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## *Connected from Afar: Culturally Grounded Remote Peer Support During the COVID-19 Pandemic*

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### **Abstract:**

In this article, two PhD students from separate Canadian universities, both sharing an immigrant background, engage in autobiographical narrative inquiry, highlighting the importance of peer-support experiences during the pandemic. They explore their journeys as immigrants and PhD students, recounting their experiences in a virtual support group. This narrative illustrates the exchange of academic, mental health and personal support rooted in shared culture, language and ethnicity. The study provides insights into the benefits of peer support on virtual platforms and adds immigrant perspectives. It suggests that university administrators can find innovative ways to support marginalized students, fostering mutual support among them, particularly in the remote-learning context of COVID. This article highlights the potential for authentic and effective support systems that address the unique challenges faced by immigrant and marginalized students, enhancing their academic and personal development.

**Keywords:** peer support; graduate students; immigrant students; COVID-19; narrative inquiry

## **Connectés au-delà de la distance : Soutien par les pairs à distance fondé sur la culture pendant la pandémie de COVID-19**

### **Résumé :**

Dans cet article, deux étudiantes au doctorat issues de l'immigration au sein de deux universités canadiennes différentes s'engagent dans une enquête narrative autobiographique, soulignant l'importance de l'expérience du soutien par les pairs pendant la pandémie. Elles explorent leur parcours d'immigrantes et d'étudiantes au doctorat, en racontant leurs expériences dans un groupe de soutien virtuel. Ce récit illustre l'échange de soutien académique, mental et personnel enraciné dans une culture, une langue et une ethnicité communes. L'étude met en lumière les avantages du soutien entre pairs sur les plateformes virtuelles et intègre la perspective des immigrants. Elle suggère que les administrateurs d'université peuvent trouver des moyens innovants pour soutenir les étudiants marginalisés en favorisant le soutien mutuel, particulièrement dans le contexte de l'apprentissage à distance entamé par la COVID. Cet article met en évidence le potentiel de systèmes de soutien authentiques et efficaces qui répondent aux défis uniques auxquels sont confrontés les étudiants immigrés et marginalisés, améliorant ainsi leur développement académique et personnel.

**Mots clés :** soutien par les pairs; étudiants diplômés; étudiants immigrés; COVID-19; enquête narrative

As COVID-19 has greatly affected graduate students' academic and personal lives, there is a need to look at the ways that graduate students were supported—or not—during this period. This paper presents the experiences of two doctoral students and their engagement of mutual peer support as a means to navigate the difficulties provoked by the pandemic. Building on previous work in which we reflected on our challenges during the pandemic (Y. Liu & Chen, 2022), we, Emma Chen 陈星 and Yina Liu 刘懿娜, with similar immigrant backgrounds, share our experiences of developing effective mutual peer support.<sup>1</sup> We discuss how we worked to maintain our well-being during the lockdown and work-from-home context. We illustrate, in concrete terms, the exchange of academic, mental health and personal support that arises from a shared background based on culture, language and ethnicity.

### Literature Review

Recent literature underscores the positive impact of peer mentorship on a range of academic skills and competencies essential to higher education curricula (Hilsdon, 2014; Miller et al., 2011). Peer support may be formal (e.g., events held by the department to engage graduate students to meet) or informal (e.g., gathering in a lounge and chatting with a few students in similar research areas). Studies have explored the benefits of graduate peer support groups from various angles, such as increasing diverse academic skills, including academic writing literacies (Cahusac de Caux et al., 2017; Kumar & Aitchison, 2018) and disciplinary knowledge (Miller et al., 2016), and maintaining psychosocial well-being (Fugate et al., 2001), including self-confidence and motivation (Maher et al., 2013). Peer mentorship serves as a valuable asset in curriculum development, as it facilitates a more inclusive and collaborative learning experience for diverse student populations (Kwenani & Yu, 2018).

