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Rethinking Paulo Freire's Critical Pedagogy: Challenges and Relevance in South Africa's TVET Sector

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Abstract

Freire's vision of education as a practice of freedom inspires transformation. However, the structural, pedagogical, and socio-economic realities of South Africa's Technical Vocational Education and Training (TVET) sector, compounded by discipline-driven academic biases, pose challenges to its practical application. This study employs a qualitative participatory action research approach to critically examine these challenges and explore the relevance of Freirean pedagogy in TVET. Fifteen National Certificate Vocational graduates from Gqeberha participated in learning cycle group meetings with a participatory visual research method (photographs), allowing for a rich engagement with their lived experiences. Thematic analysis, informed by Freirean critical pedagogy, was used to interpret data, centring on key themes such as critical consciousness, systemic oppression, and student agency. Findings highlight tensions between TVET's dual mandate—to equip students for immediate employability while addressing socio-political disparities—and the feasibility of Freirean praxis in a system driven by economic imperatives. Despite these challenges, student-led reflections demonstrated the potential for incremental transformation through dialogical learning. This article advocates for a rethinking of Freirean pedagogy in TVET, calling for curriculum, policy, and pedagogical reforms that balance socio-economic constraints with the goal of fostering critical and emancipatory education.

Keywords: Paulo Freire, critical pedagogy, technical and vocational education and training, national certificate (vocational)

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Introduction

Paulo Freire's (1970, 1974) critical pedagogy has long been celebrated as a transformative framework for education, offering a vision of learning as a practice of freedom through dialogue, critical reflection, and collective action. In rejecting the "banking model" of education, which treats students as passive recipients of knowledge, Freire advocated for a humanising pedagogy that positions students as co-creators of knowledge and active agents of change (Sathorar et al., 2023). In South Africa's Technical and Vocational Education and Training (TVET) sector, this vision holds promise for addressing deeply entrenched systemic inequities, including the socio-economic challenges students face and the instrumentalist orientation of education policies (Majola et al., 2024).

Structural barriers, such as the rigid design of the National Certificate Vocational NC(V) curriculum and governance constraints, limit opportunities for critical dialogue and participatory learning. Pedagogically, many educators lack the preparation and institutional support to adopt humanising practices, thus perpetuating hierarchical teacher-student relationships (Vimbelo & Bayaga, 2023, 2024). Socio-economic realities further complicate the adoption of Freire's ideals because poverty and inequality shape students' priorities—many of whom focus on employability—and the capacity of institutions to foster transformative practices (Majola et al., 2024).

This article critically engages with these tensions, drawing on findings from a doctoral study (Majola, 2024) to interrogate the gap between Freire's theoretical ideals and the realities of South Africa's TVET sector. It motivates for the rethinking of Freirean principles in a context often dominated by instrumentalist priorities, where education is primarily viewed as a pathway to immediate employment rather than as a means of fostering critical consciousness and social transformation. Additionally, it reflects on Freire's assumption that students are inherently ready and willing to engage in conscientisation, exploring how the lived realities of South African TVET students may complicate this assumption.

While acknowledging these tensions, the article also highlights promising practices within the sector. Student-led initiatives and moments of dialogical engagement demonstrate the potential for Freirean praxis to emerge— even in constrained environments. These instances serve as a reminder of the resilience and agency of students who navigate systemic barriers in pursuit of transformative education. This article contributes to ongoing debates on rethinking critical pedagogy in diverse and inequitable educational contexts by engaging critically with Freire's pedagogy. It proposes a pragmatic rethinking of Freire's principles, rooted in the socio-economic realities of South Africa, and advocates for targeted reforms to curriculum, pedagogy, and policy. The article positions TVET as a contested but promising site for meaningful educational transformation, requiring critical engagement and creative adaptation of Freirean ideas.

The article is structured into six sections. Theoretical Framework: Freirean Pedagogy in TVET examines Freire's critical pedagogy and its relevance to South African TVET. Methodological Approach outlines the research design and methods used. Barriers to Freirean Praxis in South African TVET explores the structural, pedagogical, socio-economic, and education resource challenges that hinder the application of Freirean principles. Lessons from Practice: Insights from South Africa's TVET Sector highlight Freirean praxis, showcasing its potential within systemic constraints. Towards Overcoming the Hindrances:

Recommendations for Policy and Practice proposes reforms in curriculum, educator training, and socio-economic support. The Conclusion reflects on these findings, advocating for a pragmatic rethinking of Freirean principles to address the realities of South Africa's TVET landscape.

