

Hearing and Listening to the Voices from Below: TVET Students' Praxis in a Freirean Context<https://doi.org/10.36615/9qh55627>**Ezekiel Majola**<http://orcid.org/0000-0002-5887-7134>Faculty of Education, Post School
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ABSTRACT

This article revisits the lived experiences of South African Technical and Vocational Education and Training (TVET) students through a Freirean lens, foregrounding the praxis of listening as a transformative act of conscientisation. Drawing on participatory action research (PAR) with National Certificate (Vocational) [NC(V)] graduates, the study explores how students reflect on and act against systemic inequities within their learning environments and labour market transitions. Moving beyond the idealism often associated with Freirean applications, the paper offers grounded evidence of how students mobilise dialogical spaces, peer learning networks, and collective activism to contest exclusionary pedagogies and institutional neglect. It distinguishes between hearing - a tokenistic recognition of students' voices - and listening, which entails dialogical engagement that generates agency and systemic critique. Positioned within South Africa's evolving TVET landscape, including post-Quality Council for Trades and Occupations (QCTO) reforms and shifting policy frameworks, the study argues that genuine listening can reframe employability as a humanising and emancipatory process rather than a narrow economic imperative. By integrating students' praxis with recent critical debates on vocational justice and transformation, the paper contributes to reimagining TVET as a site of collective empowerment and social change. The findings advance a Freirean pedagogy of transformation rooted in listening, action, and liberation.

Submitted: December 16, 2024

Accepted: February 3, 2026

Introduction

TVET in South Africa continues to be heralded as a policy solution for unemployment, poverty alleviation, and skills development among marginalised youth. However, persistent inequalities in access, curriculum design, and institutional culture reveal deeper contradictions that extend beyond issues of employability (McGrath & Ramsarup, 2024; Allais & Ngcwangu, 2025). Despite the sector's expansion, TVET often fails to cultivate the human capabilities and civic agency necessary for students to participate fully in social and economic life (Lotz-Sisitka & McGrath, 2023; Majola, Geduld & Rangana, 2025). These inadequacies expose tensions between the instrumental goals of skills supply and the emancipatory potential of education as a practice of freedom. For many students, outdated curricula, inadequate infrastructure, and precarious transitions into the labour market reproduce rather than redress historical inequities.

Against this backdrop, this article foregrounds the voices and praxis of TVET students as a lens for re-imagining the sector's transformative purpose. It argues that listening, as theorised within Paulo Freire's critical pedagogy, is not a passive act of empathy but an active political practice through which students and educators engage in praxis - the dialectical interplay of reflection and action aimed at social transformation (Freire, 1970; Freire & Shor, 1987). Whereas hearing denotes surface-level acknowledgment, listening involves dialogical engagement that challenges structural oppression and affirms learners as co-creators of knowledge. This conceptual shift responds to Freire's call for a humanising pedagogy that links education to liberation and to contemporary demands for socially just, inclusive post-schooling in South Africa (Vally & Motala, 2014; Majola & Geduld, 2025).

Drawing on qualitative data from PAR with NC(V) graduates in the Eastern Cape, the article examines how students mobilise reflection and collective action to confront systemic barriers and imagine alternatives. Their experiences reveal a critical paradox: TVET aspires to empower, yet remains bound by the same neoliberal logics that constrain its emancipatory potential. The discussion therefore advances a Freirean framework of listening as praxis, a pedagogical and institutional stance that repositions students from objects of policy to subjects of transformation. By situating these findings within current reforms and emergent scholarship on humanising pedagogy, the article contributes to ongoing debates about how TVET can evolve beyond skills provision toward a truly transformative, justice-oriented educational project.

Theoretical Framework: Freirean Critical Pedagogy

Paulo Freire's critical pedagogy offers a radical framework for reimagining education as a practice of liberation rather than a mechanism for adaptation. Central to this framework are the interrelated concepts of praxis, conscientisation, and the critique of the banking model of education, all of which foreground dialogue, reflection, and collective action as pathways to emancipation (Freire, 1970; Freire & Shor, 1987; Freire & Horton, 1990). These ideas remain profoundly relevant in the South African TVET sector, where post-apartheid reforms have yet to overcome structural inequities rooted in racial capitalism and neoliberal governance (McGrath & Ramsarup, 2024; Allais & Ngcwangu, 2025; Majola, Geduld & Rangana, 2025).

Key Freirean Concepts in the TVET Context

Freire's concept of praxis, the unity of reflection and action, insists that knowledge emerges through critical engagement with lived experience. Praxis challenges learners and educators to interrogate the material conditions of their existence and act to transform them. In contemporary South African TVET, this translates into students' capacity to critique exploitative learning conditions and labour market constraints while imagining alternative futures (Majola, 2025a; Majola & Geduld, 2025). Similarly, conscientisation, the development of critical social awareness, demands that students move beyond surface complaints about skills gaps towards recognising how systemic inequalities are sustained through political economy, race, and class (Freire, 1974; Kundnani, 2020). Through this lens, TVET students' reflections on unemployment and curriculum irrelevance are not simply grievances but early stages of critical consciousness that can lead to collective mobilisation.

