Beyond academisation: Freirean praxis and the repoliticisation of VET in South Africa

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Abstract

This article explores the tension between the academisation of vocational education and training (VET) and efforts to reclaim its transformative potential. Drawing on Paulo Freire's critical pedagogy, it argues for the repoliticisation of VET in South Africa, where the post-apartheid VET system remains shaped by inequality, outdated curricula, and low social status. Rather than viewing VET merely as preparation for employment, repoliticisation foregrounds student agency, dialogical praxis, and the pursuit of epistemic justice. Centred on the experiences of 15 students who participated in Learning Cycle Group (LCG) meetings – structured, dialogical spaces informed by Freirean pedagogy – the study draws on participatory data to examine how students resisted being positioned as passive recipients of training. Instead, they articulated aspirations rooted in social justice, critical reflection, and collective transformation. The findings reveal that when students engage as co-investigators of their realities, VET can become a site of critical consciousness and political becoming. Integrating Freirean ideas into VET is thus presented not as elitist academisation but as a counter-hegemonic move that reclaims the humanising and political dimensions of education, positioning VET as a democratic space of dignity and dialogue.

Keywords: vocational education and training (VET), academisation, repoliticisation, Paulo Freire, critical pedagogy, humanising education, South Africa

Introduction

In many parts of the world, vocational education and training (VET) systems are undergoing reform to respond to shifting labour market demands, technological change, and the need for youth employment. In South Africa, however, these reforms are unfolding within a post-apartheid terrain marked by deep structural inequality, the historical marginalisation of vocational knowledge, and enduring perceptions of Technical and Vocational Education and Training (TVET) colleges as second-class institutions. The South African TVET sector is organised around two main qualification pathways: the National Certificate (Vocational) [NC(V)] and the National Accredited Technical Education Diploma (NATED) N1–N6 programmes, offered across 50 public colleges.

Despite policy reforms such as the White Paper on Post-School Education and Training (Department of Higher Education and Training in South Africa [DHET], 2013), the TVET system remains underfunded and suffers from outdated curricula, weak lecturer development, and poor articulation into universities. Many students – largely from working-class and rural communities – face systemic barriers such as inadequate teaching facilities, irrelevant subject matter, and limited progression opportunities. The consequence is a system that often reproduces social hierarchies and limits, rather than expands, the life chances of its students (McGrath & Ramsarup, 2024; Spreen & Vally, 2010; Vally & Motala, 2022). While government policy has sought to professionalise and reposition VET through qualifications frameworks and curriculum reform, many of these efforts have prioritised occupational alignment and productivity over student agency, critical engagement, or transformative pedagogy (Allais, 2019; Allais & Marock, 2024; Wedekind et al., 2024).

It is within this context that the concept of the academisation of VET has gained attention. Broadly, this refers to the increasing incorporation of theoretical, disciplinary, or academic knowledge into vocational education – often at the expense of its practical, hands-on character (Gonon & Bonoli, 2025; Haasler, 2020; Kaiser, 2021). Some scholars have critiqued this trend as an attempt to elevate the status of VET by making it resemble university education, thus reinforcing the academic–vocational divide rather than challenging it (Gamble, 2006; Gjelstad, 2025; Wheelahan, 2007). Others have noted that this shift risks alienating working-class learners who enter VET institutions seeking practical skills rather than abstract knowledge (Majola et al., 2024; Sabela & Masuku, 2020). However, the binary between 'academic' and 'vocational' knowledge risks obscuring what is most at stake: how different forms of knowledge – practical, academic, and critical – might be combined in ways that affirm student dignity and agency.

This binary can also obscure more radical, political questions about what kinds of knowledge count, who gets to speak, and what the purposes of education

should be. In response to these tensions, this article draws on the critical pedagogy of Paulo Freire to argue not for the academisation, but for the repoliticisation of VET. Freire's concepts of dialogue, praxis, and conscientisation enable a move beyond the binary, reframing the debate on academisation not as a technical question of curriculum reform, but as a political question of whose knowledge matters. This approach demonstrates that Freire's bottom-up pedagogy can productively intervene in systemic debates on academic drift by re-centring student voice and lived experience. Rather than turning VET into a mimicry of academic education, the task is to reclaim it as a space of dialogue, critical reflection, and political formation – a space where students are not merely trained for the world of work, but empowered to question and transform it (Freire, 1970, 1998; Vally & Motala, 2017).

This position is grounded in a participatory action research project that engaged 15 TVET students in Learning Cycle Group (LCG) meetings – structured dialogues modelled on Freirean pedagogical principles. The LCGs were designed not to deliver content, but to cultivate collective inquiry, voice, and critical consciousness among students whose experiences are often marginalised in educational discourse. Through these group meetings, students reflected on their lives, their college experiences, and the socio-economic conditions they navigate. Their narratives provide rich insights into how VET can be reimagined—not through technocratic reforms, but through pedagogies of humanisation and conscientisation (Freire, 1998; Moll, 2023; Vally & Spreen, 2006). Although the study was conducted on a modest scale, it signals the potential for such dialogical spaces to be institutionalised more broadly within the TVET sector, thereby moving from isolated practice towards systemic transformation.

