Decolonisation and South African TVET: A Different Missing Middle

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Abstract

This paper explores the South African Technical Vocational Education and Training (TVET) sector in relation to calls for decolonisation that have emanated from higher education institutions (universities) and basic education institutions (schools). Both the public and the academic community have echoed these institutions' calls for transformation through protests and articles in academic journals and the popular media. Apart from two articles in the popular media the silence on decolonisation and TVET has been deafening. A key phrase during the #FeesMustFall protests was "the missing middle," referring to those students who were too rich for NSFAS bursaries but too poor to afford university fees. I argue that the TVET sector is a different missing middle in that it is missing from debates about decolonising education in South Africa. Through a document analysis of TVET related legislation, I argue that it is too "high" for basic education and too "low" for higher education. By drawing on Jan Blommaert's notion of "voice" and Gayatri Spivak's notion of "the subaltern," the paper considers why there has been such silence on decolonising the TVET sector.

Keywords: decolonisation; Technical Vocational Education and Training (TVET); higher education; voice; subaltern; language

Introduction

The student-driven Fallist Movements of 2015 to 2017 (#RhodesMustFall and #FeesMustFall) brought a number of education-related issues to the fore, most notably the need for free and decolonised education in South Africa. The predominant focus of these movements and protests were university campuses, university fees and university

curricula. It was only with the release of the report of the Commission of Inquiry into Higher Education and Training (2017) that public attention was drawn to the plight of the Technical Vocational Education and Training (TVET) sector. Despite consistent underfunding up to that point, TVET students were not involved in the protests. Ironically, the sector suffered budget cuts and its students received decreased bursary allocations as a result of the protests (Commission of Inquiry into Higher Education and Training 2017, 24–25; Davis 2017; Tshwane 2017). To fully appreciate the impact of these budget cuts one must consider the following statistics: In 2016 the TVET sector consisted of 705 397 students, aged between 15 and 40, with 56.8 per cent identifying as female and 92.1 per cent identifying as African (DHET 2018, 33–35). The staff complement, whose administrative and academic duties were also affected, numbered 18 235 (DHET 2017, 37).

The lack of TVET participation in the Fallist Movements, as it relates to fees, might be explained by the fact that "since 2011 poor students in TVET colleges have not had to pay tuition fees, and have been assisted with accommodation or transport costs" (DHET 2013a, 8). However, the silence of the sector itself on the issue of decolonising education is quite striking. Also striking is the limited extent to which the academic community has considered South African TVET part of its discourse on decolonisation.

In what follows I discuss TVET in light of a phrase emanating from the #FeesMustFall protests, "the missing middle," which refers to those students who were too rich for NSFAS bursaries but too poor to afford university fees. I argue that the TVET sector is a different missing middle in that it is missing from South Africa's decolonisation discourse. First, I provide a brief overview of recent literature on decolonising basic and higher education. I then discuss the only available literature on decolonising South African TVET. Following that, I consider the themes arising from a document analysis of TVET related legislation and articles from the media and academia about the sector in general. Finally, I draw on the work of Blommaert (2005; 2015; Maryns and Blommaert 2002) and Spivak (1988) in order to frame the TVET sector as a voiceless subaltern and a different missing middle.

Recent Literature on Decolonising South African Education

Since 2016 a great many works on decolonising South African education have been published. The following serve as but a selection of topics covered. Studies on higher education have ranged in focus from decolonising the university (Mbembe 2016), to creating an African university (Ndlovu-Gatsheni 2017; Ndofirepi 2017), decolonising the curriculum (Badat 2017; Le Grange 2016) to resisting epistemic violence (Heleta 2016) and rethinking pedagogy (Davids 2018; Waghid and Hibbert 2018), creating space for disability within discussions of decolonisation (Watermeyer 2019), and considering how language relates to the decolonising agenda (Makalela 2018; Prah 2017). Though fewer in number, there have also been studies on decolonising schools. They have considered issues of inclusivity (Walton 2018), of including indigenous

knowledge in the curriculum (Seehawer 2018) and of the roles of school management (Duku and Salami 2017) and language (Christie and McKinney 2017) in decolonising schools.

