Keeping Up with Changing Times: Student Leaders, Resilience, Fragility and Professional Development

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Abstract

The Fallist movements of 2015/16 brought about rapid change to the South African higher education space, which required student leaders to reconsider their roles as agents of change and transformation. Student leaders contribute as stakeholders of and decision-makers in student governance, and some find themselves in a context where their working and living spaces become increasingly entangled. This is a particularly challenging context, which requires them to conflate their personal and "professional" lives. In this article, we focus on the challenges student leaders face as peer educators in both on- and off-campus residences of the University of the Free State (UFS), Bloemfontein, South Africa. The resilience and vulnerability of student leaders, and how these play out in their experiences at UFS, will be highlighted. The importance of self-reflection, resilience and fragility in professional development will be explored. Guided by the theoretical underpinnings of pedagogy as transformative and humanizing, and a multiple-method-approach that included survey data as well as arts-based methods, we engaged with student leader experiences in order to understand how they negotiated challenges in a space of tranformation and constant change. We found arts-based research to complement and support the more conventional data gathering process. Our article thus highlights how methodological inventiveness can address new and different questions that arise in our rapidly changing pedagogical space. Through this, we highlight the complex micro-social experiences of student leaders who live in spaces of transformation. Student leaders are in a unique position as people who live and work in the student community, and their role as peer educators remains largely unexplored. In this article, we hope to contribute to a body of knowledge that could foreground student leadership in relation to transformed pedagogy.

Keywords

student leadership, resilience, methodological inventiveness, transformation, leadership training

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Introduction

During a time of crisis, leadership is tested, and leaders can either rise to meet the challenge or fail to live up to the expectations of their role. Working at the University of the Free State (UFS), South Africa, and specifically within the division of Student Affairs, we have witnessed the toll that crises such as the Fallist movements and COVID-19 pandemic have taken on student leaders.

The 2015 #RhodesMustFall movement, culminating in the #FeesMustFall and #PatriarchyMustFall movements and together known as the #Fallist movements, posed new challenges to higher education transformation. The demands of the students centred around "free education" and the "decolonization of knowledge" (Hendricks, 2018, p. 17).[1] On a global scale and more recently, as the COVID-19 pandemic spread from country to country, national lockdowns and work from home became the new norms. Education swiftly moved from physical classroom spaces to virtual and digital platforms. Unexpectedly, teachers around the world were teaching from their living rooms. A sudden move out of the traditional workplace setting into personal space undoubtedly influences the way we think about professional identity. For student leaders, it was no different – overnight, they found themselves having to perform leadership roles in the virtual space. The shift to online learning and interaction during the COVID-19 pandemic further exposed some of the fault lines and inequalities in the South African education landscape (Schreiber et al., 2020).

The Fallist movements and COVID-19 pandemic have changed the South African higher education landscape dramatically. Given this, the role of a student leader has been redefined by intense challenges and sudden changes. In the context of this article, we consider the student leadership role to be a semi-professional. We understand the semi-professional as being someone who is trained for a role and acts as a mediator between organisational goals and stakeholders. In this case the organisation is the university and students are the clients. According to Whitty (2006) the nature of professionalism is traditionally tied to occupations like law and medicine with teaching and educator's being viewed as semi-professional. However, in contemporary sociology – and specifically those sociologists working from a feminist perspective – has taken a critical view of what professionalism entails. For example, Davies (1995, 1996) sees traditional notions of professionalism as "characterised by elitism, paternalism, authoritarianism, highly exclusive knowledge, control and detachment" (Whitty 2006, p. 3). Taking a more collaborative and democratic view on professional work, and how organisations like universities function, it could be argued that student leadership is semi-professional work as these leaders mediate the university's organisational goals in relation to the student needs of the cohort they serve. Although student leaders do not belong to a professional body or have a formal qualification for this role, they do receive training for

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1   Decoloniality, in this context, can be read as the recognition of "the incomplete nature of political decolonization and in particular the displacement of local knowledge and hierarchy, and privileging of certain knowledge systems" (Hendricks, 2018, p. 10). See Nyamnjoh (2016) for more in this regard.

their role and have significant responsibilities to various stakeholders within the higher education sector which is why we consider them as semi-professionals.

