



Reflection on teachers' perceptions of the factors influencing a decline in learner enrolment in Economics: A case of Koloti Circuit in Limpopo Province

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ABSTRACT

This study reflects on teachers' perceptions of the factors that contribute to the persistent decline in learner enrolment in Economics within Koloti Circuit, Limpopo Province. Grounded in Critical Theory, the study interrogates the structural, pedagogical, and socio-cultural conditions shaping subject choice in under-resourced schools. A qualitative approach, employing semi-structured interviews with twelve purposively selected Economics teachers from six secondary schools, allowed the researchers to access participants' lived experiences and professional insights. Data were thematically analysed to uncover recurring patterns and meanings. The findings reveal that external influences from parents, peers, and teachers, coupled with inadequate academic performance and limited awareness of career pathways in Economics, discourage learners from enrolling in the subject. Each factor reflects the connection of structural inequalities, teacher agency, and learner subjectivity, revealing Economics as both an intellectual pursuit and a contested space within schooling. The study concludes that without deliberate interventions—such as strengthened career guidance, reformed curriculum design, and equitable school practices—Economics risks further marginalisation in the secondary school curriculum. Recommendations are advanced for policymakers, school managers, and teachers to reimagine Economics education as relevant, empowering, and socially just. This study contributes to scholarship by providing context-specific insights to improve curriculum design and strengthen career guidance in Economics within the Koloti Circuit. It further informs educational stakeholders on strategies to address structural and socio-cultural barriers to learner enrolment, and lays a foundation for broader research on Economics enrolment trends in South Africa.

Keywords: Learner Enrolment, Economics Education, Teacher Perceptions, Critical Theory, Curriculum Justice.

INTRODUCTION

Economics education has historically played a central role in equipping learners with the capacity to understand complex socio-economic realities, make informed financial decisions, and participate meaningfully in the global economy. However, despite its importance, learner enrolment in Economics

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at the secondary school level has experienced a marked and troubling decline. This phenomenon is not confined to South Africa; it is reflected globally, where Economics struggles to retain its position among subjects perceived as more prestigious or directly career-oriented, such as Mathematics, Physical Science, and Information Technology.¹

In South Africa, the Department of Basic Education reported a 44% decline in Economics enrolment between 2023 and 2024, a staggering figure with far-reaching implications.² The contraction of Economics enrolment undermines learners' individual opportunities and the national goal of cultivating critically literate citizens capable of engaging in informed debate about economic justice, inequality, and development. Thaba-Nkadimene et al. emphasise that the decline in Economics is particularly acute in rural and under-resourced provinces, where structural barriers intersect with learner misconceptions, inappropriate teaching strategies, and inadequate career guidance.³

Although substantial research has interrogated enrolment patterns in Mathematics, Science, and Technology (MST) subjects, there has been comparatively little focus on Economics as a discipline within the Business, Commerce, and Management (BCM) stream. This neglect is paradoxical, given the subject's vital contribution to producing graduates who pursue careers in Accounting, Finance, Management, and Public Policy. Existing studies identify multiple influences on subject choice, including parental expectations, peer networks, teacher influence, learner attitudes, and perceived career opportunities.⁴ Nonetheless, a gap remains in understanding how these factors converge specifically in Economics and how they are perceived by teachers who witness these dynamics daily.

Economics education in South Africa faces an urgent crisis as enrolment numbers continue to plummet, particularly in rural districts such as Koloti within Capricorn North. Despite the subject's potential to cultivate critical thinking, problem-solving, and financial literacy, Economics has been increasingly sidelined in favour of science-oriented streams. Literature reveals a complex web of factors driving this decline, including poor subject performance, peer and parental influence, lack of career awareness, and teacher demotivation.⁵

The erosion of enrolment poses dual risks. At the individual level, learners are deprived of exposure to a subject that could broaden their career horizons; at a societal level, the commercial sector faces a dwindling pool of economically literate graduates, potentially weakening national competitiveness. Furthermore, as Hlatshwayo notes, many learners perceive Economics as both "difficult" and "irrelevant" to their daily lives, reinforcing negative attitudes that further depress enrolment.⁶

