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Do they really need my voice? Activism and resistance of students with non-conforming identities in higher education

Abstract

University campuses should be places that allow for students to gain knowledge, experience knowledge, and discover how to relate it to themselves and what they are capable to do with it. However, the experience of higher education varies from student to student. The determining factor: their social identity. This paper discuess how students with non-conforming identities explore their leadership potential and channel it into activism, giving an insight on what kind of activism they engage in and the kind of resistance they face. From the lens of trans* (Jourian and Simmons, 2014), decolonial (Jimenez-Luque, 2021), and queer grassroots leadership (Pryor, 2021), the advocacy of those students is analyzed based on the existence of two systems of oppression: Genderism (Bilodeau, 2009 in Jourian, 2014) and Whiteness (Wiborg, 2021). As a genderqueer activist in higher education, I describe what activism looks like for students with non-conforming identities, providing an interesting take on the meaning of resistance, and daring to define it as leadership itself.

Keywords

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Introduction

Black, white. heterosexual, homosexual. Cisgender, transgender. Two, a binary.

Social identities are tricky. They are made of layers, but those layers are of different sizes and different weight. They shape the way people show up in the world and the way the world perceives them. Similarly, they shape how each individual perceives themselves. Non-conformity indicates that something or someone stands out compared to the masses, to the majority. In this paper I seek to explore precisely that relationship between non-conforming students and their leadership identity and how having a non-conforming trait can lead to a better understanding of one's non privileges and more willingness to speak out in the face of oppression. In this sense, I am particularly interested in analysing the leadership development of students that identify as gender non-conforming as there is more scope to understand why authentic leadership is at stake and what drives them to push the status quo to its limits. Based on my personal experience I have realised that even in a university such as Soka University that claims to be student centred, the voices that are heard are always those of students who fit in into the majority, who have and express characteristics that assimilate them and make them similar to everyone else. However, for those who do not fall into this privileged category, it is hard to be seen and listened to, even in a humanistic environment. It is essential to explore the relationship between social change and the leadership of those who do not fall into the standard of the majority. Thus, this paper asks what the role of resistance is and how youth with non-conforming identities can affect social change.

Furthermore, as I do not aim to make this a study of protest but of resilience, I plan to investigate what can support non-conforming youth to refine and develop their leadership

identity and find empowerment to contrast oppression and express themselves genuinely. To do so, I will bring in my experience as a recepient of Value Creating Education (VCE), a pedagogy theorized by Tsunesaburo Makiguchi in pre-War Japan (Gebert and Joffee, 2017), and applied at my alma mater, Soka University. As there is no strict modus operandi of VCE (Guajardo, 2023), the lived experience of students who attended classes by VCE practioners gives us a material from which to derive insightful knowledge on the applied versions of this pedagogy. I wil, thus, dwell into the praxis of VCE as operationalized by Professor Guajardo in the form of dialogic lerning (Guajardo, 2023).

I believe it is of utmost importance to have more research on leadership of non-conforming individuals as there is not much knowledge out there. Moreover, most of the research revolves around hardships, oppression and repression of people with not conforming identities, whether it is being an individual from an ethnic minority, a disabled individual, or someone from the LGBTQ+ community. Thus, focusing on the leadership identity of those individuals and its role in reaching social justice with a focus on how there can be true authentic leadership development would be a beneficial and refreshing addition to the present literature.

Focus of the paper

Through an analysis of different form of non-conforming identities, be that gender, race, religion, sexual orientation, and others, I intend to identify the reasons that impede those students from developing their own authentic leadership. Using articles on Trans* leadership, LGBTQ+ activism, and Black Queer leadership, this paper will describe the challenges that students with non-conforming identities face on campuses and what type of activism is developed to combat systems of oppression. Finally, it will analyze the resistance that is faced on a personal and

institutional level. In addition, emerging solutions, and suggestions that show that Trans* students and students in minority groups can genuinely grow to be authentic leaders will be examined and explained. Throughout the paper, I use the term "non-conforming identity" to describe all those individuals that do not fit into the categories that are assumed as normative, being in terms of sexuality, gender, ethnicity, physical condition, and other social identities. Queer is used to describe both gender and sexual orientation. Finally, Trans refers to Transgenderism while I will be using Trans* (Jourian, 2014) to discuss about genderqueer, non-binary and other gender non-conforming identities, stemming from the assumption that from a decolonial perspective gender is already outside of the binary, therefore Trans* (Tudor, 2021).

