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Moving beyond vocational qualifications: A Freirean perspective on the transformative path of vocational education

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Abstract

In this article, I examine the transformative potential and persistent challenges in South Africa's Technical and Vocational Education and Training (TVET) sector from a Freirean perspective, situating the analysis within broader global debates on vocational education and youth transitions. Using a qualitative Participatory Action Research (PAR) design, I engaged a purposive sample of 15 National Certificate (Vocational) [NC(V)] graduates in Gqeberha, South Africa. Data was generated through life narrative interviews and Learning Cycle Group (LCG) discussions, and analysed thematically using Freirean concepts of conscientisation, dialogue, and praxis. The findings reveal a significant misalignment between student aspirations and post-graduation realities, with graduates experiencing persistent barriers to employment, further education, and entrepreneurship. These challenges are linked to limited curriculum responsiveness, insufficient dialogical engagement, and weak institutional support systems. Consistent with international evidence on vocational education systems, the study highlights how employment-oriented models often fail to address broader issues of inclusion, agency, and social justice. I argue for a reimagined TVET curriculum grounded in Freire's problem-posing pedagogy—one that promotes critical consciousness, social responsibility, and structural engagement. I contribute to the literature by demonstrating how participatory and humanising pedagogies can reposition vocational education as a site of empowerment rather than mere skills training. Practically, the findings suggest the need for curriculum reform, stronger industry and community linkages, and the institutionalisation of participatory learning spaces to support graduate transitions and social inclusion.

Keywords: banking education, problem-posing education. TVET, critical pedagogy, transformative learning environments, social justice

Introduction and contextual background

Technical and Vocational Education and Training (TVET) systems in South Africa have long been positioned as mechanisms to address youth unemployment, poverty, and systemic skills shortages (Powell, 2021; Sibiya, 2024). Successive policy frameworks have conceptualised TVET as a development tool to bridge education and labour market transitions. However,

growing scholarship critiques this employment-centric framing for prioritising technical qualifications at the expense of critical, inclusive, and community-responsive education (Powell & McGrath, 2019; Vimbelo & Bayaga, 2024). This narrow utilitarian model risks reinforcing structural inequalities rather than redressing them, particularly for students from historically marginalised communities (Majola, Geduld, et al., 2025; Aploon-Zokufa & Papier, 2024).

Beyond South Africa, these tensions are evident globally. Increasingly, TVET systems across different contexts are expected to respond to youth unemployment while simultaneously addressing inclusion, equity, and social transformation. International scholarship highlights persistent contradictions between labour market responsiveness and broader educational goals. For example, Ballantyne (2025) demonstrated how inclusive vocational education systems struggle to balance economic demands with holistic learner development, while Rozenfeld and Maltseva (2026) revealed the unstable and non-linear pathways experienced by vocational graduates. Similarly, Mackrill and Jønsson (2025) emphasised the difficulties of supporting vulnerable learners in vocational systems in pointing to the structural inequalities that extend beyond national boundaries. These studies suggest that the challenges observed in South Africa reflect wider global dynamics rather than isolated national shortcomings.

I argue that South Africa's TVET sector, and specifically the National Certificate (Vocational) [NC(V)] programme, must be fundamentally reimagined to embrace a holistic educational purpose—one that actively nurtures socio-economic agency, critical consciousness, and community engagement. Drawing from Paulo Freire's critical pedagogy (1968/2000), I position education not merely as preparation for employment but as a practice of freedom wherein students become active agents capable of transforming the conditions that marginalise them (Schmidt, 2020; Majola, Rangana, et al., 2025). Freire's critique of the banking model of education—that sees learners as passive recipients of knowledge—is particularly relevant to the TVET landscape, both in South Africa and internationally, where didactic pedagogies and standardised curricula often dominate (Rudman & Meiring, 2018; Porres et al., 2020). Freire's alternative model of problem-posing education advocates for dialogical learning, reflection, and action—principles that resonate strongly with emerging global calls for more inclusive, humanising, and learner-centred vocational pedagogies (Lensjø & Billett, 2026; Nakar & Singh, 2026).

