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A critical review of debates surrounding race/ethnicity and TVET

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ABSTRACT

The special issue (SI) TVET race and ethnicity in the global south and north closes with a critical review of debates that address race/ethnicity and TVET'. These debates focus on the crisis of care, decolonisation and whiteness as well as the manner in which we conceptualise TVET. The paper was developed in response to the special issue but also by wider debates about race, ethnicity and TVET. In a short review paper, such as this it is only feasible to signal and touch on a number of debates that could contribute towards re-thinking TVET and its wider social purposes.

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Introduction

This critical review was developed in response to the papers in the SI but also by wider debates concerned with race, ethnicity and TVET, as well as those touched on in an earlier SI (Avis, Mirchandani, and Warmington 2017). It is important to set this review in its socioeconomic and political context which necessitates a reprise of some the themes addressed in the current editorial. Many of the concerns expressed in the earlier SI (2017) remain current and are present in Black Lives Matter and Rhodes must fall¹ protests, in campaigns to decolonise the curriculum, in allied challenges to white supremacy as well as in the crisis of care engendered by Covid-19 (Avis et al. 2021; Bathmaker and Pennacchia, 2022; Elias 2022; Joncas and Edward, 2022). Importantly care workers, many of whom are drawn from racialised groups, were construed as 'heroes' during the pandemic but little has changed in their socio-economic position. Whilst there was a moment when the pandemic highlighted questions about what counted as 'really' useful labour, and by default the contribution of TVET to community, societal and individual well-being (Elias, 2022; Joncas et al. 2022), this has subsequently been eclipsed by a focus on the revitalisation of the economy, the war in Ukraine as well as the cost of living crisis in the UK and elsewhere, allied to increasing fears of precariousness.

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However, the concern with the contribution of TVET to community and individual well-being continues in discussions in the global south (Powell and McGrath 2019). There are two points to be made. The first concerns a definitional issue as to the way in which we construct TVET, that is to say, whether an expansive or narrow conceptualisation is used, with the former drawing on adult and community education (Elias, 2022; Avis 2022; Avis et al. 2021) and the latter on employer-based instrumentalism. This is not simply a pedantic question but a political one. Narrow definitions can tie TVET to an instrumentalism that places employer interests centre stage, limiting engagement with questions of social justice to those located at best within social democratic sensibilities or at worst neo-liberalism. This is not to gainsay TVET as a site of struggle in which participants seek to move beyond social democratic tropes. Secondly, this is a context in which labour in the informal economy and worklessness are features in the lives of many. Breman and van der Linden (2014) suggest that these economic features of the global south will become increasingly present in the north, an argument that reverses conventional understandings of development in which the north is thought to anticipate subsequent developments in the south.

Intersectional understandings of VET and social relations

Importantly, TVET remains under researched in comparison to schools and higher education, which perhaps reflects its low status (Billett 2020, 161). However, in a number of social formations there has been an interest in developing vocational and hybrid pathways to higher education (Bathmaker 2017; Knight et al. 2022; Ertl 2020; Webb et al. 2017). This can also be seen in the English state's concern to dissuade young people from pursuing academic pathways particularly in non-STEM disciplines in favour of TVET (Augar Review 2019; DfE 2021a; 2021b; Williamson 2019; for the US see Remington 2018, 501–2; and for Germany and Switzerland see Deissinger and Gonon 2021, 201–2). In England as part of this project T-levels are being developed as technical equivalents of A-levels. However, current research suggests that T-levels have a level of difficulty that precludes many young people who in the past would have studied similar applied and general vocational qualifications (Terry and Orr 2022; Esmond and Atkins 2022). But in addition Whieldon (2021):online) notes that during the first year of T-levels out of a cohort of 1,363, BAME (black, Asian and minority ethnic) learners were underrepresented, with 14.2%, i.e. 193 learners being from this group, which can be compared with the 84% i.e. 1,145 who hailed from a white background. For Esmond and Atkins (2022) the development of T-levels serves to intensify the polarisation between those young people encountering welfare vocationalism ('non-advanced' VET) and those destined to become a 'technical elite'. As yet T-levels are taken by a small number of young people and it is important not to ignore the presence of other