Rationale

The existing literature scarcely discusses leadership identity of individuals with non-conforming characteristics. Trans* students' leadership is nearly inexistent, as even among the trans community, students who do not fit into any binary are underrepresented and not expected to have developed a leadership identity that is worth studying. Thus, the research used for this paper aims to close the gaps between the image that most scholarship, if it had, associated with gender non-conforming students, and provide a different take on how their leadership development can affect their approach to activism and social change. Further arguing if pheraphs theirs activism for social change is in itself an expression of leadership.

Firstly, two major systems of oppression have surfaced: genderism (Bilodeau, 2009 in Jourian, 2014) and white supremacy or Whiteness (Wiborg, 2022). Genderism occurs when a system is imbued in dichotomic values, where gender is perceived as a binary of male and female, based on the sex assigned at birth (Bilodeau, 2009 in Jourian, 2014). Individuals that do

not fit either category are then marginalized and oppressed at the institutional level, as their existance is already outside of the prefixed categories. Similarly, people of color are systemically disadvantaged and discriminated by a society that works on white supremacy. According to Wiborg (2022), Whiteness is the implementation of white supremacy, namely racial domination of white individuals, within institutions and societies. It is defined as such because, albeit unseen by White individuals, it is very evident for people of color and permeates all their interpersonal and interinstitutional experiences.

The above-mentioned systems of oppression are the ones that will be taken into consideration in this paper and constitute the landscape in which the activism and leadership development of Trans* students and Black students and/or genderqueer black activism is analyzed.

Moreover, I will draw examples from literature that investigates the leadership development of Black students to draw a parallel between self-awareness of one's race and of one's gender, being race the oppressed element of White supremacist environment. In this regards, Hotchkins (2017) describes how being raised with a sense of "racialized" self-esteem, has impacted Black student leaders and how they have been using this awareness to affect social change in White contexts. Hotchkins explored the contemporary landscape of civil rights movements in higher education through the actions of Black student leaders and to understand how their comprehension of themselves had shaped their activism.

Davis (2021), instead, focuses on the other side of the same coin, investigating how White student leaders in higher education understand their racial identity and privilege. His research showed how from an initial colorblindness and "White fragility" the students matured

a deeper understanding of their identity. The goal was to link privilege, identity, and power and prove that the understanding of one's racial privilege is essential for White student leaders to dismantle their intrinsic Whiteness and get closer to become active leaders for social change.

On a similar note, Case et al. (2012) analyze privileges and how those condition school institutions to advantage those students who conform to the gender or racial normative. In this last case it would be by following costumes or ways of existing of the ethinc majority. Through a case study, they tested how cointentional education, as described in the "pedagogy of the oppressed" by Paulo Freire, and "critical liberatory feminist pedagogy", a way to analyze the student activism for social change, can be applied to explore the reasons for resistance among student body, faculty, and staff. The paper covers what forms of activism for social change were rejected meanwhile showing how the awareness of this resistance and the methodology used, empowered the activists. Finally, students and faculty learned how to influence the broader campus culture and in what ways they could extend their privilege to educate their own community. Pryor (2021) also focuses on campus activism from the perspective of Queer youth that engages in grassroots leadership to create or change policies that will ameliorate the lives of LGBTQ+ individuals. Their aim is to understand how their efforts are born out of a bottom-up (grassroots) leadership practice that is shaped by their identity. In the analysis, they also include the factors that keeps them motivated to continue their activism work despite outside resistance.

Moreover, one strong voice in the context of LGBTQ+ activism is Renn (2007), who draws a divide in scope between LGB youth and Queer or Genderqueer students. The research wanted to demonstrate the relation between LGB identities and leadership and furthermore show how youth who identify with the broad term queer extends to become activists. They argue that

LGB students were satisfied with the opportunity to have a "seat at the table", meanwhile queer students strived to "knock over the table", using their queer identities to question the whole heteropatriarchal White dominated status quo and overthrow it. This divide draws an historical line that begins to define the borders between sexual orientation and gender identity and helps opening the discussion about Trans* students and leadership identity.

