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Frontline Workers from Home: A Feminist Duoethnographic Inquiry of Mothering, Teaching, and Academia during the Initial Stages of the COVID-19 Pandemic

In this article, we use a feminist lens to discuss and critique the unique challenges associated with our multidimensional identities as Ontario elementary schoolteachers, mothers, and academics. Employing a duoethnographic method, we recount our personal lived experiences of mothering, teaching, and academic related tasks during initial stages of the COVID-19 pandemic. We juxtapose our experiences at home, in our combined identities and roles, with the various levels of expectations set upon us. From the teaching front, these expectations include those from the government, school boards, and educational administration. On the academic front, there are the hidden expectations of writing and publishing, and being productive during mandated down time. At home, there are increases in domestic labour, caring for children and, for one of the authors, homeschooling. Taking into account the “Learn at Home” program, mandated synchronous learning, Ontario’s provincial approach to reopening schools for the 2020–2021 school year, and the literature on motherhood and academia, this article explores the nuanced experiences, barriers, and challenges that we encountered at the beginning and throes of the pandemic and into the unknown. The dialogic analysis of our experiences is rooted in feminist understandings of motherhood, teaching, and academia; it highlights the gendered issues of domestic and precarious labour, paid labour, caregiving, and mandatory social isolation.

Introduction

On March 12, 2020, the Ontario government closed all public schools in the province for the following three weeks, as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic. This closure was followed by a swift conversion to online remote learning models, in which education for over two million Ontario elementary and

secondary students was provided by teachers, most of whom are women (Statistics Canada). Shortly thereafter, childcare centres also closed, leaving many families with a loss of childcare. In this article, we take readers through our dialogic stories from the beginning and the midst of the pandemic as we ventured into the unknown elements of our lives as mothers, teachers, and academics. We use a feminist duoethnographic method of inquiry to capture and understand our experiences.

As the pandemic continues to impact our lives at unprecedented rates and in unpredictable fashions, it is important to situate this article in time and place. We embarked on our inquiry and wrote this article in July 2020. Our geographic location is Southwestern Ontario, important to note because our work and lives are deeply impacted by not only national but also provincial politics and decision-making bodies. Although the pandemic continues to rapidly evolve, our temporal scope ranges from mid-March to late July. Mid-March is the beginning of our experiences as captured in this article because that is when the government mandated schools and childcare centres to close and universities moved to remote-learning models in response to COVID-19. Late July is the concluding timeframe of our narratives in this article; however, we acknowledge that this is by no means the conclusion of our ongoing experiences with the pandemic.

Positionality/Reflexivity

As feminist scholars, we prioritize the act of situating oneself within our inquiries as a crucial part of epistemic responsibility. Who we are affects not only how we experience the world but also what we can know. In the following excerpts, we position ourselves in relation to our inquiry.

Salsabel

I see myself first and foremost as a mother, teacher, and scholar because these are identities that I have created for myself and that I have chosen to struggle within. However, coming to an understanding of my position in the social world necessitates that I disclose that the following aspects of my identity as well: I am a woman, a first-generation immigrant, a visible Muslim, and an Iraqi Canadian who comes from a low socioeconomic background but who is now in some ways a part of the middle class. I am also a wife, and I am responsible for the great majority of domestic and childcare labour in my home. Furthermore, my husband and I do not have any extended family in Canada, and, as a result, we have very limited support.

As a doctoral student and sessional instructor, I am part of a privileged space of knowledge creators. Although academia is an elite place, there are many ways

in which it disadvantages people of colour, such as myself; thus, I find myself simultaneously part of its elite standing and on the margins of it. I recognize that being an employed educator who is represented by a union carries some privilege, even though elementary teaching is in many ways not a privileged space for workers. However, as a nonwhite teacher in an overwhelmingly white schoolboard, I often contemplate the deep marginalization I've experienced in my role. As a long-term occasional (LTO) teacher, I have the privilege of having long-term employment, although I am still classified as "occasional." This means that each year is uncertain, and my position is not fully secure until I receive a permanent contract, which puts me in a precarious position as a worker. As a doctoral student, I am involved in various precarious roles that involve research, service, and sessional teaching. The challenges of precarious labour are heightened for myself as a mother and woman of colour; however, my physical ability places me in a position of privilege in various layers of my experiences.