Theoretical Framework: Freirean Pedagogy in TVET

The LSA, in Japan, has been the main source of professional development for both pre-service and in-service teachers (Lewis, 2000). Japan strongly promotes science and technology in high school science education (Ministry of Education, 2016). The 2015 Trends in International Mathematics and Science Study survey revealed that although Japanese learners scored high in science (systematic knowledge), their science literacy (scientific concepts and processes) was low (Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science, and Technology, 2016). Thus, a measure taken in Japanese education was to provide Japanese teachers with the opportunity through LSA to observe new pedagogical methods, assess the teaching of their colleagues, and provide constructive feedback to encourage reflective practice and improvement. The LSA has enhanced teacher practice and knowledge in North America (Rock & Wilson, 2005), as well as teacher knowledge, teaching materials, and instruction in mathematics education (Lewis et al., 2009). The same is true for the growth of the capacity of American teachers to enhance mathematics instruction by creating high-quality instructional practices that are shared (Gibbons et al., 2017). The quality of education in Iran has been impacted by the integration of the Japanese LSA (Sarkar Arani, 2015).

Paulo Freire's critical pedagogy envisions education as a transformative process grounded in dialogue, critical reflection, and action. Central to this approach is Freire's rejection of the "banking model" of education, where authoritative teachers deposit knowledge into passive students. Instead, Freire advocated for a participatory, dialogical approach that positions students as co-creators of knowledge. This humanising pedagogy challenges traditional hierarchical structures in education, promoting mutual respect and collaboration between educators and students. Through conscientisation—becoming critically aware of social, political, and economic oppression—students are empowered to envision and enact transformative change (Freire, 1970, 1974).

Freire's ideas have resonated across diverse educational contexts, emphasising the potential of education to dismantle oppressive structures and empower marginalised communities. Focal to his framework is the belief that education should not merely prepare individuals for predefined roles within existing societal systems but enable them to critically question and challenge those systems (Freire & Horton, 1990; Freire & Shor, 1987). Freire (1970) focused on dialogue, which fosters a horizontal relationship between teachers and students, where both engage in mutual learning. This process of conscientisation encourages students to move beyond passive acceptance of their circumstances, fostering a sense of agency and a collective drive toward social transformation.

To contextualise this study, examining the broader applications of Freirean pedagogy within TVET is essential. Freire critiqued traditional educational models, advocating a shift from passive learning to active, dialogical engagement. His concept of education as a practice of freedom, where reflection and action (praxis) are central, challenges TVET's instrumental focus on skills training (Freire & Horton, 1990). Freire's framework provides a compelling basis for rethinking TVET as a space for both personal

empowerment and societal transformation, where students engage critically with their realities and contribute to social change (Majola et al., 2024).

Building on this, scholars like Tur Porres and Hyslop-Margison have expanded Freire's ideas within the context of TVET. Porres (2017) and Porres et al. (2020) argued that Freirean pedagogy can elevate vocational education beyond qualification-based training by fostering critical consciousness and social emancipation. They highlighted the transformative potential of dialogical and reflective practices in empowering students to challenge socio-economic inequalities. Similarly, Hyslop-Margison (2000) and Hyslop-Margison and Dale (2010) critiqued the dominance of technical-rational approaches in vocational education, advocating for pedagogies that democratise knowledge and engage students in analysing the socio-political forces shaping their lives. Both scholars emphasised the role of TVET in not just imparting technical skills but in cultivating a more profound sense of agency and societal responsibility among students, aligning with Freire's vision of education as a tool for liberation. These insights deepen the discussion of South Africa's TVET sector, where socio-economic and structural challenges complicate the implementation of Freirean ideals (Majola, 2024).

For South Africa's TVET sector, Freirean pedagogy offers a compelling framework for addressing systemic inequities. The dual mandate of TVET—to equip students with skills for the labour market while fostering socio-economic empowerment—aligns with Freire's vision of education as both practical and emancipatory (Freire, 1970). However, applying these principles in South African TVET requires navigating complex challenges including rigid institutional structures, socio-economic disparities, and the instrumentalist priorities of vocational education. Despite these hurdles, Freirean pedagogy remains relevant for reimagining TVET as a space where students critically engage with their realities and develop the capacity to transform them (Majola et al., 2024).