Freire's (1970) critique of the banking model of education, which deposits knowledge into passive learners, resonates sharply with the NC(V) curriculum's persistent disconnection from local realities. Scholars have long noted that the NC(V) framework privileges compliance with industry standards over critical engagement with social issues (Gewer & Akoobhai, 2013; Mabunda & Frick, 2020). Freire's problem-posing education, by contrast, calls for a dialogical pedagogy in which students and teachers co-create knowledge. Within this framework, listening emerges as a radical act that resists both bureaucratic control and neoliberal audit cultures dominating South African TVET (Allais, 2019; Monk, Molebatsi, McGrath, Metelerkamp, Adrupio, Openjuru *et al.*, 2025).

From Hearing to Listening: Reclaiming a Humanising Pedagogy

A central extension of Freire's ideas advanced in this article is the distinction between hearing and listening. Hearing denotes token engagement common in policy discourses that celebrate "student voice" without redistributing power. Listening, by contrast, is an active, ethical, and political practice through which educators, institutions, and students enter dialogical relationships aimed at dismantling oppression (Freire & Shor, 1987; Majola, Rangana & Geduld, 2025). In this sense, listening becomes a form of praxis: it requires reflection on structural conditions and concrete action to transform them. This reconceptualisation contributes to a growing body of Southern scholarship on humanising pedagogy (Lotz-Sisitka & McGrath, 2023; Vimbelo & Bayaga, 2024), positioning it not merely as an affective stance but as a strategy for systemic change.

Relevance to South African TVET

The historical and political foundations of South African vocational education, rooted in apartheid's racialised labour division (Kallaway, 1996; Seekings & Nattrass, 2006), continue to shape post-apartheid policy. Although frameworks such as the National Qualifications Framework (NQF) and the QCTO have sought to democratise skills development, they often reproduce narrow economic imperatives that obscure social justice goals (Buthelezi, 2018; Allais & Ngcwangu, 2025). Freire's critical pedagogy thus demands a deeper rupture with these structural limitations. Rather than adjusting curricula to fit labour market trends, it calls for a radical redefinition of education's purpose to cultivate critical consciousness and collective agency capable of challenging racial capitalism itself (Vally & Motala, 2014; Majola, Rangana & Geduld, 2025).

In this view, the resilience and creativity of TVET students represent more than coping strategies; they constitute acts of resistance. By framing these actions as forms of praxis, educators and policymakers can move from romanticising student perseverance to recognising its political significance. Listening, when grounded in Freirean ethics, becomes a vehicle for transforming TVET from a site of compliance to a site of struggle and possibility. Thus, Freire's framework reimaged through contemporary South African realities offers not only a theoretical lens but also a moral and political imperative: to move from hearing students to listening with them in pursuit of liberation. This shift reframes TVET as a participatory and justice-oriented project that bridges critical pedagogy, vocational empowerment, and social transformation.

Methodology

This study adopted a qualitative PAR design, grounded in the principles of Paulo Freire’s dialogical pedagogy. PAR was chosen to transcend extractive forms of inquiry by creating collaborative spaces in which knowledge is co-constructed with, rather than about, participants. In response to calls for more emancipatory methodologies in the study of South African TVET (Powell & McGrath, 2019; Majola, 2025b; Majola & Geduld, 2025), this approach positions participants not merely as research subjects but as co-researchers whose reflections and actions constitute critical knowledge about structural inequities within the sector.

The study engaged 15 NC(V) graduates from Gqeberha, selected through purposive sampling to represent diverse socio-economic and educational backgrounds. The aim was to foreground marginalised perspectives that are typically absent from dominant, quantitative policy-driven analyses of TVET. Participants’ experiences were explored through Learning Cycle Group (LCG) dialogues, a Freirean-inspired method adapted from participatory learning and action cycles. Unlike traditional focus groups, LCGs prioritise dialogue, reflection, and collective problem-solving over consensus-building. Each cycle comprised three interlinked stages: critical reflection on lived realities; identification of structural barriers; and planning for transformative action. These iterative sessions became spaces of conscientisation, where participants interrogated institutional power relations, curriculum gaps, and socio-economic exclusion (Freire & Horton, 1990; Majola, Geduld & Rangana, 2025).