Given these realities, there is a pressing need to interrogate the perceptions of teachers—key actors in the educational process who mediate between curriculum policy and learner experience. Therefore, this study reflects on teachers' perspectives regarding the decline in Economics enrolment in Koloti Circuit, aiming to advance insights into policy and practice. This article addresses that gap by reflecting on Economics teachers' perceptions of the declining enrolment trends in the Koloti Circuit of Limpopo Province. Through the lens of Critical Theory, it interrogates how educational structures and power dynamics shape learner agency, subject choices, and future opportunities. Therefore, by embedding reflection within each finding, the study aims to document perceptions and generate critical insights that illuminate possibilities for change.

¹ Hemraj Ramsurrun, Roushdath Elaheebocus, and Aatish Chiniah, "Decline in Enrollment in Science and Technology Education: From the Perspectives of Mauritian Educators," *STEM Education* 5, no. 1 (2024): 1–18.

² Department of Basic Education (DBE), *National Senior Certificate 2024 Diagnostic Report*. (Pretoria: Government Printer, 2024).

³ Kgomoitlokoa Thaba-Nkadimene et al., "Curriculum Advisors' Reflections on Phasing out Accounting in the Limpopo Secondary Schools: A Case Study of 10 Districts in Limpopo Province," 2024.

⁴ Jacob Kola Aina and Michael Olu Ayodele, "The Decline in Science Students' Enrolment in Nigerian Colleges of Education: Causes and Remedies," *International Journal of Education and Practice* 6, no. 4 (2018): 167–178.; Yusuf Nusirat, "Perceptions of College of Education Students on Factors Causing Low Enrolment in Chemistry Education," *Universitepark Bülten*, 2018.

⁵ Thema Adolph Mathiba, "Factors Influencing a Decline of Learners Enrolment in Commercial Subject: A Case of Driekop Circuit in Limpopo Province" (2021); Nusirat, "Perceptions of College of Education Students on Factors Causing Low Enrolment in Chemistry Education."

⁶ Delight Shaun Hlatshwayo, "Teachers' Views on Causes of Poor Performance in Economics among Grade 11 and 12 Learners in Matlalane Circuit, Limpopo Province" (2021).

LITERATURE REVIEW

The decline in enrolment in Economics is not unique to South Africa. Studies across the United States highlight how teachers, parents, and school managers often influence subject choice, channelling learners towards more prestigious or lucrative STEM fields.⁷ Peer dynamics also play a role: learners frequently select subjects aligned with friendship groups, reinforcing herd behaviour and marginalising Economics.⁸ Such patterns underscore how social and institutional pressures circumscribe learner autonomy.

In Russia, despite state policies aimed at increasing enrolment in commercial subjects, Economics enrolment has declined primarily due to insufficient teaching quality, lack of motivation, and learners' negative perceptions of career opportunities.⁹ This demonstrates that top-down policy reforms alone are inadequate without addressing classroom-level pedagogical and motivational factors.

Similarly, in Nigeria, research indicates that rigid curricula, poor teaching methods, and limited career pathways discourage learners from pursuing Economics.¹⁰ Peer and parental influences are compounded by systemic issues, such as underqualified teachers and a lack of resources, exacerbating the subject's declining appeal.

Across the SADC region, comparable findings emerge. In Botswana, for example, declining enrolment is attributed to inadequate academic results, high content loads, lack of career relevance, and unqualified teachers.¹¹ Studies emphasise that learners increasingly make subject choices based on perceived employment prospects, with Economics often seen as offering limited pathways compared to science or technology.¹²

These global studies highlight recurring themes: structural barriers, poor teaching, curriculum overload, and undervaluing of Economics relative to science-based subjects. These concerns resonate strongly with the South African context.

