The Challenges of Implementing a Humanising Pedagogy in Technical Vocational Education and Training Colleges in South Africa

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Abstract

This article explores the challenges of implementing a humanising pedagogy in South Africa's technical and vocational education and training (TVET) colleges, with a focus on barriers to fostering critical consciousness and student empowerment. While grounded in Paulo Freire's critical pedagogy, the study extends this framework by incorporating the capabilities approach, which emphasises education's role in expanding freedoms and opportunities for human flourishing. Drawing on data from learning cycle group meetings—used both for data generation and critical reflection—the study identifies key structural, pedagogical, and socio-economic constraints. These include the rigid structure of the National Certificate (Vocational) (NC[V]) curriculum, insufficient teacher preparation for transformative pedagogies, and persistent inequalities that undermine student agency. By integrating Freirean praxis with the capabilities approach, the article calls for pedagogies that move beyond content delivery to support students' well-being, aspirations, and agency. It argues that fostering epistemic justice and participatory learning in TVET can enhance students' capabilities, equipping them not only with technical skills but also with the capacity to critically engage with and transform their socio-economic realities. The findings contribute to broader debates on socially just pedagogies and the developmental role of TVET.

Keywords: humanising pedagogy; technical and vocational education and training (TVET); critical pedagogy; transformative learning environments

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Introduction and Contextual Background

In post-apartheid South Africa, technical and vocational education and training (TVET) colleges occupy a contradictory space: They are positioned as instruments for economic redress and social inclusion, yet remain structurally disempowering and under-resourced. While intended to alleviate youth unemployment and address historical inequalities, TVET institutions are shaped by policy choices rooted in neoliberal austerity, a deindustrialised economy, and a labour market that increasingly devalues vocational qualifications (Commission of Inquiry into Higher Education and Training 2017; Vally and Motala 2014). Within this constrained context, students from marginalised communities enter TVET with aspirations for upward mobility (Powell 2012), only to encounter rigid curricula, under-prepared lecturers, and an education system that seldom engages their lived realities (Majola, Powell, and Jordaan 2024).

This article interrogates the challenges of implementing a humanising pedagogy in South African TVET colleges by drawing on Paulo Freire's critical pedagogy and the human capabilities approach advanced by Amartya Sen (1985, 2004, 2005) and Melanie Walker (2005, 2008). Freire's work compels us to address both the "internal contradiction" of dehumanising, banking-model pedagogies within classrooms and the "external contradiction" of an oppressive socio-economic order that limits the possibilities for liberation and critical agency. However, much of the discourse on pedagogy in TVET remains focused on narrow technical competence and employability, sidestepping questions of justice, agency, and transformation (Powell and McGrath 2019). This article contends that implementing a humanising pedagogy in TVET demands not only classroom-based dialogical methods, but also a broader reckoning with how macro-level forces—neoliberal policies, systemic underfunding, and structural unemployment—constrain both educators and students.

The capabilities approach is used in this article not as a supplement to Freire, but as a complementary framework that helps to conceptualise how social, economic, and institutional conditions affect students' capacity to flourish. Where Freire speaks to pedagogy, consciousness, and political awakening, the capabilities approach enables an assessment of whether students have the substantive freedoms and opportunities to convert educational experiences into meaningful life outcomes. Together, these frameworks offer a more holistic critique of TVET and a more robust vision for transformation—one that centres epistemic justice, student agency, and the need for structural change.

This article is based on qualitative data drawn from learning cycle group (LCG) meetings, conducted as part of a PhD study, with National Certificate (Vocational) (NC[V]) graduates in the Eastern Cape (Majola 2024). Through participatory engagement with these graduates, the study examines how institutional, curricular, and socio-economic barriers frustrate efforts to implement a truly humanising pedagogy (Majola, Powell, and Jordaan 2024). The aim is not to romanticise critical pedagogy or downplay the vocational mandate of TVET, but to reimagine how vocational learning

can be aligned with the broader goal of human development. In doing so, the article contributes to ongoing debates on socially just pedagogies, and the urgent need to transform TVET into a space of empowerment, rather than containment.

Humanising Pedagogy in TVET

Freire's philosophy of education is grounded in a profound commitment to human dignity, agency, and the transformation of oppressive social structures. His concept of humanising pedagogy is built on two interrelated critiques: the internal contradiction of the "banking model" of education, which positions students as passive recipients of knowledge, and the external contradiction of capitalist and colonial systems that reproduce inequality through education (Freire 1970, 1974). For Freire, education must go beyond individual enlightenment—it must become a collective process of naming, knowing, and transforming the world. This vision demands a pedagogy that is not only dialogical and participatory but also insurrectionary in its intent: a means of disrupting the reproduction of injustice both inside and outside the classroom.

In the context of South Africa's TVET colleges, Freire's ideas acquire renewed relevance. The TVET system, born out of post-apartheid policy aspirations, has increasingly become a space shaped by neoliberal imperatives: a skills-first logic that prioritises employability, industry responsiveness, and technicist curricula (Majola 2024; Ngcwangu 2019; Vally and Motala 2014). This narrow orientation marginalises broader educational goals such as critical consciousness, personal agency, and socio-political engagement—precisely the dimensions Freire identifies as central to humanising education. Rather than serving as a springboard for empowerment, TVET risks functioning as a containment site, where marginalised students are trained for low-wage, precarious employment in a fragmented economy that offers few real opportunities.