This methodological design operationalised “listening as praxis”, the central theoretical construct of this paper, by embedding it within the data-generation process. Listening was not a passive act of empathy but an epistemic practice through which participants and the researcher engaged in mutual recognition and co-learning. The process required what Freire (1970) terms “dialogical humility”: an openness to being transformed by others’ experiences. Through this approach, the research environment mirrored the emancipatory relationships it sought to study, exemplifying a humanising methodology (Esau & Daniels, 2022; Vimbelo & Bayaga, 2023, 2024). The data corpus consisted of audio-recorded and transcribed LCG sessions, reflective journals, and field notes documenting both participant dialogue and researcher reflexivity. Thematic analysis, guided by Freirean categories of praxis, conscientisation, and humanisation, was used to interpret the data (Braun & Clarke, 2013). Coding was iterative and collaborative: emergent themes were co-validated with participants during follow-up meetings to ensure fidelity to their meanings. This process revealed three overarching

themes: structural dissonance; agency through solidarity; and contradictions of transformation, which illustrate how students move from personal frustration to collective critical awareness and action.

Reflexivity was integral to maintaining rigour and ethical accountability. The researcher, positioned as both a critical scholar and TVET practitioner, maintained a reflexive journal to examine how personal commitments to Freirean ideals influenced interactions and interpretations. This transparency ensured that the analysis remained dialogically grounded rather than interpretively imposed (Herr & Anderson, 2016). Ultimately, the PAR methodology enabled participants to move from articulating grievances to formulating strategies for systemic change, most notably through the formation of the TVET Student Movement Group, a collective outcome that exemplified praxis in action. Through this participatory, listening-centred approach, the study not only generated rich qualitative data but also embodied Freire's insistence that research must contribute to liberation. It therefore demonstrates that listening, when enacted as an epistemological and methodological principle, can transform both knowledge production and educational practice within the TVET sector.

Findings and Analysis

This section examines how South African TVET students navigate structural constraints and demonstrate praxis reflection and action within a context of persistent inequality. Through their narratives, participants reveal how critical awareness emerges amid institutional neglect, inadequate curricula, and disillusionment with employability promises. Their reflections illuminate a complex interplay between agency and constraint, situating Freire's critical pedagogy within the lived realities of the NC(V) experience.

Theme 1: Conscientisation through Disillusionment, Recognising Structural Barriers

Participants articulated a growing consciousness of the contradictions embedded within the NC(V) system, particularly the gap between the curriculum's promises and the lived realities of students. One participant captured this disillusionment vividly:

"You enrol in college with determination... but that commitment is nothing because you find out you are not being taught well. The lecturers should be coming to class more regularly... It is unacceptable for the lecturers not to come to class we cannot passively accept that kind of world passively imposed on us nor can we adapt to it. Here goes your passion for attending

college because nothing is happening there. You cannot blame [students] for losing interest.”
(LCG meeting, 2021)

This statement reflects conscientisation, Freire’s (1970) notion of critical awakening, where learners begin to name their oppression and locate it within broader structural realities. The participants’ recognition of the systemic disjuncture between their aspirations and institutional neglect underscores how TVET continues to reproduce socio-economic marginalisation despite policy reforms.

Students noted that lecturer absenteeism and the lack of dialogical engagement stifled their learning and constrained their ability to question systemic inequities. As another student expressed:

“I know it’s my duty to read my books, but [I] expect lecturers to come to class and help me... They do not come to the class where you need them. It is very disappointing, and you think: what is the use of going to college anyway? This has led me to believe that without lecturers as dialogical partners, students are deprived of the tools necessary to examine their circumstances and collaborate effectively toward meaningful change.” (LCG meeting, 2021)

These reflections echo Majola and Geduld’s (2025) finding that pedagogical disengagement in TVET perpetuates a dehumanising pedagogy - one that silences rather than empowers. Yet, within this disillusionment emerged a sense of collective agency. Participants described how they began creating spaces of dialogue and praxis beyond institutional confines:

“Our internship experiences made us reflect on how workplaces actually function and how different that reality was from what we were taught at college.” (LCG meeting, 2021)

These self-initiated activities exemplify what Freire (1990) calls praxis - the unity of reflection and action upon the world to transform it. Listening, dialogue, and collaboration became acts of resistance and renewal. Through these articulations, participants began to imagine transformation as a communal project rather than an individual pursuit.

However, their efforts were often undermined by institutional inertia. As several participants recounted:

“We would talk to the campus manager about lecturers not attending classes, but everything stayed the same. Instead, lecturers shouted at us for reporting them ... Reporting through class reps never worked. The campus manager didn’t resolve the absenteeism, and our class

became enemies with the lecturers we reported. We addressed this challenge by being critically conscious.” (LCG meeting, 2021)

This tension between awakening and alienation demonstrates that conscientisation is neither linear nor uncontested. Institutional actors such as lecturers, administrators, and policymakers remained largely unresponsive. Their failure to listen perpetuated a cycle of alienation and disengagement. As Freire (1990) reminds us, dialogue cannot exist without humility, love, and faith in people’s capacity to transform. The persistence of hierarchical communication in TVET institutions suggests that such dialogical ethics remain unrealised.