In this article, we use private/public and personal/professional entanglements as a backdrop, to highlight the importance of pedagogy as transformative, holistic and humanizing. We furthermore explore some of the challenges student leaders faced as they moved beyond their leadership development to a place where they experienced tension between the professional-personal binary. Student leaders in on-campus residences are expected to perform their roles and duties in the same spaces that they live, thus creating this tension between their working and living environments, where the private and the public spheres of their lives merge. We view student leaders as peer educators with responsibilities in semi-professional roles and will consequently explore the importance of self-reflection, resilience and vulnerability in their student leadership development roles and professional development.

The question we explore in this article is: How can we better prepare our student leaders to lead during times of rapid change and crisis? Our aim was thus twofold. First, we explored the experiences of student leaders in 2019 in order to acquire an understanding of the context they worked and lived in at the time. We also looked at how these experiences could be used to inform peer-educator role-training that would be suitable to respond to their experiences. Student leaders are uniquely positioned as they simultaneously work and live among the student community. Their roles as educators deserve more exploration. In this article, we hope to contribute to a body of knowledge that could foreground student leadership in relation to transformed pedagogy.

Exploring the Student Leadership Experience: 2018-2019

After a number of student protests on the UFS campus, it became clear that students were unhappy and frustrated with university management and the student leaders were caught in the middle of the engagements and communication. We noticed that the challenges of the role took a toll on some student leaders, whereas others were able to meet the demands of their professional, academic and personal obligations. Therefore, we decided to initiate a project to explore the student leader experiences in order to improve training and support that could develop more resilient student leaders.

We collaborated on this project from different angles. Pulane is the head of residence life, which includes residence programmes and the training of student leaders. Liezl is a former residence head and researcher in the higher educational space, with a specific focus on transformation. Marguerite is a former residence head and also a lecturer in education, with an interest in educator experience and professional development. We came together on this project because of shared experiences and a shared commitment to transformation of the higher education space.

It is understood that the transformation of higher education in South Africa is complex because it is part of the broader process of political and socio-economic transition to democracy that the country and its people have been undergoing, officially, since the first democratic elections in 1994. Therefore, the role of student leadership at

an institution in the process of transformation may not be as simple as expected (Sebola, 2019). Student leadership is increasingly becoming a priority of higher education institutions, and programmes that claim to develop leadership capabilities in students are proliferating across university campuses worldwide (Skalicky et al., 2020).

Programmes such as student leadership development provide curricular experiences where learning outcomes help to organise resources and hold students responsible for their learning by helping them make sense of their experiences while they serve on their roles in an intentional way. Students must be provided with regular opportunities to succeed and struggle in various contexts because at some point in their lives, they might need to apply the intended behaviour, knowledge or attitude outcomes after the experience (Guthrie & Jenkins, 2018).

To investigate the issues at hand, we were guided by the following research question:

> How can we better prepare our student leaders to lead during times of rapid change and crisis?

From that, we formulated the following four subsidiary questions:
1. What are the complex personal–professional experiences of student leaders?
2. How can we use different methodologies to understand student experiences?
3. How do we support student leaders in the context of transformation?
4. How can our professional development programmes inform and support the resilience of our student leaders?

Theoretical Underpinnings: Humanizing and Transformative Pedagogy

This article's theoretical underpinnings align with the UFS's Integrated Transformation Plan (ITP), in which transformed pedagogies are seen as one of the goals for teaching and learning at the UFS. Transformed pedagogy is understood as a humanistic (Jama, 2017) or humanizing (Zembylas, 2018) pedagogy which can be described as a form of critical pedagogy (Freire, 2003).

Drawing on Freire's critical pedagogy, Salazar (2013) define humanization as a "process of becoming more fully human as social, historical, thinking, communicating, transformative, creative persons who participate in and with the world" (Salazar, 2013, p. 126). More than a process, however, humanization is "the practice of freedom" (Salazar, 2013, p. 126) through which subjugated people become conscious of oppression, rid themselves of limiting and oppressive worldviews imposed by the oppressor, reimagine their world and work towards self-actualization. Hence Freire wrote, "[t]o transform the world is to humanize it" (Freire, 2003, p. 70). Freire's notion of humanization integrally links with his definition of *pedagogy*, defined as an educational practice that should actively work towards the transformation of oppressive social conditions. A transformative and humanizing education is therefore more than the teaching and learning of technical skills in the classroom, but rather encompasses the holistic development of a student in every sense of his/her/their existence. Such a practice of transformative education should be contextual, whilst using the local

knowledge of the student to guide pedagogical outcomes (Salazar, 2013, pp. 126-127, 129; Zembylas, 2007).