While the potential of Freirean pedagogy in South African TVET is compelling, its implementation faces significant challenges. The NC(V) curriculum, focusing on vocational skills and employability, prioritises technical training over critical thinking and dialogue, limiting the scope for transformative education. This instrumentalist approach contrasts sharply with Freire's vision of education as a practice of freedom. Institutional governance issues, such as inadequate resources and inconsistent policy enforcement, further restrict the ability of TVET colleges to create participatory learning environments central to Freirean pedagogy (Vimbelo & Bayaga, 2023, 2024).

Furthermore, socio-economic barriers significantly impact students' ability to engage with and benefit from Freire's approach. Many TVET students face severe economic hardships, which can limit their capacity to prioritise critical reflection and socio-political engagement when their immediate concern is survival or securing employment (Powell et al., 2024). These socio-economic realities starkly contrast Freire's (1970) ideal of students as active participants in their own learning and agents of social change. The pervasive inequality in South African society further marginalises TVET students, making it difficult for them to fully embrace the critical consciousness Freire advocates. This theoretical framework critically examines these structural, pedagogical, and socio-economic barriers, offering valuable insights into the limitations and possibilities of humanising pedagogies in South Africa's TVET sector (Vimbelo & Bayaga, 2024). It highlights the need for a more nuanced and contextually relevant approach to implementing Freirean principles that can address students' and institutions' aspirations and constraints.

Methodological Approach

Photographs were used in this study as a participatory research tool to document and critically engage with the lived experiences of NC(V) graduates. This approach aligns with the principles of photovoice, as outlined by Wang (1999), which emphasised participant agency in capturing and narrating their realities. Our study followed Wang's structured procedures, including (1) facilitating discussions on ethical considerations and the purpose of visual documentation, (2) training participants on how to use photography to express socio-economic and pedagogical challenges, (3) conducting learning cycle group (LCG) discussions where participants critically reflected on their images, and (4) collectively interpreting the photographs to draw out recurring themes related to systemic barriers and empowerment.

The visual materials included in this study have been clearly labelled and integrated into the text with contextual explanations to enhance their analytical significance. Each image serves as a critical lens through which the challenges faced by NC(V) graduates are explored. Specifically: Image 1 illustrates the socioeconomic barriers that hinder students' educational and professional trajectories, Image 2 highlights structural challenges within TVET institutions that limit access and progression, Image 3 showcases pedagogical constraints that affect teaching and learning processes, Image 4 captures strikes as a form of collective action, reflecting students' agency in contesting systemic injustices, and Image 5 portrays student-led initiatives, emphasising resilience and self-driven strategies for navigating the constraints they face. By embedding these images within the text and analysing them through a Freirean lens, the study ensures that visuals are not merely illustrative but actively contribute to the critical discourse on NC(V) graduates' lived experiences.

Image 1

Depicting the Structural Challenges



Image 2*Depicting the Socio-Economic Barriers***Image 3***Depicting the Pedagogical Challenges***Image 4***Depicting the Strikes as Collective Action*

Image 5*Depicting Student-Led Initiatives*

Each photograph was discussed in-depth during LCG meetings, providing participants with a platform to critically analyse and interpret their lived experiences. This process was not merely descriptive but reflexive, fostering critical consciousness by allowing participants to interrogate their realities and the structural forces shaping them (Rolbiecki & LeMaster, 2021). These facilitated discussions encouraged students to move beyond individual narratives, drawing connections between personal struggles and broader socio-economic and institutional constraints. In this way, photovoice served as more than a data collection tool—it became a means of conscientisation, empowering participants to reclaim agency over their narratives and engage in transformative dialogue (Rangana et al., 2023).