What emerges from these student voices is a deep yearning for recognition, transformation, and justice. Far from being passive recipients of training, the students articulated critiques of their educational experiences and aspirations for more meaningful, inclusive learning. They expressed frustration with curricula that felt detached from their realities and with lecturers who treated them as empty vessels to be filled (Buthelezi, 2018). Yet, they also voiced hope, solidarity, and a desire to become agents of change in their communities. In this way, their testimonies represent acts of repoliticisation – efforts to reclaim education as a site of struggle and possibility (Gonon et al., 2025; Spreen & Vally, 2010).

By bringing these student narratives into conversation with Freirean theory, the article challenges dominant interpretations of what counts as quality or effective VET. It argues that repoliticisation rejects neither academic nor vocational knowledge, but instead seeks to connect both with critical, dialogical forms of knowing that emerge from students' lived realities. In doing so, it contributes to broader efforts to rethink vocational education not merely as a tool for economic development, but as a terrain of cultural resistance, epistemic

justice, and political becoming (Allais & Ngcwangu, 2025; McGrath & Ramsarup, 2024).

The article proceeds as follows. It begins with a theoretical framing that situates Freire's pedagogy in relation to the academic–vocational binary and debates around VET reform. It then outlines the participatory methodology and structure of the Learning Cycle Groups. The core of the article presents four themes drawn from student narratives, highlighting how they reframe VET as a space of critique, voice, and hope. The discussion then reflects on the implications of these findings for VET pedagogy and policy, arguing for a repoliticised approach that resists both technicism and elitist academisation. The conclusion calls for deeper engagement with student voice and critical pedagogy as tools for reimagining the future of vocational education in South Africa.

Theoretical framing: Freire and the politics of knowledge in VET

The critical pedagogy of Paulo Freire offers a transformative lens for inter-rogating and reimagining VET, particularly in contexts marked by structural inequality, such as South Africa. Freire's concepts of conscientisation, praxis, dialogue, and humanisation form the bedrock of his pedagogical approach, which seeks not merely to reform education but to repurpose it as a liberatory and democratic project (Freire, 1970, 1974; Freire & Horton, 1990). Within systems where VET is often reduced to job preparation and technical instruction, Freire's pedagogy demands a deeper engagement with the social purposes of education, asking: education for what, for whom, and by whom?

Freirean pedagogy and the reclamation of voice

Central to Freire's pedagogy is conscientization – the process of developing a critical awareness of one's social reality through reflection and action. This form of consciousness enables learners to perceive the structures of domination that shape their lives and to recognise their capacity to act against them (Freire, 1974). This process is actualised through praxis, the dialectical interplay between critical reflection and transformative action. Freire insists that education must be rooted in learners' lived experiences and must aim not simply at the transfer of information, but at awakening a sense of agency.

This also necessitates dialogue. Freire rejects the 'banking model' of education – in which knowledge is deposited into passive students – in favour of dialogical engagement between students and educators as co-investigators (Freire & Shor, 1987). Through dialogue, students not only learn content but develop the ability to question, reflect, and propose alternatives. Humanisation, then, is both the goal and the method of Freirean education: it is about recognising the learner as a full human being, capable of naming and changing the world (Freire, 1998).

Although these concepts are widely discussed in broader educational theory, they are rarely integrated into the practices and discourses of vocational education. This is striking, given that vocational education itself is built around forms of practical and experiential knowledge. Freire's approach allows us to ask how such vocational knowledge might be reconnected to theory in ways that are meaningful to students' lived realities – rather than reduced to technicism or displaced by abstract academic content. In a VET context, where education is framed in terms of productivity, employment outcomes, and economic alignment, Freire's pedagogy introduces a vital and counter-hegemonic discourse that centres learner agency, critique, and social transformation (Hyslop-Margison & Dale, 2010; Porres, 2018).

Instrumentalism and the technicist drift in VET

VET in South Africa, and elsewhere, has long been dominated by a narrow, instrumentalist logic in which education is seen primarily as a means of preparing workers for industry. The language of skills development, employer engagement, and competency-based training has shaped curricula, pedagogy, and assessment frameworks in ways that marginalise broader educational aims (Allais, 2019; Hodkinson, 1998). The influence of human capital theory – often promoted by global institutions such as the World Bank – has led to a decontextualised and depoliticised model of vocational learning (Ngcwangu, 2015). Scholars such as Wheelahan (2007) and Gamble (2006) have critiqued this model for denying vocational students access to theoretical and conceptual knowledge, thereby reinforcing social subordination. Instead of enabling students to understand the structures and relations that shape their work and lives, instrumentalist VET trains them for compliance.

In the South African context, Allais and Ngcwangu (2025) argue that employer-centred skills planning often results in superficial curriculum adjustments that fail to address systemic inequality or prepare students for meaningful participation in society. The technicist framing of quality in VET compounds the problem. As Wedekind et al. (2024) observe, dominant conceptions of lecturer quality are overly focused on administrative efficiency and compliance, rather than on relational, critical, or student-centred pedagogies. This view sidelines the intellectual and ethical dimensions of vocational teaching, reducing lecturers to implementers rather than educators capable of engaging in transformative praxis.

