Exploring Traces of Humanising Pedagogy in South African TVET Colleges: A Transformative Approach

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Abstract

Humanising pedagogy (HP) offers a transformative framework for addressing deeply entrenched challenges in South Africa's Technical and Vocational Education and Training (TVET) colleges, particularly in fostering student inclusion and rethinking lecturer-centred instructional practices. This exploratory qualitative study investigates the perspectives of six TVET lecturers and fifteen students across two Eastern Cape colleges, examining both the possibilities and limitations of embedding HP in teaching and learning. Guided by a Freirean theoretical lens, data were generated through reflective dialogues with lecturers and learning cycle group meetings with students, which provided structured spaces for dialogical reflection and shared meaning-making. The findings reveal a complex interplay between the aspirational ideals of HP and the systemic constraints faced by lecturers and students. While participants recognised HP's potential to promote inclusive, student-centred pedagogies, institutional barriers such as rigid curricula and limited professional development hinder its broader implementation. The study underscores the importance of professional learning initiatives that equip lecturers with strategies for fostering critical engagement and social justice in TVET education. By incorporating both lecturer and student voices, this research contributes to the discourse on humanising pedagogy and highlights the need for institutional and policy reforms that support reflective practices and student agency in shaping educational experiences.

Keywords: exploratory qualitative study; Freirean pedagogy: student inclusion; student-centred instruction; TVET; humanising pedagogy

Introduction

The South African Technical and Vocational Education and Training (TVET) sector continues to face enduring challenges that undermine its potential to contribute meaningfully to social transformation and economic development. Persistent inequalities rooted in the country's colonial and apartheid history manifest in the exclusion of marginalised students and inequitable resource distribution across institutions (Powell and McGrath 2019). These structural inequities are compounded by entrenched lecturer-centred instructional practices, which often prioritise curriculum compliance over critical engagement and student empowerment (Vimbelo and Bayaga 2024). Recent national data illustrate the scale of these challenges: in 2022, South Africa's 50 public TVET colleges enrolled approximately 726 000 students, yet completion rates remained below 40%, and employment outcomes for graduates were highly uneven, with many experiencing delayed or precarious labour market entry (Department of Higher Education and Training [DHET] 2021, 2023; Rogan and Papier 2020). Such realities highlight the urgent need for pedagogical approaches that address not only technical skills but also social inclusion and learner agency.

Within this context, humanising pedagogy (HP) has been proposed as a transformative framework for reimagining TVET education. Rooted in Freire's critical pedagogy, HP foregrounds dialogue, mutual respect, and the co-construction of knowledge as means to empower students and foster social justice (Freire 1970). What distinguishes HP from general student-centred teaching is its explicit focus on dismantling oppressive power relations, validating students' lived experiences, and cultivating critical consciousness. Whereas student-centred pedagogy often emphasises individual engagement and differentiated instruction, HP situates learning within broader struggles for equity and justice, making it both relational and political. However, scholars have also cautioned that HP is not without limitations: its dialogical ideals may be difficult to implement in resource-constrained, standardised systems such as South African TVET (Allais 2024; Majola, Rangana, and Geduld 2025), and attempts at "humanisation" may inadvertently burden lecturers with expectations they are not institutionally supported to meet (Kajee 2021). These critiques underscore the importance of examining HP not as a universally positive concept but as a contested framework shaped by context.

This study therefore explored how traces of HP manifest in South African TVET classrooms, with particular attention to how both lecturers and students navigate systemic and institutional constraints. The focus on two Eastern Cape colleges reflects both pragmatic and conceptual considerations: the province contains some of the most socio-economically disadvantaged communities, and its colleges illustrate the tension between rural underfunding and semi-urban institutional inertia. By engaging six lecturers and fifteen students through reflective dialogues and learning cycle group meetings, the study investigated how participants perceive the role of HP in fostering inclusion and shifting from lecturer-centred to student-centred instruction. While

exploratory in scope, the study foregrounds participant voices to examine both the possibilities and the challenges of embedding HP in vocational education.

The research is guided by two key questions: (1) How do TVET lecturers and students perceive the role of HP in fostering student inclusion within their learning environments? (2) How can HP serve as a transformative paradigm for shifting instructional practice in South African TVET colleges?