Recent empirical studies affirm the need for TVET education to foreground learner agency and critical engagement. Majola et al. (2024), for instance, explored how critical pedagogy can be contextually adapted in South African TVET colleges, while Vimbelo and Bayaga (2024) demonstrated how humanising pedagogies enhance student engagement. Internationally, Høyen (2026) showed how vocational pathways are shaped by social and institutional contexts, further complicating transitions into work. The growing call for inclusive curriculum design (Khoza, 2025; La Fleur, 2024) demands a reconfiguration of vocational education beyond instrumentalist training toward approaches that enable empowerment, agency, and collective action. Despite its reform intentions, the NC(V) programme introduced in 2007 has been widely criticised for failing to provide a coherent and empowering educational pathway

(Mabunda & Frick, 2020; Majola, 2025). Graduates frequently encounter barriers to employment, further education, and entrepreneurship, thus reflecting a systemic misalignment between curriculum design, labour market realities, and learners' lived experiences—a challenge mirrored in international contexts (Høyen, 2026; Rozenfeld & Maltseva).

In this study, I address this problem by examining how and whether current TVET curricula enable conscientisation and social action, and by exploring possibilities for reimagining vocational education as a vehicle for social justice. In doing so, I contribute to emerging global debates on the purpose of vocational education, particularly from Global South perspectives that challenge dominant paradigms (Monk et al., 2023). To explore these dynamics, I employ a Participatory Action Research (PAR) methodology anchored in Freire's philosophy of dialogical and transformative inquiry (Rangana, 2023; Wood, 2020). Engaging NC(V) graduates through life narrative interviews and Learning Cycle Group (LCG) discussions in Gqeberha, I examine how students interpret their educational experiences, navigate post-study transitions, and envision alternative futures.

This discussion proceeds in four parts. First, it maps the structural constraints shaping the NC(V) curriculum. Second, it applies Freirean concepts to curriculum transformation. Third, it presents findings from participatory research. Last, it reflects on implications for policy and practice in arguing for a socially just reconfiguration of TVET education.

Literature review and theoretical framework

Reimagining vocational education from a Freirean perspective

South Africa's post-apartheid education system continues to grapple with entrenched inequalities rooted in colonial and apartheid legacies (Seekings & Nattrass, 2006). Within this landscape, the TVET sector has been positioned as a key mechanism for addressing youth unemployment and social inequality. However, despite ongoing reforms, the sector remains structurally constrained in its ability to promote meaningful socio-economic mobility and inclusive development (Majola, 2025; Papier et al., 2019).

Globally, similar concerns have been raised regarding the role and purpose of vocational education. While TVET systems are often framed as solutions to youth unemployment, international research highlights persistent tensions between economic responsiveness and broader educational goals such as inclusion, agency, and social justice. Ballantyne (2025), for instance, demonstrated that inclusive vocational education systems struggle to balance labour market demands with holistic skill formation, while Rozenfeld and Maltseva (2026) showed that vocational graduates often experience unstable and non-linear transitions into employment. These findings challenge the assumption that vocational qualifications necessarily lead to secure livelihoods.

In the South African context, vocational education has been shaped largely by an instrumentalist logic that prioritises alignment with labour market needs over learners' lived realities and aspirations (Powell & McGrath, 2018; Sibiya, 2024). This orientation reflects

broader global trends, where vocational systems are increasingly governed by neoliberal imperatives that emphasise efficiency, standardisation, and employability (Wheelahan, 2015). However, such approaches risk reproducing existing inequalities rather than addressing them, particularly for students from marginalised backgrounds.