This technicist drift also narrows the meaning of vocational knowledge, reducing it to fragmented tasks and competencies rather than holistic forms of practice that integrate technical, conceptual, and ethical dimensions. As a result, vocational students are denied opportunities to engage with vocational know-

ledge critically – both as a resource for work and as a means of understanding and reshaping their social conditions.

Academisation vs repoliticisation: A necessary distinction

In response to the marginalisation of vocational learners, some reformers have advocated for the academisation of VET – introducing more theoretical or disciplinary knowledge into curricula to raise its academic prestige and overcome the 'low status' of vocational pathways (Gamble, 2006; Gonon & Bonoli, 2025). While this strategy may appear progressive, it risks reproducing the binary between vocational and academic knowledge rather than disrupting it. Moreover, the academisation of VET can lead to the imposition of abstract, disconnected theory that fails to engage students' lived realities or foster critical agency.

Sabela and Masuku (2020) warn that this approach may alienate working-class students, especially when theoretical content is delivered without context or reflection. In contrast, Freirean praxis begins not with abstract theory, but with problem-posing education grounded in students' experiences and directed towards collective inquiry (Freire, 1970). While academisation is typically analysed as a systemic drift towards academic forms of knowledge, Freire provides a bottom-up perspective that reframes this debate from the standpoint of learners' experiences. Placing Freire and academisation in dialogue is thus not a categorical mistake but a deliberate attempt to show how global debates on academic drift can be rethought through the voices and agency of vocational students in South Africa.

This article therefore advocates for repoliticisation, not academisation. Repoliticisation involves returning to the foundational questions of education: What is its purpose? Who defines the curriculum? Whose knowledge is valued? As Porres et al. (2014, 2020) argue, repoliticising VET means creating spaces for learners to speak as subjects, not objects – to engage with educational content critically and collectively, rather than passively. In this way, repoliticisation affirms the intellectual and political capacity of vocational learners. It does not merely insert academic knowledge into vocational spaces but transforms the nature of educational relationships and practices. It asserts, as Rancière does, that all learners are equally intelligent and that education must be based on the presumption of equality (Porres, 2017). Through this lens, VET becomes not only a site of preparation for work, but a space for ethical becoming and democratic participation.

Repoliticisation in the South African context

Repoliticising VET is especially pressing in South Africa, where vocational education remains shaped by apartheid legacies, market reforms, and policy

contradictions. Although the White Paper on Post-School Education and Training (DHET, 2013) promised a more inclusive, coherent, and developmental post-school system, its implementation has been uneven and often captured by managerial and neoliberal imperatives (Akoojee, 2016; Vally & Motala, 2017, 2022). The continued fragmentation between VET and higher education, the limited articulation pathways, and the neglect of student voice all undermine the possibility of transformative education.

In this context, repoliticisation means more than critique – it means action. It requires creating dialogical spaces where students can engage in critical reflection on their social conditions and on the role of education in their lives. Balwanz and Hlatshwayo (2016) demonstrate that when students are invited into spaces of collective inquiry, they produce knowledge that is both critical and hopeful. Similarly, Majola et al. (2024) foreground how TVET graduates make sense of their educational struggles and reimagine their futures through Freirean dialogue. Repoliticisation also requires a shift in the role of TVET lecturers and researchers. As Terblanche and Bitzer (2018) argue, curriculum change in TVET must be led by educators who understand the needs of their students and communities, not imposed from above. Repoliticisation places educators in partnership with learners, fostering what Freire (1990) calls co-intentional education – where teacher and student learn together in the process of naming and transforming the world.

The Freirean call to reclaim education as a practice of freedom remains deeply relevant to vocational education today. In resisting both technicism and elitist academisation, repoliticisation offers a critical and emancipatory alternative. It challenges the assumption that vocational learners are incapable of theory or critique and insists that, like all learners, they are intellectuals in their own right. By grounding education in dialogue, contextual relevance, and collective inquiry, repoliticisation provides a way to revitalise TVET in South Africa and beyond. It is not a return to theory for theory's sake, but a move towards humanising, participatory, and socially just education – an education that does not simply prepare people for work, but prepares them to shape the world.

The South African TVET sector exemplifies these contradictions. NC(V) programmes, for example, combine vocational subjects with general education but are often delivered through outdated syllabi and under-resourced facilities, leaving students alienated from both academic and practical knowledge. NATED courses remain narrowly occupational, with little space for critical reflection or progression into higher education (Allais & Ngcwangu, 2025).

In this fragmented context, repoliticisation requires not only the creation of dialogical spaces such as Learning Cycle Groups, but also a rethinking of how curricula and pedagogy position vocational knowledge itself – as something to be critically engaged with, not merely consumed or discarded. Repoliticisation

therefore insists that vocational knowledge be valued not only as a set of skills for employability, but as a terrain of critical engagement in its own right. This requires building bridges between vocational, academic, and critical knowledge – enabling learners to move beyond the binary and to situate their learning within broader struggles for justice, dignity, and democratic participation.