Recent Literature on Decolonising TVETs

Four articles—that is the sum total of published works that grapple with decolonisation and South African TVET. Two media articles are included here because they represent the first published opinions on the topic and because the views of the general public are often reflected in and influenced by the media (McCombs 2014). Both Ngcaweni (2017) and Gumede (2017), whose articles were published in the *Mail & Guardian* and the *African Independent* respectively, emphasise vocational education's ability to bolster the country's industrial and economic development, thereby equating the pursuit of vocational education to the objective of decolonising South African education.

To his credit, Ngcaweni (2017, par. 5) calls attention to the lack of rigorous debate about decolonising TVETs, but he characterises TVETs as higher education institutions (HEIs) that are not universities, implying that TVETs are part of higher education (HE). He also critiques the view of TVETs as "alternative" institutions because doing so "[contributes] to the crisis facing higher education" and undermines TVETs' ability to expand the economy and lift South Africans out of poverty (Ngcaweni 2017, par. 5, 21 and 24).

Gumede (2017) establishes the centrality of vocational education to industrialisation and development, asserting that "education based on an industrialisation path should be the new emphasis" of the debate over decolonising education in Africa (Gumede 2017, par. 2). Following Gumede's line of reasoning, vocational education will lead to industrialisation, which in turn will lead to decolonisation.

The links that both Ngcaweni (2017) and Gumede (2017) make between TVETs and the economy exemplify the economic-determinist perspective that regards education as a tool of economic growth (Vally and Motala 2014a, 2). Such a perspective often discounts the fact that education "is not a guarantee of employment and participation in the labour market" (Vally and Motala 2014b, 32).

The remaining two articles appeared more recently in academic journals and, while they do not focus directly on the topic of decolonisation and South African TVET, they do raise related issues. Yassim, Rudman and Maluleke (2019) discuss the curriculum development of the Advanced Diploma Technical and Vocational Training, aimed at training TVET lecturers, as part of Nelson Mandela University's decolonisation efforts. One could say that this qualification attempts to decolonise the pedagogy of TVET lecturers, but the authors concede that decolonising the TVET curriculum itself would prove far more complex as TVET lecturers are provided with the curriculum and have a limited role, if any, in its design (Yassim, Rudman, and Maluleke 2019, 15). They

nonetheless assert that the decolonisation conversation at TVETs has begun. However, this assertion fails to convince. No evidence is given of "TVET student protests [lamenting] an outdated curriculum" and only one instance is quoted of TVET students from a single college joining a discussion organised by HE students about the decolonisation of HE (Yassim, Rudman, and Maluleke 2019, 15).

Ngwenya (2019) is more indirect in her assertions regarding decolonisation and South African TVET. She notes that HEIs' inaccessibility to poor black students opposes decolonisation efforts in HE (Ngwenya 2019, 111). She further notes that the new democratic government prioritised global competitiveness and creating human resources for labour over issues of access and redress (Ngwenya 2019, 115). The TVET path came about as a result and, while imbued with the potential to be ideal, the reality of South Africa's social inequality meant that TVETs became the default option for "black students from poor schools" who could not access universities, unlike their privileged white counterparts who had privileged pedagogical encounters (Ngwenya 2019, 115).

Conceptual Framework

Voice

Blommaert (2005, 4) defines "voice" as the way in which people make themselves understood or not. Maryns and Blommaert (2002, 13–14) explain that making oneself understood depends on the ability to anticipate what an interlocutor would find meaningful, and what ideologically marked language resources one possesses. In other words, wherever there is an inequality of resources, the outcome will likely be misunderstanding or a disregard for what is said (Blommaert 2015, 112). Blommaert (2005, 233) summarises the pervasiveness of such misunderstanding or silence as follows: "problems of voice are problems of inequality, and as such they will occur in every environment where inequality is a feature of structure." He also calls attention to the fact that "the absence of discourse events" can be misinterpreted as an interlocutor having nothing to say, but, quoting Hymes, he explains that sometimes an interlocutor simply "does not find a way to say it" (Blommaert 2005, 61). So then, while the reasons for silence may be layered, they are often linked to unequal language resources.