Theoretical Framework—Humanising Pedagogy

HP has emerged as a response to the dehumanising effects of traditional, hierarchical education systems that perpetuate exclusion and inequality. Rooted in Paulo Freire's *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (1970), HP calls for a shift that centres students' lived experiences, fosters mutual respect, and disrupts the "banking model" of education, where students are reduced to passive recipients of information (Majola, Powell, and Jordaan 2024). The foundational principles of HP dialogue, co-creation of knowledge, and student empowerment challenge dominant power relations and emphasise relational, transformative practices (Majola and Geduld 2025).

Humanising Pedagogy vs. Student-Centred Pedagogy

HP is often conflated with student-centred pedagogy (SCP); however, the two differ in important ways. SCP focuses on learner engagement and instructional adaptation within existing institutional structures. HP, however, is explicitly political: it seeks to dismantle hierarchies, validate students' lived realities, and cultivate critical consciousness (conscientisation) that enables learners to interrogate and transform oppressive conditions (Freire 1970; Vimbelo and Bayaga 2023). In this sense, SCP can be seen as a pedagogical strategy, whereas HP is a justice-oriented educational philosophy.

HP in the South African TVET Context

The relevance of HP to South African TVET education is heightened by persistent inequalities. TVET students, often from marginalised communities, face resource shortages, rigid curricula, and the symbolic violence of an education system that undervalues their experiences (Majola, Powell, and Jordaan 2024; Motala and Vally 2014). For example, studies highlight that rote assessment practices frequently silence student voices, while lecturer-led instruction often prioritises syllabus completion over critical engagement (Mabunda and Frick 2020). However some lecturers have introduced dialogical practices and multilingual teaching to foster inclusivity, demonstrating that even within constraints, HP-inspired practices can reorient learning towards participation and agency (Majola 2025).

Critiques and Limitations of Freirean Pedagogy

While HP's transformative ideals resonate strongly in theory, scholars caution against uncritical adoption. Ellsworth (1989) critiques critical pedagogy for potentially

reproducing authoritarian dynamics under the guise of liberation, while more recent decolonial scholars argue that Freire's framework, though progressive, is embedded in Western epistemologies that may not fully reflect Global South realities (Andreotti 2011). Furthermore, the instrumental goals of vocational education labour market preparation often clash with Freire's emancipatory aims (Allais 2024; Majola, Rangana, and Geduld 2025). The challenge lies in reconciling these tensions without reducing HP to "good teaching practices" or romanticising its potential.

Towards a Reflective and Contextualised HP

HP in TVET requires both theoretical nuance and practical grounding. Reflection, a core element of Freire's praxis, enables lecturers to interrogate their positionality, challenge entrenched classroom hierarchies, and adapt teaching to diverse student realities (Sathorar and Geduld 2021). Structured dialogical approaches such as reflective dialogues with lecturers or group-based learning cycles with students can serve as practical enactments of HP principles. However, their impact is shaped by systemic conditions: underfunding, assessment-driven curricula, and policy pressures that prioritise employability over empowerment (Lutaaya, Mabusela, and Ntshangase 2023). Thus, while HP offers a valuable framework for rethinking pedagogy in South African TVET, its adoption must be understood as partial, contested, and situated. Rather than assuming its universal applicability, this study explores how elements of HP are negotiated in practice, highlighting both enabling possibilities and structural constraints.

Methodology

Research Design

This study adopted an exploratory qualitative research design to investigate how HP is perceived and enacted within South African TVET colleges. The choice of an exploratory design was deliberate, as the integration of HP into vocational education remains under-researched, and the aim of this project was not to test predetermined hypotheses but to generate preliminary insights into the lived experiences of lecturers and students. The interpretivist orientation of the study aligns with Freirean critical pedagogy in its focus on meaning-making, dialogue, and the co-construction of knowledge within specific socio-educational contexts (Creswell 2013).

Participants and Sampling

The study was conducted at two public TVET colleges in the Eastern Cape province of South Africa. These institutions were selected purposively because they reflect two contrasting but representative contexts within the provincial TVET landscape: one a rural college with severe resource constraints, and the other a semi-urban college with comparatively better infrastructure but institutional inertia that often resists pedagogical innovation. Together, these sites provided an opportunity to examine how systemic inequalities manifest differently across educational contexts and how HP principles might be negotiated in both under-resourced and better-resourced environments.