Kimberly

Over the past six years, I have simultaneously juggled the roles of mother, graduate student, and elementary school educator. Striving to remain conscious of the certain levels of privilege I possess, I actively reflect and transparently share these components of my identity with the readers of this work. Acknowledging the significance of positionality within the research process, I would be remiss not to disclose the historically privileged aspects of my identity that shape my positionality as a feminist scholar and mother. I recognize and acknowledge the significance of situating myself in relation to my positionality as a white, middle-class, cisgender, and able-bodied woman who occupies spaces in historically privileged contexts. Therefore, although my status as a woman and mother in academia presents certain structural and institutional challenges based on gender, I acknowledge that I have benefited from systems of privilege based on race, class, ableism, and sexuality in multiple contexts. In our household, my husband completes the majority of the domestic labour. Childcare duties are shared somewhat equally, except for my taking on more when his work schedule (i.e., having to work mandatory overtime) challenges this division. I am the manager of all things "unseen," such as clothing, school-related tasks, and decision making. My husband and I have immediate family members and close friends who are available and willing to help with childcare when the need presents itself. With this privilege, I position myself as an ally to marginalized and traditionally disenfranchised individuals and groups, both within the research process and the everyday contexts disclosed above.

Mothering, Teaching, and Academia within the Context of COVID-19

This discussion explores the impacts of the current global pandemic on women and mothers as well as on teacher mothers and academics, within the context of COVID-19. For purposes of this research, the term “mothers” will hereinafter refer to Andrea O’Reilly’s definition and include “any individual who engages in motherwork” (YFile). We define “academics” as those participating in academia through full or part-time studies and/or academic employment as sessional, adjunct, or professor. Teacher mothers include those who are mothers and are practicing certified teachers in public elementary or secondary schools.

Prior to the pandemic, it was well established, both anecdotally and statistically, that women and mothers managed many of the domestic- and caregiving-related responsibilities (Statistics Canada). Although most women participate in the labour force in Canada, they continue to comprise the majority of those who complete informal and unpaid caregiving duties for children, elders, and people who are ill or with disabilities (Statistics Canada). In each of these contexts, women disproportionately shoulder the lion’s share of the childcare and domestic tasks. For example, women spend an average of 50.1 hours per week on childcare, more than double the average time (24.4 hours) spent by men (Statistics Canada). Certainly, in the context of the global pandemic, these rates have dramatically increased, as it is mothers who are mostly home with children all day long.

Beginning in mid-March, mothers began to experience intensified domestic and caregiving responsibilities in the home front. After the Government of Ontario declared an emergency under the Emergency Management and Civil Protection Act in response to COVID-19, schools and childcare centres were both mandated to be closed, effective immediately. This action had immediate implications for families, which was especially true for lone-parent and mother-led families, who in 2014, headed approximately 80 per cent of lone-parent families in Canada (Statistics Canada). Lone-parent mothers were especially affected by food insecurities due to extensive job loss and reduced hours of work (Statistics Canada), but this was a public health issue that was common among low-income mother-led households well before the pandemic (McIntyre et al.). Food insecurity is defined as “the inability to acquire or consume an adequate diet quality or sufficient quantity of food in socially acceptable ways, or the uncertainty that one will be able to do so” (Government of Canada). The financial effects of COVID-19 have increased for those who reported having experienced food insecurity during the pandemic (Statistics Canada). For example, according to a food insecurity report conducted by Statistics Canada, nearly 15 per cent of Canadians indicated that in May 2020, they lived in a household that had experienced food insecurity within

the past 30 days. Of this 15 per cent, the rate of food insecurity was higher for households with children (19.2 per cent) (Statistics Canada).