Methodology: Dialogical research and participatory praxis

This study was conducted in the Eastern Cape, South Africa – a province characterised by entrenched poverty, high unemployment, and limited post-school opportunities (Majola, 2024). These socio-economic conditions significantly shape vocational learners' experiences and highlight the need for research that is both contextually grounded and ethically responsive. To address this complexity, the study employed a qualitative Participatory Action Research (PAR) design, framed by Paulo Freire's pedagogical principles of dialogue, conscientisation, and praxis. PAR was selected not only for its methodological relevance but also for its political orientation. Rooted in Freire's pedagogy, PAR rejects hierarchical relationships between researcher and participant, positioning both as co-investigators engaged in a shared process of inquiry and transformation (Freire & Horton, 1990; Herr & Anderson, 2016). This approach allowed the study to disrupt traditional research logics and align with critical calls for a more humanising and relational form of educational research – particularly within the VET context, where student voice is frequently marginalised (Powell, 2012; Powell & McGrath, 2019).

Freirean praxis in research design

Freire's concept of praxis – the dynamic interplay between critical reflection and action – shaped both the design and the intention of this study (Freire, 1970). Rather than treating participants as data sources, the research aimed to create dialogical spaces in which participants could reflect on their experiences, name systemic barriers, and collectively imagine alternatives. In this sense, data generation became a pedagogical act: a space of conscientisation where participants developed awareness of the socio-political forces shaping their lives and education (Freire, 1974). This approach also responded to dominant policy and institutional discourses that tend to position TVET learners as passive recipients of employability-focused training rather than as capable agents with the right to participate in shaping their education (Majola et al., 2024). Informed by this critique, the research process was intentionally collaborative, affirming Freire's belief that educational practice must begin with people's lived realities and strive towards transformation.

Research participants and context

Fifteen former National Certificate (Vocational) [NC(V)] students from public TVET colleges in the Eastern Cape participated in the study. All had completed the Level 4 qualification and came from rural or peri-urban communities. Participants were purposively selected to reflect diversity in age, gender, educational pathways, and employment status. The NC(V) pathway was chosen because it illustrates the dual pressures of vocational and academic knowledge integration within the South African TVET system: while designed to provide both practical and theoretical knowledge, it is often experienced by students as outdated, irrelevant, and poorly resourced. Most participants were navigating complex challenges related to joblessness, educational exclusion, and familial responsibilities. Research activities were conducted in community venues and participants' homes, with careful attention to accessibility and comfort. The use of familiar and culturally affirming spaces formed part of a broader commitment to humanising research practice – reducing power imbalances and honouring participants' agency.

Data generation methods

Two primary methods were used to generate data: life narrative interviews and Learning Cycle Group (LCG) meetings. These approaches supported the study's commitment to dialogical, participatory, and critically reflective research. Interview prompts and LCG dialogues extended beyond personal struggles, inviting participants to reflect on curriculum design, teaching methods, assessment practices, and the forms of vocational and academic knowledge encountered during their studies. Life narrative interviews provided space for participants to share their personal and educational journeys in their own voices and languages. All names used in reporting the findings are pseudonyms to protect participants' identities. Rather than extracting fixed data points, the interviews enabled participants to make sense of their experiences with systemic marginalisation, including unsafe transport, financial insecurity, and feelings of exclusion within the education system (Majola, 2024; Russell, 2022). These narratives were not only expressions of struggle but also of meaning-making. In line with Freire's emphasis on lived experience as a source of knowledge, the interviews became acts of self-reflection and political awakening – spaces where participants could critically engage with their own stories and locate themselves within broader social and educational structures (Freire & Horton, 1990).

LCG meetings functioned as collective spaces of dialogue and reflection. Grounded in Kolb's (1979) experiential learning cycle and adapted within a Freirean pedagogical framework, the LCGs were designed to promote collaborative sense-making, problem-posing, and critical discussion. Each session was structured to guide participants through cycles of experience sharing, reflection,

conceptualisation, and action planning. Sessions were conducted in isiXhosa, the participants' home language, to promote linguistic inclusion and counter the dominance of English in education and research. This was particularly significant since language itself is a key mediator of knowledge: using isiXhosa enabled participants to articulate experiences of vocational learning in ways that connected directly to their lives, including the relevance – or irrelevance – of curricular content. This linguistic choice reflected a broader commitment to cultural responsiveness and epistemic justice – principles that resonate strongly with Freire's call for education that affirms learners' identities and knowledges (Majola, 2024; Rangana, 2023). LCG meetings went beyond traditional focus groups by fostering a dialogical ethos in which participants not only shared perspectives but also challenged one another, drew connections between personal and structural issues, and articulated collective aspirations for educational transformation. In this sense, the LCG methodology not only generated data but also piloted a model of dialogical pedagogy that could be replicated across TVET colleges as a tool for systemic repoliticisation.

Ethical commitments and research constraints

The research was shaped by an ethic of care and accountability. In addition to securing institutional ethics clearance, the study implemented practical measures to reduce participation barriers. Transport allowances were provided, and flexible scheduling accommodated participants' daily responsibilities, including childcare, informal work, and community commitments. Despite these efforts, structural constraints persisted. Some participants faced food insecurity, emotional stress, and limited access to data and connectivity – factors that influenced their engagement. These realities reinforced the importance of designing research methodologies that are sensitive to the socio-economic conditions of participants and that do not assume uninterrupted access to time, resources, or stability (Ezomo & Prinsloo, 2024; Wood et al., 2023). Rather than treating these constraints as disruptions, the study recognised them as part of the research terrain. They were discussed openly in LCG sessions, becoming opportunities for collective reflection on the structural violence embedded in the South African post-school landscape. In this way, even the limitations of the research process contributed to its critical and dialogical character.