Subalternity

The term "subaltern," as used by Spivak (1988) in her famous essay, "Can the Subaltern Speak?", has its roots in the Marxist definitions of Antonio Gramsci and the Subaltern Studies Group. The dictionary definition of the term denotes a lower ranking officer in the military, but Gramsci (cited in Morton 2003, 48) used the term to refer to those who are subordinate. The people Gramsci had in mind were the rural peasants of Southern Italy who were politically unconscious, unorganised and therefore vulnerable to the ideas propagated by the state (Morton 2003, 48). The historians of the Subaltern Studies

Group found Gramsci's "subaltern" definition useful to describe the continued oppression of the lower classes in post-independent India (Morton 2003, 48).

Spivak, however, critiqued the group's blindness to and exclusion of the female voice in their Marxist characterisation of the subaltern and thus appropriated the term to mean Third World women (Morton 2003, 48). In one of a collection of articles that revisit Spivak's seminal text, Griffin (2018) argues for an expansion of Spivak's meaning of the term "subaltern" because it implied a radical state of disenfranchisement that put subjects beyond reach. Since such extreme disenfranchisement is seldom the case in contemporary contexts, Griffin (2018, 111) suggests that subalternity may be more productively understood in terms of a continuum that stretches "from those utterly beyond reach to those [subalternised] in subtle but deeply impactful ways for not fitting certain social norms and categories." In my discussion of TVET as subaltern I follow Griffin's nuanced use of the term.

Although Spivak answers her essay's central question—Can the subaltern speak?—in the negative, it can be argued, as Sebastian (2014) does, that answering this question is not Spivak's central aim; rather, it is to draw attention to the ethics of representation or how we speak of or on behalf of the subaltern. Griffin (2018) explores this issue of representation by opposing two types of marginalisation: the type that occurs through misrepresentation or the imposition of identity onto a group, and the type that occurs through condoning a group's silence. Whereas Spivak's (1988, 288 and 307) assertions that "[the subaltern woman] cannot know and speak the text of female exploitation" and that "there is no space from which the sexed subaltern subject can speak" would tempt one to accept such silence, Griffin (2018, 107) contends that much has changed in terms of decolonisation and history-from-below in the 30 years since Spivak's essay first appeared that would invalidate her assertions. Griffin (2018, 106) draws on an example of cross-cultural interviews with disenfranchised women to show that sometimes the peculiarities of an answer (e.g. "I don't know" or "What do I know") can in fact reveal something about lived experiences. So then, while it is important to be wary of misrepresentation, it should not prevent one from trying to understand the subaltern's position, what they are saying or not saying, and the reason for their silence.

Methodology

Working from an interpretive, constructionist paradigm, I drew on my personal experience as a lecturer of English First Additional Language within the National Certificate Vocational (NCV) programme at a TVET college to help me approximate the reasons for the sector's silence. I suspected it to be due to public perceptions, confusion regarding its identity as HEI and an inability of its graduates to access other HEIs. Based on these suspicions, I formulated the themes of stigma, position, and inaccessibility to inform a document analysis. Merriam (1988, 118) asserts that "documents of all types can help the researcher uncover meaning, develop understanding and uncover insights relevant to the research problem." I chose document

analysis as methodology because it requires a selection of data instead of a collection thereof, making it time efficient. Selecting documents from the public domain also meant that no permission from authors was required (Bowen 2009, 31).

I selected documents based on their ability to answer thematically relevant questions. To inform my theme of stigma, I asked how TVETs are perceived by the public, the academy and the government. I selected media articles, some of which quote government opinion, and academic publications to answer this question. For the purpose of elaborating on my theme of position, I asked how "higher education" is defined and whether TVETs fit this definition. I answered these questions by consulting the Department of Higher Education and Training's *White Paper on Post-School Education and Training* (DHET 2013a), the Higher Education Amendment Act, No. 9 of 2016 (RSA 2017, henceforth the HE Act) as well as the legislation quoted therein. I posed a question regarding NCV graduates' ability to access HE in order to inform my theme of inaccessibility. What became relevant here was the legislation that determines the NCV programme, the *National Education Policy Act, 1996 and Further Education and Training Act, 1998: National Policy Regarding Further Education and Training Programmes: Approval of the Documents, Policy for the National Certificate (Vocational): Qualifications at Levels 2 to 4 on the National Qualifications Framework* (RSA 2006, henceforth the NCV Policy) and the gazetted requirements for access to HE qualifications, the policy on the *Minimum Admission Requirements for Higher Certificate, Diploma and Degree Programmes Requiring a National Certificate (Vocational) at Level 4 of the National Qualifications Framework* (RSA 2009, henceforth the Minimum Requirements Policy).