Nevertheless, the challenging reality is that doctoral students are likely to feel isolated and disconnected from their peers, particularly during the time they work on their dissertations (Ehrenberg et al., 2007). Haskins et al. (2013) found that immigrant and minoritized students have unique challenges in forming relationships with peers. Additional research reveals that graduate students may have difficulties in peer support related to culture, race and geographic location (Lorenzetti et al., 2019).

Furthermore, COVID-19 created an isolated environment for graduate students during which they could not attend in-person classes or connect with other graduate students as frequently as before. Research from T. Liu et al. (2022) and Webber et al. (2022) showed that, during the COVID-19 pandemic, graduate students in various programs and disciplines gained multiple benefits from peer mentorships, including social support, mental well-being and academic success. Yet COVID-19 brought complex challenges to traditional peer mentorships for graduate students (Schlegel et al., 2022). The conventional form of peer support was not feasible during the COVID-19 pandemic, as people were unable to meet each other in person and were increasingly likely to be occupied with emergent family arrangements (Hanson, 2023).

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<sup>1</sup> And we note that we each contributed equally to this article.

There was a need for graduate students to present new forms of peer mentorships that worked during the COVID-19 pandemic. Webber et al. (2022) investigated how the pandemic restrictions forced a reconsideration of traditional methods of supervision and peer learning, and they explored the value of a virtual doctoral networking group. Schlegel et al. (2022), explored the value of unstructured peer communication where graduate students connect with their peers without a specific schedule or plan, in either in-person or online contexts. Our own experiences as graduate students during the pandemic attest to the need to craft new forms of peer support, particularly for students who may feel particularly isolated by linguistic or cultural differences.

## Methodology

Narrative inquiry, as a methodology, is fundamentally about understanding human experiences through the lens of the stories we tell. At its heart, narrative inquiry is described as "people in relation studying people in relation" (Clandinin, 2013, p. 24), and it emphasizes the intricate web of relationships in the narratives we explore. For us, this emphasis on relationships holds particular significance. It is not just a methodological underpinning but the very starting point of our peer support journey, pushing us into a rich, profound collaboration both personally and professionally. Guided by this ongoing reflexive and reflective nature of narrative inquiry (Clandinin, 2013), we, in this research, adopt an autobiographical narrative inquiry approach (see Chen, 2021; Chen & Y. Liu, 2022). Here, we begin with our autobiographical accounts, delving deep into our personal experiences and how we traverse the world as graduate students. We then intersect our narratives with academic literature, unraveling the multi-layered complexities of individual stories and situating our experiences within broader societal narratives. Through shedding light on our mutual support during the isolating times of the pandemic, we aim to emphasize the significance of generous peer support rooted in shared linguistic and cultural backgrounds, all the while exploring the wider implications of our inquiry.

## Telling our Stories

In this section, we share our experiences of mutual peer support as minoritized doctoral students at two universities in Canada. We focus on how peer support helped us navigate working from home during the pandemic.

### Emma's Story

Thursday was the day of the week I most looked forward to. I got up in the morning and brought breakfast to my desk, in pajamas and slippers. When I logged onto Zoom at 9 am, I knew there would be a friendly face greeting me with a warm smile and a cheerful "Good morning!". And that began a fruitful conversation, which led to a productive morning of work.

Yina and I had many connections. We both completed our Master of Education degrees at the University of Saskatchewan, although a couple of years apart. We shared the same passion for children's literature, particularly multicultural and multilingual picture books. We are both immigrant students from Mainland China and speak the same language. However, our paths never crossed until

the Canadian Society for the Study of Education (CSSE) Annual Conference in May 2021. Yina called me after attending my online paper presentation session. I remembered that call vividly—we introduced ourselves and our doctoral work progress, and we chatted like old friends, even though even though we had just met at the conference. It was a significant moment for me—as someone who started a PhD in May 2020, right after the COVID-19 pandemic outbreak and never had a chance to connect with any fellow graduate students—to have an actual conversation with another PhD student who was going through similar challenges and conquering similar milestones. We also discovered that our research projects, even though concerning different topics, shared several common theoretical and practical perspectives, and that both of us were involved literacy education and linguistically minoritized communities. We did not let that phone call slide as a solitary occasion; instead, we held on to that moment and turned it into a continuing effort to build a relationship and stay connected.