Identifying the gap: Beyond employability toward agency and justice

While existing literature has extensively examined the role of TVET in skills development and labour market integration, there remains a significant gap in understanding how vocational education can foster critical consciousness, agency, and social transformation, particularly from the perspectives of graduates themselves. Much of the research—both locally and internationally—focuses on system performance, policy effectiveness, or employer needs, often marginalising learner voice and lived experience. Recent global scholarship has begun to challenge this narrow focus. For example, Mackrill and Jønsson (2025) highlighted the structural barriers faced by vulnerable students in vocational systems, while Høyen (2026) illustrated how career trajectories are shaped by socio-cultural and institutional factors rather than individual choice alone. Similarly, Nakar and Singh (2026) revealed the ethical complexities faced by educators in navigating institutional expectations and learner needs, and Lensjø and Billett (2026) emphasised the socially constructed nature of vocational teaching practices. These studies collectively point to the need for more context-sensitive, learner-centred, and critically informed approaches to vocational education.

From a Global South perspective, Monk et al. (2023) argued for a rethinking of dominant VET research paradigms, highlighting the importance of context, power, and epistemic justice. This aligns with critiques of traditional vocational education models that prioritise technical competence over critical engagement and social responsibility. Despite these advances, there remains limited research that integrates critical pedagogy with participatory methodologies to explore how vocational education can be transformed from within. I address this gap by foregrounding the experiences of NC(V) graduates and examining how participatory, Freirean approaches can enable new forms of understanding, agency, and curriculum transformation.

Freirean pedagogy as theoretical framework

This study is grounded in Freire's critical pedagogy, which provides a powerful framework for understanding education as a site of both oppression and liberation. Freire (1968/2000, 1974) critiques traditional banking models of education, in which learners are treated as passive recipients of knowledge, and advocates instead for a problem-posing approach centred on dialogue, reflection, and action (praxis). In the context of vocational education, Freire's ideas challenge the dominant emphasis on technical skill acquisition by foregrounding the importance of critical consciousness (conscientisation)—the ability of learners to understand and transform the social conditions that shape their lives. This perspective has been increasingly applied in TVET research to critique instrumentalist approaches and advocate for more humanising and inclusive pedagogies (Porres et al., 2020; Schmidt, 2020).

International studies further reinforce the relevance of Freirean pedagogy in vocational contexts. For example, Porcher and Esmond (2026) illustrated how vocational systems are shaped by political and ideological struggles, while global research on vocational education highlights the need to move beyond narrow economic objectives toward more democratic and socially responsive models. These perspectives align with Freire's vision of education as a practice of freedom, where learners are empowered to question, challenge, and transform existing structures. In South Africa, scholars have increasingly drawn on Freire to critique the limitations of the TVET system and to advocate for curriculum transformation that prioritises learner agency and social justice (Majola, Geduld, et al., 2025; Vimbelo & Bayaga, 2024). However, the application of Freirean pedagogy in practice remains uneven, often constrained by institutional structures, rigid curricula, and limited opportunities for dialogical engagement.

Participatory action research as methodology and praxis

In addition to its theoretical grounding in Freirean pedagogy, in this study I adopt Participatory Action Research (PAR) as both a methodological approach and a form of praxis. PAR is rooted in principles of collaboration, reflexivity, and social transformation in seeking to dissolve traditional hierarchies between researcher and participant (Rangana, 2023; Wood, 2020). Importantly, PAR is not merely a method of data collection, but a theoretically informed approach aligned with Freirean principles of dialogue and collective action. It enables participants to become co-researchers actively engaged in generating knowledge, reflecting on their experiences, and identifying possibilities for change. This makes it particularly well-suited to research in contexts of marginalisation, such as TVET, where learner voices are often excluded from decision-making processes. By integrating PAR with Freirean pedagogy, in this study I position research itself as a transformative process. Participants are not only sources of data but active agents in critically examining their educational experiences and envisioning alternative futures. This approach responds directly to calls in the literature for more participatory, learner-centred research in vocational education (Mackrill & Jønsson, 2025; Monk et al., 2023).

Toward a transformative and inclusive TVET curriculum

The convergence of Freirean pedagogy and participatory research highlights the potential for reimagining TVET as a space of empowerment, rather than mere skills training. Both South African and international literature point to the need for curricula that are contextually relevant, socially responsive, and oriented toward human development**.** However, despite growing recognition of these needs, many TVET systems remain constrained by policy, institutional inertia, and dominant economic paradigms. As a result, the transformative potential of vocational education remains under-realised. In this study, I contribute to ongoing debates by demonstrating how learner-centred, participatory approaches can open up new possibilities for curriculum transformation, particularly in contexts marked by inequality and marginalisation.