less prestigious qualifications set at the same level. Although, it might be something of an overstatement to refer to the young people following T-levels as joining an elite they do constitute a privileged group within the working class. T-levels, TVET as well as non-advanced vocational education can become embroiled in an instrumental discourse that addresses political economy, emphasising competitiveness and the needs of industry and business. The result is that questions about race and ethnicity are treated as subordinate and of secondary importance. A concern with fairness, equal opportunity, meritocracy and access could be pushed much further to consider the broader and more educative possibilities of TVET. However this concern can easily be eclipsed by the hegemony of capitalist and business interests. The result is that the radical potential that can arise when these terms are critically interrogated becomes domesticated and stripped of its emancipatory possibilities. It is important to retain a holistic and relational approach articulated with an intersectional understanding of social and educational relations. If these relations of race, ethnicity, class and gender are mobilised in isolation without some acknowledgement of intersectionality, particular elements may be drawn upon, co-opted or bent to serve capitalist interests. This can be illustrated by what Fraser (2019) describes as progressive neo-liberalism in which aspects of feminism, multiculturalism, LGBTQ+ and environmentalism are mobilised in a politics of recognition set within a restricted un-dialogic notion of identity politics that echoes neoliberalism's construction of competitive individualism. For Táiwò (2022) this results in a politics that is amenable to elite capture. The point for Fraser, is that the politics of recognition may address a particular group rather than addressing a more holistic approach to social justice that incorporates a relational analysis and anti-capitalist stance. These aspects of progressive neo-liberalism are articulated with a market and financially orientated stance that fails to offer any real challenge to capitalism (Fraser 2019, 11–12). Writing on the way in which equality is subsumed by meritocracy, Fraser suggests, 'the progressive-neoliberal program for a just status order did not aim to abolish social hierarchy but to "diversify" it, "empowering" "talented" women, people of colour, and sexual minorities to rise to the top' (2019, 13–14). Importantly, this represents an ideological discourse that aims to co-opt and disarm critique whilst simultaneously being set within a context of struggle and the exercise of agency. This struggle can subvert the logic of progressive neo-liberalism and may lead to alliances that challenge capitalism and its social hierarchies.

Lived experiences and decolonising curricula

In some respects Fraser's analysis of progressive neo-liberalism reflects social democratic and left liberal sensitivities, addressing as it does questions of access, equal opportunity as well as students lived experience of discrimination and exclusion. However, if we consider research on schooling and higher

education (precluding TVET), critique has, in some instances, moved beyond social democratic orientations. In this case the lived experiences of BAME students are articulated with questions of white supremacy, decolonisation (broadly understood) and the curriculum (Arday and Mirza 2018; Bhabra et al, 2018; Agbaire et al. 2022). This work considers questions of whiteness as well as that of indigenous knowledges – concerns that are largely absent from TVET. In some instances when decolonisation is mobilised in TVET research it calls for an acknowledgement of the value of indigenous cultures and the affordances this calls forth (see Joncas et al. 2022). For example, Beaudry and Perry (2020) explore a carpentry apprenticeship in Manitoba (Canada) that works with indigenous participants. This apprenticeship aims to acknowledge the colonial history and lived realities of indigenous peoples and argues that a ‘decolonising approach to apprenticeship learning that prioritises Indigenous epistemologies may result in higher levels of learner success’ (Beaudry and Perry 2020, 1). Interestingly this paper is set in a discussion of colonialism and the manner in which this history has shaped the lived realities and experiences of indigenous peoples. Much the same can be said about McNicholas & Humphries’ (2005) paper that explores the experiences of female Maori accountants and similarly seeks to value Indigenous epistemologies as well as noting the development of support networks within their community. Beaudry and Perry (2020), 1) draw on Billett and Smith’s (2016) distinction between apprenticeship as a mode of learning and as a model of education. The latter ignores learners’ prior individual and collective experiences and consequently can be a barrier to access. An acknowledgement of the former can open-up access to apprenticeships by recognising learner’s personal epistemologies, a term which has resonance with Beaudry and Perry’s (2020) indigenous epistemologies. The model that follows from this has a resonance with feminist and critical pedagogies that seek to acknowledge learner and community ways of knowing – their epistemologies. There is a tension in this discussion and it concerns the manner in which we think about TVET. In the two examples just discussed the ‘interventions’ are judged by learner success, their potential occupational performance and contribution to the workplace. Despite both papers detailed engagement with the ‘violent’ histories of colonialism and its ongoing presence in the lived experience of indigenous people there is a tension towards left liberal or social democratic responses i.e. learner success and so on. This then poses a question as to the manner in which we conceive TVET in relation to the politics of decolonisation, the challenge to white supremacy and a context in which worklessness and informal working are features of many people’s lives. Kaur (2022) touches on some of these in her discussion of spatiality and the third space in a debate that is anticipated in Joncas et al’s. (2022) literature review. Whilst discussing the issues of reparative futures that address colonialism and white supremacy Sriprakash et al. (2021) write,