However, Freire's framework offers more than a critique. It provides a radical pedagogical vision that can be reimagined within the TVET context—not by turning TVET into a "mini-university", but by exploring how dialogical and participatory practices can be integrated into vocational instruction (Majola, Powell, and Jordaan 2024). Humanising pedagogy in TVET does not require abandoning technical skills; it requires embedding them within a curriculum and teaching approach that values students' lived experiences, supports reflection on structural conditions, and invites collective action (Vimbelo and Bayaga 2023, 2024). This might involve problem-posing pedagogies in practical subjects, collaborative projects that address real-world community issues, or classroom dialogue that foregrounds the socio-economic contexts shaping vocational work itself.

While Freire's original work focused on literacy education in rural Brazil, its resonance with South African TVET is striking: Both deal with populations excluded from elite education; both operate in contexts of systemic inequality; and both face the tension between education as liberation and education as labour preparation (Freire 1970, 1974;

Lima 2022). Freire's insistence on education as a political act, one that must confront and transform reality, remains urgent in a TVET system shaped by underfunding, curriculum rigidity, and the shadow of deindustrialisation. To humanise TVET, then, is not merely to adopt a new teaching technique—it is to reclaim education as a space for dignity, agency, and justice.

Structural Barriers to Humanising Pedagogy in TVET

The structural barriers to implementing a humanising pedagogy in South African TVET colleges are not merely institutional or pedagogical—they are fundamentally political. The design and functioning of the TVET system are the products of decades of policy decisions shaped by global neoliberalism, post-apartheid state restructuring, and the legacy of apartheid-era vocational tracking. Rather than being resourced and positioned as transformative sites of development and inclusion, TVET colleges have been systematically underfunded, bureaucratised, and stripped of their potential to offer more than narrow occupational training (Commission of Inquiry into Higher Education and Training 2017; McGrath et al. 2020; Vally and Motala 2014).

Freire's notion of the "external contradiction" reminds us that education cannot be detached from the socio-economic systems in which it is embedded. In South Africa, the broader economic context—marked by deindustrialisation, youth unemployment, and widening inequality—undermines the possibility of vocational education serving as a genuine pathway to empowerment. The TVET curriculum, particularly the NC(V), is tightly aligned to short-term labour market demands, privileging task-specific competencies over critical thinking or socio-political awareness. While this may appear practical in theory, in practice it binds students to an economy that is unable or unwilling to absorb them, creating a tragic mismatch between educational intent and socio-economic reality (Ngcwangu 2019; Powell and McGrath 2019).

This contradiction is compounded by curriculum rigidity and policy orthodoxy. The NC(V)'s emphasis on assessment-heavy, compartmentalised learning fragments students' educational experiences and constrains pedagogical flexibility. The standardisation of outcomes and narrow accreditation frameworks leave little room for dialogical or contextualised approaches that would allow students to reflect on their realities or connect their learning to broader social struggles (Majola 2024). In this way, the curriculum not only marginalises critical consciousness but also reinforces what Freire called the banking model of education—a method that deposits skills into students without engaging their agency or creativity (Freire 1970; Porres 2018).

What emerges is a TVET system structurally ill-equipped to support transformative learning: one that prepares students for a labour market that no longer exists in the form envisioned by policymakers (Allais and Ngcwangu 2025). The result is not just pedagogical frustration but existential disillusionment, as students—particularly those from working-class and rural communities—find themselves with qualifications that do not lead to employment, nor equip them to analyse or challenge their exclusion (Majola,

Powell, and Jordaan 2024). The promise of TVET as a mechanism for economic upliftment collapses under the weight of a political economy that offers little to those at its margins.

To respond meaningfully to these structural barriers, efforts to humanise pedagogy in TVET must be accompanied by a critique of the broader economic and policy frameworks that sustain inequality. This requires recognising that the challenges of implementation are not simply due to "resistance to change" or "curricular inertia", but rather to a system functioning precisely as it was designed—to produce minimally employable labour, not critical citizens.

The Role of TVET Lecturers in Humanising Pedagogy

TVET lecturers are central actors in the implementation of a humanising pedagogy; however, they are often under-prepared, under-supported, and systemically constrained in their ability to foster transformative educational experiences (Mahlangu and Mtshali 2024). Unlike schoolteachers or university academics, many TVET lecturers enter the profession through occupational, not pedagogical, pathways. As a result, they may be skilled in their trade but receive limited training in critical or dialogical teaching methodologies (Balwanz and Hlatshwayo 2015; Wilson-Strydom and Walker 2015). This epistemological gap—between content knowledge and pedagogical practice—limits their capacity to move beyond rote instruction and towards practices that engage student agency and critical reflection.

However, the challenge is not merely technical. It is structural and ideological. The curriculum and institutional environment in TVET colleges often reinforce hierarchical teaching models, rigid schedules, and a narrow focus on outcomes-based performance indicators. These bureaucratic constraints disincentivise pedagogical experimentation and favour efficiency over reflection, coverage over engagement, and control over dialogue (Vimbelo and Bayaga 2023, 2024). Consequently, even well-intentioned lecturers are often trapped in a system that does not value or enable the practices Freire described: mutual humanisation, problem-posing education, and co-construction of knowledge (Freire 1970).

Yet, Freire reminds us that teachers, too, are subjects of oppression—and therefore capable of transformation. The lecturer's role in TVET need not be reduced to that of a technocratic transmitter of knowledge (Freire and Horton 1990). Even within a vocational context, educators can find openings to adopt more dialogical, student-centred methods. These include reflective learning journals in practical classes, participatory project-based learning, peer teaching in workshops, and contextualised discussions of the socio-economic relevance of the vocational content being taught. For example, a course in office administration might incorporate a dialogue on the precarious nature of clerical work in post-industrial economies, inviting students to reflect on the conditions of their future employment—not merely the tasks they are expected to perform.