Research methodology and data generation

I used a qualitative research approach within a Participatory Action Research (PAR) design, grounded in Freire's emancipatory philosophy (Freire, 1974; Wood, 2020). I considered a qualitative approach most appropriate because I sought to explore the lived experiences, perceptions, and meaning-making processes of graduates in the TVET system—dimensions that cannot be adequately captured through quantitative methods. Rather than measuring variables, my aim was to understand how participants interpret their educational experiences and navigate post-graduation realities.

PAR was selected not only as a methodological strategy but also as an approach that is theoretically aligned with Freirean principles of dialogue, reflection, and praxis. PAR challenges traditional hierarchical relationships between researcher and participant by positioning participants as co-researchers who actively engage in the production and interpretation of knowledge. This orientation is particularly relevant in the TVET context, where graduates are often marginalised in policy and research discourse. By creating space for collaborative inquiry, PAR enables participants to reflect critically on their experiences while simultaneously identifying possibilities for transformation (Rangana, 2023).

The study was conducted in Gqeberha, located in South Africa's Eastern Cape province, a region characterised by persistently high levels of youth unemployment and limited access to economic opportunities (Majola, 2024). The research focused on a purposively selected group of 15 National Certificate (Vocational) [NC(V)] graduates who had completed their studies between 2016 and 2021. A purposive sampling strategy was employed to ensure that participants had direct and relevant experience of the phenomenon under investigation. Selection criteria included completion of an NC(V) Level 4 qualification, willingness to participate in iterative group discussions, and representation across diverse socio-economic and gender backgrounds. Participants were recruited through alumni networks, social media platforms, and referrals from college staff.

Although the sample size is relatively small, it is consistent with qualitative and PAR methodologies, which prioritise depth of engagement and richness of data over statistical generalisation (Wood, 2020). The intention was not to produce generalisable findings, but to generate nuanced, contextually grounded insights into the experiences of TVET graduates. Furthermore, in the study I deliberately centre the voices of graduates who are often underrepresented in vocational education research. While other stakeholders such as lecturers, employers, and institutional leaders play an important role in shaping the TVET system, their exclusion in this study was a conscious methodological decision aimed at foregrounding graduate perspectives. This approach aligns with emerging international scholarship that emphasises the importance of learner voice in understanding vocational pathways and outcomes (Høyen, 2026; Mackrill & Jønsson, 2025). Future research could extend this work by incorporating different stakeholder perspectives to provide a more comprehensive systemic analysis.

Data was generated through life narrative interviews and Learning Cycle Group (LCG) discussions. The life narrative interviews allowed participants to reflect on their educational journeys, aspirations, and post-graduation experiences, thus providing insight into the longitudinal dimensions of their engagement with the TVET system. This method is particularly effective in capturing how individuals make sense of their experiences over time (Russell, 2022). In addition, Learning Cycle Group discussions were conducted as part of the PAR process, structured around iterative cycles of planning, action, observation, and reflection (see Kemmis & McTaggart, 2000). These sessions created a dialogical space in which participants could analyse collectively their experiences, challenge assumptions, and co-construct new understandings.

Data collection was facilitated through a combination of face-to-face engagement and digital platforms, including Zoom and WhatsApp, to ensure accessibility and sustained participation. While the use of digital tools enabled flexibility and continuity, particularly in contexts of geographic dispersion, it also presented limitations such as connectivity challenges and reduced opportunities for observing non-verbal cues. The data was analysed using a thematic analysis approach informed by Freirean concepts of conscientisation, dialogue, and praxis. The analytical process involved the transcription of interviews and group discussions, followed by iterative coding to identify recurring patterns and themes. These themes were then interpreted from a Freirean perspective to examine how participants developed critical awareness and engaged in processes of reflection and action. To enhance credibility and trustworthiness, emerging findings were shared with participants for validation, ensuring that the analysis remained grounded in their perspectives and experiences.