In African contexts, particularly in Somalia and Kenya, enrolment patterns are shaped by the mismatch between curriculum content and reality in the labour market. Learners perceive commercial subjects as less likely to lead to stable employment than science-related careers.¹³ This perception is reinforced by national employment data showing far greater demand in STEM-related fields than in commerce.¹⁴

In South Africa, the crisis is acute. The DBE (2025) reports that only 25% of learners enrolled for Economics nationally, placing South Africa among the lowest-ranked sub-Saharan countries in Economics enrolment. Contributing factors include inadequate subject performance, misperceptions about the difficulty and irrelevance of Economics, the negative influence of school managers, and inadequate career guidance.¹⁵

⁷ Hlatshwayo, "Teachers' Views on Causes of Poor Performance in Economics among Grade 11 and 12 Learners in Matlalanane Circuit, Limpopo Province"; Thami Isaac Makhoba and Motsi Qoyi, "Factors Affecting Learners' Decision to Enrol in Commercial Subjects- A Case of the Chris Hani District, Eastern Cape Province, South Africa," *Journal Of Education And Learning*, 2024, 275–84.

⁸ Mustafe Salad, "Teachers' Perspective on the Major Causes of Declining Student Enrollment in Faculties of Education in Somalia: Major Causes of Declining Student Enrollment in Faculties of Education in Somalia," *International Journal of Curriculum and Instruction* 15, no. 3 (2023): 1601–21.

⁹ Will. Flanders, "Opting out: Enrollment Trends in Response to Continued Public School Shutdowns," in *Covid-19 and Schools*, ed. Robert Maratno and David T. Marshall (New York: Routledge, 2023), 189–201; Chris J Hendriks and Grace F Dunn, "Factors That Influence Learners' Performance in Grade 12 Accounting: A Case Study in the Northern Cape," *Koers: Bulletin for Christian Scholarship= Koers: Bulletin Vir Christelike Wetenskap* 86, no. 1 (2021): 1–14.

¹⁰ Niyi Jacob Ogunode, Ukpoju Bartholomew Ojochnemi, and Victor Olugbenga Ayoko, "Leadership Styles and School Effectiveness," *Excellencia: International Multi-Disciplinary Journal of Education* 1, no. 4 (2023): 102–14; Oladiran Stephen Olabiyi et al., "Public-Private-Partnership for Effective Delivery of Technical Vocational Education in Enhancing Graduate Employability Skills during the Era of Covid-19 Pandemic in Nigeria," *Jurnal Pendidikan Teknologi Dan Kejuruan* 28, no. 1 (2022): 1–13..

¹¹ Michael. Gaotlhogogwe, "The Impact of Lack of Resources on Declining Students' Enrolments in Design and Technology in Botswana Junior Secondary Schools.," *Design and Technology Education* 17, no. 1 (2012): 10-17.

¹² Leon Marongedza, Promise Machingo Hlungwani, and Precious Hove, "Institutional Constraints Affecting Secondary School Student Performance: A Case Study of Rural Communities in Zimbabwe," *Cogent Education* 10, no. 1 (2023): 2163552.

¹³ Mustafe Salad, "Basic Education in Somalia: Problems and Solutions," *International Journal of Engineering Applied Sciences and Technology* 6, no. 9 (2022): 61–66.

¹⁴ Department of Labour (DoL), "Annual Labour Performance Report," 2023, 15-44.

¹⁵ Modumedi Joseph Machaea and Berington Zanoxolo Gobingca, "Assessing the Relative Participation of Teachers in Curriculum Development in Secondary Schools in OR. Tambo Inland Education District of the Eastern Cape: South Africa," *E-Journal of*

A further challenge lies in how Economics is introduced. In Grades 8 and 9, the subject is embedded within Economic and Management Sciences (EMS), where it receives limited exposure. As Ngcobo and Khumalo argue, this fragmented introduction perpetuates the view that Economics is abstract, theoretical, and disconnected from learners' lived realities.¹⁶ Consequently, when learners make subject choices in Grade 10, many perceive Economics as both complex and irrelevant.