Despite its advantages, photovoice as a research method has been critiqued for its perceived lack of methodological rigor. Liebenberg (2018) argued that the flexibility of visual methods may lead to subjective interpretations, potentially compromising analytical precision. However, the integration of structured, critical dialogue throughout the research process ensured the validity and depth of participants' reflections (Wood & Kahts-Kramer, 2022). The participatory nature of the study further mitigated concerns over researcher imposition because participants themselves played an active role in the interpretation of images, co-constructing knowledge in a manner consistent with Freirean praxis. Moreover, the inclusion of photographs in this study was a deliberate strategy to interrogate Freire's assumption that students are inherently prepared for critical reflection and collective action. While Freire's theory suggests that education should cultivate conscientisation, this study critically examines the extent to which TVET students—many of whom navigate precarious socio-economic conditions—are positioned to engage in such transformative praxis. By integrating visual methods into participatory action research, the study exposes the tensions between the aspirational ideals of critical pedagogy and the material realities constraining students' ability to challenge systemic oppression.

The thematic analysis of the LCG transcripts was guided by Freirean critical pedagogy, with an emphasis on critical consciousness, systemic oppression, and empowerment. To ensure a rigorous and reflective

analytical approach, the study followed a structured process. First, an initial review of the transcripts identified recurring themes related to students' struggles, agency, and aspirations. This was followed by iterative coding and categorisation, aligning emerging patterns with Freirean concepts such as dehumanisation, dialogue, and praxis. Participant validation sessions allowed students to engage with the refinement of themes, ensuring that interpretations remained grounded in their lived experiences. Reflective discussions between researchers and participants further deepened the critical analysis, reinforcing the dialogical nature of Freire's approach.

Freire's humanising pedagogy was central to this process, ensuring that participants' voices were not merely documented but critically engaged. The study uncovered deep tensions between TVET's instrumentalist curriculum—designed primarily for workforce preparation—and the transformative potential of critical pedagogy. While systemic barriers such as institutional constraints and socio-economic disparities persist, student-led reflections and engagements revealed moments of resistance and agency, demonstrating the potential for incremental transformation within TVET.

By embedding reflective practices at every stage of the research process, this study exemplifies Freirean principles in both methodology and analysis. It contributes to a deeper understanding of how socio-economic inequalities shape TVET students' experiences and highlights the necessity of pedagogical approaches that prioritise dialogue, agency, and empowerment (Chalaune, 2021; Vimbelo & Bayaga, 2024).

Barriers to Freirean Praxis in South African TVET

Structural Challenges

The NC(V) curriculum, as Majola et al. (2024) argued, embodies an instrumentalist approach designed to align with labour market demands. While this focus on technical skills and employability addresses immediate economic imperatives, it neglects the development of critical engagement—a foundational element of Freirean pedagogy. This omission limits students' ability to reflect critically on their socio-economic realities and engage in transformative actions. Students' experiences vividly illustrate the disconnect between policy intent and lived realities. Vuvu (all names are pseudonyms) shared the disillusionment felt after completing NC(V):

After completing NC(V) Level 4, I thought I'd be working and helping my family escape poverty, but nothing has changed. We were promised jobs, but where are they? (Vuvu, 16-10-2021)

Similarly, Ndevuz expressed a narrow focus on passing exams as the primary goal:

I just focused on passing exams, trusting the lecturers to teach what was needed for me to graduate and get a job. (Ndevuz, 16-10-2021)

The NC(V) curriculum's narrowly defined purpose constrains opportunities for reflective dialogue and the cultivation of critical consciousness. The curriculum's rigidity and standardisation exacerbate this limitation, offering little flexibility for educators to introduce transformative or humanising pedagogical practices.

Students further highlighted the overwhelming academic pressures inherent in the NC(V) programme:

With NC(V), we were pressed for time—tests, assignments, and exams. We always had something to submit. NC(V) was not an easy programme because of too many activities; we were always stressed about exams and submitting assignments. Doing seven subjects is very hectic, and you need to study all these subjects, or you will fail. (Mblatswaz, 16-10-2021)

This relentless emphasis on meeting academic targets prioritises assessment over meaningful learning, leaving students with limited capacity for critical reflection or transformative engagement. These structural constraints highlight the urgent need for a curriculum that balances employability with developing critical consciousness, fostering a more humanising and reflective educational experience.