Finally, participants’ testimonies of disrupted learning due to recurrent strikes and delayed allowances reveal the structural fragility of the TVET system:

“Sometimes the strike would last the whole week... There was a year in 2017 when we were doing level 3, and there were strikes during exams, and we would fall behind... There were strikes because we would receive allowance money very late, students would be in trouble with their landlords, and we would only receive money after three months. My academic performance was affected.” (Seyisiz, 2021)

These lived accounts illuminate how systemic dysfunction rooted in administrative neglect and policy fragility erodes students’ motivation and reproduces disillusionment. However, within this despair, critical awareness deepens. As Freire and Shor (1987) argue, moments of recognition are the first acts of liberation, marking the movement from passive acceptance to critical interrogation of reality.

Theme 2: From Awareness to Collective Action - Peer Learning as Praxis

The disillusionment and critical awareness articulated in Theme 1 laid the foundation for collective action. Confronted with persistent lecturer absenteeism, limited institutional support, and structural obstacles such as strikes and delayed allowances, students began to refuse passive acceptance of their circumstances. Their recognition of systemic barriers did not lead to resignation; rather, it catalysed a movement towards self-organised learning, mutual support, and peer-led initiatives. As one participant explained:

We would meet to share what we learned during our internships, how offices work and what tools to use. We also helped each other learn, connecting what we were taught to our

everyday experiences in the townships. Sometimes, we worked on small projects to help our communities, using what we learned in class in real-life situations". (LCG meeting, 2021)

This shift illustrates Freire's (1970) notion of praxis: reflection intertwined with action to transform the world. By taking ownership of their learning and creating dialogical spaces among themselves, participants began to reclaim education as a collective project of empowerment rather than a passive acquisition of skills. These emergent peer-learning networks enabled students to address both academic and emotional gaps left by the institution, fostering solidarity and critical engagement.

Through these peer learning initiatives, participants redefined what it meant to learn and to act together. They consciously built networks of mutual aid to counter institutional inertia and the precarious conditions they faced:

"It would be beneficial to help each other with cases like that. In case someone in this group knows of a vacancy, please post it because I myself don't know. Let us help each other." (LCG meeting, 2021)

This emphasis on horizontal collaboration reflects what Freire (1970) termed problem-posing education, a process in which learners engage dialogically to make sense of, and respond to, their shared realities. Rather than waiting for institutional rescue, students transformed their collective vulnerability into agency. As one participant explained:

"The group can assist us in Port Elizabeth, with a representative going to employment agencies on our behalf, registering our CVs, and negotiating for us before we even email our CVs. This way, they can start with us whenever they are looking for people to work." (LCG meeting, 2021)

In these interactions, learning was intertwined with survival, a form of praxis that merged critical awareness with practical strategies for navigating structural exclusion. Beyond information-sharing, participants identified skill-building as a key need, and proposed workshops as vehicles for empowerment:

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

“Workshops can help us; maybe an individual workshop can help me in how to conduct job interviews because sometimes we do not know our mistakes, and they do not tell us how we performed... We were not taught enough about an interview questions and how to answer those questions. Yes, we know how to conduct ourselves, but how to respond? We need more information about it. Workshops or training will do we will gain much knowledge from it.” (LCG meeting, 2021)

Such reflections illuminate the collective pedagogical imagination that emerged within the group. Students were not only addressing immediate challenges but also reclaiming education as a shared, transformative process rooted in their lived experiences. Their actions embody Freire’s notion of education as the practice of freedom learning that arises from dialogue, solidarity, and the pursuit of humanisation. Comparable forms of collective agency have been observed in recent TVET research, where student networks compensate for institutional deficits and transform marginality into sites of learning (Majola, Powell & Jordaan, 2024; Vimbelo & Bayaga, 2024; Majola, Rangana & Geduld, 2025). In this sense, the peer learning circles documented here exemplify both resistance and reimagination through students asserting their right not only to learn but to also redefine what learning means in contexts of systemic neglect.