Discussion of Findings

TVET as Voiceless Subaltern

Following Griffin's (2018, 111) conceptualisation of subalternity as a continuum, I argue that the TVET sector is subalternised "in subtle but deeply impactful ways for not fitting certain social norms and categories" and voiceless in Blommaert's terms of having unequal and ideologically marked language resources. I therefore argue that (1) the TVET sector is stigmatised, that (2) its position in the South African education sector is neither here nor there and that (3) its graduates cannot access an HEI. To argue point (3), I use a Blommaert-inspired metaphor: viewing the two sectors as interlocutors engaged in communication. Successful communication between these two interlocutors (the TVET and HE sectors) would mean that TVET graduates (specifically NCV graduates) are able to access an HEI (specifically a traditional, research-intensive university). Inaccessibility of an HEI by TVET graduates would indicate miscommunication or silence.

Stigma

Badroodien (2004) traces the history of technical and vocational education provision in the country back to the 1850s, noting that it has always been beset by "issues related to indigence, social and educational inferiority and mental backwardness" (Badroodien 2004, 21). His analysis also highlights how the sector was a tool for colonising and segregating South African society. He explains that before the 1900s technical and vocational education was aimed at "civilising" non-whites only, while after 1910 such education was provided solely for whites to combat the social ills arising from the urbanisation of the poor, white, rural population (Badroodien 2004, 23). In the 1940s this welfare-like approach was shifted to non-whites, while the provisioning for white learners increased in quality and opportunities such as certification, training and jobs (Badroodien 2004, 40). Education provision at the technical and vocational level was also differentiated in terms of space: African, coloured and Indian learners were often accommodated in state correctional facilities such as schools of industries, reformatories and prisons, and they were always further separated according to race (Badroodien 2001, 47).

The media also paints a dismal picture of the sector in how it characterises the courses on offer, the type of people who attend, the quality of the educators and the sector as a whole. According to Vlok (2016, par. 4), many courses offered at TVETs are "ideal for people who are practical or good with people but not necessarily academically strong." Grobler (2018, par. 1 and 4) acknowledges that society views TVETs as less desirable than universities, and that they are often overlooked by students, but asserts that TVET is for people "who are not afraid to get their hands dirty and to really make a difference." Moeng (2018), in her discussion of the newly developed university qualification for TVET lecturers (see Yassim, Rudman, and Maluleke 2019 above), paints these educators as unqualified or underqualified (par. 6 and 8), lacking technological know-how (par. 23), and ultimately responsible for improving the outcomes of the sector (par. 25–16). Government's sentiments on the sector, as captured in the media, include Prof. Asmal's (2003, par. 1) assertion that it is the Cinderella of our education system, and a former Minister of Higher Education and Training Naledi Pandor's acceptance of its dented reputation (Phakati 2018).

Position: Neither Here nor There

For years my innocent, albeit ill-considered, belief was that I was working in the HE sector. This belief was shared by colleagues and is still expressed by many in the sector, by random strangers, by academics and even by government officials, albeit through the media or in interactions with me. Ngcaweni's (2017, 21) belief, mentioned earlier, that TVETs ought to be part of HE, is a sentiment that is echoed in this striking quote from recently re-appointed Minister of Higher Education and Training Blade Nzimande: "TVET colleges must be considered as higher education options" (Drum Digital 2017). Even astute academics have bought into this misconception as revealed in a book that discusses access to HE: "In the South African context access to higher education has

curiously come to mean access to universities … [It] must evolve to mean access into varied institutional forms" (Dhunpath and Vithal 2014, 20).