With this in mind, a humanizing approach to pedagogy means that educators "are responsible for creating the conditions suitable to promoting a more fully human world through their pedagogical practices" (Zembylas, 2018, p. 5). During a time of social change, the educator is challenged to develop cognitive and emotional resilience and develop strategies to productively engage with change and transformation. Therefore, the educator's professional development and resilience are central to a transformative practice.

We consider a transformed pedagogy as relational encounters that make opportunities for growth possible (Zembylas, 2007). As such, pedagogy is extended beyond the classroom space into the support services offered by the university. This implies that "educators" can be understood to encompass all who interact with students in an educational setting, therefore including student leaders. It also means that learning is seen as that which happens both inside and outside the classroom. In other words, the co-curricular project is vital for the holistic development of students and the professional grounding of staff and students.

Methodological Approaches

We used different sources to gather qualitative and quantitative data that would inform our interpretation and help us in making suggestions for the preparation of peer educators to lead in times of crisis, social change and transformation. A survey was used to gather general feedback on student leaders' experiences in leadership. From the survey respondents, a smaller sample participated in a focus group discussion to delve deeper into their experiences. This was followed up with an arts-based workshop, where we engaged in a creative manner with those experiences. Both the survey and the arts-based workshop helped us to gauge the student leaders' experiences to understand how they negotiated challenges in a space of transformation.

Outgoing chairpersons and members of the residence committees (RCs) at the UFS were invited to participate in this research project. These student leaders were asked to complete a Yearly Residence Student Leadership Survey. We wanted to determine what skills they had gained and what support they had received during their leadership term. Some of the students who had completed the survey were then invited to participate in focus group discussions. Following the focus groups, we also invited the participants to further participate in an arts-based workshop. We used arts-based methods of enquiry (drawing and a puppet show) and arts-based forms of interpretation (poetry) to express some of our learnings from engagement with the participating student leaders in the course of a one-day workshop. For this research project, we obtained ethical clearance from the University of the Free State (UFS-HSD2018/1280). All the participants signed informed consent letters before participation and could withdraw from participation at any point during the project.

Such a multi-layered research approach affords different methods of data gathering. For this project we used survey and qualitative data generated during focus groups and arts-based workshops. The survey helped us to gather quantitative information that was followed up by a focus group discussion. Approximately 100 surveys were distributed electronically amongst outgoing student leaders. All the outgoing student leaders from 30 residences were invited to participate; 23 on-campus and 7 day-residences. Of those invited 70 student leaders responded to the survey. A sample of 40 accepted the invitation to participate in a focus group session which was two hours long. The survey used closed-ended questions, which focused on the knowledge required for the role of student leadership, the processes for attaining student leadership positions and knowledge of elections. It highlighted the effectiveness of the training they had received and its impact on their experiences.

Findings

Survey and focus group discussion

The first part of the survey aimed to understand if the participating student leaders were aware of the procedures to become an RC member. The results showed that during their candidacy the participants were well informed about the election process and their duties before entering into residence leadership (Figure 1).
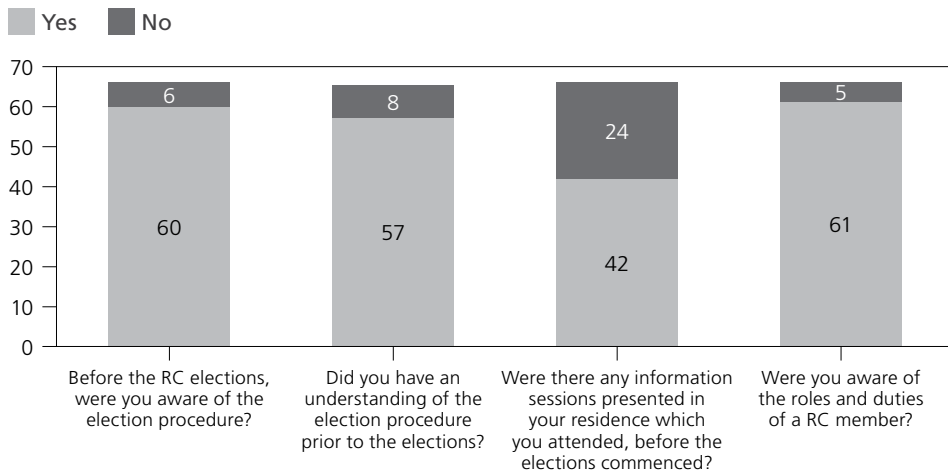

Figure 1: Election procedure

Once students are elected as student leaders, they undergo several training programmes. Some programmes are arranged by the student leadership development office as generic leadership training, some are arranged specifically for portfolio purposes by the office

of residence life along with the residence heads, who serve as staff members within the residence environment.