Participants were recruited purposively to ensure they could speak directly to the research questions. Six lecturers, drawn from vocational programmes in engineering, business studies, and hospitality, participated in the study. All had between three and fifteen years of teaching experience in the TVET sector. Fifteen students also took part, representing a mix of programme areas such as engineering, business management, and information technology across the National Certificate (Vocational) (NC[V]) graduates. The student sample reflected diversity in sex (eight female and seven male participants), age (ranging from 26 to 30 years), and socio-economic background, with the majority coming from households with limited or unstable income sources.

Although the sample size was modest, it was consistent with standards in exploratory qualitative research, which prioritise depth of understanding over statistical generalisability. Data saturation was monitored throughout the process, and themes began to stabilise after the fifteenth student participant and the sixth lecturer, indicating that sufficient variation and depth of data had been captured to address the research questions (Guest, Bunce, and Johnson 2006).

Data Collection Procedures

Data were collected over a six-month period between August and November 2021. Two complementary methods were employed: reflective dialogues with lecturers and learning cycle group meetings with students. The reflective dialogues with lecturers were semi-structured, one-on-one sessions designed to create space for critical reflection on teaching practices, classroom power dynamics, and the challenges of fostering student inclusion within a largely lecturer-centred system. Each lecturer participated in two sessions, lasting between 60 and 90 minutes, resulting in a total of twelve reflective dialogues. The dialogues followed a flexible guide informed by Freirean principles of dialogue and praxis, which allowed participants to direct the conversation towards issues most salient to their own professional and institutional realities.

The learning cycle group meetings with students were designed as dialogical spaces where participants could reflect collectively on their learning experiences, feelings of inclusion or exclusion, and perceptions of lecturer practices. Each group comprised between four and six students, and three meetings were held at each of the two colleges, for a total of six sessions. Each meeting lasted approximately 90 minutes and was facilitated in a participatory style that encouraged peer-to-peer interaction and collaborative meaning-making rather than a conventional question–answer format. These group meetings were not focus groups in the conventional sense but drew on Freirean dialogical methods to foreground the students' lived experiences and to treat them as co-researchers in the knowledge construction process. All sessions were audio-recorded with the participants' consent, transcribed verbatim, and anonymised. Field notes were taken during and immediately after each session to capture contextual observations, non-verbal interactions, and researcher reflections that could enrich the later stages of analysis.

Data Analysis

The data were analysed using thematic analysis as outlined by Braun and Clarke (2006), a flexible yet rigorous method well-suited to identifying patterns across qualitative datasets. The analysis followed the six phases recommended by Braun and Clarke. First, the research team engaged in repeated reading of transcripts in order to become immersed in the data and to begin noting initial impressions. Second, systematic coding was undertaken using NVivo software to manage the large volume of textual data. Segments of text relevant to the research questions such as expressions of agency, experiences of exclusion, or reflections on pedagogical practices were coded and grouped for further analysis.

In the third phase, codes were collated into preliminary categories that reflected broader patterns, such as "student voice," "curricular rigidity," and "lecturer agency." During the fourth phase, these categories were reviewed, compared, and refined to ensure internal coherence and to check their relevance across both lecturer and student datasets. The fifth phase involved defining and naming the final themes, which were consolidated into three overarching thematic areas: (1) student agency and participation, (2) pedagogical constraints and lecturer positionality, and (3) systemic and institutional barriers. In the final phase, these themes were developed into a narrative analysis, supported by illustrative quotations from both lecturers and students.

To ensure rigour, a second researcher independently coded 20% of the transcripts. Inter-coder comparison yielded an agreement rate of 85%, and discrepancies were discussed and resolved collaboratively, thereby strengthening the credibility of the coding framework. An audit trail was maintained throughout the process to document analytical decisions, the evolution of codes into themes, and reflexive notes about interpretive choices.

Ethical Considerations and Reflexivity

The study was granted ethical clearance by Nelson Mandela University's Ethics Committee (No. H21-EDU-PGE-021). All participants provided informed consent after being briefed on the objectives of the study, the voluntary nature of their involvement, and their right to withdraw at any stage without consequence. Confidentiality was assured through the use of pseudonyms, and identifying details of institutions and participants were removed from transcripts and reports.