Theme 3: Structural Contradictions, Employment, Capitalism, and Survival

Despite their growing critical awareness, participants remained entrapped within structural contradictions that link education to neoliberal labour market logics. Many voiced profound frustration with the NC(V) qualification’s unfulfilled promise of employability and the gap between aspiration and outcome:

“I went to TVET college to have my Grade 12 (NQF Level 4) and to gain knowledge, but the result was for me to get employed. It is very disappointing that I can’t get a job with the qualification that you hoped would assist you.” (LCG meeting, 2021)

For several participants, this disillusionment extended beyond personal disappointment to a recognition of systemic failure. The TVET curriculum, they observed, was narrowly framed around employability, with little space for personal or social transformation:

“When we applied and enrolled for Office Administration, we hoped that after finishing, we would get an internship. However... I am at home, sitting with that qualification; I do not have a job. But besides that, this highlights once again how limited the TVET curriculum is in providing skills for life.” (LCG meeting, 2021)

Such reflections expose the enduring tension between education as emancipation and education as economic assimilation. As Allais and Ngcwangu (2025) argue, South Africa's TVET reforms remain entangled with capitalist imperatives that prioritise short-term employability over long-term human development. This structural contradiction was sharply expressed by participants who located their struggles within broader social realities of poverty and exclusion:

“With the knowledge I got after doing NC(V) Level 4, I would be working by now. But I am still struggling. My family is living in poverty, and I can't do anything about it. We were told this qualification would help us get jobs.” (LCG meeting, 2021)

While these voices reflect despair, they also gesture towards a nascent critical consciousness, a moral and political awareness that education should serve humanity, not merely the economy. Vuvu continued, imagining a transformative alternative:

“As a working professional, I aim to foster a more empathetic, equitable, and resilient world where education is a powerful driver of positive societal change.” (Vuvu, 2021)

This articulation moves beyond critique towards a rehumanising vision of education, one aligned with Freire's call for praxis rooted in solidarity and love. However participants also recognised that such visions are constrained by systemic structures that continue to define worth in economic terms. As one participant lamented:

“With my qualifications, I dreamed of being a receptionist or a PA. But those dreams haven't come true because I can't find a permanent job. It seems all our learning wasn't enough to change my life.” (Nandiz, 02021)

Here, the contradiction between humanising education and neoliberal employability becomes palpable. Nandiz further reflected on the kind of education that might bridge this divide:

“I am ill-prepared as a current and future planetarian for the complex challenges of a globalised world; educational systems must prioritise and integrate critical pedagogy... to cultivate leaders and citizens who can address global challenges.” (Nandiz, 2021)

Such statements resonate with Monk *et al.* (2025), who warn that when TVET becomes an instrument of market adaptation, its liberatory potential is compromised. The participants' testimonies thus reveal the psychological and emotional costs of structural unemployment, as well as their emerging critique of the economic rationality that underpins TVET policy.

The disillusionment with employability rhetoric mirrors the systemic contradictions that Freire (1970) described as “limit situations” moments, when learners confront the boundaries imposed by oppressive systems yet begin to glimpse the possibility of transcending them. This awakening marks a critical step in conscientisation: participants were not merely dissatisfied; they were naming and theorising their marginalisation, transforming their frustration into a generative space of reflection and resistance.

Theme 4: Resistance and Re-imagining - The TVET Student Movement Group

A pivotal moment in the study was the formation of the TVET Student Movement Group, a student-led network that emerged organically from the LCG dialogues. Participants articulated their motivation:

“We need a group for TVET graduates, a community to support and understand each other. With the commitment we’ve shown here, we can make this happen.” (LCG meeting, 2021)

The creation of this group signified a critical transition from awareness to organised resistance, an embodiment of Freirean praxis that merges reflection with collective action. Through dialogue, students began to reimagine their role, not as passive recipients of policy but as agents capable of shaping their futures:

“No one will speak for us if we keep quiet. We must start something ourselves, even if it’s small, so that people know TVET students also have a voice.” (LCG meeting, 2021)

The group’s activities included peer mentorship, advocacy for improved infrastructure, and public engagement on issues such as delayed National Student Financial Aid Scheme (NSFAS) allowances. One participant reflected:

“I become weary of complaining with no results. But now I can see, when we came together, we decided to act to write letters as NC(V) graduates, meet people in authorities, and make our challenges visible.” (LCG meeting, 2021)

This sense of collective agency reflects the process of conscientisation, as participants recognised that isolation and silence sustain oppression. Another participant described the emotional shift that accompanied this awakening:

“Before, I used to feel like I was struggling alone. But in these meetings, I realised our struggles are connected. Together we can push for change.” (LCG meeting, 2021)

By cultivating solidarity, the group disrupted the fragmentation often experienced by marginalised learners and created a platform for mutual empowerment. This initiative parallels Majola, Geduld and Rangana's (2025) observation that student-led conscientisation can ignite transformative movements within South Africa's TVET sector.

However, the group's pragmatic focus on securing internships and jobs revealed a persistent contradiction: their activism simultaneously challenged and reproduced the very system they sought to transform. As one participant admitted:

"We fight for change, but at the same time, we still hope for the system to recognise us and give us opportunities. It's hard to break free from that." (LCG meeting, 2021)

This ambivalence resonates with Allais's (2019) warning that transformation pursued within neoliberal parameters risks being co-opted by the structures of domination it seeks to oppose. The participants' emphasis on employability reflects what Freire (1974) termed "semi-transformation", an incomplete liberation where adaptation and resistance co-exist. However, this contradiction does not diminish the movement's radical potential. As one student poignantly expressed:

"Even if we start by fighting for jobs, we are learning to fight together. Maybe one day we'll also change how things work, not just what we get." (LCG meeting, 2021)

This statement encapsulates the dialectical struggle at the heart of Freirean praxis - the ongoing tension between survival within oppressive systems and the pursuit of freedom beyond them.