Moreover, Freirean praxis demands not only individual effort but collective change. Supporting TVET lecturers to adopt humanising pedagogies requires institutional commitment to professional development that includes critical pedagogy, participatory methods, and culturally responsive instruction (Freire 1974). This is not about transforming lecturers into public intellectuals, but about enabling them to recognise and respond to the structural injustices that shape their students' lives. As Walker and Boni (2020) argue, teacher development must itself be understood as a process of building capabilities—not only technical or instructional, but also relational, ethical, and political.

Socio-Economic Challenges and Their Impact

The socio-economic challenges that students face in the TVET sector are not peripheral to pedagogy—they are central to it. As Freire (1970) insists, education is never neutral: It is either an instrument of liberation or a mechanism of domination. For many students in South Africa's TVET colleges, structural poverty, unemployment, food insecurity, and inadequate schooling histories combine to shape the conditions under which they learn—and too often, fail to thrive (Powell and McGrath 2019). These students are not only materially disadvantaged but also politically and symbolically marginalised. Their realities call for an education that recognises their humanity, their aspirations, and their right to flourish.

Participants in this study spoke about the everyday struggles that inhibit their ability to engage meaningfully with learning: the burden of having to contribute to household incomes, the lack of basic learning materials, unreliable transport, and a constant sense of urgency to "just get a job". These socio-economic pressures compress the space for reflective learning and severely limit the development of critical consciousness. As one participant shared:

> You just have to pass and hope for a job. There's no time to think about anything else. (LCG Meeting, 2021)

This aligns with Freire's critique that oppressive systems seek to domesticate students—to reduce them to survival, rather than enable their transformation.

It is here that the capabilities approach provides a valuable analytical lens. Developed by Sen (1985) and extended by Walker (2005, 2008), the capabilities approach allows us to understand the ways in which socio-economic deprivations restrict students' real freedoms—their ability to convert educational opportunities into meaningful lives. Freire gives us the pedagogical imperative to humanise; the capabilities approach helps us assess whether the conditions for such humanisation exist. For example, the notion of "capability deprivation" can explain why even the most dialogical classroom cannot succeed if students are too hungry to concentrate or too anxious about financial insecurity to participate.

The integration of these frameworks thus becomes necessary, not because Freire is insufficient, but because the capabilities approach sharpens our understanding of how injustice is materially experienced in education. Freire demands a pedagogy of liberation; Sen and Walker help us understand how institutional and socio-economic arrangements enable—or constrain—that liberation in practice. Together, they make visible the structural violence of inequality that seeps into classrooms and erodes the possibility of truly transformative learning.

Moreover, students' accounts reveal a form of deferred disillusionment. They enter the TVET system with hope, only to find that the promise of employment remains elusive. The NC(V) qualification, in particular, is often viewed as insufficient by employers, leaving students with a credential but no clear pathway to work or further study. As another participant lamented:

> We studied hard for three years, but where are the jobs? Where is the change? (LCG Meeting, 2021)

This disjuncture between aspiration and outcome not only undermines students' faith in the system but erodes their agency—the very agency that Freire insists is central to education as a practice of freedom.

Socio-economic inequality is not an external backdrop to the story of TVET—it is the terrain on which the struggle for humanising pedagogy must be fought. If TVET is to play a meaningful role in advancing social justice, it must confront not only what happens in the classroom, but also the broader political and economic conditions that delimit students' capacity to act, think, and dream.

Institutional and Policy Constraints

Institutional and policy-level constraints present formidable barriers to the implementation of a humanising pedagogy in South Africa's TVET sector. These constraints are not accidental—they are embedded in the design and functioning of the system, reflecting broader ideological commitments to efficiency, accountability, and labour-market responsiveness. While the post-apartheid state has rhetorically committed to transformation and redress, in practice the TVET system has been shaped by austerity, bureaucratic managerialism, and the instrumentalist logic of producing employable graduates for a volatile and shrinking labour market (Ngcwangu 2019; Vally and Motala 2014).

TVET institutions are required to meet performance targets tied to graduation rates, throughput statistics, and employment outcomes—often without regard for the quality of learning, the socio-political development of students, or the broader developmental function of education (Papier et al. 2019). As a result, pedagogy is subordinated to administration, and education becomes reduced to a technocratic exercise in compliance. This logic echoes what Freire (1970) critiqued as the dehumanising

reproduction of dominant interests: education as a tool for adapting the oppressed to a world of inequality, rather than equipping them to challenge and transform it.

Institutionally, the NC(V) curriculum is implemented within rigid frameworks that leave little room for creativity or critical engagement. Lecturers must follow tightly prescribed syllabi, adhere to centralised assessment models, and manage large classes with minimal resources (Majola, Powell, and Jordaan 2024; Vimbelo and Bayaga 2024). Professional development is often generic and decontextualised, lacking any substantive focus on critical pedagogy, cultural responsiveness, or participatory methods (Balwanz and Hlatshwayo 2015). The consequence is a disjuncture between policy ambitions for transformation and the lived pedagogical realities within TVET classrooms.

Moreover, the persistent underfunding of TVET colleges reflects a deeper political prioritisation. The post-apartheid state's continued privileging of university education—both symbolically and financially—has contributed to the marginalisation of the vocational sector (Commission of Inquiry into Higher Education and Training 2017; Soudien 2023). TVET colleges remain under-capitalised, poorly resourced, and disconnected from broader developmental strategies, leaving them structurally incapable of supporting the holistic well-being and intellectual development of their students. From a capabilities perspective, this represents a profound form of capability deprivation: the denial of the institutional support and social resources necessary for students to lead flourishing lives (Sen 1985, 2005; Walker 2005).