Researcher reflexivity was a central component of the methodology. The first author, who has prior teaching experience in the TVET sector, maintained a reflexive journal throughout the data collection and analysis phases. This practice was used to critically interrogate the researcher's own positionality, assumptions, and potential influence on participant interactions and interpretation of the data (Finlay 2002). Member-checking was conducted by sharing emerging themes with a subset of participants, who confirmed

that the analysis reflected their perspectives accurately. This feedback loop further reinforced the trustworthiness of the findings.

Findings and Discussion

This study explored how elements of HP are experienced in two Eastern Cape TVET colleges. Three overarching themes emerged from the data: (1) student agency and participation, (2) pedagogical constraints and lecturer positionality, and (3) systemic and institutional barriers. Each theme is presented below with illustrative quotations from both lecturers and students. Table 1 below shows the sample of the thematic analysis approach (Braun and Clarke 2006) used to identify recurring patterns, tensions, and insights from the data.

Table 1: Sample coding

Framework Code (Initial Label)	Category (Cluster of Related Codes)	Theme (Final Level)	Illustrative Data Extract
"We are only taught to pass exams"	Rate assessment practices	**Systemic and institutional barriers**	"Most of the time it feels like we are just preparing for tests, not really learning." (Student, College A)
"I try to use isiXhosa sometimes"	Multilingual strategies for inclusion	**Pedagogical constraints and lecturer positionality**	"When I explain in isiXhosa, they engage better, but the curriculum doesn't allow time for that." (Lecturer 3)
"We feel spoken at, not listened to"	Lack of student voice in class	**Student agency and participation**	"It's always the lecturer talking. We hardly get to contribute to the discussion." (Student, College B)
"My job is to finish the syllabus"	Pressure to prioritise curriculum coverage	**Pedagogical constraints and lecturer positionality**	"I know dialogue is important, but I must finish the syllabus for audits, so I often revert to lecturing." (Lecturer 1)
"Plumbing became meaningful when we fixed the water system"	Community-based application of skills	**Student agency and participation**	"Before, plumbing was just pipes, but the community project made me see how it helps people." (Student, College A)
"There are too many students in one class"	Overcrowding and resource shortages	**Systemic and institutional barriers**	"Sometimes we are 60 students in one room. How can the lecturer pay attention to everyone?" (Student, College B)
"Lecturers are not trained in HP"	Professional development gaps	**Pedagogical constraints and lecturer positionality**	"We want to humanise teaching, but most of us were never trained for that." (Lecturer 5)

Student Agency and Participation

The findings reveal that traces of humanising pedagogy are visible in TVET classrooms, although they often appear in fragmented and inconsistent ways. Students consistently articulated a desire for greater voice and participation in their learning experiences, underscoring the importance of dialogical approaches. Many described frustration with traditional, lecture-based instruction that positioned them as passive recipients of knowledge. As one student explained, "It's always the lecturer talking. We hardly get to contribute to the discussion" (Student, College B). Another echoed this sentiment: "Sometimes I feel like I am just there to copy notes, not to think for myself" (Student, College A). These accounts resonate with Freire's (1970) critique of the "banking model" of education, which he argues strips students of agency and critical engagement.

At the same time, the data illustrate how certain pedagogical practices fostered moments of agency when lecturers shifted towards more participatory, dialogical teaching. Students pointed to instances where they were encouraged to critically reflect on their own realities, connect theory to practice, and engage in collaborative meaning-making. One student recalled, "When our lecturer asked us to debate how our studies link to our communities, it made me feel like my ideas matter" (Student, College B). Another highlighted the impact of applied, community-oriented learning: "Before, plumbing was just pipes, but the community project made me see how it helps people" (Student, College A). These experiences align with Brookfield's (2017) notion of critically reflective teaching and Freire and Shor's (1987) call for education as an act of liberation, where students are empowered to question and reshape their realities.

Language also emerged as a critical dimension of agency. Several students explained that the dominance of English in teaching and assessment created barriers that left them feeling excluded. Lecturers who incorporated isiXhosa or other familiar languages into teaching were perceived as more inclusive and effective. One lecturer reflected, "When I explain in isiXhosa, they engage better, but the curriculum doesn't allow time for that" (Lecturer 3). Students confirmed this, noting that multilingual strategies helped them grasp concepts and participate more confidently. This finding supports Kajee's (2021) work on linguistic inclusivity as a dimension of humanising pedagogy and echoes Delport's (2016) argument that culturally responsive teaching fosters belonging. Yet, despite these positive efforts, lecturers acknowledged institutional constraints that limited the systematic integration of multilingual and dialogical strategies, including rigid curricula, large class sizes, and performance-driven accountability systems (Allais 2024; Lutaaya, Mabusela, and Ntshangase 2023).