Study findings: Reclaiming voice and agency in TVET through dialogical praxis

This section presents four interrelated themes that emerged from the LCG meetings with 15 former NC(V) students. These themes illuminate how partici-pants – when engaged in intentionally dialogical and participatory spaces – were

able to reflect critically on their educational journeys, articulate systemic injustices, and begin to reimagine the role of vocational education in their lives. Far from being sites of passive data extraction, the LCGs functioned as dynamic, relational spaces grounded in Freirean pedagogy. In the spirit of what Freire (2005) describes as the culture circle, the meetings enabled participants to engage in collective meaning-making, problem-posing, and the naming of oppressive realities (Freire & Horton, 1990; Freire & Shor, 1987).

Within these dialogical encounters, students transitioned from being perceived – and often perceiving themselves – as passive recipients of narrowly framed, market-driven training, to becoming active subjects in the co-construction of knowledge. This process was not merely cognitive, but also affective and political, offering participants opportunities to reclaim their voices, affirm their lived experiences, and challenge the dehumanising dimensions of technicist TVET provision (Allais & Ngcwangu, 2025; Hodkinson, 1998). This shift aligns with broader critiques of South African VET policy, which has historically marginalised student perspectives in favour of labour-market alignment and employer-defined competence models (Powell, 2012; Vally & Motala, 2022).

In this way, the LCGs operated as pedagogical interventions that disrupted the dominant logic of VET, fostering a sense of belonging, agency, and critical hope. As Porres et al. (2014) suggest, such spaces hold emancipatory potential when they allow learners to engage not only with the curriculum, but with their own conditions and futures as political subjects. The themes that follow offer insight into how repoliticisation becomes possible when students are invited to participate as knowers, not merely as learners, and when education is approached as a dialogical, humanising, and transformative act (Majola et al., 2024).

Theme 1: From silence to speech: Breaking the culture of passive reception

Many students described their experiences in the college as marked by voicelessness and disengagement. Lectures were often delivered in a rigid, top-down manner, with little space for interaction, questioning, or personal reflection. Content was frequently presented as fixed and unchallengeable, reinforcing a sense of exclusion. One student reflected:

> We are always told what to do. They just come in, give us notes, and expect us to understand. There's no asking us what we think or how we feel about what we are learning like we're just there to listen and pass. But we have thoughts, we have experiences from home, from the township, from our lives, that also matter. (LCG Meeting, 2021)

The LCG meetings disrupted this dynamic by creating dialogical and inclusive spaces where students were encouraged to speak, listen, and reflect together. In these moments, participants began to express frustrations they had long

internalised. For many, it was the first time their perspectives were affirmed as valid and meaningful. As another participant explained:

> For the first time, I felt like my voice mattered. Even if I was nervous, I knew this was a space where we listen to each other no one's voice is above another. At college, you keep quiet because if you ask too many questions, you're seen as difficult. But here, we could talk about our real struggles from taxi issues to not understanding the work and no one judged us. (Participant VM, 2021)

This theme reflects Freire's (1970) critique of the banking model of education, where students are treated as empty vessels to be filled with pre-packaged knowledge. The LCGs, by contrast, promoted a shift from silence to speech a shift that marked the beginning of conscientisation, as students began to recognise their capacity to think, question, and contribute meaningfully to educational dialogue. In these spaces, education moved from a one-way transfer of information to a mutual, participatory process of becoming.

Theme 2: We are not just workers: Reclaiming identity and dignity

What emerges here is not a rejection of vocational knowledge itself but a call to broaden it: students valued practical competence but wanted it integrated with critical thinking, entrepreneurial capacity, and leadership development. They articulated visions of a VET system that prepares them not just as compliant workers but as innovators, community builders, and active citizens. In this sense, they redefined what vocational knowledge could mean beyond narrow skill sets toward a holistic form of learning that bridges technical, academic, and critical domains. Students expressed growing discomfort with an education system that seemed to prepare them solely for low-status, repetitive, and externally defined forms of labour. Many felt boxed into narrow occupational roles, with little room to explore their identities, passions, or social contributions. One participant remarked:

> Everything they teach us is about working for someone else following instructions, doing the same thing every day. It's like the system sees us as just future employees for big companies or factories. But what about me? What about my ideas, my dreams? What if I want to start something of my own or give back to my community? (LCG Meeting, 2021)

This rejection of narrow occupational preparation was a recurring theme throughout the LCGs. Students did not question the value of practical skills, but they challenged the instrumental framing that reduced them to labour market outputs. Many expressed frustration at the lack of focus on broader personal and intellectual development, particularly in areas like critical thinking, leadership, and entrepreneurship capacities they saw as essential for community upliftment and long-term resilience. Another student shared:

> I want to be more than just employable. I don't want to wait for someone to hire me all the time. I want to be useful in my community, even start something that helps others. I want to lead, not just follow instructions my whole life. But this kind of thinking isn't encouraged in college it's all about getting any job, not about growing as a person. You can't have access to admitted to university with this NC(V) qualification, expect coming back to TVET college to do NATED courses, like most of us did, so we are trapped, maybe I can say we are just meant to be workers in this system. (Participant W2Y, 2021)

These reflections challenge the dominant labour-market framing of VET and assert the desire for an education that recognises students as full human beings not just as units of labour. Freire's concept of humanisation is powerfully evident here. Participants articulated a need for education that nurtures not only technical competence but also self-worth, agency, and a sense of purpose. In their voices, we hear a demand for a different kind of VET one that affirms dignity and identity alongside employability.