We propose that an education for reparative futures would embed the practice of asking ongoing and difficult questions with the past: cultivating spaces to remember, create, explore and discuss injustices; fostering an ethics of listening and dialogue capable of generating new perspectives; seeking to understand the histories, voices, and experiences that have been silenced or erased through assimilative forms of education; and grappling with the irresolvable difficulties of redemptive thought. It is an education that, like the abolitionist thinking of Black feminism, is defined by its imaginative potential rather than by the constraints of predetermined or delegated outcomes: it is dedicated to building new relationships of reciprocity, modes of collaborative interpretation and collective organisation to imagine life beyond all forms of injustice. Learning with the past – particularly past struggles over the future – is crucial, we argue, for holding open education as a mode of critique, rather than allowing it to sustain systems of domination. (Sriprakash et al. 2021, 3)

Can TVET address such an agenda whilst attending to technical and vocational education and yet remain TVET? Or, do we need to re-imagine TVET so that it can seriously address questions of well-being, social and reparative justice thereby constituting an emancipatory project that extends beyond the workplace? How broadly should we construe such a reparative project? Historically western capitalism has been wedded to colonialism, a relation that continues as a feature of neo-colonialism and racial capitalism. Can we re-imagine a decolonised TVET without aligning this project with anti-capitalism (see for example Sriprakash et al. 2021 32–35 discussion of racial capitalism)?

Diversity and ‘Othering’

It could be suggested that much of the preceding discussion is rooted in a critique of British imperialism and neo-colonialism. However, it is important to acknowledge the involvement of other European nations in both colonialism and imperialism (Avis, Orr, and Warmington 2022, 44–47). The history and present forms of western capitalism are entwined with race and ethnicity which can be witnessed in patterns of migration. It is crucial to think about the terms we use to describe migrants and their children and the politics of language which is a critical feature of British discussions of race and migration. We should be aware of the danger of ‘othering,’ whereby migrants are considered as outsiders who need to be assimilated into wider society. The very tone of this type of exchange serves to cement the ‘otherness’ of migrants and their children. Similarly, the call for inclusion and recognition of diversity operates on much the same terrain assuming as it does irreconcilable differences that need to be managed (Ahmed 2012).

The point is that diversity is set against a homogenised view, which at best offers a pluralistic notion or at worst a racist cultural construction of the social formation. There is a paradox, on the one hand a recognition of diversity signals an acknowledgement of difference whilst simultaneously constituting diversity as ‘otherness’. Bathmaker and Pennacchia (2022) discuss the policy context in

which governing bodies of UK further education colleges (the main providers of TVET) are placed which calls for a governing body to recognise ethnic diversity. They note that whilst ethnic and racial diversity can be seen in the composition of governing bodies, black and minority ethnic governors are frequently little more than a token gesture towards adding diversity to the board. There are two issues that flow from Bathmaker and Pennacchia's (2022) research. The first questions whether the patterns of governance they discuss are reflected in European VET, albeit that these are set within a governing context mediated by a particular socio-economic and political setting. In addition, how can a discussion of governance in which the language of migration is hegemonic address issues of diversity that go beyond constructions of the migrant 'other'? Much the same question can be addressed to the DACH (Germany, Austria, Switzerland) dual VET system. This discussion leads us to Fraser's (2013) three dimensions of social justice – redistribution, recognition and participatory parity which can be drawn on in the struggle towards a socially just society.