Ethical clearance for the study was obtained from the Nelson Mandela University Research Ethics Committee (Ref: H21-EDU-PGE-021). Informed consent was secured from all participants, and pseudonyms were used to protect their identity. Given the sensitive nature of discussions about unemployment and marginalisation, participants were also provided with access to appropriate support resources where necessary.

While the study generated rich and meaningful insights, certain limitations should be acknowledged. The focus on a single group of graduates limits the extent to which findings can be generalised beyond the specific context. In addition, the absence of other stakeholders constrains the ability to examine institutional dynamics from many different perspectives. However, these limitations are balanced by the depth of engagement and the participatory nature of the research process, which enabled the co-construction of knowledge and the development of critical awareness among participants. In this sense, the research process itself functioned as a form of transformative pedagogy, consistent with Freire's vision of education as a practice of freedom.

Findings

In this section, I present the key findings of the study, structured around the Freirean principles of conscientisation, dialogue, and praxis, as they emerged across the three PAR cycles. Drawing from participants' life stories and Learning Cycle Group (LCG) discussions, I explore

how NC(V) graduates engaged in reflective critique of their educational experiences and the socio-economic structures they encounter post-study. The voices of participants are presented not merely as testimonials, but as catalysts for collective meaning-making and action a core objective of both Participatory Action Research (PAR) and Freirean pedagogy.

The unfulfilled promise of vocational education: From expectation to disillusionment

Participants across the board entered the NC(V) programme with strong hopes of transformation in expecting stable employment, social mobility, and improved family circumstances. Their decisions to pursue TVET were not passive but framed by a deep aspiration to overcome poverty, improve their lives, and contribute meaningfully to their communities.[1] This aligns with Freire's concept of the *capability to aspire*, where hope functions as a driving force for change (Freire, 1974; Powell, 2012).

> Yes, I did not do well with my matric in 2014. In 2016, I heard about TVET and the job opportunities it presents, so for me going to TVET was for a qualification that would bring me a job to end the poverty struggles here at home. (Participant, VUV, 2021)

However, post-graduation realities diverged sharply from these aspirations. Participants described being left with certificates that held little currency in the labour market, compounded by the absence of structured job placement mechanisms or entrepreneurial support. This disconnect created disillusionment and emotional distress, with several participants reporting feelings of betrayal and frustration, outcomes that are antithetical to the Freirean goal of education as empowerment.

> I cannot change my family's circumstances because I cannot find work. What can I say? I am not complaining, but I am frustrated by this whole thing (LCG meeting, Cycle 1, 2021)

This disjuncture between expectation and outcome underscores a fundamental critique: the NC(V) qualification, though well-intentioned in design, has not delivered meaningful economic emancipation, nor has it offered learners tools to reframe critically or navigate structural exclusion.

Curriculum disconnect: From "Banking Education" to the demand for relevance

One of the strongest thematic patterns to emerge was a critique of the NC(V) curriculum as overly theoretical, rigid, and disconnected from students' lived realities and community needs. Participants described their learning as repetitive, didactic, and lacking applied knowledge relevant to the real-world entrepreneurial or employment contexts they sought to enter. Freire's

1 Participants' responses have not been edited.

(1968/2000) notion of banking education during which students are treated as passive recipients rather than co-creators of knowledge was evident in their narratives.

> The curriculum was very theoretical. They didn't even teach us how to go about starting a business. I wanted to learn how to apply the skills, not just write tests. (LCG meeting, Cycle 2, 2021)

This critique was intensified by the perceived absence of practical entrepreneurship education. While participants were exposed to vocational content, it was described as narrow in scope, often failing to reflect socio-economic realities such as informal economies, localised trades, or digital entrepreneurship. As a result, students were supposedly qualified but underprepared for economic survival, let alone leadership or innovation.

In the LCG reflections, participants began to imagine what a liberatory curriculum might look like in their suggesting the need for locally relevant content, greater practical training, and integration of critical life skills, including community development and problem-solving.