Of the 66 respondents who answered the question regarding the election procedure, 60 chose 'Yes', agreeing that they were aware of the election procedure prior to the voting process and only 6 responded with 'No' (Figure 1). Fifty-seven (57) respondents chose 'Yes' to indicate that they had understood the election procedure prior to the elections and 8 chose 'No'. Usually, there is an information session with residences before the election. Forty-two (42) respondents chose 'Yes' to indicate that they had attended the said session, whereas 24 indicated 'No'. Lastly, 61 of the respondents chose 'Yes' to indicate that they were aware of the roles and duties of an RC member and only 5 indicated 'No', which means the majority of the respondents were fully aware of the RC processes and roles.

It is clear from the responses that the training with residence heads provided value in developing the respondents' capacities for their leadership roles, with the majority agreeing that the training had prepared them (Figure 2a). With regard to this question, 36% of respondents agreed, 29% were neutral and 35% disagreed. However, some respondents indicated that improvements could have been made that would have assisted them to respond better to many of the experiences and to become more resilient. With regards to general training (Figure 2b), 40% of respondents indicated that the training had equipped them optimally for their terms, 33% felt neutral about this and 27% disagreed.
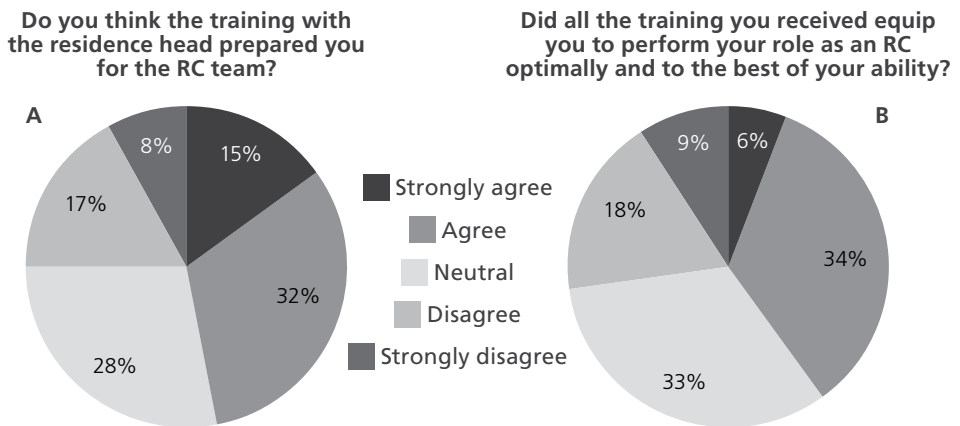

Figure 2: Preparedness

Respondents also indicated whether the overall training had been of value, prepared them and improved their performance (Figure 3).