After that initial connection over the phone, Yina and I established a regular meeting schedule—every Thursday morning from 9 am to 12 pm—for the two of us to meet on Zoom and work on co-authored research projects. To date, Yina and I have co-authored three research articles, including this piece. It is fair to say that, at least for me personally, I could not have achieved this level of productivity if my co-author had not been there to hold me accountable. The second half of our meeting time was always dedicated to writing. We wrote independently but together on a collaborative online document with the camera on, stopped and shared pieces of ideas now and then, and reported our writing progress to each other at the end of the meeting. However, that was not even the best part of our weekly meeting. My favourite was the first half of our weekly meeting. We just chatted, like any friends meeting in a café, catching up on each other's lives. The topics of our conversations spread over personal, professional and social events: from sharing highlights of recent family activities with partners and children to expressing frustrations about working alone at home and losing track of the day or the month; from celebrating each other's academic achievements (big and small) to discussing current societal events in Canada and in China; from sharing our mental health challenges and healthy lifestyle tips in pandemic isolation to updating one another on our most recent discoveries about publications, conferences and grant opportunities.

To me, Thursday morning felt like the "recharge" station in a marathon race, where people hand the runners water and bananas. Right in the middle of the week, when I usually started to feel exhausted, I was lifted up by someone on the other side of the computer screen. Not to mention that Yina always ended our Zoom call with a cheerful affirmation: "You've got this! We've got this!"

### *Yina's Story*

In March 2020, I started to work from home in a rented basement suite. My partner was back home after living in another city, and we were staying together in a small space with limited sunshine. At this time, I had little communication with peers and was uncertain about my research proposal. My previous research required me to conduct research with children face-to-face. However, the sudden arrival of COVID-19 made it seem less possible to make in-person meetings with participants. The peers who I usually saw on campus all had young children, and their daily lives

were centred around their families. I was afraid to bother them, and I always wondered if they had time for me to chat about recent life changes or about school. Things changed gradually. I had the motivation to work on my proposal in the spring of 2020; however, gradually, that motivation faded. When I recall the experiences, I felt isolated and I was isolated. I did not physically see anybody other than my partner each week, and I did not have a chance to chat with other PhD students, even virtually. I felt that I had lost all my connection with people and with academia. Even though I received emails every day, I started to question the relationship between myself and the "academic lifestyle" (emails, writing, reading, anything related to academia). My friends who lived in other cities contacted me often. They shared their lives; having children, working in a bank, things that happened at work. I started to realize that having a connection with people is crucial!

As Emma has written, we met at the 2021 Canadian Society for the Study of Education (CSSE) conference. She was a PhD student at the University of Saskatchewan at that time. When I called her after attending her presentation, I told her about the challenges that I was having at that time and the sense of isolation and depression that I was experiencing. Maybe because we are both Chinese, born and raised in Northern China, and we both came to Canada to start our master's degrees, I felt safe and comfortable communicating with her in a "Chinese way". Not surprisingly, she started to share her experiences with COVID-19 and her life concerning her doctoral work. Surprisingly, she was also having similar feelings of being isolated over the past year. I realized that I was not alone in my struggles.

We chatted about writing our experiences together, and we saw that we had many similar experiences and shared common perspectives towards transnational and trans-linguaging issues. Emma shared a submission call in children's literature studies, and we started to work on it. During the chat, Emma gave me lots of encouragement. After meeting with Emma, I felt energetic, and the connection between myself and academic work was back. I started to feel that I was important, and my thoughts were important, too.

After the first phone chat, we met through Zoom to write the abstract for the call together. During our meetings, we not only shared our writing goals, and our concerns and worries about our studies, but also life updates. For example, we talked about the health insurance for my parents while they were traveling to Canada, how to maintain a daily exercise routine, and how to stay motivated when sometimes I did not want to do anything. While sharing these concerns and challenges related to well-being with Emma, I felt that the burden was being lifted, and I could relax after the chat. It helped to talk to someone who had been through similar experiences and who perceived the world similarly.