Pedagogical Challenges

One of the key barriers to implementing Freirean pedagogy in South African TVET colleges is educators' inadequate training and professional development. Vimbelo and Bayaga (2023) argued that many lecturers lack the skills to transcend traditional teacher-centred approaches, reinforcing hierarchical relationships and limiting opportunities for dialogue and co-creation of knowledge. Students' testimonies vividly highlight the consequences of unprepared and disengaged lecturers:

Many of us were committed to completing our studies, but that commitment became meaningless when lecturers did not come to class regularly or did not teach well. Some students lost interest entirely because of these issues. (LCG meeting, 16-10-2021)

We expect lecturers to guide us, but they do not show up or make an effort to support us. It's disappointing, and it makes you wonder if attending college is worth it. (LCG meeting, 16-10-2021)

These narratives underscore the contradiction between Freirean ideals, where educators serve as facilitators of critical engagement, and the realities of inconsistent teaching practices. Lecturer absenteeism and inadequate pedagogical preparation erode students' enthusiasm and diminish their trust in the educational process, leading to widespread disengagement.

Furthermore, institutional resistance to innovative teaching methods further entrenches these challenges. Traditional, didactic methods are often perceived as more efficient, creating inertia that hinders the adoption of student-centred practices. Students' experiences reveal the systemic failures in addressing their concerns about these practices:

We reported lecturer absenteeism to the campus manager, but nothing changed. Instead, lecturers became hostile, and the situation got worse. (LCG meeting, 16-10-2021)

We wasted time and effort reporting issues, but they were never resolved. It felt like management did not care about our concerns. (LCG meeting, 16-10-2021)

This lack of accountability aligns with Myathaza's (2019) findings that lecturer absenteeism is a major factor in student disengagement. As described by the participants, the dismissive attitudes of institutional management perpetuate a cycle where student voices are ignored, undermining Freire's principles of dialogue and transformative action. Ndebele et al. (2024) and Soudien (2023) noted that systemic failures within educational institutions exacerbate the disconnection between the rhetoric of critical pedagogy and its implementation. Without genuine commitment to addressing these challenges, the potential for TVET education to empower students and foster transformative praxis remains unrealised.

Socio-Economic Barriers

The harsh socio-economic realities many TVET students face often force them to prioritise immediate survival over long-term educational goals, limiting their ability to engage in the reflective and critical practices central to Freirean pedagogy. Students' voices vividly illustrate these struggles.

Sbosh described the lengths she went to secure basic necessities:

I had to find a boyfriend to pay for my accommodation and food because the bursary funds only came after six months. It wasn't easy, but I managed to get my Level 4 qualification and leave. (Sbosh, 16-10-2021)

Menemez highlighted the daily financial burdens:

I took three taxis to get to campus and often had no money for lunch. At home, no one was employed, so transport money was my biggest challenge. (Menemez, 16-10-2021)

Such conditions severely constrain students' capacity to participate fully in their education, further entrenching their marginalisation.

The broader inequities in South Africa's socio-economic landscape also undermine the transformative potential of education. Delays and inadequacies in financial support exacerbate the struggle. Melaz explained:

We waited months for our allowances. I rented a place and couldn't pay because the money never came on time. (Melaz, 16-10-2021)

Snez shared similar frustrations:

They promised NSFAS would fund us, but there was no accommodation near the college. We had to walk from the township because we had no transport money, and our parents expected NSFAS to help. (Snez, 16-10-2021)

These systemic barriers reinforce cycles of poverty and exclusion, making it difficult for students to envision and pursue transformative change. Together, these testimonies reveal the intricate interplay between poverty, structural oppression, and educational policy. While Freirean pedagogy offers a compelling vision for empowerment and liberation, its application in the South African TVET context requires systemic reform and innovative strategies to address these socio-economic constraints.

Educational Resources

Resource shortages present significant barriers to NC(V) students' success in South African TVET colleges, reflecting systemic challenges documented by Ramphela (2017), Badat (2010), and Soudien (2012). The students' testimonies reveal how these deficits undermine their educational experiences and prospects. One participant described the consequences of inadequate staffing:

The college didn't replace the teacher who left before the year ended. Some of us failed because there was no one to teach us. (LCG meeting, 16-10-2021)

Another highlighted the impact of insufficient resources:

The computer labs were never enough. During exams, some students couldn't write because of a shortage of computers. Most of us failed computer studies because we had limited access to practice. (LCG meeting, 16-10-2021)

The chronic delay in providing textbooks further compounded these issues:

We had to use old, torn textbooks or borrow and copy from others because new ones never arrived. (LCG meeting, 16-10-2021)

These experiences illustrate the structural inequities Ramphela (2017) identified as perpetuating socio-economic disparities. Without adequate resources, education cannot fulfil its transformative potential. Badat (2010) emphasised that systemic reforms are necessary to ensure equitable access to resources, enabling TVET colleges to address historical injustices and foster student success.