Community, inclusion and exclusion

There are also questions about the way in which we construct conceptualisations of society and community and the manner in which these embody notions of inclusion and exclusion as well as hierarchical relations. Whilst discussing conceptualisations of community in what he describes as the 'work society', Chamberlain (2020) refers to its hierarchical and exclusionary structure. Much of the same can be said about community or indeed society in general, which similarly embodies constructions of homogeneity, hierarchy and the distribution of esteem. In a sense, these have been intimated towards in my discussion of othering and allied processes that serve to marginalise the 'other' by constructing community in relation to a 'common being' – positing a homogenising construction. Chamberlain draws on a number of terms mobilised by Nancy (1991) to move beyond narrow conceptualisations of community, viewing it as constituted by 'singular plural beings'. Nancy points towards a number of differentiations which perhaps we could refer to as dichotomies, whereby the notion of 'common being' is contrasted with 'being in common' and 'being together' set against a 'being of togetherness'. Consequently, in the case of the latter terms 'being in common' and 'being of togetherness', community is formed by 'singular plural beings'. At this juncture, Gilbert's (2014, 97–98) reflections on singularity may offer some clarification,

'Singularity' is a difficult term with a complex genealogy, but for our purposes it is perhaps most useful to understand it as a way of referring to the uniqueness of a particular entity, phenomenon, or experiential element, while specifically declining to refer to it as 'individual' ... but in the case of the singular person, it is possible to acknowledge that each person is unique without adopting a properly individualist perspective ... but is rather a consequence of the fact that each person constitutes

(and is constituted by) a unique intersection within an infinitely complex and perpetually mobile set of relations.

Such an understanding views community as comprising ‘singular plural beings’ thereby avoiding hierarchical and homogenising constructions that serve to include some and exclude others. It points towards the person’s uniqueness and the manner in which each person is constituted by ‘an infinitely complex and perpetually mobile set of relations’, thereby avoiding an atomistic individualism.

Conceptualising culture

Sivanandan (foreword to Kundani, 2007:vii) points out that the ‘war on terror’ has served to demonise multiculturalism, seeking ‘to put an end to Britain’s proud record of integration and ally it instead to Europe’s assimilationist policies in a descent into nativism’. It might be a step too far to align Sivanandan’s comment with Nancy’s notion of community but there are similarities in the refusal of assimilationist policies and nativism. These refusals carry with them an openness to a notion of community that goes beyond a homogenising conceptualisation of culture, thereby attempting to circumvent hierarchical constructions. It offers the possibility of an understanding of community that can incorporate incommensurate, irreconcilable and antagonistic relations. This arises from the uniqueness of ‘subjects’ who are located in a ‘perpetually mobile set of relations’ which would include class, race and gender, avoiding the essentialism surrounding these terms but at the same time recognising their materiality. This then returns us to our earlier discussion of inclusion/exclusion and reparative justice that avoids the danger of solipsism present in the discussion of community. Nancy’s notion of community might provide the space in which an education for reparative futures could be set. To reprise Sriprakash et al. (2021, 3) who argue that such an education,

would embed the practice of asking ongoing and difficult questions with the past: cultivating spaces to remember, create, explore and discuss injustices; fostering an ethics of listening and dialogue capable of generating new perspectives; seeking to understand the histories, voices, and experiences that have been silenced or erased through assimilative forms of education; and grappling with the irresolvable difficulties of redemptive thought.

Reimagining TVET?

Finally, we are left with important questions about the direction of TVET. How can TVET address the agenda set out by Sriprakash et al. (2021, 3)? Can it contribute towards a re-imagining of social relations that moves beyond current injustices and be articulated with a mode of critique that struggles to

undermine systems of domination. Or, is it ensnared by the hegemony of employer and capitalist interests and the illusion of fairness and opportunity?

Note

1. 'Rhodes must fall' – 'the fallist movement' sought to remove statues of colonialists, slavers etc from public buildings as a representation of colonial oppression and exploitation. In addition the movement drew attention to the continued significance of neo-colonialism, a complacency towards the past and a failure to acknowledge its brutality (Germany, Austria, Switzerland).

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