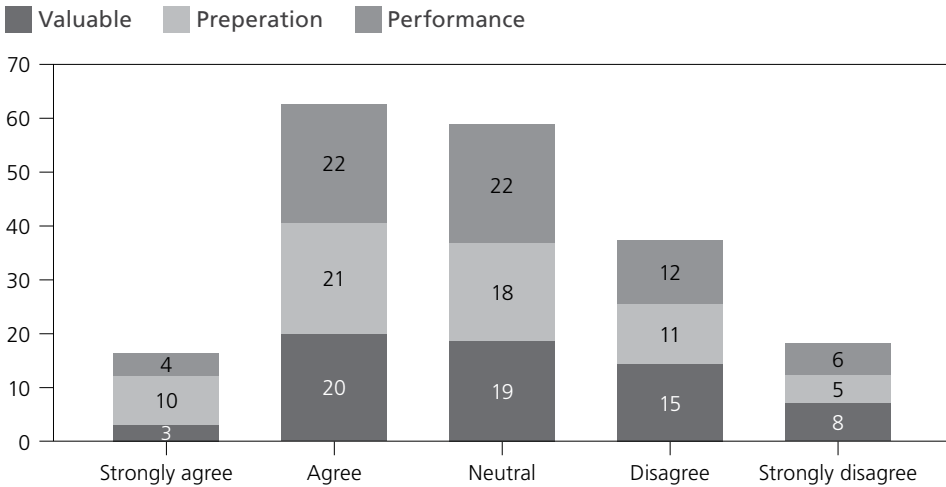**Overall training response**

Figure 3: Overall training response

Regarding whether the training had been valuable, 23 respondents indicated that it was valuable, 19 felt neutral about this and 23 felt that the overall training was not valuable. Regarding whether the training had prepared them, 31 respondents felt that the training had prepared them for their roles, 18 felt neutral about this, whereas 16 felt the training had not prepared them for their roles. Lastly, 26 respondents agreed that the overall training had contributed to their performance as RC members, 22 felt neutral about this and 18 felt that the training had not contributed to their performance.

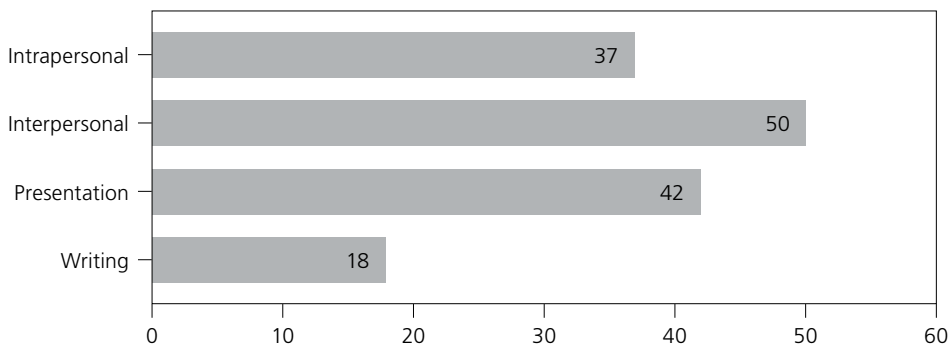**Skills acquired during RC term**

Figure 4: Skills acquired

Almost all respondents indicated that they had received support during their leadership term (Figure 5).
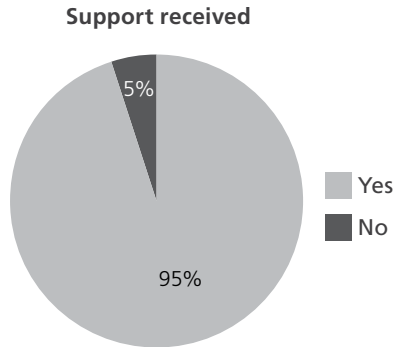
Support received

Figure 5: Support for student leaders

When asked where their support had come from, a few sources were highlighted by respondents as their source/s of support. These include (from highest to lowest) friends, residence head, RC team members, RC from another residence and parents (Figure 6).
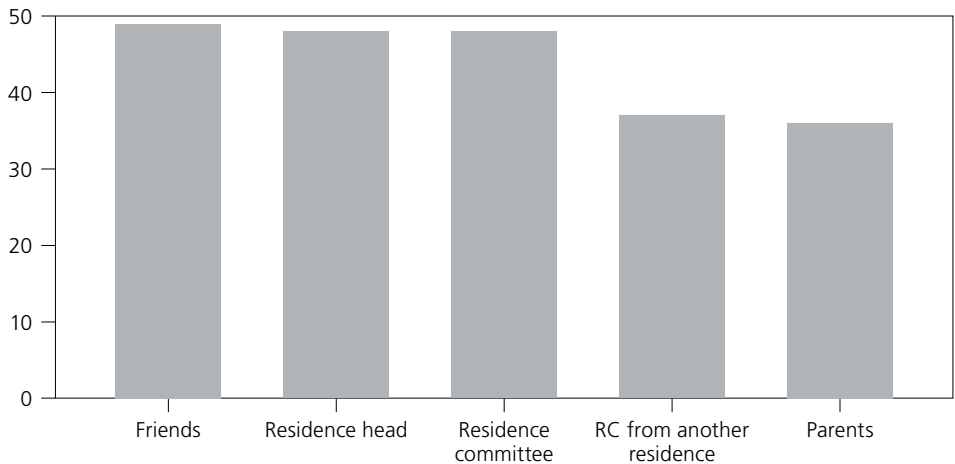
Top 5 support sources

Figure 6: Main support sources

Although the above were the main sources of support that had assisted the respondents in being resilient student leaders, other sources were also mentioned. These included lecturers, administrators, senior students and university management. The results on support highlight the complexity of the experiences of residence student leaders, as these are student leaders that have to work and lead in an environment in which they also live and stay. Thus, with the support of the sources mentioned, student leaders can overcome the challenges in their environment.