To humanise TVET education under these conditions requires more than pedagogical reform—it requires institutional transformation. This means rethinking the metrics of success, challenging the dominance of economic rationality in education policy, and designing systems that value not only what students can do, but who they can become (Sathorar et al. 2023). Freire's vision of education as the "practice of freedom" must be extended to institutional life itself, demanding that colleges become spaces of justice, care, and democratic participation—not just skill delivery mechanisms.

Towards a Humanising Pedagogy in TVET

Despite the structural constraints that characterise South Africa's TVET sector, a shift towards a humanising pedagogy remains not only necessary but possible—if framed as both a pedagogical and systemic transformation. Drawing on Freire's critical pedagogy and the capabilities approach of Sen (1985, 2004) and Walker (2008), this section offers a conceptual map for reimagining TVET not as a technicist pipeline to precarious employment, but as a space for cultivating agency, critical reflection, and human development.

To begin, a humanising pedagogy in TVET must challenge the false dichotomy between "skills" and "thinking". Freire (1970) insists that education must help learners read both "the word and the world", enabling them to not only acquire practical competencies but also interpret, question, and act upon their social realities. In the TVET context, this

does not require abandoning technical content or turning vocational programmes into university-style liberal arts courses. Rather, it involves rethinking how vocational knowledge is taught and to what end. For example, plumbing students might explore water inequality in informal settlements alongside technical training; office administration students might reflect on labour precarity and gendered workplace hierarchies (Majola, Powell, and Jordaan 2024). Such integrative, contextualised learning affirms students' lived experiences while cultivating a sense of social purpose and possibility.

Secondly, from a capabilities perspective, a humanising TVET pedagogy must attend to the broader conditions that enable students to flourish. This means viewing education not only as the transmission of skills but as the expansion of capabilities: real freedoms to live the kind of lives students value and have reason to value (Sen 1985). Pedagogically, this translates into practices that foster student voice, participation, and belonging. It also demands attention to emotional well-being, relational support, and the development of aspirations that are realistic yet expansive (Walker 2018; Wilson-Strydom and Walker 2015). In practical terms, this could involve participatory learning cycles, mentoring relationships, co-designed projects with community relevance, or critical dialogue within vocational modules.

Critically, this pedagogical transformation cannot be achieved solely at the classroom level. Institutions must create the enabling environments necessary for such work: policies that allow for flexible curriculum adaptation, resource allocation for student support, and professional development for lecturers that centres transformative learning, not just instructional efficiency. Leadership at the college and system level must embrace a values-based vision of TVET—one rooted in social justice, not just economic responsiveness.

Ultimately, Freire's call for a pedagogy of liberation finds renewed urgency in the TVET sector, where students are often structurally positioned as future workers but rarely as future citizens or agents of change. Integrating this vision with the capabilities approach offers a more complete framing: one that understands students not only as economic actors but as human beings with aspirations, histories, and untapped potential. A truly humanising TVET system would therefore aim not merely to prepare students for work, but to equip them for life—and for the collective project of social transformation.

Research Process and Data Generation

The methodological foundation of this study is rooted in participatory action research (PAR)—a form of enquiry that is not only about generating knowledge but also about transforming the conditions under which knowledge is produced and lived. Aligned with Freire's (1970, 1994) emancipatory vision of education, PAR situates participants as co-researchers in a collective process of reflection, dialogue, and action. In the context of South African TVET, where students' voices are often marginalised and their

agency suppressed, this approach is not simply methodological—it is political (Majola 2024). It affirms the epistemic authority of students and frames research as a space for conscientisation and liberation.

Data for this study were generated through a series of learning cycle group (LCG) meetings, conducted with 15 NC(V) graduates in Gqeberha. These meetings operated as both data-generation platforms and pedagogical encounters. Unlike conventional focus groups, LCGs are structured around cycles of shared reflection, storytelling, questioning, and meaning-making. Participants are not "subjects" of research, but co-investigators of their own conditions. This approach echoes Freire and Horton's (1990) notion of making "the road by walking"—learning through dialogical engagement and collective praxis.

Participant selection was purposive, aimed at capturing a diverse range of student experiences across "race", gender, geography, and educational background. This reflects the capabilities approach's insistence on contextual specificity: the recognition that individual capabilities are shaped by deeply embedded social, cultural, and economic variables (Walker 2005). The diversity of voices enriched the collective enquiry, enabling participants to both affirm and contest each other's narratives as they made sense of the constraints and possibilities within the TVET system.

Thematic analysis was employed, guided by Freirean and capabilities-informed lenses. Transcripts of the LCG sessions were analysed to identify recurring themes related to agency, disempowerment, aspirations, structural barriers, and educational encounters. This process was iterative and dialogical; emerging interpretations were brought back to participants for validation and expansion, ensuring that meaning was co-constructed rather than imposed. In doing so, the research not only documented students' experiences but also became a space for them to critically reflect on and begin to reimagine their relationship to education, work, and society.

The methodological choices in this study reflect a commitment to epistemic justice—a core concern of both Freire and Walker. Freire (1970) argues that the oppressed must reclaim their right to name the world; the capabilities approach expands this by asking whether individuals have the real freedoms to participate in meaning-making and to shape their futures. Through PAR and LCGs, this study operationalises these principles, foregrounding student voice not as anecdote, but as theory-in-the-making.

The research process is not peripheral to the study's argument—it enacts it. It demonstrates that even within a constrained system such as TVET, spaces can be carved out for democratic engagement, critical reflection, and transformative learning. It is through such grounded praxis that the promise of a humanising pedagogy begins to take shape.