### **Retelling our Stories**

In this section, we reflect on our experiences and examine our education and well-being from three distinct angles: establishing a sense of routine during the COVID-19 pandemic; developing a peer mentorship program from scratch that benefits all participants; and understanding the importance of shared culture, ethnicity and language for students from marginalized backgrounds.

## Emma's Retelling

### *Establishing Regularity in Life Amid COVID-19*

Navigating a global pandemic brings new perspectives to one's life. I never appreciated or even noticed the value of a regular daily schedule until it was disrupted by the outbreak of COVID-19. In consideration of health and safety for myself and the community, I spent most of my time working at home, away from colleagues and peers. This working condition created a profound sense of isolation. Time seemed to have stopped since the emergence of COVID-19; my life felt adrift and I was struggling to find a solid anchor point. Fortunately, the small peer support system Yina and I inadvertently created became that anchor, grounding my life and mental health.

Empirical results show a positive relationship between social rhythms and mental health (Cai et al., 2017). Research findings also suggest that less regular social rhythms predict anxiety and stress (Velten et al., 2018). Consistent with these findings, my experience before meeting Yina resonated with the challenges associated with irregular social rhythms. Additionally, Margraf et al. (2016) found that an individual's mental health can be improved through the regularity of their social rhythms. Therefore, regularity of social rhythms is strongly associated with positive psychological health, suggesting that improving social rhythms can lead to increased psychological well-being among graduate students (Velten et al., 2018). After establishing a regular meeting schedule and a social rhythm, I can attest that my anxiety and stress levels decreased, while my life satisfaction and mental health levels increased.

I often find myself contemplating the alternative—what my life, my work and my mental health might have looked like had Yina and I not connected through that phone call after CSSE 2021, or if we had not seized the opportunity to establish a regular meeting agenda.

The establishment of our remote peer support group was driven by a combination of social intention, professional needs and a hint of contingency. What if we could turn that contingency into certainty? What if such peer support opportunities were systematically provided to all graduate students? Every time I recall the experience of our meeting, I am filled with gratitude, knowing how this connection has enriched my personal and academic journey. These reflections push me to envision potential shifts in higher education, where all graduate students have such opportunities to benefit from peer mentorship.

### *Building a Two-Way Peer Mentorship From the Ground up*

Our remote peer support experiences demonstrated a grassroots, two-way, peer mentorship. As such, Yina and I simultaneously acted as each other's mentor and mentee, as we shared knowledge and experiences, developed research skills, celebrated academic milestones and navigated academic systems. Through this process, we, as graduate students, functioned as intellectual and experiential knowledge holders, becoming genuine teachers to one another (Cornu, 2005). This dynamic interaction exemplifies peer mentorship as an informal curriculum, where learning extends beyond traditional structures and becomes integrated into daily interactions. By embedding mentorship into

the fabric of our academic lives, we created a living curriculum that fostered continuous personal and professional growth. In an informal and stress-free manner, our resiliency, knowledge acquisition and academic competency grew (Lorenzetti et al., 2019). By promoting learning across four domains of graduate education (i.e., academic, psychological, social and career domains), peer mentorship provided us with opportunities to develop the skills and experience required for completing a graduate degree. Most importantly, learning from and with a fellow PhD student, and navigating through similar academic systems in a relevant research field, reduced my academic anxiety and a sense of isolation (Lorenzetti et al., 2019).

Amid COVID-19, graduate students faced significant challenges accessing adequate and appropriate mentorship from faculty members. The shift to virtual learning and the closure of universities disrupted traditional mentoring relationships, leading to increased feelings of isolation and stress among students. Many institutions were unprepared for the sudden transition to online platforms, exacerbating the difficulties in maintaining effective mentorship and supervision (Almahasees et al., 2021; Nash, 2021). This lack of access to adequate mentorship during the pandemic further heightened anxiety and depression among graduate students, who already experienced higher rates of these mental health issues compared to the general population (Almahasees et al., 2021). From my experience, I believe that opportunities for peer support and mentorship could fill such gaps, especially in an online environment where graduate students could leverage technology to establish stable relationships with one another.