> We needed education that prepares us to lead, not just to apply for jobs. We wanted to learn how to bring change in our communities, not just get employed. (LCG meeting, Cycle 2, 2021)

From silence to dialogue: Making structural barriers visible

Across the PAR cycles, the LCG meetings created a dialogical space in which participants shifted from viewing their failures as individual shortcomings to recognising structural constraints embedded in the TVET system. This is a hallmark of conscientisation developing critical awareness of the forces shaping one's life and positioning education as a site of struggle (Freire, 1974; Majola et al., 2026).

Initially, students expressed self-blame or shame regarding their unemployment. However, through facilitated discussions and critical reflection on shared experiences, a new collective narrative emerged—one that named systemic injustices, including: inadequate job placement support; poor articulation between NC(V) and higher education pathways; the irrelevance of certain curriculum components; weak industry linkages; and fragmented policy implementation.

> I used to think I failed, it's my fault for not find a job because I chose the wrong qualification program. But now I see this system was not made for us to succeed. We were given certificates but not no means, no work exposure as supposed. (LCG meeting, Cycle 3, 2021)

Through the Freirean process of naming the world, participants moved from internalising failure to externalising structural critique thus laying the groundwork for resistance and transformation.

Emergent praxis: Seeds of agency and collective action

While the study did not result in large-scale action, PAR Cycle 3 revealed emerging moments of praxis, where participants began initiating collective responses to their challenges. These included forming a TVET Student Movement to support NC(V) graduates, creating a WhatsApp group for job leads and emotional support, and planning workshops on CV writing and interview skills. As one participant expressed,

> We as TVET students need to look out for one another as much as possible. The idea of having a group, a network, is nice. It's good to have someone in your corner whom you can go through things with together. (LCG meeting, Cycle 3, 2021)

Another added,

> 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, Cycle 3, 2021)

These actions reflect an early stage of transformative praxis, wherein reflection is converted into strategic action. Freire (1974) argued that empowerment requires the capacity not only to reflect but to act intentionally upon the world. While constrained by institutional limitations, the participants began to visualise themselves as agents of change in challenging the notion that they are passive recipients of failed policy.

> Like what we discussed before in our previous meeting, we as TVET students need to look out for one another as much as possible. The idea of having a WhatsApp group and name it, where we can collectively be there for each other, whatever it may be, is always nice. It's good to have someone in your corner whom you can go through things with together. (LCG meeting, Cycle 3, 2021)

> I think workshops can help a great deal, whereby we can teach and learn from each other how to answer questions in an interview when there are opportunities, and you are called for an interview. Some of us have never been called for an interview before. (LCG meeting, Cycle 3, 2021)

This sense of agency, though nascent, represents the pedagogical power of PAR combined with Freirean dialogue transforming marginalised learners from objects of vocational training to subjects in the struggle for economic and social dignity.

The curriculum as a site of struggle and possibility

For participants in this study, the NC(V) curriculum was a source of tension designed to serve an economic agenda, however disconnected from their lived realities. While it was structured to deliver employability, many experienced it as rigid, repetitive, and inattentive to the social, cultural, and economic contexts of township youth.

> I just focused on passing exams, trusting the lecturers to teach what was needed for me to graduate and get a job. (Participant, XYT, 2021)

Students internalised the idea that qualifications would secure employment. However, the reality of post-graduation unemployment left many disillusioned.

> What made us come from the townships is getting employment after college more than anything else… to get a qualification to get into employment. Participant, BTO, 2021

> I was excited... but I cannot get a job since graduation in 2017… What is that? (LCG meeting, Cycle 1, 2021)

These reflections reveal a banking model of curriculum that delivers content but not transformation. The curriculum failed to foster the critical skills, entrepreneurial thinking, or socio-political awareness needed to navigate structural unemployment. However, through participatory dialogue, students articulated clear alternatives: entrepreneurship, life planning, and financial literacy integration; community engagement and applied service-learning; and culturally grounded and locally relevant learning. These proposals align with Freire's (1974) emphasis on education rooted in the experiences and aspirations of the oppressed and echo recent scholarship advocating curriculum reform in TVET (Aploon-Zokufa & Papier, 2024; Vimbelo & Bayaga, 2024; Wheelahan, 2015).