Moreover, the frustrations voiced by participants echo Soudien's (2012) argument that resource scarcity undermines academic outcomes and students' sense of belonging and empowerment. As one student noted:

It was difficult to stay motivated when the college wasn't providing what we needed to succeed. (LCG meeting, 16-10-2021)

Freire's (1970) principles of critical consciousness and empowerment underscore the essential role of resources in fostering transformative education. The participants' testimonies reveal how resource constraints erode these possibilities, reinforcing cycles of disadvantage and marginalisation.

Lessons from Practice: Insights From South Africa's TVET Sector

Applying Freire's critical pedagogy within South Africa's TVET sector offers inspiration and critical reflections. Despite systemic challenges, instances of student-led initiatives and collective action demonstrate the potential for Freirean praxis, underscoring the transformative capacity of dialogical engagement and conscientisation.

Student-Led Initiatives

Faced with resource shortages and institutional gaps, students often take the initiative to support one another, embodying Freire's call for agency and solidarity. One participant shared:

With computer subjects, the college didn't have enough labs. Instead of complaining, we organised ourselves, went to the public library to practise, and helped each other understand what lecturers were teaching. That's how I passed all my computer subjects. (LCG meeting, 16-10-2021)

Similarly, students navigated textbook shortages by collaborating:

The textbooks were not enough, so we made copies for each other. Through those efforts, I passed all seven subjects from Level 2 to Level 4 and graduated on time. (LCG meeting, 16-10-2021)

These grassroots efforts highlight students' resilience and capacity for self-organisation, even as they expose institutional shortcomings that leave critical support structures lacking.

Strikes as Collective Action

When institutional failures extended to delayed NSFAS bursary payments, students resorted to protests, disrupting classes and exams but signalling deeper systemic frustrations. Freire would view these strikes as acts of collective resistance against oppression. However, the repercussions were significant, as one student recalled:

During strikes, classes were disrupted, exams postponed, and sometimes students were removed from exam rooms. My academic performance suffered because allowances arrived months late, leaving students in trouble with landlords. (Seyisiz, 02-11-2021)

While disruptive, these protests embody Freire's notion of education as a space for challenging inequities and asserting agency, even in systemic inertia.

Formation of the TVET Student Movement

Amid these challenges, the learning cycle discussions facilitated by this study provided fertile ground for collective mobilisation. Frustrations over unemployment and societal neglect of TVET graduates galvanised participants to propose a TVET student movement.

One participant articulated the need for a supportive network:

We need to look out for each other as TVET students. A group like this can support us in finding work and creating our community. (LCG meeting, 16-10-2021)

Another echoed this sentiment:

The idea of being lone rangers without support should be a thing of the past. With the commitment we've shown in these meetings, we can form a strong community to support one another. (LCG meeting, 16-10-2021)

The TVET Student Movement reflects Freire's vision of conscientisation, where collective action and dialogue empower individuals to address shared challenges. The group illustrates the transformative potential of participatory action research by fostering solidarity and creating a platform for advocacy. The

examples mentioned above highlight both the promise and the context of policy and practice in the colleges, which limits the application of his ideas in practice, which in turn, limits the application of implementing Freirean pedagogy in South Africa's TVET sector. On the one hand, students' resilience and collective efforts illustrate the transformative potential of Freire's emphasis on dialogue and critical reflection. Their initiatives—often born out of necessity rather than institutional support—expose the systemic failures of educational institutions while demonstrating the agency and solidarity of the students themselves. However, this transformative potential must contend with structural inequities, resource constraints, and a labour-market-driven agenda prioritising employability over empowerment. To bridge this gap, systemic reforms are essential to institutionalise practices that enable equity and transformation, allowing TVET to serve as a pathway to employment and platform for genuine empowerment and societal change.

Freirean Theory in Support of the South African Perspective

Freire's model advocates that conscientisation can be universally achieved through dialogue and praxis; this premise often highlights the structural inequalities and systemic poverty that constrain critical engagement in South Africa's TVET context. Freirean ideas celebrate human agency and the transformative power of education, they risk romanticising agency without addressing the material conditions that undermine it. As Ramphela (2008) and Jansen (2001) observed, South African education systems often prioritise employability and market readiness, sidelining the deeper socio-political goals Freire envisioned.

