio, while continuing to manage stress. Last summer, Claudia was hired as a research assistant to support our SSHRC-funded *Partnership 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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