Taken together, these findings show that student agency is not an inherent feature of the TVET classroom but emerges conditionally, shaped by individual lecturer practices and bounded by systemic constraints. While students valued the opportunities they had to participate, reflect critically, and learn through applied and inclusive methods, they also recognised the limitations imposed by broader institutional priorities. This tension illustrates the fragile status of humanising pedagogy in the TVET sector: it exists in

traces, often dependent on individual innovation, but is not yet embedded as a systemic practice.

Pedagogical Constraints and Lecturer Positionality

Lecturers in this study acknowledged the value of HP but consistently described the tensions they face in trying to implement it within the rigid structures of South African TVET education. A central challenge identified was the pressure to cover the syllabus, which prioritised content delivery and standardised assessments over dialogical, student-centred learning. As one lecturer explained, "I know dialogue is important, but I must finish the syllabus for audits, so I often revert to lecturing" (Lecturer 1). Another reinforced this constraint: "We want students to think critically, but the assessments measure only memorisation" (Lecturer 4). These accounts mirror Freire's (1970) critique of the "banking model" of education and reflect Powell and McGrath's (2019) observation that TVET curricula are often assessment-driven and resistant to transformative practice.

Students echoed these concerns, often expressing frustration at being positioned as passive recipients of knowledge rather than active participants. One remarked, "We feel spoken at, not listened to" (Student, College B), while another added, "I sometimes wonder if my experiences even matter here because the lecturer just teaches what is in the book" (Student, College A). These perspectives underscore Delport's (2016) warning that when student agency is neglected, education risks reproducing structural inequalities rather than challenging them.

Some lecturers attempted to resist these constraints by experimenting with dialogical and inclusive strategies. For example, one described using isiXhosa to explain complex concepts: "When I explain in isiXhosa, they engage better, but the curriculum doesn't allow time for that" (Lecturer 3). Others incorporated problem-posing and experiential approaches, such as linking lessons to community-based projects, which students found particularly empowering. These efforts resonate with Freire's (1970) call for problem-posing education and with Walker's (2010) argument that student-centred pedagogies can simultaneously enhance employability and foster critical consciousness. However, as lecturers themselves acknowledged, such innovations were dependent on individual initiative rather than institutional encouragement. "We want to humanise teaching, but most of us were never trained for that" (Lecturer 5) reflected a broader concern about inadequate professional development.

The findings also suggest that lecturer positionality plays a crucial role in shaping classroom dynamics. While some lecturers demonstrated openness to reflexivity and student dialogue, others admitted to feeling constrained by institutional hierarchies and accountability demands. One candidly explained, "Sometimes I feel guilty because I know what the students need, but the system won't let me give it to them" (Lecturer 6). This tension reflects what Motala and Vally (2022) describe as the structural

contradictions of mass vocational education: while it promises inclusion, it often reproduces exclusion through rigid bureaucratic control.

Pedagogical innovation in these TVET colleges remained fragile and inconsistent. While individual lecturers experimented with dialogical and culturally responsive strategies, their efforts were undermined by systemic pressures, outdated curricula, and limited institutional support. Without structural reforms and dedicated professional development, the transformative potential of HP risks being reduced to isolated practices rather than a sustained pedagogical shift.

Systemic and Institutional Barriers

Both lecturers and students emphasised that their ability to enact or experience HP was shaped not only by classroom practices but by broader systemic and institutional conditions. A central barrier identified was the rigid and assessment-driven TVET curriculum, which, as one lecturer described, "leaves no space for experimenting with new approaches; my job is to cover the syllabus and prepare students for tests" (Lecturer 2). This pressure to prioritise coverage over dialogue mirrors Freire and Horton's (1990) critique of the banking model of education, where knowledge is deposited rather than co-created, and reflects Powell and McGrath's (2019) analysis of TVET's inflexibility.