Finally, considering the literature previously discussed, I believe is important to expand on the research and move beyond the leadership development and practice of students with non-conforming identities that grow to be activist to fight for their groups to be recognized and represented within their educational institution. As a White, Trans* student, I have experienced first-hand the lack of representation and the standards that a White heteropatriarchal and genderist society have set in my university. The feeling of non-fitting in any community have led me to believe that I did not belong in the advocacy of any cause. At the same time, I had grown to think that I did not have the right to claim and cultivate any leadership identity of my own.

The current literature, albeit limited, has been showing that Trans* students are unable to become authentic leaders (Jourian, 2014). Therefore, it is necessary to have literature out there preoccupied with how the authentic leadership of those students would look like and better support them in opening new paths for resistance and social transformation.

The quest of linking actvism to an expression of one's leadership in the case of those students who acknowledge and live all parts of their identities stems out of my experience of Value Creating Education (VCE). Gujardo (2023, p.51) desrcibes her practice of VCE as an *ethos*. As someone who has sat in her classes I could not agree more with this definition. If usually we refer to the application of a pedagogy as *method*, i.e. Montessori, an ethos is what the Greek

considered a way of living and that is exactly what I reckon of VCE. It comes alive through

dialogic learning, a praxis that engages students identities and lived realities with their

surroundings and theories. Guajardo (2023, p.54) describes "dialogic learning entails moving

from a state of conformity or invisibility to a state of vulnerability." She talks about the

necessity for students to homologate with their peers, to conceal their experience in tacit accord

with conformity. However, the moment we start bargaining what of ourselves is relevant or

important and what can be discussed in class, opting to show only what is seen as the norm, we

become invisible This application of VCE resonates with Fauzia and Amenta's (2024, p.55)

description of the power of representation asserting that "representations give us the measure of

what we can be". The work of dialogic learning that allows students to connect *head to heart*

(personal communications, 2023) and to explore how do their lived narratives, their identities,

and bodies relate to knowledge, guarantees their right to represent themselves, to self-determine.

Students enter the class and healing begins. I, thus, posit this understanding of VCE as the

necessary starting point for students in minority groups to operationalize their voice into

leadership potential.

Leadership concept

I am focusing the analysis on authentic leadership as from the research I found it to be the

most essential in leadership for social change and activist work as well as the most difficult to

achieve for Trans* students. Moving further, I will analyze decolonial and grassroots leadership

and the article will culminate with queering leadership, what follows the process of defeating

internal resistance.

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According to Northouse (2016, in Powlus 2017), authentic leaders have a sense of purpose, they know what they are doing, where they want to go, what to do to get there, have a set of values and manifest passion towards their goal. This knowledge comes from a deep sense of self, an awareness of their entire being, they understand who they are, hence they can be sure of where they are headed. However, Trans* students are unable to fulfill the basic postulate of authentic leadership, that is knowing themselves, or what Davis (2021) borrowing from Early and Fincher (2017), defines as "Consciousness-of-Self. Such axiom, revolves around the idea that the leader develops a sense of their identity and its complexity and how their presence as leaders is shown to the world. In this sense, it becomes hardly possible for students with a non-conforming identity to have the right to explore themselves fully and authentically, thus automatically failing, due to society's binarism, the requirements of authentic leadership (Jourian, 2014). On a parallel road travels decolonial leadership, a framework that envisions the overthrow of the dominant social order and representation and power for oppressed groups. Jimenez-Luque (2021) takes decolonial efforts into leadership practice, making them a modus operandi to put culture and identity into a colonial context.

Furthermore, towards a better understanding of activism within campuses, this paper also considers grassroots ledership as it presupposes a collective, equitable form of leadership that that can navigate and dismantle institutionalized forms of oppression (Kezar & Lester, 2011, in Pryor, 2021). Queering leadership occurs when grassroots leaders attempt to overturn genderist and heteronormative interpretations of the world, rendering their practice of grassroots leadership intentionally Queer.

Overall, this paper will try to understand Trans* leadership first through the lenses of imperfect authentic leadership and decolonial leadership, followed by a rediscovery of the self and culminating with a glimmer of hope for the realization of authentic leadership for Trans* students.