The survey was followed up with a focus group discussion. Engagements during the focus group elicited introspection by participants on their experiences as student leaders in residences. Participants could reflect on themselves on a personal level, as student leaders, and on their experiences with the university management, sharing both positive and negative experiences. They expressed their appreciation of the monetary stipend they had received and the skills they had gained, amongst other benefits. In addition to what they highlighted on the survey, they added the following skills gained during their time as student leaders: conflict resolution, time-management and dealing with diversity. They also shared what they did not like, including the lack of support from their fellow students or university authorities.

When asked about what could be improved, especially by student affairs and staff responsible for student leadership, participants highlighted mostly support and instruction or practical advice on how they should cope with multiple roles, and issues of communication and transparency. Training was also emphasised, more specifically that training should not only occur at the beginning of the term, but that some developmental and support programmes should also be initiated in the middle of term as well. The word cloud below represents the issues in need improvement as highlighted by participants (Figure 7).

If there was one thing you would improve, what would it be?

Figure 7: Areas of improvement word cloud

Thus, students highlighted that support, training, accountability, transparency, and communication were most valued for the fulfilment of their roles. The critical reflections that emerged from the focus group discussion support the findings from the survey data. In the next section we proceed to juxtapose the arts-based workshop findings with the findings from the survey and focus group discussion.

Interpretation of the arts–based workshop

The workshop was attended by the group of 40 student leaders that also participated in the focus group discussions, and lasted for 2 hours. One of the activities in the arts–based workshop was to create a river of experience (inspired by the river of life exercise). Below, some images of what the participants created, as well as our interpretations thereof are provided. Most participants depicted their term as a linear progression, with a start and a finish. Only one student (Figure 8) depicted it as a cycle.
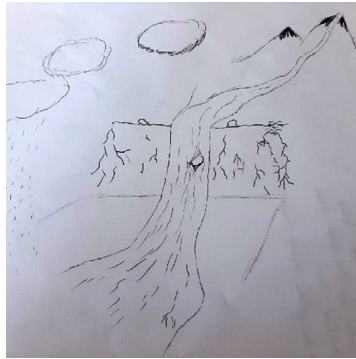

Figure 8: Leadership is a cycle

It was interesting to see that participants perceived their growth as linear. A general theme that emerged from almost all the drawings was a type of "blockage" (Figure 9), "rock" or dangerous obstacle (Figure 9) at the start which participants felt they had to overcome in order to grow.
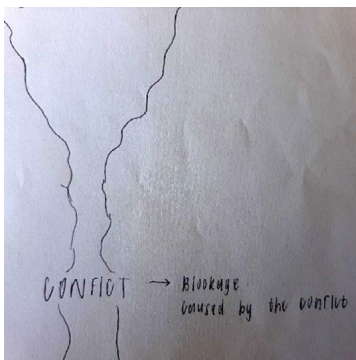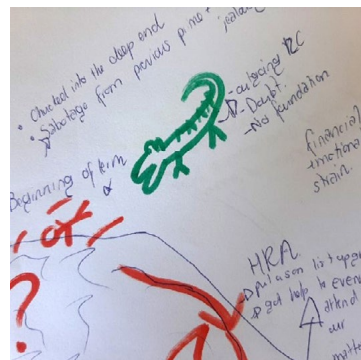

Figure 9: Conflict

Figure 10: Danger

Overall, participants tended to depict their term as "having a happy ending". Some of them illustrated the river as branching out into new possiblities. In other words, the leadership experience could be extended into new opportunities. One of the participants