Students, too, felt marginalised by this rigidity. One explained, "We are taught how to pass, not how to think" (Student, College B), while another highlighted the gap between training and lived realities: "We learn how to fix machines, but not why industries exploit people who work with these machines" (Student, College A). These voices illustrate how the narrow employability-driven orientation of TVET limits opportunities for transformative learning, reinforcing Allais's (2020) argument that neoliberal frameworks reduce education to economic survival rather than holistic development.

Resource shortages further compounded these challenges. Students noted the impact of overcrowded classes and limited access to technology: "Sometimes we are 60 students in one room. How can the lecturer pay attention to everyone?" (Student, College B). Lecturers confirmed these issues, pointing to delayed funding, inadequate infrastructure, and outdated curricula as daily obstacles. Such constraints echo findings by Lutaaya, Mabusela, and Ntshangase (2023) and Mesuwini and Mokoena (2024), who stress how inequitable resource distribution undermines quality teaching and learning in South African TVET colleges.

Despite these barriers, some glimpses of transformative practice emerged. One student described how a campus water purification project shifted their understanding of vocational education: "Before, I thought of plumbing as just a skill. But after working on the water purification system for our community, I saw how our work can make a real difference" (Student, College A). This example illustrates how project-based, community-oriented learning can bridge technical skills with critical consciousness, showing the potential of HP when linked to real-world issues (Sakata, Bremner, and

Cameron 2022). However, such innovations remained isolated, dependent on individual lecturers rather than systemic support.

Assessment practices were another site of tension. Lecturers reported frustration with standardised evaluations that reduced learning to narrow competencies: "We are expected to assess students based on their ability to perform specific tasks, but there's no space to evaluate their problem-solving or critical thinking skills" (Lecturer 4). Students echoed this concern, arguing that rote memorisation limited their preparedness for workplace realities: "I know how to follow steps for machine operation, but I don't feel prepared to solve unexpected problems in a real job setting" (Student, College B). These accounts reinforce Freire's (1987) critique that traditional assessment sustains the banking model of education.

Taken together, the findings highlight how systemic barriers, rigid curricula, resource shortages, and narrow assessment regimes restrict the realisation of HP in TVET. They also point to the need for multilevel interventions. At the institutional level, curricula must move beyond rigid content delivery to foster critical thinking and creativity, supported by structured professional development in dialogical and trauma-informed pedagogy (Madu and Edokpolor 2021; Mesuwini and Mokoena 2024). At the policy level, structural inequities such as outdated curricula and uneven resource allocation must be addressed, while decommodifying education to prioritise liberation and empowerment (Allais and Marock 2024; Freire and Shor 1987). At the societal level, TVET should be repositioned as part of broader struggles for social justice, linking technical training with grassroots empowerment and systemic transformation (Kajee 2021; Olawale, Mncube, and Harber 2022).

Reconciling HP with the realities of TVET requires bridging the gap between ideals and practice. While educators and students demonstrated glimpses of agency and innovation, the broader institutional and policy frameworks continue to reinforce a narrow, market-driven model of vocational education. Without structural reform, HP in TVET risks remaining a set of isolated practices rather than a transformative paradigm.

Humanising Pedagogy as a Contested Practice in TVET

The findings from this study illuminate both the promise and the limits of applying HP in South African TVET colleges. While students and lecturers identified moments where dialogue, agency, and inclusivity reshaped classroom dynamics, these practices emerged only in fragments, dependent on individual innovation rather than institutional or systemic transformation. This points to a central contradiction: the ideals of HP, rooted in Freire's emancipatory vision of education as liberation (Freire 1970), collide with the structural and ideological realities of a TVET sector shaped by neoliberal policy frameworks and resource scarcity.

Critically, these results challenge overly romanticised interpretations of HP that assume it can be unproblematically transplanted into any educational setting. As Ellsworth (1989) argues, critical pedagogy itself carries tensions and risks reproducing hierarchical power relations, particularly when implemented within formal institutions that remain resistant to deep structural change. In this study, lecturers who sought to enact HP often found themselves constrained by assessment-driven curricula, bureaucratic accountability measures, and limited institutional support. In this sense, HP became less a systemic framework for transformation and more a fragile, individualised practice, vulnerable to co-option by the very structures it seeks to resist.