Freire's framework does not explicitly guide the reconciliation of technical-vocational training with broader emancipatory objectives. For TVET institutions, the pressure to produce employable graduates often renders humanising pedagogy secondary, creating a disconnect between Freire's transformative aspirations and the sector's immediate priorities. Soudien (2023) further highlighted this dynamic, pointing out how structural oppression within education systems stifles opportunities for meaningful dialogue and critical reflection, particularly in environments defined by scarce resources and rigid curricula.

This study revealed promising instances of Freirean praxis within TVET, demonstrating the potential for transformation even in constrained contexts. Student-led initiatives, such as peer mentoring and curriculum advocacy, reflect the principles of dialogical engagement and collective action. However, these efforts frequently arise out of necessity, with students filling gaps left by systemic failures. Nkomo (2013) and Seekings and Nattrass (2006) argued that such grassroots actions underscore the urgent need to bridge structural inequities with institutional support, fostering environments where transformation is not merely aspirational but achievable.

To ensure Freire's principles remain relevant in South Africa, his framework must evolve to engage directly with the socio-economic realities facing TVET students. This involves addressing structural barriers such as poverty, inequality, and underfunded institutions while integrating systemic support for transformative practices. Freirean pedagogy can align more effectively with students' lived realities by creating spaces for critical dialogue, participatory engagement, and institutional accountability. As Ramphela (2012) asserted, transformative education in South Africa requires ideals and actionable strategies that confront the intersecting forces of structural oppression and systemic inertia.

This article highlights the need for a more contextually attuned application of Freire's ideas, ensuring that education is both a tool for personal liberation and a mechanism for addressing broader social injustices. Freire's vision offers a vital blueprint; its practical realisation in South Africa's TVET sector requires balancing aspirations for transformation with the urgent demands of equity, inclusion, and economic precarity.

Towards Overcoming the Hindrances: Recommendations for Policy and Practice

Addressing the structural, pedagogical, and socio-economic barriers that hinder the implementation of Freirean praxis in South Africa's TVET sector necessitates a multifaceted approach. The following

recommendations aim to rethink critical pedagogy to the realities of the TVET context while advancing transformative education.

Policy Reform

Curriculum Revision

The current NC(V) curriculum's labour-market-driven focus must be expanded to incorporate modules that promote critical thinking, socio-political awareness, and participatory learning. Such integration aligns with Freire's vision of empowering students to analyse their socio-economic realities critically. Scholars like Badroodien (2004) argued that moving beyond a low-skill regime requires a curriculum that develops technical skills and fosters the intellectual and social capabilities necessary for active citizenship.

Student Inclusion in Policymaking: A Progressive Rethinking

True inclusion in policymaking demands more than token platforms for dialogue—it requires dismantling the structural conditions that perpetuate oppression and exclusion. TVET students, particularly those from impoverished and marginalised backgrounds, must be repositioned as active systemic change agents. This shift goes beyond consultation, requiring a redistribution of decision-making power to enable students and communities to co-determine institutional priorities and curricula.

Vally and Motala (2014) emphasised that emancipatory education must subvert the hierarchies that reproduce inequality. In South Africa's TVET context, this entails addressing apartheid-era legacies and the socio-economic barriers that still marginalise working-class and rural students. Mere participation in policymaking is insufficient for students grappling with systemic poverty and limited resources. Seekings and Natrass (2006) highlighted the need for broader socio-economic transformation to disrupt class-based inequalities and challenged the neoliberal agendas that commodify education and prioritise employability over empowerment.

Progressive inclusion requires institutions to integrate student perspectives on education as a tool for societal transformation. Badat (2010) called for institutional mechanisms that amplify historically excluded voices, ensuring policies actively address the systemic violence and precarity many students face. Student advocacy and representation must be embedded at all decision-making levels to confront TVET's labour-market-driven focus and advocate for a curriculum that balances technical skills with critical socio-political awareness.

Policymaking reimagined in this way becomes a revolutionary act that dismantles barriers to student agency, creates equitable structures, and transforms education into a space for liberation and justice. Institutions must listen to students and be restructured to reflect their collective power and potential.