wrote the following on their rivier of experience: "I learnt in that role that not everyone thinks like me or has the same capabilities […] [I] learnt to understand others that are not like me with the help of those leading me and leading with me." Furthermore, many participants showed how leadership had exposed them to different *others* (where "other" can be defined as the racialised, religious, differently abled or gendered other) and how this was perceived as something positive. Participants showed how obstacles had helped them learn and grow and also how they had sometimes needed support (from residence heads) to overcome (represented by a bridge) difficult situations (Figure 11). It was interesting to see how their river was depicted with fewer obstacles towards the end, and perhaps this is an indication that student leaders had developed the necessary skills to handle conflict, etc., towards the end of their leadership term. Some also showed how becoming a leader was similar to being thrown into a river and how you had to either "sink or swim" (Figure 12).
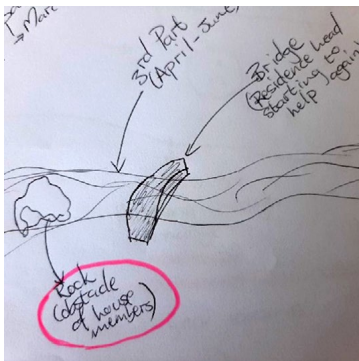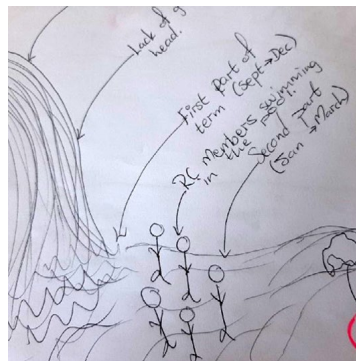

Figure 11: An overcoming bridge   **Figure 12: The deep end**

In most cases, the participants depicted some form of resilience in their drawing to show that the leadership experience had shaped them to become stronger. For example, one participant wrote down the words "pressure is privilege".

From the individual river of experience exercise, we then moved to collaborative creation and performance through a puppet show. Participants were divided into smaller groups and given the task of making puppets (Figure 13) and using their puppets to create a performance or skit of a specific significant incident during their terms as leaders.

What emerged during the puppet show was very different from the river of experience exercise. We noticed that the collaborative and performative form of expression allowed the participants to be far more critical of the institution and their own roles as student leaders. Where the river of experience exercise allowed the participants to reflect on their leadership terms, it seemed that they had the desire to show a logical progression of overcoming challenges, growing and changing.

During the puppet show, some of the performances got intense and one participant became emotional as she recalled how difficult being a leader had been for her. Others

showed how RC members became isolated from their peers. One group expressed the experience as follows: "Leadership makes you more vulnerable. Everyone is watching and judging […] She used to be happy go lucky, but not anymore […]". Furthermore, the puppet show performance seemed to be a space for participants to vent their frustration at not having been supported enough: they felt they were "thrown into the deep end". Another group also showed the reality of sexual harassment within the student leadership structures and how female leaders face this added challenge. From the performances, participants expressed their desire to be respected and heard. They also showed a desire for immediate answers, and an impatience with having to wait for things to happen. Given their youth, this impatience is to be expected, yet it was interesting to see that, despite their roles, they showed little knowledge of the bureaucratic and operational processes of the university, or the different stakeholders and governance structures within the institution. To them, everyone and anything that is not a student was reducible to the all-encompassing "management". This response seems almost childlike, yet is also a strong indication that if students are not substantively educated about and invited into the governance structures of the university, they feel disempowered and frustrated on the outside of the formal structures of decision-making. What we saw was an interesting tension between the desire for freedom (just leave us alone), on the one hand, and guidance (show us what to do), on the other.

Figure 13: The puppets

The river of experience exercise showed participants' experiences as more harmonious ("happy ending"), whereas the puppet show was more critical and showed how some of the problems they faced had remained unresolved. Thus, there was a difference between what they reported on the individual level and what they reported on the collective level. This difference of experience could also suggest that on the individual level, they experienced the changes as positive, even if the problems had remained unresolved (as

expressed collectively). From the workshop with the participating student leaders, it became clear they had faced a variety of problems they could not solve. The workshop however revealed that the students' focus shifted from trying to solve problems, to developing the resilience to face problems confidently.