Findings

The image of a student leader and an LGBTQ+ activist emerge as intertwined from the articles. Most of the literature explores social justice issues and lack of civil rights or LGBTQ+ rights on universities campuses showing how students who identify as part of the LGBTQ+ community and/or students of color discovered themselves as activists after they have encountered discrimination and lack of rights. Furthermore, it shows how a lack of understanding of social identities and the illusion of inclusivity has been impeding students flourishing in universities.

Firstly, as students entered higher education and started experiencing discriminations on campuses, they commenced understanding how their social identity was being perceived in that educational setting. Education is, at times, perceived as perfect and impassible of mistakes as wisdom and knowledge are at its core. However, critical race theory and queer of color critic have shown that those environments are imbued with biases and assumptions that posit who belongs and who sets the standard (Ekpe and Roach, 2023). Thus, according to Pryor (2021), when students encounter those hinders, they are awakened to the role that their ethnicity, gender, or any other identity, plays and is perceived by the system. By realizing how they are prevented from certain opportunities, or disadvantaged in other circumstances, or yet again how they always feel estranged from a place where they should belong, some students begin reorienting

their leadership focus on activism for social change. As described by Renn (2007), this activism varies according to the degree by which they are discriminated based on how their social identities are perceived. They go on to explain that the advocacy of White male homosexual students tends to focus on how to "get a sit at the table", showing that the intersection of race and gender, both in the dominant category, with sexual orientation, a non-conforming identity, exposes them to a lesser degree of discrimination. Hence, they feel that being part of the discussion constitutes the pick of activism that will help them create positive changes. On the other hand, Trans*students were more prone to want to "knock the table over", being aware that the current structure would not have allowed for their non-conforming identity to be heard given the vast gap between them and those who dominate. Thus, those students were willing to take risks and overturn the system, believing that to be the key for social change.

Furthermore, activism is also constructed by collective traumatic experiences and how aware you are about the obstacle that you will encounter in society and education due to your social identity. Students of color who grow up in predominantly White environment are an example of how being racially socialized changes the approach you may have to racism during your school time (Hotchkins, 2017). If parents, grandparents and/or relatives share what it means to live and navigate through racial oppression the younger generation will grow up being conscious of their identity. If they focus on raising confident individual by passing down knowledge of their lived experiences as people of color, young people of color are more likely of carrying out that sentient throughout their education. Thus, once they experience marginalization or oppression in higher education, they already have the tools to understand what is happening to them and around them and channel it towards activism. In this sense, students of color operate racial resistance to oppose a system that treats students differently based on ethnicity. This

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resistance translates directly into their way of being agents of change, initiating an activism that is meant to strategically defeat an embedded system of oppression, Whiteness. As Pryor (2021) phrases it, Black Students' activism is easily recognizable as such because similarly to Queer students' activism it involves one of their identities thus being activists is equal to giving a part of oneself. Risks being here the keyword that distinguishes those student activists who care about a cause but are not directly harmed due to their identity versus those whose identity becomes the reason why there are pushed to activism in the first place.

Moreover, the other face of the coin when looking at students' activism in higher education is that quite often educators and education systems avoid addressing questions of socialized identities (Davis, 2021). Indeed, exactly because of how they identify students may avoid speaking about inclusivity, equality, and how power and its dynamics bring the two together on their campuses (Wiborg, 2021). What emerges from the study of students' advocacy on campus shows that social change, which is supposedly the results of this activism, is seen as neutral. Hence, in an educational setting not addressing and naming the oppression or taking social identities and experiences into account, advocacy becomes an abstract concept with no end or target and inclusivity is simply a word that is to be achieved through *niceness.* Wiborg points out that this praxis leads to complacency, ingenuity and to thinking that social change should be quiet, polite, ordered and non-disrupting. Thus, educators tend to focus on teaching the progress that has been made to advance rights, avoiding critical lenses and centering on the positive. They examine how this systemically uphold Whiteness, disregarding how this form of oppression concretely manifests itself for students of color. I would further argue that *niceness* in higher education uphold all forms of oppressive systems, vinifying the efforts of student activists and silencing those that do not conform.