Although the shift to working from home may have created more opportunities to meet professional responsibilities with greater ease, academic mothers soon began to voice their concerns about the limitations this new lifestyle imposed on their productivity. Certainly, fathers face increased demands during the pandemic as well; however, as the literature demonstrates, it is primarily mothers who often manage far greater domestic and caregiving loads, regardless of their academic or professional obligations. Although academic mothers belong to a space that is inherently privileged, the current pandemic has further highlighted the unique gender-based discrimination within academia, which has been dubbed the “motherhood penalty” or “baby penalty” (Correll et al.; Mason et al.). Demonstrating some of these barriers academic mothers face, recent studies have suggested that academic women have submitted fewer single-authored studies during the first few months of the pandemic (Flaherty). Reflecting the intersections of identities in certain faculties (e.g., science, technology, engineering, and mathematics), the gender gap in submissions has widened to an even greater degree for women in science, where gender, class, and racial inequities are hardly obscure (Markova et al.). The mandated school and childcare closures have further contributed to many mothers’ abilities to remain and reenter the workforce in other fields as well.

The microenvironment of the pandemic has rendered productivity for mothers as nearly impossible. Government mandated school and childcare closures have either partially or completely removed many mothers out of the workforce, which is projected to continue to affect their reentry as the pandemic continues. This reality was demonstrated by the June 2020 Statistics Canada Labour Force Survey, which revealed that as of May 2020, the employment rate among men had recovered to 93.2 per cent of its February level, compared to 89.2 per cent among women (Statistics Canada). This discussion draws attention to the many ways COVID-19 has affected various women and mothers. It also highlights how the gendered expectancy of mothers to adhere to their designated feminine-coded duties of care has impacted their ability to remain productive and active in the workforce. Acknowledging the increase in hardships felt by lone-parent mothers and racialized mothers, the pandemic has brought to the surface many inequities pertaining to motherhood. In the next section, we outline our use of a duoethnographic method that is informed by feminist methodology.

Duoethnographic Method

Duoethnography is a relatively new method of inquiry that involves two researchers who employ narrative as a communicative strategy (Norris; Sawyer and Norris; Krammer and Mangiardi). Engaging in the duoethnographic method involves being in conversation with each other and with the broader social, cultural, and political structures that inform our experiences. We understand duoethnography as a dialogic method, which allows us to draw on our lived experiences to investigate motherhood, teaching, and academia in the context of a global pandemic. In keeping with the tenets of feminist methodology, this article situates experience as intersectional, mediated to some degree by discursive realities, and located within broader sociopolitical structures. By highlighting our own voices as women and mothers, we practice the feminist goal of centring the voices of women, and we do so in a reflexive manner. Our experiences are deeply tied to our respective positionalities, and our goal is to shed light on issues related to our inquiry, not to generalize our experiences to all teacher mothers or to all academic mothers. Although this article does illuminate some of the literature and voices of various mothering populations, it is beyond its aims to provide generalized insight into the positionalities of other mothering populations during the initial stages of the pandemic.

Donna Krammer and Rosemarie Mangiardi explain that duoethnography involves revealing, reconstructing, and reinterpreting our experiences, examining the meanings we associate with them, and then “allowing those meanings to be transformed into the dialogical coupling and the juxtaposition of the coupling” (44). Joe Norris similarly articulates the process of duoethnography in the following quote: “Each author of a duoethnographic piece is both the researcher and researched. The team employs storytelling to simultaneously generate, interpret, and articulate data.... Their stories weave back and forth in juxtaposition to one another, creating a third space between the two into which readers may insert their own stories” (234). After the conclusion of the school year, we met once a week for a month to engage in dialogue based on the respective journaled narratives that we had prepared. We took detailed notes on our dialogues, and each week these notes informed our narratives for the following one.