Drawing from my own journey, as well as the insights of scholars such as Badger (2010) and Huizing (2012), it is evident to me that peer mentorship is one of the best practices to promote student learning. Through our experiences, Yina and I have felt first-hand how peer mentorship beautifully dovetails with faculty-student mentorship, introducing an indispensable informal layer of support (Smith & Delmore, 2007). I cannot deny the importance of having a systematic structure for peer mentorship, especially considering its vast potential to guide students, particularly during the challenging PhD years. However, even as I feel the need for some structure, I deeply believe that the true essence of a peer mentorship lies in its authenticity, sprouting from genuine student connections. It is crucial to me that any formal structure introduced acts as a gentle guardian, ensuring the essence of these bonds remains untouched, preserving the spontaneity and joy that makes peer mentorship so transformative.

### *Yina's Retelling*

#### *Shared Cultural Background*

While meeting and working with Emma, who is also a Chinese immigrant and graduate student, I found that we shared many common topics and experiences as part of our graduate programs. In my department, the majority of graduate students are from White, middle-class backgrounds and have experience working as teachers in public schools. During my first two-year residency, whether taking courses or attending informal gatherings, I often found myself as a



## *Peer Support During COVID*

listener, learning new information about schools and teachers' lives, and hearing stories of raising children. As I did not have much to contribute to their conversations, I felt somewhat left out.

However, meeting with Emma weekly gave me a different feeling about connecting with graduate students and peer support. I felt that my situations and concerns were understood, which I believe comes from our shared cultural background. For example, I could share my concerns about my lack of teaching experience in Canadian public schools, and together, we looked for alternative opportunities. I also shared personal aspects of my life with Emma and sought advice. For instance, when my parents wanted to visit me in Canada, I needed advice on helping them apply for visas and purchase medical insurance for their travel. Emma shared her experiences of applying for visas for her family members and provided me with contact information for travel insurance. Such experiences are unique to immigrants, and meeting with Emma created a safe space for me to share my concerns and experiences as a Chinese immigrant graduate student.

These experiences of working and meeting with Emma positively affected my study effectiveness, my motivation to continue my graduate program and my mental health. Research has shown that students have a more positive sense of learning when accompanied by other students from the same cultural background (Du et al., 2016; Horvat & Lewis, 2003; Rovai & Gallien, 2005). Working from home during the pandemic, I faced various challenges (Y. Liu & Chen, 2022); however, engaging with Emma and receiving peer support from her encouraged me to overcome my sense of isolation.

### *Shared Doctoral Student Cultural Background*

Through our weekly connection, Emma and I chatted not only about our academic lives but also our personal lives, such as mental health issues and questions. Talking with Emma made me feel that my situations were understood by someone who shares similar perspectives and situations. This feeling is different from talking with people who have not been doctoral students.

With friends who are not graduate students, when sharing things about my life, such as my writing routine or an interrupted workday, I've often felt stressed and disconnected from their perspectives. Many times, my friends struggle to understand the life of a doctoral student, and sometimes their suggestions are not very helpful or realistic. While their advice comes from kindness, their lack of understanding of a doctoral student's life and workload makes their suggestions irrelevant or impractical. They may believe that doctoral students have more free time compared to people working nine to five. Some people, including my parents, think that my life is much easier than that of an undergraduate student since I do not attend classes every day. It is challenging to explain my actual life and what a doctoral student needs to do (e.g., reading, writing, working as research/teaching assistant), and how much time each task takes. Furthermore, there are few TV shows or dramas about people working in academia, compared to portrayals of lawyers or doctors. I sense the misunderstanding from people about my actual life, and they often cannot understand why I say, "I am busy".

I feel relieved and comfortable while chatting with Emma about my study, research and daily life. This stems from the fact that we share common knowledge about what being a doctoral student entails, what our daily lives actually are like, and how many things we need to manage every day—about the culture of academia. Through Emma, I feel that my situation and concerns are understood.