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Resistance is double faced. It is the power of those students who are never represented, always silenced and ignored. It is also the weapon of those who are dominant in an educational setting and use *niceness* to preserve their status and resist change, masking this resistance with inclusivity and an aversion for breaking the harmony. Wiborg (2021) suggests that it is time to trouble this *niceness*, to be disruptive, to address and analyze social identities and point out power relations and systems of oppression. When education is structured in a way that refuses to see how students differ, those who are non-conforming suffer from being treated at best with equality, but a form of equality that hides further questioning of true inclusivity. Ekpe and Roach (2023) describe this as a guise of inclusivity, in other words an inclusivity that conceals its true form, and only superficially reflects its aim. What student activists then engage with is *truth telling*, a form of resistance that involves calling out biases and assumptions about people of color and other marginalized communities (hooks, 2005 in Wiborg, 2021). What student activist are blamed for is engaging in *truth telling*, as it appears as a disruptive and disrespectful form of resistance.

Resistance also manifests as lack of interest (Pryor, 2021). University administrations often dismiss new requests and policy changing because they believe there is no real need for change. Similarly, faculty and students who are conforming to the dominant group and have not yet experienced discrimination, seem to lack empathy and understanding of why certain students push for change, thus resisting those changes. In addition, many argue that current school policies are already inclusive enough as they advocate for treating everyone equally, therefore they see no need for creating more specific policies. This form of opposition often vilifies students' activism and denigrates their experiences of discrimination. The claim that "we treat everyone in the same way, we only see human being", may sound positive for those who do not

want to trouble *niceness;* however, it creates an illusion of inclusivity (Sawyer and Waite, 2021).

Saying that "we are all the same" equals for a White individual to state that "they see no color",

rendering instantly the sufferings of people of color insignificant and unheard.

Finally, Trans* leadership results as the most vanguard of all as it helps push forward a

vision of student leadership that is disruptive by definition as it breaks through the gender binary

(Jourian and Simmons, 2017). Activism, thus, becomes an obvious reaction to a system that does

not recognize and validates gender non-confirming students which, in a gendered campus, are

often faced with having to label themselves, being punished for breaking binary norms, visibly or

mischievously unprivileged compared to their cisgender peers, marginalized and denied access to

leadership positions (Jourian, 2014). This last point connects directly to those students' activism

in the sense that genderist campuses make leadership positions unavailable by default to those

students as they either require a female or a male student. Therefore, students with gender non-

conforming identities are prevented from covering those positions as they would not be validated

by their cisgender followers. At the same time, being locked out from institutionalized leadership

positions or covering them without being able to be authentic, pushes those students towards the

need for a refined and specific advocacy: Trans* activism to change policies within higher

education.

Auto-Ethnographic finding

Sara Ahmed (2012) in "On being included" discusses the praxis of *stranger making*. She

defines it as a politics that makes certain bodies accepted in certain places while the rest are

othered. If I look back at my experience as a student leader in higher education, I can clearly

recollect the moment *stranger making* occurred. False. *Stranger making* was already in place.

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Jourian (2014), argues that authenticity needs to be trans*formed, to be experienced by Trans* individuals. I agree. *Stranger making* happens throughout education and continues beyond it. I have covered different leadership positions in club activities and student led festivals and never felt like it was where I belonged, that I was allowed to be in charge. I now identify as an activist and an artivist and understand the barriers and othering that was in place and made me unable to fulfill my roles. Moreover, I commenced to focus on how my identity implied that I could never separate my actions from social justice and thus activism to achieve it. If my body is political (Ahmed, 2012), I decide to use it as form of resistance that can contribute to positive change.

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Implementation

My journey of self-determination began the moment I sat in front of my dialogue dyad (Guajardo, 2023) partner and decided to tell my truth. I never thought I could ever narrate myself neither that I would reflect on any part of my identity as I was raised to believe that *I* was the norm. Guajardo's (2023) praxis of dialogic learning helped me understand that reflection was the key in reclaiming my voice and power. Do they really need my voice? If I am the norm, what happens when I stop adhering to it? If I were not to reflect and bring out all parts of my identities, I would have been experiencing the illusion of a privilege that wounds me rather than benefits me. If I am nothing more than a normative White woman from the city center of Milan, am I truly speaking in the classroom?