Theme 3: The curriculum is not about us: Alienation from content and context

Several participants explicitly connected this alienation to the outdated NC(V) curriculum, which they felt had little resonance with contemporary technologies or local livelihoods. Their critiques carried implicit proposals: they wanted curricula that address urgent community challenges (such as unemployment, crime, and health), that integrate local knowledge with modern technical skills, and that open pathways to further study. These are not abstract desires but concrete curricular visions grounded in their daily struggles. A recurring critique from participants was the perceived irrelevance of the curriculum to their lives and contexts. Many felt alienated from the content, describing it as disconnected from their communities, lived realities, and post-college challenges. One participant expressed this sense of dislocation bluntly:

> We learn things that have no meaning in our daily lives. It's like the textbooks and topics are out of touch with the reality of the township , making matters worse we are in 2021 but some of the subjects taught at the college are using the syllabus written in 1995, what is that? Is it relevant in this day and age, they don't understand where we come from or what we're dealing with outside of class. (LCG Meeting, 2021)

Others described the curriculum as abstract, rigid, and lacking in everyday applicability. The dominant teaching approaches often highly formal and content-heavy left students disinterested and demotivated, particularly when they could not see how learning connected to their present or future. Another student reflected:

> Sometimes I sat in class and ask myself, what's the point of all this? Why are we learning things that the teacher is not sure of himself, definitely things that are not applicable to change our lives. Learning about typing speed and typewrite with that

> help me to increase my chances of getting a job that I help me support my family or deal with poverty that is written all over at home and my community? (LCG Meeting, 2021)

These reflections point to what Freire refers to as the failure of education to engage with generative themes the issues, struggles, and hopes that emerge from learners' social contexts (Freire, 1970). Instead of empowering transformation, the curriculum becomes another site of alienation. For these students, meaningful education would begin not in abstraction, but in connection with lived realities, local knowledge, and the urgent issues that shape their daily lives.

Theme 4: Education as hope and collective struggle

Alongside hope, students offered practical suggestions for systemic change: more dialogical spaces like LCGs embedded into college life, lecturers trained to facilitate critical discussion, updated workshops and facilities that reflect current labour market realities, and clearer articulation routes into higher education. These ideas demonstrate that students are not only critics of the system but also active visionaries, proposing pathways to reimagine VET from below. Despite their critiques, students did not reject the idea of education. On the contrary, they articulated a profound belief in its transformative potential if reimagined on more humanising, inclusive, and contextually relevant terms. Education, for many, remained a space of aspiration and emotional investment. As one participant described:

> We don't just come here TVET college for a qualification which does not get to a job. We come with pain, with dreams, with questions. Some of us are dealing with poverty, loss, and trauma. We need a place that helps us heal and grow, to end poverty and transform our lives and that of our families, we carried hopes of our families driven by aspiration to change in our black community. (LCG Meeting, 2021)

Another participant further highlight:

> Do you know where I live? Some of us walk long distances to go to college because we want this education to improve our lives. Yes, I might be hungry when I get to school. Yes, you don't know what might happen on the road with all the criminal activities, but we come because we want to change our lives and those of our families. Poverty is real in the township, but we stand up with hope that education can help us improve. (LCG meeting, 2021)

This notion of education as healing and restoration reveals the emotional and psychosocial dimensions of vocational learning that are often overlooked in policy and curriculum design. The LCG meetings, in contrast, provided a rare space for students to speak openly, reflect deeply, and begin to imagine alternatives. As another student shared:

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> If we could have more spaces like this, where we really talk and listen to each other, maybe we could change this place our college, even our communities. We've got ideas, we just need people to believe in us. Maybe we can be the ones to make things better for others. (LCG Meeting, 2021)

Another participant observed:

> When we share our experiences together, I have realised that I am not alone in these challenges. It makes us stronger and helps us think of solutions, somewhere of being there to support each other as TVET graduates, since the college seemingly does not care what happened after you graduate. (Participant K, 2021)

These voices reflect not only critical engagement, but also a form of praxis the merging of reflection and action directed at transformation (Freire, 1970). Students were not merely critiquing a broken system; they were imagining and enacting a different kind of vocational education one rooted in solidarity, agency, and justice. Their words point to a desire for VET to become a space of possibility, not just productivity.