Theme 5: Listening as Praxis - From Voice to Transformation

The final theme crystallises the study's central argument: that listening, when enacted as a Freirean praxis, transcends token participation and becomes a generative act of transformation. In this study, listening was not merely a methodological gesture of inclusion; it evolved into a dialogical process through which participants recognised themselves and one another as subjects capable of reflection and action. This shift from being "spoken for" to "speaking with" embodied what Freire (1970) describes as the movement from voice to consciousness, and ultimately, to transformative praxis. Participants' reflections illustrate how dialogical listening transformed despair into solidarity and isolation into community:

"By working together and supporting each other, we can build a community that truly understands our struggles and helps us overcome them." (LCG meeting, 2021)

Through the iterative process of dialogue, participants began to articulate both their structural concerns and their collective aspirations. Their voices converged around the four interconnected dimensions of transformation institutional support, mutual care, community building, and collective agency.

On institutional support:

“We need all the support we can get. Algoa TVET College’s help with internships, as promised, would make a big difference. Everyone is looking for jobs; we can’t be left to figure it out alone.” (LCG meeting, 2021)

Here, listening became a means of surfacing institutional silences, the absence of sustained support that often leaves graduates navigating precarious transitions alone.

On mutual support among students:

“We, as TVET students, need to look out for each other. Having a group to lean on makes a difference it’s good to have someone in your corner to face challenges together.” (LCG meeting, 2021)

This emphasis on mutual care reflects the emergence of what Freire calls a “pedagogy of solidarity”, where the act of listening creates a sense of shared humanity and interdependence.

On building a community:

“We should form a TVET group or something similar, a network to share job leads and build a community. This could be a great support system.” (LCG meeting, 2021)

Such expressions mark a movement from individual struggle towards collective organisation, a recognition that transformation requires spaces of belonging and sustained dialogue.

On collective transformation:

“I agree we need a group for TVET graduates - a community to support and understand each other. With the commitment we’ve shown here, we can make this happen and stop being lone rangers.” (LCG meeting, 2021)

Through these articulations, participants began to imagine transformation as a communal rather than an individual project. Listening thus emerged as praxis, an act that affirmed voice while catalysing agency and collective transformation. In these dialogical spaces, listening became both methodology and movement: a practice of recognition that validated lived experience as legitimate knowledge. This reorientation aligns with Esau and Daniels (2022) and Majola, Rangana & Geduld (2025), who contend that humanising pedagogies must centre authentic engagement with learners' realities. However, institutional actors such as lecturers, administrators, and policymakers have remained largely unresponsive. Their failure to listen perpetuates a cycle of alienation and disengagement. As Freire (1990) reminds us, dialogue cannot exist without humility, love, and faith in people's capacity to transform. The persistence of hierarchical communication within TVET institutions thus suggests that such dialogical ethics remain unrealised.

The findings reveal a dialectic of hope and constraint within South Africa's TVET landscape. Students are not passive victims of systemic failure; they are active meaning-makers who, through reflection and solidarity, begin to re-imagine education as a space for transformation. However, their praxis unfolds within the boundaries of structural inequity and neoliberal rationalities, highlighting the limits of transformation under current conditions. This study advances the growing body of Freirean scholarship in TVET (Powell & McGrath, 2019; Majola *et al.*, 2024; Allais & Ngcwangu, 2025; Majola, Geduld & Rangana, 2025; Majola, Rangana & Geduld, 2025; Majola, 2025c) by demonstrating that listening as praxis can serve as both a theoretical lens and a participatory methodology for humanising education. It repositions TVET students as epistemic agents whose knowledge, resilience, and activism provide critical insights into reimagining vocational education in post-apartheid South Africa. These findings underscore Freire's conviction that transformation begins with dialogue. By listening authentically to the voices from below, educators and policymakers can move beyond superficial reform towards the creation of an emancipatory TVET system, one that cultivates critical consciousness, collective agency, and social justice.

Discussion

This study set out to examine how TVET students in South Africa enact praxis, the cyclical process of reflection and action, within institutions that often reproduce inequality rather than disrupt it. In doing so, it introduced the concept of "listening as praxis" to extend Freirean theory into a contemporary, vocational context. The findings demonstrate that listening, when enacted

dialogically, becomes both a methodological stance and a transformative practice that enables marginalised students to move from silence to critical agency.