Discussion of the Findings of the Study

The narratives shared by NC(V) graduates during the learning cycle group meetings reveal a deeply layered experience of educational marginalisation—one that extends beyond classrooms and into the structural conditions of life. These accounts illustrate Freire's (1970) diagnosis of oppression: that students are not only denied participation in their education but are also systematically disempowered by economic, institutional, and epistemic forces that shape how they learn, live, and imagine their futures.

Participants spoke of entering the TVET system with hope—believing in the promise of education as a means of breaking cycles of poverty—only to encounter a reality marked by overcrowded classrooms, absent lecturers, inflexible curricula, and disappointing post-graduation outcomes. One participant, Nandiz, reflected: "My dreams haven't come true because I don't have a permanent job yet. … All this knowledge and learning we went through is not enough to change my life." Such testimonies are not individual failures; they represent what Sen (1985) and Walker (2005) call capability deprivation—the structural denial of opportunities to convert education into a valued and viable life path.

Many participants recounted how socio-economic pressures shaped their educational experiences. The necessity to support families, the burden of transport costs, the lack of digital infrastructure, and the absence of consistent teaching all contributed to a fragmented and survivalist mode of learning. As participant Skwez put it: "We would waste our bus fare to go to school, and the lecturers do not come. … You lose interest just like that." These conditions reflect both Freire's external contradiction—an unjust economic order that devalues the lives of the poor—and the capabilities approach's attention to the layered constraints that inhibit the exercise of agency.

Importantly, these testimonies also point to pedagogical failure. The NC(V) curriculum's emphasis on rigid assessment, rote memorisation, and narrow task-oriented learning left little space for critical engagement. Students described feeling overwhelmed, unsupported, and disengaged. As participant Mblatswaz explained: "Doing seven subjects is very hectic. … We always stressed about exams and submitting assignments. … There was no time to think." This aligns with Freire's critique of the banking model, where learning is mechanistic and alienating, stripping students of their power to interrogate, challenge, or transform their world.

At the same time, the findings reveal students' resilience, resourcefulness, and latent criticality. Despite systemic neglect, many participants demonstrated an emergent desire to question their conditions. They asked why TVET was not leading to employment, why some lecturers treated them with disdain, and why their communities remained unchanged. These moments of questioning represent the stirrings of *conscientização*—the awakening of critical consciousness that Freire saw as the first step in liberation. What was lacking, however, was a pedagogical and institutional environment capable of nurturing these insights into action.

In Freirean terms, the educational experience of these students is one of unfinished humanity—a state where the potential for critical agency exists but remains unfulfilled due to the repressive nature of both the curriculum and the socio-economic order. The capabilities approach adds conceptual clarity to this state by foregrounding the role of resources, institutional design, and social conversion factors in shaping the outcomes of educational participation. In this sense, the findings support the integration of both Freirean pedagogy and the capabilities approach: Together, they offer a powerful framework for understanding not just what is wrong, but what might be done differently.

The students' disillusionment, then, is not a sign that critical pedagogy has failed—it is evidence that it was never truly attempted within this system. Their voices call for a new educational contract: one that values them not only as future workers but as whole human beings with the right to dignity, agency, and the capacity to shape the world around them.

Bridging Freirean Pedagogy and the Capabilities Approach

The theoretical convergence of Freire's critical pedagogy and the capabilities approach is not an attempt to "fix" Freire, but rather to expand the conceptual terrain through which we can understand and respond to the layered crises within South Africa's TVET system. While Freire offers a radical vision of education as a political, relational, and transformative process, the capabilities approach helps to articulate and evaluate whether individuals and institutions possess the freedoms and conditions necessary to enact that vision in practice (Sen 1985, 2004; Walker 2005).

Freire's pedagogy is animated by the imperative of *conscientização*—the awakening of critical consciousness through dialogue, reflection, and collective action. It insists that students are not empty vessels but historical subjects capable of naming, questioning, and transforming their world. However, Freire was also clear that the process of becoming fully human occurs within structures that oppress. It is here that the capabilities approach strengthens the analysis: by enabling us to examine the socio-economic and institutional structures that constrain students' agency and limit the realisation of their potential.

For example, when participants in this study described the constant struggle for transport money, the emotional toll of family poverty, or the sense of betrayal at being "qualified but unemployable", they were not simply expressing frustration—they were giving voice to capability deprivation. That is, despite their educational participation, they lacked the substantive opportunities to convert their learning into valued outcomes. These limitations were not due to individual failure but to a system that structurally restricts the range of possible futures available to working-class youth.

Freire would insist that students must become aware of these structures, critique them, and act to change them. But awareness alone is not enough—particularly when material deprivation, institutional neglect, and policy failures severely limit students' scope for

action. This is where the capabilities approach provides an analytic complement: It enables us to understand how agency is constrained by context, and how the expansion of real freedoms—such as access to functioning institutions, responsive pedagogies, and equitable post-college opportunities—is foundational to justice.

Furthermore, Walker's work (2005, 2008, 2018; Walker and Boni 2020) offers a capabilities-friendly model of education that is explicitly aligned with Freirean values. It foregrounds student voice, well-being, dignity, participation, and democratic deliberation—all central to Freire's call for humanising education. However, it adds a layer of evaluative precision, allowing us to ask not only what education should do, but what it actually enables in real-world conditions. In the South African TVET context, this clarity is vital: It allows us to diagnose not just pedagogical failings, but structural exclusions, and to build a theory of transformation that is both radical and realistic.