Furthermore, the findings underscore the need to distinguish clearly between humanising pedagogy and generic student-centred teaching**.** While student-centred approaches may involve participatory methods, HP carries an explicitly political dimension: it demands critical reflection on structural inequalities, systemic exclusion, and the socio-economic conditions shaping learners' lives (Freire and Shor 1987). However, in the TVET context examined here, the political edge of HP was frequently blunted by the sector's instrumentalist mandate. For many students, training was experienced as preparation for immediate employability, disconnected from broader struggles for social justice. This instrumentalist orientation reflects what Allais (2020) and Powell (2021) describe as the neoliberal logic of TVET, which privileges workforce readiness at the expense of critical consciousness.

The evidence presented also highlights a tension between the local aspirations of lecturers and students and the global policy discourses shaping TVET reform. While participants expressed a desire for inclusive, dialogical education, their experiences were mediated by policy imperatives that emphasise standardisation, efficiency, and narrow skills acquisition (Allais and Marock 2024). This creates what Motala and Vally (2022) term the contradictory character of vocational education: a system that promises empowerment but often delivers exclusion.

Taken together, these findings suggest that HP in TVET cannot be understood merely as a pedagogical choice but must be theorised as a site of ideological contestation**.** The tension between Freirean ideals and institutional realities calls for a more nuanced engagement with HP one that recognises its transformative potential while also acknowledging its limitations in contexts defined by structural inequality and neoliberal governance. To move forward, scholarship on HP in vocational education must resist celebratory accounts and instead critically interrogate how power, policy, and pedagogy intersect to shape what is possible in practice.

Conclusion

This study explored how HP manifests in two Eastern Cape TVET colleges and interrogated the systemic barriers that shape its possibilities and limitations. The findings revealed traces of HP in practice through dialogical teaching, multilingual

strategies, and community-based projects but these remained fragmented and dependent on individual lecturer initiative rather than systemic support. Students consistently expressed a desire for greater agency and participation, while lecturers highlighted the constraints of rigid curricula, assessment-driven accountability, and inadequate institutional resources.

The critical discussion demonstrates that HP in TVET cannot be treated as a neutral set of teaching techniques. Instead, it is a political project, one that collides with the neoliberal logic of vocational education, which privileges efficiency, employability, and narrow skills acquisition over holistic development and critical consciousness. This tension underscores both the transformative potential and the precariousness of HP in formal vocational contexts. While HP offers a framework for resisting exclusion and fostering student empowerment, it risks dilution or co-option if not supported by structural change at institutional and policy levels.

At the institutional level, TVET colleges must move beyond rigid, lecturer-centred approaches and cultivate pedagogical cultures that foreground dialogue, creativity, and student agency (Madu and Edokpolor 2021). This requires embedding HP principles within curricula, diversifying assessment practices to include portfolios, collaborative projects, and reflective journals, and ensuring structured professional development for lecturers in dialogical and trauma-informed pedagogy (Mesuwini and Mokoena 2024). Institutional reforms should also prioritise student participation in curriculum design, making learning more responsive to lived realities.

At the policy level, reform must tackle the structural inequities that reproduce exclusion in TVET, including resource shortages, delayed funding, and outdated curricula (Allais and Marock 2024). Policymakers should decommodify education by reframing success beyond narrow labour market outcomes, aligning with Freire and Shor's (1987) vision of education as liberation. Policies that over-emphasise employability and standardisation must be rebalanced with frameworks that nurture critical thinking, agency, and social justice.

At the societal level, TVET should be repositioned as a platform for social transformation rather than solely a pipeline for workforce development. Linking vocational training to community engagement and grassroots empowerment can extend the relevance of technical skills while fostering critical consciousness (Kajee 2021; Olawale, Mncube, and Harber 2022). By situating TVET within broader struggles for equity and justice, education can serve not just to prepare individuals for employment but to empower communities to challenge systemic inequalities.

This study contributes to the growing discourse on the role of HP in vocational education by showing both its possibilities and its limits. It argues that HP in TVET is not a ready-made solution but a contested practice shaped by the interplay of pedagogy, policy, and power. To advance its transformative potential, HP must be critically

adapted to local realities, supported by structural reforms, and protected against neoliberal co-option. Only then can vocational education move beyond its instrumentalist mandate and embrace a more holistic, liberating vision of teaching and learning.

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