> I don't want to settle for being someone's slave my whole life… I want to change things – for me, my family, and our Black community. (Participant, PGT, 2021)

This powerful statement underscores the transformative potential of a curriculum that empowers rather than contains. For TVET to become a tool of social justice, it must shift from content delivery to co-constructed, context-responsive, and emancipatory learning making students not just qualified, but critically engaged agents of change.

Discussion and implications

Repositioning TVET beyond employability: A Freirean interpretation

The findings of this study reinforce a central argument: while South Africa's TVET system is formally positioned as a pathway to employment and economic participation, its outcomes for many NC(V) graduates reveal a persistent disjuncture between policy intention and lived reality. Graduates' experiences of unemployment, limited progression opportunities, and institutional disconnection point to a deeper structural misalignment between curriculum design, labour market expectations, and socio-economic conditions.

Interpreted from a Freirean point of view, this misalignment reflects more than a technical failure of curriculum delivery; it signals a limitation in how vocational education is conceptualised. Rather than functioning as a transformative space, the system often operates within what Freire (1974) described as a constrained pedagogical logic, where education reproduces existing inequalities instead of enabling learners to interrogate and transform them.

Participants' narratives, however, demonstrate that when dialogical and participatory spaces are introduced, learners begin to move toward critical consciousness, reframing their experiences from individual failure to structural critique. This tension between employability-driven models and broader educational purposes is not unique to South Africa. International scholarship increasingly highlights similar contradictions in TVET systems, where economic responsiveness often overshadows goals of inclusion, agency, and social justice (Moodie et al., 2019; Ballantyne, 2025). The findings therefore position the South African case as part of a wider global challenge in reinforcing the need to rethink vocational education beyond narrow labour market alignment.

Rethinking curriculum: From technical delivery to transformative engagement

A key implication emerging from the study is the need to reconceptualise the curriculum as a dynamic and socially situated process rather than a fixed body of knowledge. Participants' critiques of the NC(V) curriculum as overly theoretical, rigid, and disconnected from lived realities point to the persistence of what Freire termed the banking model of education. In this model, knowledge is transmitted without sufficient engagement with context, limiting learners' ability to apply, adapt, and reflect critically on what they learn. The findings suggest that curriculum reform must move beyond incremental adjustments to content and embrace, instead, a more fundamental shift toward dialogical, participatory, and contextually responsive approaches. This includes integrating entrepreneurship education, community-based learning, and life skills that reflect the socio-economic conditions of students. Such an approach aligns with both local and international calls for vocational education systems that support holistic development rather than narrowly defined employability outcomes (Wheelahan & Moodie, 2020; Lensjø & Billett, 2026). Importantly, participants' proposals for curriculum co-design and greater relevance highlight the need to treat learners not merely as recipients of education but as contributors to its development. This shift reflects an epistemological reorientation in which curriculum becomes a site of negotiation, reflection, and transformation.

From conscientisation to praxis: Reclaiming learner agency

One of the most significant contributions of this study lies in its demonstration of how participatory processes can enable shifts in learner consciousness and agency. Through engagement in PAR cycles and Learning Cycle Groups, participants moved from internalised narratives of failure towards a collective understanding of structural constraints. This process of conscientisation is central to Freirean pedagogy and represents a critical step towards transformative action. Although the scope of the study did not allow for large-scale structural interventions, participants-initiated forms of collective action, including peer support networks and skills-sharing initiatives. These actions, while modest, illustrate the emergence of praxis, where reflection is translated into intentional efforts to change lived realities. This finding has important implications for both research and practice. It suggests that creating structured spaces for dialogue and participation in TVET institutions can foster not only critical awareness but also forms of agency that extend beyond the classroom. Similar insights are emerging in

international research, where learner participation is increasingly recognised as central to meaningful vocational education reform (Mackrill & Jønsson, 2025; Nakar & Singh, 2026).