At the heart of this process is the relationship between us as authors and the ongoing conversation that takes place throughout the research process. The dialogic and generative process allowed us to arrive at “unanticipated points of intersection” (Krammer and Mangiardi 44), which paved the way for a deeper exploration into our shared experiences of mothering, teaching, and academia during a global pandemic and how these findings shed light on broader issues of gender, domestic and precarious labour, and systemic injustice.

Rick Breault states that duoethnographers should disclose the nature of their relationship to each other at the outset. As we share the same doctoral advisor, ours began when he introduced us to each other and exclaimed that we were alike in our interests, drives, and journeys. When we met, we found that our conversations often revolved on motherhood and all the challenging, beautiful, and sometimes outrageous ways it had impacted our experiences as academics and teachers. Our relationship has flourished in collaboration and friendship through embarking on the present inquiry.

It is within the tenets of duoethnographic inquiry that the dialogic process of analysis is ultimately communicated in a manner that highlights each voice; as such, it is often written in a way that is akin to a play script (Norris and Sawyer; Breault et al.). One aspect of duoethnography that stood out to us is its emphasis on transparency (Breault et al.), which compliments feminist methodology's value of reflexivity—the active and ongoing reflection of how our social and epistemological locations impact the knowledge we produce (Mauthner and Doucet).

In the Beginning

On March 12, 2020, Ontario's Chief Medical Officer of Health issued a ministerial order to close all publicly funded schools in the province until April 6, 2020. Unbeknownst to many educators and parents, this date would be further extended, and schools would remain closed until the end of the school year. On March 17, the Government of Ontario took swift decisive action by declaring an emergency under the Emergency Management and Civil Protection Act in response to COVID-19. This order immediately closed licensed childcare facilities and private schools. This day in mid-March marked what would be the start of widespread uncertainty and anxieties, as parents, workers, educators, healthcare officials, and many others would find themselves abruptly adapting to a new reality. However, unlike in the past, this new reality would occur in a context that included government-mandated social isolation and social distancing and, therefore, the withdrawal of multiple sources of paid and unpaid support. For teachers and postsecondary instructors, this new reality meant that they had to rush to plan and implement online instruction.

In the academic realm and specifically regarding writing and publishing projects, the new mandated down time meant productivity levels increased for some and diminished for others. Mothers have had challenges in moving online and remaining productive, since the line between workplace and childcare was no longer in place, which, in turn, has increased domestic and caregiving work. Moving to our own dialogic narratives, we discuss how these early stages of the pandemic influenced and shaped our experiences as mothers, academics, and teachers.

Salsabel

I am a mother to a feisty one-and-a-half-year-old. My husband is a small business owner, who works twelve hours a day. The division of labour falls overwhelmingly on me, and I didn't dwell on that fact until childcare was usurped from me. When my son was nine months old, I ended my maternity leave because I wanted to get him accustomed to daycare, and I felt ready to reenter academia. I also felt that it would be easier for him to begin experiencing daycare as a baby, before he reached the phase of a clingy toddler. I was right. Little did I know that when he was fifteen months, the world would shut down at the hands of a global pandemic. The intricacies of my decision-making process over the past few years as a working mother and student, particularly in relation to childcare and managing my career, seemed to fall apart in a day.

Kimberly

I am a mother to our five-year-old daughter. As parents to an only child, we are her playmates when she is not with her cousins or peers. Although this is something we both enjoy, the need to engage her in play during working from home hours was a challenge during the pandemic. Because my husband worked throughout the day, these caregiving responsibilities fell largely on my shoulders. Prior to the pandemic, my ability to manage my simultaneous roles as mother, teacher, and academic was largely attributable to my support systems, which include immediate family members, close friends, and licensed childcare provider. The importance of these support systems became even more apparent when the government announced that schools would be closed for an undetermined period of time. With no available options for childcare, I began to think of ways in which this would surely affect my ability to maintain my sense of balance, which has always been predicated on and maintained through my dependence on these supports. Bringing work into the home meant that my roles would surely overlap. As a teacher, bringing work home is not a unique experience, but teaching from home certainly was.

