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# On Mothering, Teaching and Learning: The maternal thinking of doctoral student mothers and their quest for social justice in and through education

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*All human life on the planet is born of woman.*
Adrienne Rich, 1976

In the book *The Essential Conversation: What parents and teachers can learn from each other*, Lawrence-Lightfoot (2003) devoted a chapter to exploring the intersection of parenting and teaching, and the fragmented roles that women, in particular, experience in educating children and young people. It is no surprise that the important work of raising and educating children is still largely pursued by women in an economic and political context that not only devalues the labour of caring for others but that fails to recognize the importance of caretaking and educating in the interest of the common good. Many of the teachers interviewed by Lawrence-Lightfoot indicated that their roles as mothers had implications for them in their professional lives. Most notably, teachers who were mothers claimed to better understand the complexities of childhood development and of learning, and felt they were less judgmental and more forgiving of individual foibles among both students and parents. As one teacher indicated when she became a mother, "I finally recognized the way in which mothering breaks your heart" (Lawrence-Lightfoot, 2003, p. 194).

This article explores the overlapping and intertwined ways in which mothering informs the educational endeavour in both P12 and higher education with a focus on maternal thinking and the role of mothers in advancing social justice. While Laurence-Lightfoot illuminated the lives of women at the intersection of teaching and mothering in the P12 context, I interrogated the multi-dimensional roles of doctoral student mothers in higher education (Pément, 2013). This narrative inquiry into the experiences of 16 doctoral student mothers in the United States was guided by Rich's (1976) notion of motherhood as both experience and institution. She argued that motherhood must be understood in two contexts—one that is grounded in personal experience and, the other, that recognizes the implications of the political institutions, such as capitalism and patriarchy, that constrain it. Further, this work was informed by critical feminism (hooks, 1994, 1999) that acknowledges gendered power differentials (among others),

and by post-structuralist notions which suggest there cannot be any theoretical, research or pedagogical efforts without questioning what it means to teach and to conduct research in a world that is fundamentally unjust (Lather, 1991).

A narrative inquiry is a qualitative methodology which draws upon strategies both traditional and innovative, with opportunities to explore new ideas and to ask new qualitative questions (Chase, 2008). Narrative researchers pay particular attention to the language, the stories, and lived realities as expressed by participants allowing for the complexity of human experience to shine.

In in-depth, semi-structured interviews, participants told me about their experiences as mothers, as doctoral students and as professionals in education. All had worked, in some capacity, in schools, colleges or at universities before undertaking their doctorates in higher education. Their ages ranged from 27 to 58 years with an average age of 42 years. Half of participants identified as women of colour, and the other half as White. Most were married. Taken together, participants were actively parenting 25 children. The average age of their children was approximately 12 years old, ranging from a few months to 25 years old.

I met doctoral student mothers at their offices on university campuses, and in their homes as they cared for their children. Consistent with findings reported by Lawrence-Lightfoot (2003), the realities of motherhood informed the professional lives of these women in ways that were both overt and covert. Not surprisingly, they described their lives as deeply enmeshed with those of their children. These powerful bonds were enacted and re-enacted in schools and universities everywhere. What follows is my attempt to play fair witness to the storied experiences of doctoral student mothers as they spoke about how mothering informed their thinking as well as their quest for social justice on behalf of their own and other people's children.