By bringing Freire and the capabilities approach into dialogue, this article proposes a dual framework for reimagining TVET: one that speaks to the educational processes of liberation, and the structural conditions of flourishing. It is through this synthesis that we can both critique the present and imagine alternative futures—futures where TVET students are not only equipped with skills but empowered to lead lives they have reason to value.

Curriculum Constraints and the Banking Model

The NC(V) curriculum is a central site where the contradictions of the South African TVET system are most acutely felt. Designed with an emphasis on technical proficiency and workplace readiness, the curriculum reflects a dominant policy logic that equates education with immediate economic utility (Mabunda and Frick 2020). While skill development is undoubtedly important, this narrow, instrumentalist framing reduces vocational education to the function of producing compliant labour for an economy that is itself fragmented, precarious, and exclusionary (Ngcwangu 2019; Vally and Motala 2014).

This logic mirrors what Freire (1970) critiques as the "banking model" of education: a system where knowledge is "deposited" into students, who are treated as passive recipients rather than active meaning-makers. The NC(V) curriculum, with its heavily assessment-driven structure and rigid subject silos, reinforces this model. Students are expected to memorise, repeat, and perform—to complete tasks rather than question systems. As participant Moshwe reflected: "We were constantly under pressure to prepare for exams and meet assignment deadlines. … There was no space for reflection or critical thinking." This is not merely an issue of workload; it is a pedagogical orientation that suppresses reflection, creativity, and critical agency.

From a capabilities approach perspective, such a curriculum represents a form of epistemic and aspirational deprivation. It limits the kinds of beings and doings that students can imagine or pursue through their education. Rather than expanding freedom,

the curriculum confines it. Participants in this study frequently described feeling disconnected from the purpose of their learning, unsure of its value in the absence of employment, and disillusioned by its failure to support their broader development as people. Participant Zee explained: "My course was based on Office Administration … but I do not feel vested to start my own business. … The information I learned is not enough to start something." Here, the absence of pedagogical depth intersects with the absence of economic opportunity, compounding the sense of exclusion.

In Freirean terms, the curriculum is not neutral—it is a tool for either oppression or liberation. A curriculum that prioritises compliance, standardisation, and technical repetition without space for dialogue or contextualisation effectively reproduces the very inequalities it purports to address. At best, it prepares students for underemployment; at worst, it stifles their hope. For participant Nandiz, this was clear: "I thought … learning would help me change my life … but I don't have a permanent job yet."

Moreover, the structuring of the NC(V) curriculum leaves little space for localised relevance, community engagement, or interdisciplinary exploration—elements that are central to both Freirean and capabilities-based pedagogies. As a result, students are deprived not only of meaningful intellectual development but also of the opportunity to reflect critically on their social and economic realities. This disconnect is compounded by the lack of pedagogical autonomy afforded to lecturers, who often feel bound to "deliver content" rather than co-create knowledge with students.

Transforming this model requires more than curriculum reform—it requires a fundamental reimagining of what counts as knowledge, who is authorised to produce it, and how it is assessed. A capabilities-oriented curriculum would embed critical reflection, student voice, ethical reasoning, and contextual understanding alongside technical learning. It would allow students to see themselves as both workers and citizens, both competent and critical. Only by challenging the curriculum's banking logic—and its alignment with a dehumanising labour market—can TVET begin to fulfil its emancipatory promise.

Teachers' Lack of Reliable Attendance and the Implications for Student Motivation

One of the most demoralising themes to emerge from the learning cycle group meetings was the chronic unreliability of TVET lecturers—frequent absenteeism, late arrivals, and poor communication. Participants expressed profound frustration at having invested scarce financial and emotional resources to attend college, only to find that lessons were cancelled without notice or that lecturers failed to show up altogether. As participant Skwez shared: "We would waste our bus fare to go to school, and the lecturers do not come. … We were supposed to attend five or six classes a day, but maybe got two."

This is not a mere administrative oversight. It represents a breach of the pedagogical relationship—a collapse of the trust, care, and dialogical presence that are essential to Freire's (1970) vision of education as a humanising encounter. When teachers are absent, not only physically but pedagogically, students experience the institution as indifferent to their struggles and uninterested in their growth. In Freirean terms, this is a form of dehumanisation: Students are treated not as subjects of learning but as numbers to be processed, tolerated, or abandoned.

The implications for student motivation are severe. Participants described feelings of disillusionment, loss of purpose, and a growing sense that their education was meaningless. As one participant remarked: "You enrol in college with determination … but when the lecturers stop showing up, your passion also fades. Some students just give up" (LCG meeting, 16 October 2021). These accounts mirror what Boni and Walker (2013) describe as capability erosion: the slow degradation of students' capacity to aspire, to act with confidence, and to imagine alternative futures.

From a capabilities approach perspective, regular and engaged teaching is not a luxury—it is a conversion factor that enables students to transform educational inputs into meaningful outcomes. When this factor is missing, the value of education is fundamentally compromised. Without dependable, caring, and critically engaged educators, students' capabilities are curtailed—not only in terms of knowledge acquisition, but in their ability to develop confidence, criticality, and social agency.

This failure also undermines the affective and relational dimensions of education. Freire emphasised that humanising pedagogy is rooted in love, humility, and commitment to students' liberation. When these are absent—when students are met with silence, absence, or neglect—the educational space becomes alienating, reinforcing the very marginalisation that TVET was meant to address. To foster motivation and trust, TVET institutions must treat pedagogical presence as central, not incidental. Reliable attendance, dialogical engagement, and care are not just professional obligations—they are the foundation of any effort to humanise education.