Salsabel

I took a longer maternity leave from my role as a public schoolteacher. It just so happens that I returned from my maternity leave the same week that the school closures began. As an LTO teacher, I wasn't sure if that meant that I would have an LTO position or remain without any teaching work until the upcoming school year. Two weeks into shutdown, I was placed into an LTO in a grade eight class. My biggest fear at this point was not how to teach online, as I felt that I was digitally savvy and relentless in my efforts to engage students. My biggest fears were how to do so while mothering a toddler and

how to build virtual connections with students whom I had never met before. Back at the university, I was rushing to move to online instruction as a sessional instructor and to develop a schedule for my toddler. To wrap up my course, I worked on developing a simple and engaging plan, involving the least amount of pain for my students and me.

Kimberly

My husband is a frontline emergency responder, which meant many extended work shifts in the beginning of the pandemic. This increase in work hours challenged the established egalitarian divisions of labour in our home. His risk of exposure to the virus while he was at work was a constant worry, which quickly became a reality when he was required to self-isolate after coming into close contact with an individual who had just tested positive for COVID-19. Not only did this mean our health was potentially in imminent risk, but it also meant that I entirely lost the domestic and caregiving support he provided prior to his self-isolation. The recurrent risk of exposure over the next few months brought with it many warranted anxieties and compounded my already challenging and recalibrating loads of caregiving, homeschooling, and career(s) during this time. My role as an academic provided me with the much-needed respite from my roles as mother and teacher.

Salsabel

I similarly feel that my scholarly tasks felt like much-needed time to retreat into myself—to imagine and be creative. This is particularly true for my writing and research projects, the ones unrelated to my dissertation.

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Our dialogic narratives in the beginning weeks of the lockdown have a thematic thread of concern over the challenges of continuing to work without childcare and family support. They also tell stories of precarious employment, emotional labour, intensified domestic and caregiving responsibilities, late nights spent working on career duties, and worry of contagion. Our gendered experiences were heavily compounded by various levels of institutional and systemic factors, such as the work our spouses engaged in as frontline and essential service workers. The opportunity to retreat from our roles as mothers and teachers was afforded through our roles as academics and was seen as a way to cope with the mental and physical exhaustion of constant teaching, caregiving, and domestic responsibilities throughout the day. At the centre of all of these issues is the gendered experiences of womanhood and motherhood, experiences often not shared by men and fathers (DelBoca et al; Hochschild; Vosko; Millier).

In the Throes

This period represents a time in which it became evident that this was our new reality for the foreseeable future. In response to the school mandated closures, mothers now found themselves adopting a new role—as teachers in their own home. Teacher mothers were now adapting to this new role as well while acclimating to the unconventional world of remote learning. Important to note here is the disproportionate number of women in teaching-related professions. In Canada, women represent 68 per cent of teachers (Statistics Canada), so the demands placed on teacher mothers were undoubtedly experienced by many. Based on the mandates provided by the Ontario Ministry of Education (MOE), teachers and parents were now delivering education according to the directives outlined in the “Learn at Home” initiative to facilitate the continuance of learning. The hours of recommended time engaged in learning ranged from a minimum of five hours of work, per student, per week for kindergarten to grade three to over ten hours of work per week, per student for grades nine through twelve.

In addition to abruptly adapting to remote learning, teacher mothers and academic instructors were now also navigating the dilemma of synchronous learning. The expectation of synchronous learning mandated by the MOE meant that teachers were expected to use live teaching for entire classes, smaller group settings, or one-on-one interactions (Government of Ontario). For teacher mothers, the dual expectation to facilitate synchronous learning with their own class while participating in it for their own child often posed scheduling conflicts. Academic mothers whose children were school age faced similar issues, in addition to those posed by their roles within postsecondary institutions. The transition to online learning for academics involved swiftly adapting course materials, changing research programs and writing schedules, and struggling to keep up with the rapidly changing expectations at the tail end of a semester. These struggles were often compounded for academic mothers, who often had heightened caregiving and domestic responsibilities.