## Mothering and Maternal Thinking as Practice and Intellectual Activity

Every student mother with whom I spoke described herself as a lifelong learner. As doctoral students, without doubt, educational activities were prominent in their lives. However, beyond their experiences as students, these women relied on informal and formal educational strategies to enlighten both their mothering and professional practices. Not surprisingly, however, popular discourse is replete with notions that implicitly demean the learning efforts of mothers. Several commonly-held views in popular culture are crystallized in pejorative language, including references to "mommy brain" or "baby brain"—"a modern affliction…which like 'senior moment' is a cheery synonym for abrupt mental decline" (Ellison, 2005, p. 3). In discussing her transition to maternal thinking, Nichols (2009) shared that her cognitive style changed given her emerging mothering practices. She wrote, "it is maternal thought that has become my dominant style and that by struggling with the internal conflicts of maternal practice I have embraced an "outlaw" [beyond dominant norms] approach to mothering which, in turn, has altered my approach to research" (p. 231). Indeed, several participants told stories about how they engaged in serious research efforts to learn how to best care for their child while simultaneously working towards their doctorates. For example, one doctoral student mother undertook an exhaustive review of literature regarding pediatric nutrition when she discovered her child had food allergies. Others mentioned how their mothering directly informed their professional and academic work. As one participant stated:

> It's really hard to separate my life experiences from what I'm doing and saying…I'm a parent and I deal with parents in my work…so I really do know what it's like. I think about how [mothering] informs my work in school…I'm in a diversity class right now and I'm thinking not just about how does this impact my work? I'm thinking, how does it, as a parent, impact me? Or, what are the implications for parents, not just students?

The emergent and fluid cognitive strategies necessary to navigate the arrival of a child and, later, in raising growing people, came to characterize participant experiences as both learners and as teachers at home and in institutions. Indeed, it was difficult for participants to disentangle their narratives about their lives as mothers and as doctoral students since these roles intersected at the juncture of two tremendously important tasks both requiring significant emotional and cognitive resources. As O'Reilly (2009, p. 298) stated, new forms of thinking emerge in mothering that render "motherwork inherently and profoundly an intellectual activity."

As lifelong learners, several doctoral student mothers spoke about how they came to the field of education initially to become better advocates for their own children by working in the classroom, by substitute teaching or in taking other jobs at the schools their children attended. Several of these women eventually sought teaching credentials and found themselves on a career path they had not anticipated. One participant told of how she became an educator in response to her child's diagnosis of a learning disability. She said:

> I never wanted to be a teacher… It wasn't meant to be in a sense, to get into special [education]…but my first child got an Individualized Educational Plan (IEP) and…being a mother I wanted to know… I went from being a safety coordinator…to becoming a teacher because I wanted to know what I had to do to take care of my [child].

Similarly, another participant explained how she "really got into university" by visiting the campus where one of her children was attending college. With her children's encouragement, she enrolled in classes and, eventually, completed a Master's in Education. Later, she embarked upon a doctoral program.

In another case, one participant told how her chronically ill child required medications and a special diet. By getting a job on a university campus, this doctoral student mother was able to stay close to her child while undertaking her Master's in Early Childhood Education. At the time we spoke, this woman was completing her doctorate in Higher Education. The university provided a safe place guaranteeing proximity to her child while she fulfilled her aspiration to seek a doctorate.

Another participant who became a single mother at an early age articulated the profound significance of education in her life and its connection to motherwork. She said, "mothering made me study. I guess [becoming a mother] has made [education] very personal. Being a parent is what got me back full-time into the university as an undergraduate…I had to create a life for us." For this doctoral student mother, attending university became a tangible expression of her dedication to the care and advancement of her child.

## Motherhood Informs a Commitment to Advance Social Justice

Intricately tied to the idea that mothering inspires new cognitive processes is the expressed commitment to social justice originating in the experiences of doctoral student mothers. As one participant stated:

As I think about college students, I think the whole experience of being a parent in general, whether I had a child in college or not…allows me to look at a student from a different lens not just as an educator but as a person who has a prior level of care or concern. I think that all that wanting the best, not just for my own kids, but for other people's kids—because I really view that as a high responsibility—supporting, encouraging and serving other people's kids.

Yet another participant recognized access to higher education as an important means for emancipation, not only for herself but, ultimately, for her child and for other people's children as well. She told me:

I began to see the potential for education to be a mitigator against oppression, marginalization and powerlessness… education can't do everything for everybody but in an economy and a society like ours it's pretty important… My [child] has given me a tangible reason for that… the human being that I'm hoping to cultivate in [my child] is the same person that I care about in my research—other people's children and my own child—where those two things come together.