Resource Shortages and the Marginalisation of NC(V) Students

The material deprivations experienced by NC(V) students in South Africa's TVET colleges cannot be understood as isolated logistical challenges; they are systemic manifestations of structural inequality. Participants in this study described a persistent lack of basic resources—unreliable access to textbooks, overcrowded computer labs, delayed distribution of study materials, and broken or outdated equipment. These conditions signal more than institutional inefficiency; they reflect a deeper marginalisation of the vocational sector, where poor students are expected to make do with less while still performing to standardised expectations.

For students such as participant Nenez, who recalled the frustration of "overcrowded labs and poor access to learning tools", these shortages became a daily obstacle to

learning. Participant Seyiz added that "textbooks often arrived late or in poor condition", further impeding their ability to study independently or stay engaged with the curriculum. Such accounts reflect a broader reality: Resource inequality is not just a constraint on academic performance—it is an assault on dignity, hope, and educational justice.

From a capabilities approach perspective, these resource deficits are not just unfortunate circumstances; they are forms of capability deprivation (Sen 1985; Walker 2005). Students cannot convert their presence in college into meaningful learning or post-college opportunities if they lack the means to participate fully. Education, in this context, becomes a hollow promise—one that offers certification without empowerment, and participation without progress.

Freire (1970) insists that education must begin from the lived realities of students. In a context where those realities are shaped by poverty, exclusion, and state neglect, a truly humanising pedagogy must confront—not ignore—these material conditions. The lack of resources is not a neutral deficit; it is a political expression of how society values (or devalues) vocational students, particularly those from working-class and black communities. As such, students internalise not only material scarcity but also a sense of symbolic marginalisation—an implicit message that their education, like their future, is of lesser importance.

These material conditions also shape the emotional and psychological experience of education. Several participants described feelings of shame, anxiety, and discouragement, knowing they were expected to succeed in an environment that offered them neither tools nor support. This emotional toll further constrains their ability to develop critical consciousness or maintain motivation, reinforcing what Walker (2018) and Wilson-Strydom and Walker (2015) identify as a deep form of educational injustice. Addressing resource shortages in TVET is therefore not just a technical or managerial issue—it is a matter of educational ethics and social repair. A humanising TVET system would ensure that all students have access to the tools necessary not only to meet assessment demands, but to engage fully, reflect critically, and pursue their aspirations with confidence.

The Need for Curriculum Transformation: Critical Engagement and Contextual Relevance

The findings of this study underscore an urgent call for curriculum transformation in South Africa's TVET sector—one that goes beyond adjustments to syllabi or the integration of digital tools. The real issue is structural: A curriculum designed around narrow occupational outputs fails to speak to the lived realities, cultural contexts, and broader aspirations of the students it serves. It not only alienates students from their education but disconnects learning from the very world it is supposed to prepare them for.

Freire (1970) argues that curriculum must emerge from and respond to the social context of learners. He insists that meaningful education involves not only the transfer of knowledge but the co-creation of critical understanding rooted in students' histories, conditions, and dreams. In the context of TVET, however, curriculum remains decontextualised and rigid—prioritising compliance with national qualification frameworks over engagement with local needs, student voice, or social transformation.

Participants in this study described how the curriculum often felt irrelevant, abstract, and disconnected from both their interests and the challenges facing their communities. This disconnect is not just pedagogical—it is political. It reflects a system structured around a one-size-fits-all model that fails to recognise the diversity of student backgrounds, aspirations, and futures. Such a model not only limits knowledge acquisition but actively undermines the formation of critical consciousness and the cultivation of agency.

The capabilities approach adds further depth to this critique by helping us understand how students' functionings—their ability to achieve what they value—are curtailed when the curriculum lacks relevance, responsiveness, and critical reflexivity. As Walker (2008) notes, a curriculum that does not enable students to see themselves as meaning-makers in the world they inhabit contributes to capability failure, stunting intellectual and emotional development.

Curriculum transformation, then, must be both content-focused and purpose-driven. It should: integrate locally relevant themes, allowing students to examine the socio-economic and environmental conditions that shape their lives; create space for dialogue, reflexivity, and collaborative problem-solving, encouraging students to link their vocational training to broader societal issues; embrace multidisciplinary and participatory approaches, recognising that technical knowledge alone cannot equip students to navigate complex realities. This is not a call to abandon skills training—it is a call to enrich and situate it. A curriculum that enables students to analyse the politics of work, interrogate gendered labour practices, question economic inequality, and imagine alternative futures would move beyond mere employability to genuine emancipatory potential. As Nkomo (2013) and Ramphele (2008) remind us, educational transformation in South Africa must address the structural and historical dimensions of inequality—not merely their symptoms. A humanising curriculum does just that: It restores the political and ethical core of vocational education, grounding it in the lived experiences and aspirations of those historically excluded from the promises of both education and work.

The Socio-Economic Context: The Intersections of Class, "Race", and Inequality

The challenges faced by NC(V) students in South Africa cannot be fully understood without acknowledging the enduring legacies of "race", class, and spatial inequality that

continue to shape educational and economic opportunity. The intersections of these structural forces reproduce cycles of disadvantage that TVET students are expected to escape, often without the support, recognition, or conditions necessary to do so. As Seekings and Nattrass (2006) argue, post-apartheid South Africa has failed to dismantle the racialised and class-based foundations of inequality; instead, these dynamics have been repackaged under new forms of market-driven exclusion.

TVET students—predominantly black, working-class youth from under-resourced communities—carry the compounded burden of historical dispossession and contemporary marginalisation. Their enrolment in vocational education is often shaped less by choice than by constraint: inadequate prior schooling, restricted access to universities, and the state's promotion of TVET as a developmental solution for those considered "not academic". This institutionalised tracking echoes apartheid-era policies that sought to steer black learners towards manual and subordinate roles, and it reinforces a hierarchy of knowledge that privileges the theoretical over the practical, the academic over the vocational.