Kimberly

In the throes of the pandemic, I found myself fluctuating between feeling like I was managing the new demands well to feeling relentless guilt for myriad reasons, which were mostly caused by institutional demands and social circumstances rather than the act of mothering itself. Although my daughter had some understanding that when I was working at home I needed some uninterrupted time, there was rarely a time where she granted it. Naturally, increases of attention seeking behaviours quickly became evident when I attempted to work while she played independently or was engaged in her own

schoolwork. The guilt that ensued from my daughter potentially feeling that she was not my priority when I was working often overwhelmed my heart in a way that many mothers are all too familiar with. This was a new form of guilt, since I do not typically feel guilty for being a working mother outside of the home.

Salsabel

My toddler was very emotional and had several meltdowns a day. The initial period of stay-at-home mandate and heightened fears over going outside, even for a walk, in the middle of crowded downtown where we live, affected his moods and behaviours. I began to notice that his intense emotions, in conjunction with all of my responsibilities, were affecting my mental health. After all, I didn't exactly choose to have so much to do while caring for a toddler. When the MOE recommended synchronous learning, the principal emailed everyone, saying we should consider doing some form of it. I set my office hours from 2:00 p.m. to 4:00 p.m. every day, as that is when my son napped. I had thought that when a toddler naps, the mother should rest. But I worked. Being a precarious and racialized worker, both in teaching and academia, always meant that I had to work harder and longer to prove myself. In the mornings, I made phone calls to parents and students, just to talk, so they knew I was here and that I cared. I had my earphones in as I changed my son's diaper and prepared his breakfast as well as enough activities to tire him so that he would nap through my office hours.

Kimberly

On the day of my dissertation defence, a colleague warned me that as I began this next phase of my academic career, I would go through stages. Unbeknownst to me at the time, these stages would manifest themselves during a global pandemic. Although the exact stages this colleague was referring to were never clarified, I imagine they were referring to the personal progression most new graduates move through: imposter's syndrome, pressures to publish dissertation work, and competing within a jobless market. Coincidentally, and within no more than a few months of completing the PhD program, I indeed found myself going through stages that were both personal and government imposed. These government-imposed stages entailed those set forth by health officials and the personal stages paralleled with those of other recent graduates. As a recent graduate, I knew I could quickly fall behind if I did not maintain momentum. I began to write manuscripts from my dissertation almost immediately, but this process became sidetracked by a sense of urgency to write and publish about the current pandemic context.

Salsabel

In my role as a doctoral student, I attended meetings as my son ran around, into my lap and off. I offered him snacks, his soother, an episode of *Masha and the Bear*, all so I could get some reading and writing done. I felt persistent guilt. When he awoke from his nap, we would drive to a park that had more space for him to walk around. He loves being outside, especially in nature. Living in an apartment, we do not have the luxury of a backyard or a driveway. Although we do have the privilege of a car, I often thought of how much easier it would have all been if I had extra space. The new realities of increased expectations as a student, sessional instructor, elementary teacher, mother, and wife made me realize how deep my reliance on childcare was.

Kimberly

I regard my academic work as freely chosen work and see this role as one that provides respite from the others. As a new scholar, I was thrilled to learn and engage myself in these processes with myself and others, but I was also doing so while suppressing the all too familiar maternal guilt, imposter's syndrome, and effects of role strain that typically accompany these new demands. The timing of my PhD completion also overlapped with a global pandemic, an economic recession, and a jobless market, which have had implications for my opportunities to network with others in my field of research and opportunities for job mobility. However, the opportunity to practice in my field while completing a PhD has continued to provide me with financial security in an otherwise jobless market, and it still provides me great fulfillment.