Doctoral student mothers spoke eloquently about how higher education not only contributed to their personal practice as mothers but how mothering labour extended into and informed their professional lives. This idea was illuminated by one participant who described her commitment to social justice and equity. She said:

> [Social justice] was important to me before I had kids. But now, it is even more important because I have kids who are going to go through education systems and who are going to go into higher education…I hope it will be more inclusive and more open to them. My kids are bi-racial…[The] work that I do is important at different levels. I do want to make a difference and have an effect on policy… [This work] is not just helping society but helping even my own family, my own kids.

Given the gendered economic, political and cultural contexts in which women enact their everyday lives, this study found that doctoral student mothers were able to negotiate institutional cultures to meet the needs of their own children which, tangentially, had implications for the interests of other people's children as well. Essentially, they understood their work in schools and universities as crucial to ensuring care for their own children while also advancing social justice interests more broadly.

## Conclusion

Much like the teacher mothers whose experiences were interrogated by Lawrence-Lightfoot (2003), participants in this study indicated that mothering, learning and teaching are profoundly intertwined activities. Andre (2009) has written that, "Motherhood has analogues in many other central human activities. Teaching is the obvious first analogue, but there are many others" (p. 70). Consistently, Matta (2013) described the changes she experienced after becoming a mother in the following way:

I am a stronger woman and teacher because I am an experienced mother…Mothering influences my interactions with [my students], my listening skills…watching my own children grow has also helped me to develop a keen interest in students' intellectual growth and development (p. 147).

In contemporary economic, political and cultural contexts in which there are competing labour demands placed on women, participants in this study proved to be resourceful in their reliance on educational institutions to satisfy personal interests as they strived to meet the needs of their own children and, ultimately, as they worked towards improving conditions for others. This study revealed that children are formidable sources of inspiration for the advancement of social change.

In the absence of comprehensive social programs, schools and universities continue to be important sites for advancing social justice. Understanding the experiences of mothers who teach in schools and universities helps to acknowledge mothering as an ontological standpoint (Quinn, 2004)—in other words, as an important and distinguishing way of being in, and knowing the world. Beyond mitigating the gendered demands placed upon women, beyond the minimizing banter relating to women's cognitive skills reflected in the notion of "mommy brain", beyond the erasure of women's needs and interests, we must recognize the legitimacy of a mother worldview (O'Reilly, 2009) that shapes all aspects of the lives of women who parent children. Without doubt mothering informs academic and intellectual activities, yet "all that hard-won knowledge is [too often] excluded as if it were a betrayal of our commitment to the life of the mind, when the real cause for exclusion is persistent sexism, a dismissive belittlement of everything that smacks of the maternal" (Sanders, 2008, p. 248). The narratives of participants in this study revealed an interest in new opportunities for shaping education on behalf of those who, historically, have been denied representation in informing the institutional cultures of schools and universities—in this case, women and children.

## About the Author

In another life, Dr. Nancy-Jean Pément was a researcher and strategic planner with the Ministry of the Solicitor General and at the Department of Justice Canada. Her research on victim policy and legislation informed amendments to the Criminal Code, as well as programs and policies relating to the National Family Violence Initiative and the National Crime Prevention Council among others. She has taught in the Faculty of Social Sciences at the University of Ottawa—the world's largest bilingual French-English university—and at the Collège d'enseignement général et professionnel in Québec. In California, she worked at CSU Northridge on its reaccreditation and for the Vice-Provost. Currently, she teaches in the Masters of Higher Education Leadership program at CSUCI. Her research interests include the sociology of higher education, women's lives in the academy, doctoral study, the sociology of law, victimization and peacemaking. Nancy enjoys poetry and has been published in literary magazines in the US and Canada. She is Jackson's mom.

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