Freire (1970) cautions against systems that dehumanise learners by stripping them of the right to question, reflect, and act upon their realities. The current structure of TVET reproduces this dehumanisation through its narrow curriculum, minimal engagement with social critique, and weak articulation into meaningful work or higher education. Students are positioned as passive recipients of predetermined futures rather than active participants in shaping their lives. This not only limits their critical agency but also denies them full personhood within the educational space.

From a capabilities approach perspective, such conditions represent a profound form of structural capability deprivation. Students are not only denied economic resources, but also social recognition, epistemic dignity, and the institutional support required to flourish. The intersection of class and "race" becomes particularly stark here: The very students for whom TVET is marketed as a tool of empowerment are those most consistently failed by its design, funding, and social value. As one participant observed, "We thought this education would change our lives, but it feels like society doesn't care if we succeed" (LCG meeting, 16 October 2021).

This sense of abandonment is not incidental—it is systemic. It reflects a broader neoliberal logic of meritocracy, where students are expected to "make it" on their own, regardless of the historical and material constraints they face. In this way, the TVET system individualises failure while masking the structural roots of inequality. A Freirean reading demands that we unmask these contradictions and resist pedagogical models that adapt students to injustice rather than prepare them to challenge it.

To build a humanising TVET, educators and institutions must explicitly confront the intersections of "race", class, gender, and geography in their pedagogical approaches and institutional cultures (Mahlangu and Mtshali 2024; Vimbelo and Bayaga 2024).

This includes recognising students' lived experiences as legitimate sources of knowledge, creating spaces for critical reflection on systemic injustice, and designing programmes that empower students not only as workers, but as citizens and change agents.

A Call for Reform and a Humanising Pedagogy

The findings of this study affirm that meaningful reform of the South African TVET system cannot be achieved through incremental adjustments to curriculum content, lecturer development, or administrative procedures alone. Instead, what is required is a radical rethinking of the purpose, structure, and pedagogy of vocational education—one that centres human dignity, critical agency, and socio-economic justice. This is a call for transformation not just in what TVET teaches, but in how it conceives of its students, its responsibilities, and its role in post-apartheid society.

A humanising pedagogy, as drawn from Paulo Freire, demands that education be an emancipatory process—one in which students are not only recipients of knowledge but co-creators of meaning, capable of transforming the conditions that oppress them. In the TVET context, this means resisting the instrumentalist logic that sees students as future labour units and instead embracing their full humanity: their histories, their struggles, their aspirations, and their right to participate in shaping their futures.

At the same time, the capabilities approach reminds us that pedagogy alone cannot transform lives if the structural conditions that enable human flourishing are absent. To humanise TVET is to create a system that recognises and addresses the multiple conversion factors—social, economic, institutional, and pedagogical—that shape students' ability to turn educational opportunities into meaningful and dignified lives. This requires investment in infrastructure, support for lecturers, flexible curricula, and the creation of post-college pathways that are visible, viable, and just.

Such reform must also be epistemic. It must challenge the inherited hierarchies of knowledge that devalue vocational learning and marginalise students' lived experience. A truly transformed TVET would treat contextually grounded, student-informed, and socially engaged learning as central—not peripheral—to educational quality. It would position TVET not as a second-tier system for those excluded from university, but as a distinct and vital space of possibility—capable of producing both skilled practitioners and critical citizens.

This article joins a growing body of scholarship: Majola, Powell, and Jordaan (2024), Powell and McGrath (2019), Walker and Boni (2020), Dale and Hyslop-Margison (2010), Porres, Wildemeersch, and Simons (2014), Porres (2018) among others, that insists on reclaiming the transformative mandate of vocational education. Through the integration of Freirean pedagogy and the capabilities approach, it is possible to envision and begin building a TVET system that does not merely reproduce existing inequalities,

but actively works to dismantle them. Reform, in this context, is not about efficiency—it is about liberation.

Conclusion

This article has critically examined the challenges of implementing a humanising pedagogy in South Africa's TVET colleges by drawing on Paulo Freire's radical vision of education as the practice of freedom and the capabilities approach as a framework for evaluating structural constraints. The study has shown that NC(V) graduates experience the TVET system not as a space of empowerment, but as a site of alienation, where socio-economic marginalisation, rigid curricula, institutional neglect, and pedagogical disengagement converge to stifle agency, dignity, and hope.

Through a Freirean lens, these experiences reflect both internal contradictions—the dehumanising pedagogical practices embedded in technicist curricula—and external contradictions—the broader political economy that produces underfunded institutions and underprepared educators within a neoliberal framework. The capabilities approach enriches this analysis by revealing the material and institutional conversion factors that constrain students' real freedoms and limit their capacity to transform educational participation into valued life outcomes.

Together, these frameworks call for a new educational paradigm: one that does not position TVET students as passive recipients of market-driven training, but as subjects of knowledge, agents of change, and citizens with the right to flourish. A humanising pedagogy in TVET must be grounded in social justice, sustained by critical dialogue, and supported by institutions that are responsive to students' lived realities.

Such transformation will not be easy. It demands not only curricular and pedagogical reform but also political will, structural investment, and a redefinition of what vocational education is for. But as the voices of NC(V) graduates make clear, the stakes are too high for incrementalism. Their experiences call for an education system that listens, reflects, and acts—one that recognises that to educate is to humanise, and to humanise is to transform.

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