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In the throes of the pandemic, we found ourselves adapting to new expectations in ways we didn't think were possible. Sustaining a career that demands interaction from home presented a set of challenges that most educators have not had to navigate prior to this pandemic. A telling emotion that we both experienced at a viscerally heightened level was guilt. The added pressures from media content about what other mothers were doing in terms of scheduling, homeschooling, and other activities often perpetuated the classed notion of intensive mothering ideologies (Hays). In turn, guilt resulted from feeling that we should give our children more attention, and, similarly, as educators and academics, we felt that we should be doing, caring, and giving more. Our narratives also tell of the gendered challenges of mothering in the midst of exhaustion, fear, and uncertainty. These experiences also speak to the ways in which elementary teaching—characterized by long hours, little flexibility, heightened emotional labour, and little regard for the complex gendered lives of teachers—is not a privileged space.

Into the Unknown

We call this section “Into the Unknown” to capture the feeling that many mothers—and particular to this inquiry, teacher mothers and academic mothers—have as we move closer to the fall term. In early June 2020, the Ontario government said that there were three learning options of how schools would reopen in September: fully remote, partially remote and partially in school, or fully in school. The Minister of Education, Stephen Lecce, indicated that the goal for September was for students to return to the fully in-school model, although he stated that the ultimate decision would be made in consultation with public health officials (TDSB). In the following weeks, school boards began planning and communicating their plans for the three possible scenarios, all of which would present unique and unprecedented challenges.

Of interesting note is that on June 19, 2020, the MOE released its funding plan for the upcoming school year, and it included no specific funding for increased costs associated with reopening schools in a pandemic (People for Education). Another alarming message that MOE put forward in late June was that “teachers who stand at the front of the class, keeping two metres away from their students, don’t need personal protective equipment” (Miller). As teachers, we cannot recall a day when we stood in front of our class to deliver instruction. In elementary school, teachers are often very close to students, kneeling down to guide them, walking around to monitor them, and so on. Furthermore, for these age groups, learning is often heavily based in play, collaboration, and community, all of which are intertwined with bodily proximity to others in the classroom. Such challenges also hold true for academic mothers whose children are school age, as these mothers will be tasked with making complex decisions about their children’s education, health, and wellbeing. They share the feeling of diving into the unknown, which comes with various layers of challenges, including the psychological toll of uncertainty. In our narratives that follow, we tell our stories of moving into the unknown.

Kimberly

As we await the announcement from the Minister of Education, I find myself growing more anxious about the repercussions of each scenario. The most difficult aspect of this waiting game comes from my role as a teacher mother. Like many other mothers, I am not necessarily able to exercise the choice between returning or not returning to work. The term “choice” is being used recklessly in discussions surrounding the return to school/work, and this is problematic, since those who can exercise choice do so within the flexible parameters of class privilege.

Salsabel

The choice of whether to send one's children to school in September is gendered and occurs within existing systems of inequity. For working mothers, this choice is an illusion. For teacher mothers, especially those who do not have the option of keeping their children at home, the choice is usurped if the MOE decides to reopen schools. I may consider taking an unpaid leave of absence to alleviate my maternal guilt, but that would exacerbate the financial stress that my family is already in as well as place me in a position in which I may be overlooked for a permanent position. Sending my toddler to daycare in the fall is difficult to fathom, given that he is too young to wear a face mask and maintain social distance from others. How can daycares mitigate the risk of virus transmission in a substantial way? How would the pandemic impact young children and staff at childcare centres? As a teacher, I have similar anxieties about keeping my students safe and staying true to my teaching philosophy, since I know the impossibility of contactless teaching, especially in my inner-city elementary school.