Implications for policy and institutional practice

My study points to the need for a multi-level rethinking of TVET policy and practice. At the curriculum level, there is a clear need to embed dialogical and participatory pedagogies that enable learners to connect their education to their lived realities. This requires moving beyond top-down curriculum design toward more inclusive processes that incorporate student and alumni perspectives. At the institutional level, strengthening linkages between TVET colleges, industry, and community organisations is critical to supporting more meaningful transitions into employment and entrepreneurship. The absence of such linkages, as highlighted by participants, contributes to the disconnect between qualification and opportunity. Expanding support structures, including career guidance and post-graduation support, is equally important in addressing the challenges faced by graduates. At the policy level, the findings suggest the need to reconsider dominant success metrics in TVET. Rather than focusing solely on employment outcomes, there is value in recognising broader indicators such as learner agency, community engagement, and the capacity for critical participation. This aligns with emerging international perspectives that position vocational education as a vehicle for social justice and inclusive development, rather than merely a tool for labour market insertion (Moodie et al., 2019).

Toward a transformative vision of TVET

Taken together, the findings and their implications point to the need for a fundamental reimagining of TVET. While current systems often prioritise efficiency and economic alignment, in this study I demonstrate the importance of integrating humanising, participatory, and justice-oriented approaches into vocational education. In this regard, the South African case offers broader insights into global debates on the purpose of TVET. As systems worldwide grapple with issues of graduate precarity, curriculum relevance, and inclusion, the need for approaches that foreground learner voice, critical consciousness, and collective agency becomes increasingly evident. The challenge, therefore, is not only to reform existing structures but to rethink the underlying assumptions that shape vocational education, moving toward models that recognise learners as active participants in both their own development and the transformation of society.

Conclusion

In this study, I set out to examine how and whether TVET curricula enable conscientisation and social action, using the experiences of NC(V) graduates in South Africa. The findings reveal three key insights. First, there is a persistent misalignment between curriculum intentions and post-graduation realities, with graduates facing significant barriers to employment, further education, and entrepreneurship. Second, the current curriculum and pedagogical practices provide limited opportunities for dialogical engagement and critical reflection, thereby constraining the development of critical consciousness. Third, despite these

constraints, participatory engagement through PAR processes enabled graduates to develop collective awareness and initiate early forms of agency and action. Together, these findings demonstrate that while existing TVET structures often fall short of their transformative promise, alternative pedagogical approaches can create conditions for empowerment and social engagement.

This study contributes to the growing body of scholarship on vocational education by foregrounding graduate voice in a Freirean framework, offering an empirically grounded critique of curriculum misalignment and its implications for social justice. In doing so, it extends beyond dominant employability-focused narratives and aligns with emerging international debates that call for a broader understanding of vocational education as a site of human development, agency, and inclusion (Ballantyne, 2025; Moodie et al., 2019). Furthermore, by integrating Participatory Action Research with critical pedagogy, the study demonstrates how research itself can function as a transformative process, enabling participants to move from being passive recipients of training to active agents in shaping their educational and socio-economic trajectories.

The findings carry important practical implications for policy and practice. There is a need for curriculum reform that moves beyond narrow technical training to incorporate dialogical, contextually relevant, and socially responsive learning approaches. TVET institutions should create structured spaces for student and alumni participation in curriculum development and institutional decision-making, ensuring that programmes reflect lived realities and evolving socio-economic conditions. Strengthening linkages between colleges, industry, and community organisations is also essential if we are to support more meaningful transitions into employment and entrepreneurship. In addition, embedding entrepreneurship education, life skills, and community-based learning within the curriculum can enhance both economic and social outcomes for graduates.

While this study is situated in the South African context, its insights have broader relevance for TVET systems globally, many of which face similar challenges of graduate precarity, curriculum relevance, and inclusion. Since international research highlights increasingly the limitations of purely employability-driven models, this study reinforces the need to reimagine vocational education as a transformative space that fosters critical consciousness, collective agency, and social justice. Ultimately, realising this vision requires not only policy reform but a fundamental shift in how vocational education is conceptualised—from a mechanism of labour market insertion to a practice of freedom that enables individuals and communities to shape their own futures.

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