The reviewed literature reveals that the decline in Economics enrolment is a multifaceted and global phenomenon, intensified in rural and under-resourced contexts such as Limpopo. Common in all studies are three critical influences: Academic challenges, including high content loads, poor performance and teaching methods. Career-related perceptions, where Economics is seen as offering limited employment opportunities. This study contributes to the literature by specifically reflecting on the voices of teachers in Koloti Circuit—voices often overlooked in policy debates. Thus, positioning their perceptions within Critical Theory, the study highlights how power, inequality, and structural barriers influence learner subject choice.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

This study is underpinned by Critical Theory (CT), a tradition rooted in the Frankfurt School, established in 1923, with notable contributors such as Max Horkheimer, Theodor Adorno, Herbert Marcuse, and later Paulo Freire. CT interrogates how power, ideology, and structural inequalities shape human experience, aiming for emancipation and social transformation.¹⁷ Within educational contexts, CT emphasises how schooling systems often reproduce inequalities through curriculum, pedagogy, and assessment, while simultaneously having the potential to disrupt these inequities by cultivating critical consciousness.

Freire advanced this orientation by arguing that education should move beyond content transmission to a process of conscientisation—empowering learners to question, critique, and transform their socio-economic realities.¹⁸ From this perspective, a subject such as Economics becomes more than a curriculum offering; it is a critical space where learners can engage with issues of inequality, poverty, unemployment, and development. When learners are dissuaded from taking Economics—whether through peer influence, parental pressure, or teacher bias—they are denied access to knowledge that could empower them to understand and navigate the economic forces shaping their lives.

Located within CT, teachers' perceptions are not viewed as isolated opinions but as reflections of broader systemic forces. Their accounts of inadequate learner performance, curriculum overload, and lack of career awareness reveal how power structures (such as curriculum design, school management practices, and labour market hierarchies) interconnect with disadvantaged learners. Reflection, therefore, becomes essential: Each finding is analysed not only as a description of reality but also as a site where inequality and justice can be interrogated.

In this sense, CT provides both an analytical lens and a moral imperative. It enables this study to ask why learners are withdrawing from Economics, whose interests are served when the subject is marginalised, and what must change to reposition Economics as a socially just and empowering discipline.

METHODOLOGY

This study was located within the interpretivist paradigm, which emphasises the socially constructed nature of reality and privileges the subjective meanings individuals assign to their experiences.¹⁹ This

Humanities, Arts and Social Sciences 6, no. 9 (2025): 1787–98, <https://doi.org/10.38159/ehass.20256892>; John Mangundu, Cephas Makwara, and Kgomotlokoa Linda Thaba-Nkadimene, "Barriers to Sustainable Integration of ICT in Pietermaritzburg Public Secondary Schools," *International Journal of Research in Business and Social Science* 14, no. 2 (2025): 342–51.

¹⁶ Sanele Ngcobo and Njabulo Khumalo, "Challenges of Adopting Entrepreneurship Education as a Strategic Approach to Unemployed-Youth in South Africa," *Technium Social Sciences Journal* 29 (March 9, 2022): 98–109, <https://doi.org/10.47577/tssj.v29i1.5430>.

¹⁷ Henry A. Giroux, *On Critical Pedagogy* (Bloomsbury Academic, 2020), <https://doi.org/10.5040/9781350145016>.

¹⁸ Paulo Freire, "Pedagogy of the Oppressed," in *The Community Performance Reader* (Routledge, 2020), 24–27, <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003060635-5>.

¹⁹ Andiso Ngobe, "Challenges in the Adoption of Information and Communication Technology at Selected Schools in the Mpumalanga Province" (University of South Africa, 2023).

orientation was appropriate because the research sought to understand teachers' perceptions of declining enrolment in Economics, a phenomenon that is inseparable from their lived realities and professional contexts.

A qualitative case study design was employed to generate rich, contextual insights. Koloti Circuit in Limpopo Province was purposively selected because of its reported high rates of decline in Economics enrolment. This setting also represents many rural and under-resourced schools in South Africa, making it an appropriate site for an in-depth case inquiry.