Professional Development

Training for Educators

Robust educator training programmes should equip teachers with the tools and strategies necessary to implement Freirean pedagogy. As Vimbelo & Bayaga (2023) and Buthelezi (2018) highlighted, TVET lecturers often struggle with limited preparation for engaging students in critical dialogue, necessitating capacity-building initiatives that address pedagogical gaps and foster dialogical methods.

Reflective Practices

Creating professional learning communities where educators can reflect, share experiences, and collaborate on best practices is crucial. Balwanz and Hlatshwayo (2016) described such communities as spaces for critical dialogue, enabling educators to innovate and effectively adapt Freirean principles to their teaching contexts.

Addressing Socio-Economic Barriers

Financial and Resource Support

Progressive transformation demands dismantling the structural inequities perpetuating socio-economic exclusion for TVET students. Expanding bursaries, subsidies, and access to essential learning materials is not merely an add-on but a fundamental requirement to disrupt the cycles of poverty and marginalisation. Freire's framework, while invaluable, often falls short of addressing the material conditions that obstruct education. Badat (2010) argued that tackling systemic inequalities necessitates bold, redistributive interventions beyond surface-level reforms. This means reallocating national resources to prioritise education for the historically disadvantaged, challenging the capitalist and neoliberal logic that commodifies learning and perpetuates inequality.

Such interventions should not be framed as acts of charity but as reparative justice for students systematically excluded by apartheid legacies and the ongoing inequities of the post-apartheid era. Financial support must be coupled with structural reforms—such as free access to wi-fi, housing, and transport—ensuring that economic precarity does not limit students' ability to engage with their education and transform their lives critically. Progressive redistribution is the only pathway to genuine empowerment, allowing students to survive, resist, reimagine, and rebuild their socio-economic realities.

Community and Industry Partnerships

Developing partnerships with community organisations and industries can create opportunities for students to apply technical skills in ways that address local challenges. Such alliances can foster praxis by linking vocational training to critical engagement with socio-economic issues. Walker (2013) emphasised the role of community-based learning in reconstructing fractured educational systems and building capacities for social change.

These recommendations advocate for adapting pragmatic Freirean pedagogy to the socio-economic and institutional realities of South Africa's TVET sector. By integrating structural reforms, enhancing educator capacity, and addressing socio-economic barriers, these strategies aim to create a more humanising and transformative educational system. This approach resonates with the principles of scholars such as Soudien (2007), who stressed the need for education systems to be both equitable and empowering.

Though rooted in universal ideals, Freire's vision finds its true potential when tailored to each context's challenges and possibilities. In the case of South Africa's TVET sector, this means fostering an education system that prepares students for employment and equips them to engage with and transform their socio-economic realities critically. This dual focus ensures that Freirean principles remain relevant and actionable, creating pathways for genuine transformation.

Conclusion

This article highlights the applicability of Paulo Freire's critical pedagogy within the South African TVET sector, emphasising the tensions between Freire's emancipatory ideals and the structural, pedagogical, and socio-economic realities of TVET. While Freire's emphasis on dialogue, conscientisation, and praxis offers valuable insights, the challenges of implementing these principles in a highly constrained educational environment strongly motivate for the rethinking of this theory in addressing certain contexts. The rigid NC(V) curriculum, institutional underfunding, and socio-economic inequalities impede the realisation of Freirean praxis, raising questions about the adaptability of Freire's ideas to systems that prioritise economic productivity over socio-political transformation. Moreover, Freire's framework assumes a level of autonomy and agency that is often unattainable for students navigating poverty, systemic oppression, and deeply hierarchical institutions. Despite these critiques, instances of student-led initiatives and collaborative practices suggest that Freirean principles can inspire moments of transformation, albeit within limited scopes. These examples highlight the need to contextualise Freire's theory, adapting it to the unique contradictions of the South African TVET landscape. Future research should critically explore how Freire's ideas can be reimaged to address the competing demands of emancipation and employability within TVET. This includes examining the possibilities for integrating socio-

political critique into vocational curricula without alienating students from the labour market and investigating how institutional and systemic reforms could create more enabling environments for critical pedagogy. By implementing Freirean theory in South African TVET, this article contributes to a nuanced understanding of critical pedagogy that balances its aspirational goals with the realities of a profoundly unequal society. Such an approach calls for a crucial yet pragmatic engagement with Freire's ideas, ensuring they remain relevant in contemporary challenges.

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