Kimberly

In approximately one week at the time of this writing, we will be provided with a solidified plan regarding the reopening of schools. As the days move closer to this anticipated announcement, I find myself becoming more anxious and searching for answers to the following questions. If we are back in the classroom on a fulltime regular basis, what will that entail for both students and teachers? How can virus transmission possibly be mitigated while also preserving the elements so critical to an effective and positive school environment for children? If we continue with remote learning, what effects will that have on my child, both socially and emotionally, as an observer to my working online and as a student herself? And finally, if we adopt a hybrid model, in addition to the aforementioned concerns, what are the options for childcare, if any? This inner dialogue represents some of the emotional labour inherent in the role of the teacher mother and the answers to these questions are asymmetrically gendered.

Salsabel

In the realm of academia, I know that the pandemic has stretched my timeline of doctoral studies. As a mother, and one who wants to have another child after graduation, my sense of time is heightened. I have a pressing drive to move through my milestones with minimal interruptions. I am afraid that the pandemic and the resulting issues for graduate students, such as longer periods of time spent waiting for feedback and emerging public health and ethical

constrictions to conducting social research, will mean a longer time in graduate school. I feel as though I have had to let go of my need for control and hyperorganization, but I fear that if I do so, all the sacrifices I've made to pursue doctoral education may be for nothing.

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As we move into the unknown, our narratives are shaped by feelings of uncertainty, anxiety, lack of control, and fear. In any reopening case, parents will be given the choice of whether or not to send kids to school. As our discussions unfolded, we found that this choice is more of a formality than an actual, free choice. It does not take into consideration social inequities, which in our case, revolve around our roles as mothers, and in our students' case, involve the challenges that come with reopening inner-city schools. Moreover, the use of the term "choice" to describe parents' agency in sending children to school disregards the multiple push and pull factors at play for mothers in the workforce. This choice is impeded by multiple social hierarchies, such as social class, and does not account for the increased amount of flexibility and privilege these factors afford some parents. The term "choice" is also shaped and influenced by women's traditional roles in society and functions to maintain hierarchical gender role expectations (Wolf-Wendel and Ward).

Conclusion

Joe Norris and Richard Sawyer state that the third meaning maker in a duoethnography is the reader, who by engaging with our work, is an "implicit co-author" (22). As such, we practice the duoethnographic tenet of giving readers the freedom to make their own conclusions rather than imposing any onto them. In embarking on this feminist inquiry, it was always our goal to be in conversation with each other, with the research, and with the women who will read our work. Ultimately, we wanted to produce knowledge that is of benefit to women and mothers, especially those who are similarly situated. In this way, the dialogic aspect of duoethnography does not end upon the publication of this article; rather, it continues as long as readers continue to engage with it.

Our narratives presented in this article are the lived experiences of our journeys as mothers, Ontario elementary schoolteachers, and academics. Embedded in our narratives are common experiences of mothers during the initial stages of the pandemic, such as increased domestic and caregiving responsibilities, emotional labour, role strain from intensified career responsibilities, and the mental health strains that were experienced in the process. We also share our unique experiences as teachers and emerging scholars in this novel context and the complexities of navigating the demands placed upon us from ministerial and school administration in addition to

academia. Our experiences while managing these three primary roles highlight the demands that are largely shouldered by women and the institutional pressures that often impede on the act of mothering, which have all been exacerbated by the pandemic. We situate these experiences within the broader context of motherhood, educational institutions, and the pandemic.

Regardless of whatever plan to return to school we become informed of over the next week, we realize that we are privileged in many of the experiences we shared here. Although our statuses as mothers, teachers, and academics meant that we were taking on more caregiving and domestic responsibilities and shouldering the physical and psychological tolls of added pressures and expectations, we did not have to worry about meals and shelter. Even though our health was at times at risk due to potential exposure to the virus, we are not part of a medically vulnerable population, and we would have been able to seek and receive healthcare. We acknowledge the experiences of so many marginalized mothers, many of whom continue to move through the pandemic with their experiences silenced.

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