In keeping with the arts-based method of enquiry, poetry was utilised as an interpretive response to the data we generated through the river of experience exercise and puppet show. In this project poetry was used as a form of professional learning (Pithouse-Morgan et al., 2019). "Poetry is increasingly recognized as a means of representing the distinctiveness, complexity and plurality of the voices of research participants and researcher in qualitative studies," according to Pillay et al. (2017, p. 262). Below, we offer a poetic response to express our interpretation of what emerged from the arts-based workshop with participants. The poem was created from selected phrases from the river of experience exercise that students created during the workshop. By bringing the phrases from individual student leaders together in this poem, a portrayal of the affective experiences of student leadership in transformative times, is created. The voices of the student leaders become one voice, alluding to a "student leader subjectivity" that has to balance a private and public, personal and professional life, emotional and cognitive life. In other words, a holistic life:

My life is not a river
it is a tree
I have roots
And rhizomes flow from me
Like a river
I hope for a happy ending
I wanted to get my vision across
I wanted to benefit others
Through major changes
But there were obstacles in my way
I look back and see I was not realistic
I had to learn that not everyone thinks like me
Transform my mindset
Learn to understand others
Into the unknown,
doubtful,
I did not find enough support
I felt useless
Until I asked for help
And kept on asking
Meeting new individuals
being able to interact with different cultures, ethnic groups and races
I had to be guided to guide others

When I started this journey – everything made sense
and I knew what I was gonna do
What kept you going – kept on smiling ☺
through all the bullshit
… I had to be fragile to become resilient

Conclusion and Way Forward

In this article, we aimed to answer four research questions. Our first question was: What are the complex personal-professional experiences of student leaders? From our findings, it is evident that for some students, the student leadership position is their first professional experience. Although student leaders are almost always initially enthusiastic about their terms as leaders, they often become overwhelmed by the demands of their positions. These demands include time-management, professional conduct, balancing work and studies, leading with integrity, and coping with challenging situations and conflict. The student leaders living in on-campus residences and serving on RCs also need to situate themselves differently in their living and now working environment. Establishing new boundaries and executing their new authority as residence leaders often put an emotional and psychological strain on these leaders. The convergence of the professional and personal has been accentuated by crises, such as the protests during #FeesMustFall and the challenges posed by COVID-19. As such, in preparing student leaders for their roles and supporting them during their terms, we need to pay attention to professional development and how to help them navigate the personal-professional demands of the roles.

The second question we asked was: How can we use different methodologies to understand student experiences? Both methods used (arts-based and survey) can be of immense value to understand these complex student experiences. From our research, it became evident that arts-based research methodologies enable students to express a wide array of emotions, frustrations, insecurities and fears. The affective dimension of their experiences was "extracted" through arts-based methods, as non-verbal, demonstrative methods enabled them to explore unresolved emotional experiences. Consequently, the holistic experiences of students as fully human could be expressed and captured with the help of arts-based methods. These visual and performative methods provided students with the opportunity to "become conscious of their presence in the world" (Salazar, 2013, p. 126), and to be fully present as emotional, cognitive and spiritual beings. In doing this they can participate in self-reflexive professional development in their peer-educator roles. In addition, surveys make it possible to connect the relationships between different items. Analysing the responses creates opportunity to identify the significance of their responses.

Our third question was: How do we support student leaders in the context of transformation? From the student feedback, we have learned how important it is for students to feel included in university structures and decision-making. The support of residence heads and other staff members is crucial to student leader success, but can only

be constructive if there is a strong relationship of trust and a shared vision. The lived experiences of staff are extremely valuable as a source of support for and guidance to the student leaders working in a transformative space. Seeing that the transformative space is always in flux, the staff members need to be able to cope with extreme instability and insecurity. The resilience of staff members from all the spheres of the university, becomes the biggest source of support for students in a time of rapid social change. The intricate relationship between student leaders and their mentors should hence be considered in the training and support provided. If we approach organisations as multifaceted and professional development as a multi-stakeholder collaboration then experiential learning is a huge part of this process, and creative reflection could be one way to help engage with learning and development.

The last question was: How can our professional development programmes inform and support the resilience of our student leaders? Guiding students on how to engage productively with uncertainty might be the best way to develop resilience. Open channels of communication and strong relationships of trust are also important between mentors and student leaders. Acting as soundboards for students, guiding them towards resilience, is one way of developing resilience. Being able to listen, and teaching students the value of true and active listening, is also valuable. As part of student leadership development and professional development, a training pack that includes areas of resilience for student leaders, advice on time- and crisis-management needs to be structured intentionally to respond to and support student leaders in higher education.

This article thus highlights how methodological inventiveness can address new and different questions that arise in our rapidly changing space. Similarly, by using humanizing and transformative pedagogy as a framework, we highlighted the need for all university staff and students to embrace their full humanity and develop as semi-professionals and peer-educators. Such an approach can contribute towards stronger professional relationships, interpersonal support and resilience for staff and students, which are imperative in times of rapid social change and transformation.

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