The argument that question whether Trans* students can ever be authentic in their leadership praxis is one that seeks to answer this rhetoricity. Guajardo (2023) posits that "dialogic learning fosters a sense of praxis in students to embrace the possibility of being courageous and contributing to a greater good." The *possibility of being courageous* is a space of empowerment that points us back to Fauzia and Amenta's (2024, p.96) words on the role of activism. They argue that activism shall not only fight against hegemonic power, which I would associate to conformity as well, but also "imagine the worlds we will live in tomorrow". Their theory of a decolonial feminism from the South of Italy (Femminismo Terrone) becomes a project of "care and dissidence" (p.97). And this care and dissidence is the same that through Guajardo's (2023) praxis of Value Creating Education students experience by learning how to become vulnerable.

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In this paper I showed how different types of non-conformity have led to student activism on university campuses to fight for more rights within one's institution. If it were not for my lived experience of VCE, I would have never allowed myself to become vulnerable. However, the *vulnera* (wounds) inflicted by the conviction that I was voiceless as my majority was already speaking in my stead would have burnt forever. VCE in the capacity of dialogic learning renders students progressively comfortable with the truths that the world deems uncomfortable. Thus, linking back to that *possibility of being courageous* (Guajardo, 2023, p.57), students with non-conforming identities that put themselves on the line to advocate for more rights in their universities offer an alternative to the narrative of the subalternate. Where from the margins of the classrooms as well as of ourselves that have been taught to negotiate what parts of our identities can be talked out loud comes a voice that needs to be heard. And we need to be the first ones hearing it.

Conclusion

In this paper I have discussed how students with non-conforming identities practice activism for social change and the type of resistances that occur. My intent was to analyze how the voices of those who are excluded in higher education are heard through the praxis of social justice activism. I begin by examining the place that leadership of students who are not in dominant groups occurs and question the authenticity of this leadership based on how higher education systems understand and respond to social identities.

From the research it emerged that students with non-conforming identities develop their activism as a form of response to the discrimination they face on campus (Case et al., 2012). Therefore, activism is conjugated with the social identity that disadvantages them, be that

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LGBTQ+ rights violations or lack of inclusivity policies or Black students' discrimination on campuses (Hotchkins, 2017). Some students then move to advocate for equitable education systems that are supportive and inclusive of all identities, thus we can see Queer Black students' movements on campuses. Furthermore, activism comes out as disruptive, as truth telling, with student leaders calling out racist, genderist, and discriminatory behaviors in universities, from faculty, staff, and other peers (Wiborg, 2021). This type of activism is the one that sparks the most fervent resistance as it pushes the harmony and claims a deeper discussion on social change. As a result, those who are in the dominant group try to reply by dismissing the truth telling and arguing that social change should be a positive, tranquil, and clean endeavor, hence blocking actual change. Another form of resistance is due to a lack of interest in the matter, covered by broad definitions of inclusivity that pretend to be thoughtful and, more importantly, effective, when they, indeed, render those students even more invisible.

Finally, I discuss how students with non-conforming identities, in particular trans* students are unable to develop their authentic leadership. Jourian and Simmons (2017) suggest that this particular type of leadership is still extremely under studied and researched. Thus, there is a need for further research to understand how those students can become authentic leaders and how they have neglected for so long that it prevented them from developing their own leadership style. However, I would suggest that further research should be done to understand trans*leadership as the final form of leadership for trans* individuals, thus rather that examining what style they could adopt, trans* leadership could be a form of leadership for others to adopt, as it bends current understanding of society and provokes systems of oppression.

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A particularly extensive mention was given to the pedagogy of Value Creating Education in its application as dialogic learning (Guajardo, 2023). This praxis was assumed as the starting ground from which the understanding of activism and resistance as expression of leadership could take place. Furthermore, it reinforced the necessity of becoming aware of one's social identities and complexities in order to reappropriate one's voice.

Paulo Freire (1970, p.21) stated that the humanistic task of the oppressed was to liberate themselves and the oppressors. Trans* leadership by being a form of resistance could allow students with any non-conforming identity to reclaim their power and operate their activism to remove the labels from themselves and from the oppressors.

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