Cross-theme analysis and implications

Together, these four themes illuminate how students – when engaged through Freirean dialogue – can begin to reframe VET from below. Their reflections are not calls for more content, tighter discipline, or increased efficiency. Instead, they demand dignity, relevance, voice, and belonging. They envision an education that is not merely about preparing for precarious jobs, but about developing as full human beings in a world marked by inequality and struggle. What these narratives articulate is not a rejection of VET, but a repoliticisation of it – a demand that vocational education be reclaimed as a space of becoming, not merely of doing. Through the LCGs, students began to move from silence to speech, from alienation to critical engagement, and from passive training recipients to active participants in shaping their educational futures. Their reflections also signal possibilities for the wider TVET sector. They demonstrate that repoliticisation is not an abstract theory, but a lived, practical demand. The visions articulated in these dialogues – curricula that connect to lived realities, pedagogy that values student voice, and facilities that support dignity – point towards systemic reforms that could transform TVET across South Africa.

Discussion: Towards a repoliticised vision of VET in South Africa

This discussion revisits the central question of the article: does integrating Paulo Freire's critical pedagogy into the South African TVET context represent a drift towards elitist academisation, or does it offer a pathway for the repoliticisation of vocational education? Drawing on the narratives of 15 former NC(V) students, this section argues that Freirean praxis reclaims VET as a space of political,

ethical, and human development – far from the abstraction and exclusion feared in critiques of academisation.

Freire in VET: Reclaiming purpose, not elitising pedagogy

South African TVET continues to grapple with historical and policy-driven marginalisation (Akoojee, 2016; Wedekind et al., 2024). Within this contested terrain, critical pedagogical frameworks are often regarded as overly academic or detached from the hands-on ethos of vocational learning. However, the findings challenge this assumption. Students engaged through Freirean dialogue did not call for abstract theorising, but for education that reflects their lived realities and affirms their voice and dignity (Freire, 1970; Majola et al., 2024). In doing so, their reflections demonstrate that Freirean praxis is not an imposition of elitist academic content, but a means of grounding vocational knowledge in context. Students did not dismiss technical training; rather, they wanted it connected to critical thinking, entrepreneurship, and community relevance.

This illustrates how Freire helps to reframe the debate: instead of opposing academic and vocational knowledge, his pedagogy reveals how both can be integrated within dialogical, participatory practice. Their critiques of curriculum and pedagogy reflect deep structural inequalities and policy shortcomings (Vally & Motala, 2017, 2022). The desire for relevance, belonging, and self-determination is not elitist but deeply political—rooted in conditions of exclusion and economic precarity.

Freire's pedagogy, centred on *conscientização* and praxis, affirms that true learning integrates reflection and action, theory and lived experience (Freire & Horton, 1990; Hyslop-Margison & Dale, 2010). This is not a call to displace skills training, but to re-situate it within an educational vision that goes beyond workplace readiness. Freirean dialogue positions students as agents in knowledge production, challenging technicist framings that reduce learners to future employees – a logic long critiqued in South African VET policy (Allais, 2019; Ngcwangu, 2015).

Beyond academisation: The case for repoliticisation

The trend of academisation in global VET discourse typically involves the integration of higher-level theoretical or disciplinary knowledge into vocational programmes (Gonon & Bonoli, 2025; Kyvik, 2009). While such moves aim to raise the perceived status of VET, they often reproduce hierarchies of knowledge and exclude learners whose social and educational backgrounds differ from university norms (Gjelstad, 2025; Kaiser, 2021).

In South Africa, attempts to uplift VET through qualifications frameworks and standardised curricula have too often resulted in bureaucratisation and alienation, rather than transformation (Allais & Marock, 2024; Vally & Motala,

2022). Students in this study did not reject knowledge per se, but the way it is disconnected from their contexts. This reflects international critiques that warn against the decontextualisation that accompanies academisation when it fails to engage with local realities (Roos & Trasberg, 2025; Wolter, 2023).

Repoliticisation, by contrast, starts from the bottom up. It grounds knowledge in students' lived experiences, encourages problem-posing education, and restores the ethical and social dimensions of learning (Freire, 1974; Porres et al., 2014). The findings confirm this: students' proposals for updated curricula, improved facilities, and recognition of their aspirations are concrete expressions of repoliticisation in practice. They reposition vocational knowledge not as low-status training, but as a legitimate, evolving field that integrates theory, practice, and critical reflection simultaneously.

This bottom-up theorising demonstrates why bringing Freire into the academisation debate is so valuable: it highlights how systemic drifts towards abstract knowledge can be challenged and redirected through learners' own voices. As Gjelstad (2025) illustrates in the Norwegian context, repoliticisation can emerge through local, community-rooted collaboration – a lesson equally relevant to South Africa, where top-down policy initiatives have struggled to create genuinely participatory spaces.

Reimagining VET from below: Voice, praxis, and democratic knowledge

The findings of this study not only expose the limitations of the current TVET system in South Africa but also illuminate the possibilities for its renewal through student voice, dialogical praxis, and political participation. Through their engagement in the LCGs, students challenged the status quo and co-constructed alternative visions of what vocational education could and should be. These visions – rooted in experience, critique, and hope – offer a vital epistemological challenge to the top-down policy approaches that continue to dominate VET reform in South Africa (Ngcwangu, 2015; Vally & Motala, 2022).