It is quite possible that our common misconception resulted from the 2009 split of the Department of Education into a Department of Higher Education and Training (DHET) and a Department of Basic Education (DBE) (DHET 2013a, 2). Before then, colleges were jointly governed by the Department of Education and the Department of Labour; an arrangement that posed many challenges. However, as the rest of the discussion will reveal, lumping TVETs and universities together poses its own, albeit different, challenges.

A careful study of the relevant legislation evinces that the TVET sector cannot be considered part of HE. The HE Act defines a "higher education institution" as an institution that offers higher education and, most importantly, is declared as such under the HE Act (RSA 2017, 4). The same act defines "higher education" as "all learning programmes … registered in accordance with the provisions of the [NQF Act] as a qualification or part-qualification on the HEQSF" (RSA 2017, 4). Therefore, proof that TVETs offer programmes registered on the HEQSF would constitute proof of their status as HEIs.

But what exactly is the HEQSF? It is one of three sub-frameworks according to which the national qualifications framework (NQF) is organised. The NQF organises all educational offerings in South Africa according to 10 ascending levels of qualification or learning achievement and three types of qualifications. This means that qualifications on the same NQF level are not necessarily the same since their type, or sub-framework, may differ. Another way of understanding the sub-frameworks may be to categorise them as sectors. In this sense then the HEQSF or Higher Education and Qualifications Sub-Framework, which occupies levels 5 to 10 on the NQF, can be categorised as the HE sector. The GFETQSF or General and Further Education and Training Qualifications Sub-Framework (GFETQSF), which occupies levels 1 to 4 on the NQF, can be considered the basic education (BE) sector. The OQSF or Occupational Qualifications Sub-Framework, occupying NQF levels 1 to 8, can be regarded as the trades and occupations sector (RSA 2008, 6). While the former two sectors are distinct and well-known among South Africans, the latter does not exist in common parlance but is used here for ease of reference. These sub-frameworks are coordinated by the South African Qualifications Authority (SAQA), which ensures that qualifications are registered under the right sub-framework.

So then, proof of TVETs' status as HEIs would lie with SAQA. According to SAQA's most recent database of qualifications (SAQA 2018), none of the qualifications offered at TVETs are registered on the HEQSF, which means TVETs cannot be considered HEIs. The qualifications that TVETs offer are registered on the GFETSQF and OQSF. On the GFETSQF, which can be considered BE, TVETs offer qualifications on NQF levels 2 to 4, known as the NCV programme. The programme's exit qualification at

NCV Level 4 is equivalent (in NQF level and sub-framework—GFETSQF) to the exit qualification offered at school, the National Senior Certificate (NSC) or matric. However, these two qualifications do not share the same status. Whereas the yearly matric examinations and results are widely reported, the NCV Level 4 examinations and results hardly make it to the news. In defence of the public, their lack of interest may be attributed to the consistently low pass rates (hovering around 40%) that have been reported in official statistics since 2011 (DHET 2018, 41).

The other qualifications offered by TVETs are registered on NQF levels 5 to 6, similar to qualifications offered by HEIs that range from NQF levels 5 to 10. However, these qualifications and institutions are fundamentally dissimilar—TVET qualifications are registered on the OQSF, not the HEQSF. And as mentioned earlier, only institutions that offer qualifications registered on the HEQSF may receive recognition as HEIs.

The three-way split in sub-frameworks means that despite any similarities between the sectors, TVETs are neither here (part of BE) nor there (part of HE).

Inaccessibility

The theme of inaccessibility deals with NCV graduates' (in)ability to access HEIs. I use a Blommaert-inspired metaphor: viewing the TVET and HE sectors as interlocutors engaged in communication to explain this. Representing these sectors/interlocutors are NCV graduates on the one hand and a traditional, research-intensive university (Stellenbosch University, my alma mater) on the other. Successfully accessing Stellenbosch University would constitute successful communication or the enactment of voice on the part of NCV graduates, whereas an inability to do so would constitute miscommunication or their voicelessness.