Reclaiming Freire in a Contemporary TVET Context

Freire's ideas continue to hold profound relevance in South Africa's post-apartheid education landscape, where structural inequalities persist under new guises of neoliberal reform (Allais, 2019; Majola *et al.*, 2024, Majola, Geduld & Rangana, 2025). However, as Powell and McGrath (2019) argue, the TVET system remains trapped in a utilitarian paradigm that prioritises employability over empowerment. The present study situates itself within this tension, illustrating how students' disillusionment with the NC(V) curriculum serves as a catalyst for critical awareness. Participants' narratives expose the contradictions between policy rhetoric and lived experience, echoing Allais and Ngcwangu's (2025) argument that the "skills for employability" discourse obscures deeper questions of social justice. The students' ability to name and critique these contradictions signals what Freire (1970) describes as conscientisation: an awakening to the social, political, and economic forces that shape their conditions. This awakening is not merely cognitive; it is emotional and ethical - a refusal to accept alienation as inevitable. By engaging with their realities through peer-led initiatives and collective organising, participants re-imagined education not as compliance but as resistance. Their acts of dialogical learning, particularly within the LCGs, mirror Freire's problem-posing education where learners and educators co-create meaning through lived experience (Freire & Shor, 1987). In this sense, the study affirms that Freire's critical pedagogy is not a static theory but a living practice capable of evolving within diverse, contemporary educational spaces.

Listening as Praxis: Extending Freirean Theory

While Freire's work emphasised dialogue as a condition for humanisation, this study refines that idea by conceptualising listening as praxis, a process that binds reflection, action, and empathy into a transformative methodology. Listening here is not a passive act of reception but an epistemological intervention: it redistributes power in the production of knowledge. Within the context of TVET, where student voices are often marginalised by top-down bureaucratic practices, listening becomes a counter-hegemonic act. As Majola Rangana & Geduld (2025) note, authentic transformation in TVET requires creating dialogical spaces that challenge the "silencing architectures" of policy and institutional culture. The peer dialogues and student movement initiatives documented in this study exemplify such spaces, where students articulate collective agency and re-imagine their educational identities. Moreover, this form of listening disrupts the banking model that dominates vocational training, whereby knowledge is deposited by experts and

received uncritically by learners. Instead, it aligns with Freire's (1974) call for co-intentional education, where all participants engage in a shared pursuit of understanding. In practice, the LCGs operationalised this principle by positioning students as co-researchers, whose experiences became the starting point for theorising structural injustice. This redefinition of listening has both pedagogical and political implications. Pedagogically, it calls for educators to cultivate humility and vulnerability, to be willing to learn from students as equals. Politically, it positions listening as an act of solidarity that can foster collective consciousness and grassroots mobilisation. In this dual sense, listening as praxis becomes an instrument of liberation within and beyond the classroom.

Navigating the Contradictions of Praxis under Constraint

However, as the findings reveal, praxis in the TVET context is profoundly constrained by material realities. Participants' activism, particularly through the TVET Student Movement Group, occurred within an economic system that values technical compliance over critical engagement. Their efforts to secure internships and jobs, though pragmatic, illustrate what Allais (2019) calls the "instrumentalisation of hope": a process where education promises transformation but delivers conditional inclusion within an unequal system. This contradiction resonates with Majola's (2025b) critique of "bounded praxis," where students exercise agency but remain structurally limited in their capacity to effect systemic change. The dual pursuit of survival and liberation typifies the precarious positioning of TVET learners in South Africa's post-colonial economy. Nonetheless, even within these constraints, the emergence of collective action and critical dialogue signifies resistance to dehumanisation, a vital precursor to systemic transformation. Freire (1990) reminds us that liberation is not a single event but a process sustained through dialogue and struggle. The study's participants embodied this process through iterative cycles of reflection, resistance, and reimagination. Their praxis, though partial and contested, represents a form of "micro-liberation" that, cumulatively, contributes to the broader project of educational justice.

Reframing the Purpose of TVET

The findings call for a reimagining of the purpose of TVET beyond narrow economic mandates. As Powell (2012) and Walker (2012) argue, education should expand individuals' capabilities to aspire and to act, not merely prepare them for labour market entry. The participants' demand for a more responsive and humanising curriculum underscores the necessity of embedding critical, dialogical, and community-based learning within vocational education. This study therefore challenges policymakers and educators to shift from hearing, a superficial acknowledgment of student concerns, to listening as co-creation. Doing so requires systemic reforms: integrating participatory

feedback mechanisms, embedding Freirean pedagogy in lecturer training, and designing curricula that cultivate social imagination and collective responsibility. By centring listening as praxis, this research contributes to current debates about the decolonisation of vocational education. It aligns with Lotz-Sisitka and McGrath's (2023) "VET Africa 4.0" vision, which calls for an education system that balances human, ecological, and economic imperatives. Within this framework, listening becomes a method of relational knowing essential to rebuilding TVET as a space of care, justice, and democratic participation.