Freire (1970, 1974) argued that the starting point of any liberatory pedagogy must be the lived realities and struggles of learners. This study echoes that position. Students did not simply critique curriculum irrelevance or classroom authoritarianism; they proposed VET as a platform for empowerment, leadership, and community transformation. Their testimonies reflect a form of situated theorising – knowledge generated from below that directly contests institutionalised silences and marginalisation (Porres, 2018, 2020; Spreen & Vally, 2006). Crucially, these testimonies contained visions for reform: curricula that address current labour-market technologies while also tackling community issues; lecturers who facilitate dialogue rather than dictation; facilities that reflect the dignity of students' aspirations; and systemic articulation routes into higher

education. These visions push the conversation beyond critique into concrete proposals for repoliticisation.

This reimagining is not only pedagogical but political. As Gjelstad (2025) and Gonon and Bonoli (2025) have shown in European contexts, resisting the encroachment of abstract academisation requires the development of context-sensitive, locally grounded alternatives. In the South African case, this means rejecting both technicist training models and elite academic mimicry, and instead cultivating democratic knowledge spaces where students become active participants in curriculum design and institutional critique. The LCGs in this study operated as such spaces, modelled on Freire's culture circles (Freire & Shor, 1987). They reveal what TVET could become if reoriented around the principles of humanisation, critical consciousness, and structural justice (Hodkinson, 1998; Walker & Loots, 2018). Beyond their immediate outcomes, the LCGs point to a replicable model of pedagogy that could be scaled across TVET colleges, embedding dialogical practices into everyday teaching and learning. This positions repoliticisation not as an isolated experiment, but as a viable systemic alternative to both technicism and academisation.

In South Africa, where educational inequality continues to be structured along lines of race, class, and geography, this reimagining is urgent. It requires more than curriculum tweaking or expanded assessment metrics – it demands a shift in power from policymakers and institutional managers to the students and communities most affected by vocational marginalisation (Vally & Motala, 2017; Wedekind et al., 2024). Ultimately, reimagining VET from below means understanding students not merely as recipients of knowledge or labour-market entrants, but as citizens, thinkers, and co-authors of educational purpose. This shift lies at the heart of repoliticisation. It is not about abandoning VET's practical focus; it is about redefining what counts as practical, and for whom.

Conclusion: Reclaiming the political in vocational education

This article has explored what it means to engage Paulo Freire's critical pedagogy within the South African TVET landscape, particularly amid concerns about the so-called academisation of vocational education. Drawing on the voices of 15 TVET students who participated in LCG meetings, the article has shown that a Freirean approach does not abstract vocational education from its practical purpose – it revitalises and repositions it as a site of social meaning, political agency, and ethical becoming.

In a system structured around NC(V) and NATED programmes that too often remain outdated, poorly resourced, and disconnected from further study, the need for such revitalisation is especially urgent. The students' narratives disrupt long-held binaries between theory and practice, between academic and

vocational, and between training and education. Their voices call not for university-style theorisation but for a form of learning that is critically reflective, contextually rooted, and socially transformative.

They proposed curricula that speak to local realities, lecturers trained to facilitate dialogue, modernised workshops and teaching spaces, and clearer articulation into higher education. These visions signal that students are not only critics of TVET but also active authors of its possible futures. In this sense, they affirm Freire's insistence that education is never neutral – it either serves to reproduce oppression or becomes a practice of freedom (Freire, 1970). The testimonies reflect a longing not simply for jobs, but for recognition, relevance, and the opportunity to lead lives of dignity.

Engaging Freire in TVET, then, is not an act of elitism – it is a process of repoliticisation, a reclaiming of education's capacity to build solidarity, challenge injustice, and affirm the full humanity of learners. This stands in stark contrast to dominant policy trends that treat vocational students as labour-market instruments and VET as a delivery mechanism for economic outputs (Allais & Ngcwangu, 2025; Vally & Motala, 2014, 2022).

Repoliticisation invites us to see vocational education not as a lower rung on a hierarchical system, but as a space for democratic dialogue and collective transformation. The LCGs in this study demonstrate how such repoliticisation can be practised in everyday institutional life and suggest a model that could be scaled across TVET colleges to embed student voice and dialogical pedagogy into the system itself.

The implications are far-reaching. Freirean pedagogy offers more than a method – it offers a philosophical and ethical foundation for reimagining the purpose of VET in post-apartheid South Africa. If taken seriously, this means shifting from education for the economy to education with and for people – especially those historically marginalised by colonial, capitalist, and neoliberal structures (Majola et al., 2024; Spreen & Vally, 2010).

This article does not advocate for VET to become abstract or academically remote. Rather, it calls for a radical centring of student voice, dignity, and possibility. It proposes a vocational education that is intellectually expansive, emotionally restorative, and politically alive. This is not about replacing practical skills with academic theory, but about integrating vocational, academic, and critical knowledge in ways that affirm dignity and possibility.

As Freire reminds us, 'education either functions as an instrument which is used to facilitate integration of the younger generation into the logic of the present system, or it becomes the practice of freedom' (Freire, 1970, p. 34). The students in this study have pointed us toward the latter – and it is our task, as educators, researchers, and policymakers, to listen. Repoliticisation, in this sense,

is not only a theoretical claim but a systemic necessity for the renewal of South African TVET.

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