The Minimum Requirements Policy determines the pass percentages of NCV graduates who wish to study further (RSA 2009, 9). In order to apply for Bachelor's Degree studies an NCV graduate (someone who obtained an NCV Level 4 Certificate) ought to have obtained at least 60 per cent in three fundamental subjects (these are English First Additional Language/Afrikaans First Additional Language/isiXhosa First Additional Language, Life Orientation and Mathematical Literacy) and at least 70 per cent in four vocational subjects (these are predetermined based on a student's choice of NCV course, for example Hospitality, Tourism, Marketing, etc.). The policy includes the caveat that admission is subject to institutional admission requirements; that is, the specific requirements of the university's different faculties and their programmes should also be met. Most of Stellenbosch University's programmes require at least Mathematics if not both Mathematics and Physical Sciences (SU 2018). Its other programmes require a certain average pass percentage in either four or six "school subjects designated for university admission" in addition to a language or in addition to two languages. Only three NCV subjects are included in these "school subjects designated for university admission": Mathematical Literacy, Life Orientation and English First Additional

Language (SU 2018, viii). In other words, an NCV graduate would be denied access to Stellenbosch University regardless of the programme s/he applies to. However, consultation with the registrar's office (Anonymous 2018, interview with staff member in registrar's office, August 27) revealed that an NCV graduate could engage the registrar's office to make their case for admission, but then s/he would still have to compete with matriculants who stand a better chance at acceptance by virtue of the subjects they have access to at school. It is commendable that the registrar's office is willing to engage with NCV graduates wishing to apply, but it is unlikely that they would consider this an option after reading the university's admission requirements (SU 2018) or interacting with its Centre for Prospective Students. In both cases they would find themselves unacknowledged or "missing."

Returning to Blommaert's notion of voicelessness and how it is underpinned by unequal access to language resources and/or ideologically marked language resources, I want to point out a distinct disadvantage NCV graduates have compared to their NSC counterparts (matriculants) when attempting to access HEIs. Matriculants have access to a minimum of two languages at school, one at Home Language (HL) level and another at First Additional Language (FAL) level. NCV graduates, in contrast, only have access to one language, which is offered at FAL level only. These two facts compound to create ideologically marked and unequal language resources.

The NCV Policy, which governs the programme's design and structure, allows for any one of the 11 official South African languages to be used as long as that language is also the college's language of learning and teaching (RSA 2006, 16–17). Only two of the 50 colleges nationwide offer a language other than English FAL; NCR TVET College and Boland College offer Afrikaans FAL (Anonymous 2018, email messages to author, October 8 and 11). The NCV Policy also allows for the chosen language to be offered at HL or FAL level, but in practice the chosen language is only offered at FAL level. In BE the two levels refer to the proficiency levels of students, with FAL implying lower proficiency (DBE 2011, 8). In fact, the NCV subject guidelines for English FAL highlight that many TVET students "will not yet be fluent or accurate enough" (DHET 2013b). The FAL label implies a "less than" sentiment and that the language is ideologically marked. This sentiment is amplified by a DHET official's description of FAL as being "fit-for-purpose in the workplace" (Anonymous 2018, email message to author, August 23), which is suggestive of the lower status afforded to blue-collar workers.

Conclusion and Recommendations

The stigmatised TVET sector does not fit the social norms and elevated status associated with studying further. Neither does it fit the existing education categories—BE or HE. It is instead shrouded in ambiguity and often misunderstood. Furthermore, given its NCV graduates' inability to access HEIs, as illustrated through Stellenbosch University's admission requirements, and their limited language resources—one

ideologically marked language—the sector can be framed as a voiceless subaltern. Blommaert's (2005, 61) assertion that absent discourse events have more to do with lacking language resources than the lack of a reason to speak up thus becomes the most likely explanation for the TVET sector's silence on the issue of decolonisation.

On the basis of my findings, I recommend that the TVET sector's position within South African education be demystified. Maintaining the shroud of ambiguity serves to placate those who aspire to access HE and keep them from overcrowding HEIs. The TVET sector's status must be raised, but doing so by pretending it is part of HE is disingenuous. Trades and occupations, the sector offering qualifications on the OQSF, should be recognised as a sector in its own right, perhaps governed by a department separate from those overseeing BE and HE. Perhaps then the TVET sector might shake its missing-middle identity and find its voice. The academic community, who is complicit in the TVET sector being "missing," should also consider focusing research efforts on decolonising this sector.

Acknowledgements

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