Towards a Humanising Pedagogy of Transformation

The overarching insight of this study is that transformation in TVET cannot occur without a humanising pedagogical ethos, one that recognises students not as data points within performance metrics but as full human beings. As Vimbelo and Bayaga (2023, 2024) show, humanising pedagogy in TVET can foster empathy and agency when it is grounded in dialogue and mutual respect. The present study extends this by demonstrating that listening itself is an act of humanisation: it reaffirms students' dignity and legitimises their lived experience as knowledge. Thus, listening as praxis offers a practical pathway toward operationalising Freire's vision in vocational contexts. It situates transformation within everyday interactions between students and lecturers, between policy and practice, and reclaims education as a collective moral project.

Conclusion

This article set out to explore how South African TVET students navigate systemic barriers and enact praxis, the process of reflection and action, through Freire's critical pedagogy. Grounded in participatory inquiry, the study reveals how students' lived experiences expose the contradictions at the heart of the NC(V) curriculum and the wider vocational education system. These contradictions between empowerment and employability, inclusion and marginalisation, survival and transformation shape the contours of students' daily struggles. However, rather than succumbing to despair, participants transformed their disillusionment into critical awareness, solidarity, and collective action. Through the formation of peer learning groups and the TVET Student Movement Group, participants demonstrated that agency can flourish even within structurally constrained contexts. Their reflections and actions illustrate Freire's central claim: that education becomes truly transformative when learners recognise themselves as subjects, not objects, of history. The study therefore reaffirms the potential of a humanising pedagogy, one that centres dialogue, critical reflection, and the lived experiences of students as sites of knowledge production.

A central theoretical contribution of this research is the articulation of listening as praxis. While Freire emphasised dialogue as the foundation of humanisation, this study extends his framework by foregrounding listening as both a pedagogical and political act. Listening, as revealed through the narratives of TVET students, is not passive acknowledgment but a relational and ethical commitment to transformation. It entails openness, humility, and reciprocity - qualities that enable authentic dialogue and challenge hierarchical modes of knowledge transmission. In this sense, listening becomes a radical act: it redistributes power between students and educators, between the margins and the centre. When educators, administrators, and policymakers listen dialogically rather than bureaucratically, education shifts from an instrument of compliance to a vehicle of emancipation. The findings thus position listening as the bridge between humanising pedagogy and transformative institutional change, a missing link in the implementation of Freirean principles within South African TVET.

While the findings illustrate students' capacity for critical agency, they also underscore the constraints that limit its transformative reach. Students' activism and peer learning initiatives coexist with ongoing struggles for employment, dignity, and recognition in a neoliberal system that equates education with market readiness. As Allais and Ngcwangu (2025) and Majola (2025b) note, such contradictions reveal the endurance of racial capitalism and the commodification of education, which reduce human potential to economic productivity. However, even within these constraints, the emergence of collective organising and reflective dialogue represents what Freire (1974) termed "small acts of liberation." These micro-level practices of listening and solidarity hold the potential to gradually shift institutional culture and discourse. The study thus contributes a nuanced understanding of praxis not as grand revolution but as continuous, situated resistance within everyday educational encounters.

The findings of this study have significant implications for pedagogy, institutional practice, policy, and research within South Africa's TVET sector. Pedagogically, educators must reconceptualise teaching as a dialogical partnership rather than a unidirectional process of instruction. Integrating Freirean principles of reflection, co-creation, and relational listening can cultivate classrooms that value students' voices as legitimate sources of knowledge. Embedding "listening cycles" into teaching practice would allow students to articulate challenges, link personal experiences to broader social realities, and co-develop strategies for learning. Moreover, professional development for lecturers should include training in humanising pedagogy to bridge the cognitive and emotional dimensions of learning and counter dehumanising institutional norms (Vimbelo & Bayaga, 2024;

Majola & Geduld, 2025). Institutionally, TVET colleges should establish participatory forums and student-led communities of practice, such as the TVET Student Movement Group, to enable shared decision-making and strengthen communication between students, lecturers, and management. At the policy level, reform must move beyond the narrow rhetoric of “skills for employability” towards an education system that fosters critical citizenship and social transformation. Embedding listening as praxis within the NQF and broader policy discourse can help reposition TVET as a space of empowerment rather than compliance, while funding mechanisms like NSFAS should incorporate participatory accountability that centres student voices in programme design and monitoring. Finally, future research should extend the framework of listening as praxis to other post-school education and training contexts such as community colleges, Community Education and Training (CET) centres, and workplace learning to explore its wider relevance. Longitudinal studies following TVET graduates involved in conscientisation-based initiatives could further illuminate how micro-level acts of listening and solidarity contribute to sustained social and educational transformation.

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