The concept of cultural context extends beyond mere ethnic characteristics. Frequently, the shared cultural nuances of doctoral students—including their daily routines, responsibilities, contemplations and writing endeavors—are underestimated or disregarded. Much of the existing scholarly literature neglects this shared cultural context. Recognizing and understanding this shared experience can reinforce doctoral students' identities, preventing self-doubt.

### **Discussion and Implementation**

As graduate students, we recognize the crucial role of receiving quality peer support, particularly while working remotely, during uncertain times. In this paper, utilizing autobiographical narrative inquiry, we share our experiences of our two-way peer support journey and explore it through three angles: establishing regularity in life amid COVID-19, building a two-way peer mentorship from the ground up, and acknowledging shared culture, ethnicity and language for minoritized students. It is plausible that many minoritized graduate students may face similar challenges when seeking peer support. Our experiences offer opportunities for other graduate students, especially minoritized immigrant students, to contemplate and reflect on their peer support trajectories, and our experiences may inspire them to explore new ways of receiving support from their peers. This study provides insights into the benefits of peer support on virtual platforms and includes perspectives from immigrant students, presenting an opportunity for university administrators to consider authentic and innovative ways to support marginalized students, particularly within the unprecedented remote context of COVID-19.

As such, we suggest adopting more ground-up, culturally sustainable approaches in higher education curricula, with a focus on centering the needs of culturally minoritized graduate students. By integrating these approaches into the curriculum, universities can create more inclusive learning environments that address the unique challenges faced by these students. More specifically, here are some specific practices a university might undertake:

- Develop and integrate into the curriculum virtual peer mentorship programs that are accessible and thoughtfully designed, specifically addressing the unique needs of minoritized and immigrant students, without compromising the informal curricular essence of peer support;
- Incorporate specialized training and resources for peer mentors and mentees into the curriculum, focusing on understanding and addressing challenges faced by minoritized students in virtual platforms and remote learning settings, while maintaining the organic nature of the peer relationships;
- Cultivate a sense of belonging and community by organizing online events, workshops and networking opportunities that celebrate and uplift the experiences, voices and expertise of

marginalized students, without imposing overly formalized curricular structures;

- Encourage cross-cultural communication and understanding among students through non-obligatory cultural sensitivity training and by actively promoting the value of diverse perspectives within the academic community. This involves recognizing and dismantling existing power structures that marginalize certain groups, while fostering an atmosphere of genuine connection and learning; and
- Continuously assess and improve peer support initiatives by seeking feedback from minoritized students, ensuring their voices shape the development and evolution of these programs in response to the ever-changing landscape of higher education, building this feedback into the curriculum without losing the authenticity and ground-up nature of peer mentorship.

By integrating these practices into the curriculum, higher education institutions can better prepare students for academic success while fostering a more inclusive and equitable sense of belonging and community within their diverse student body, promoting sustained engagement and success, all the while keeping the spirit of informal peer mentorship alive.

## Conclusion

The era marked by the rapid shift to remote learning due to the COVID-19 pandemic has underscored the pivotal role of effective peer mentorship for graduate students. Such peer mentorship is especially exigent for those who are culturally minoritized. Our autobiographical narrative inquiry sheds light on the deep-seated benefit of fostering peer mentorship that prioritizes shared cultural subtleties and confronts the particular challenges faced by minoritized students. Our experiences highlight the responsibility higher education institutions bear in this context. In the academic realm, it is imperative for these institutions to truly understand and incorporate these findings into actionable strategies. Creating space to develop genuine virtual peer mentorship programs should be at the forefront of these initiatives. But the task does not stop there; it is equally essential to advocate for a culture of understanding towards diverse backgrounds. Ultimately, by investing in robust peer mentorship that appreciates cultural nuances, higher education institutions can achieve more than just academic excellence. They can create a learning environment that is both inclusive and equitable. In such a setting, all students, regardless of their cultural background, may feel not only recognized but also interconnected and cherished.

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