Purposive sampling was used to select participants with relevant expertise. Twelve Economics teachers from six secondary schools, with two teachers per school, were included. Inclusion criteria required participants to be currently teaching Economics at the Further Education and Training (FET) band (Grades 10–12), have taught the subject for at least three years, and be employed in the Capricorn North District. This sampling strategy ensured that participants had both the professional experience and contextual knowledge necessary to contribute meaningfully to the study.

Data Generation

Data was generated through semi-structured interviews, conducted face-to-face. Each interview lasted between 30 and 40 minutes and was audio-recorded with participants' informed consent. The interview schedule included questions such as, What factors do you think influence learners' decisions not to enrol in Economics? How do you perceive the role of teachers, peers, and parents in shaping subject choices? What strategies could be employed to address declining enrolment? This flexible design encouraged reflective discussion, allowing researchers to explore emerging themes.

Data Analysis

Data were thematically analysed following Braun and Clarke's six-phase model: familiarisation, initial coding, generating, reviewing, defining, naming themes and producing the final report.²⁰ Inductive and deductive coding were employed. Deductive codes were informed by the Critical Theory framework (e.g., power, marginalisation, equity), while inductive codes emerged directly from participants' narratives.

Ethical Considerations

Ethical clearance (Clearance No. 2024/11/15000000403) was obtained from the University of South Africa. Permission was also granted by the Limpopo Department of Education and participating schools. Informed consent, confidentiality, and voluntary participation were strictly observed. Pseudonyms (Teacher 1–12) are used throughout to protect anonymity.

PRESENTATION OF FINDINGS, DISCUSSIONS, AND REFLECTIONS

Three dominant themes emerged: (1) external influences from parents, peers, and teachers; (2) poor academic performance in Economics; and (3) limited career awareness in Economics. Each finding is presented with supporting extracts, followed by a reflective analysis.

Finding on External Influence from Parents, Peers, and Teachers

Participants consistently emphasised that learners' subject choices were not made independently. Parents often dictated choices, favouring the sciences over commerce. Similarly, peers influenced each other by selecting the same streams to remain in the same classes. Some teachers, particularly those in science departments, were also reported to discourage capable learners from pursuing Economics.

Teacher 3: *"Learners choose not to study Economics due to the influence of their parents. Many parents come to our school and make the decision for their children about which stream to enrol in."*

²⁰ Virginia Braun and Victoria Clarke, "Using Thematic Analysis in Psychology," *Qualitative Research in Psychology* 3, no. 2 (2006): 77–101.

Teacher 9: *"I believe learners fail to study Economics because of their friends. They don't want to be separated, so they all choose science subjects in order to be together."*

Teacher 1: *"Many science teachers in our school influence learners not to choose Economics and rather encourage them to go into the science stream."*

Reflection

This finding reveals the power of social and institutional networks to shape learner trajectories. Rather than being autonomous agents, learners are embedded in webs of expectation where parental authority, peer belonging, and teacher bias converge. Within a Critical Theory lens, this highlights how subject choice is not neutral but is structured by unequal hierarchies that privilege specific disciplines (such as the sciences) while marginalising others (such as Economics). The silencing of learner agency reflects systemic injustice: the learner's voice is subordinated to adult authority and peer conformity.

The privileging of science streams demonstrates the hidden curriculum at play, where knowledge is stratified into "high-status" and "low-status" categories. Economics, often perceived as less prestigious, is thereby devalued. Such hierarchies reproduce socio-economic inequalities, as learners are denied access to critical knowledge to navigate financial and economic realities. Reflecting on this, the role of teachers must be reimagined. Rather than gatekeepers who channel learners into predefined streams, teachers must act as advocates of curriculum justice, ensuring learners' decisions are guided by informed choice, not imposed influence. Critical awareness must be cultivated so that learners can resist social pressures and exercise agency in charting their futures.

Poor Academic Performance

Teachers identified poor performance in Economics as a significant deterrent to enrolment. Learners perceive the subject to be difficult and require extensive reading, writing, and application of abstract concepts. Low pass rates discourage future learners, who avoid Economics to escape the risk of failure.

Teacher 8: *"Learners would not choose Economics because the subject is not performing well in my school. The heavy curriculum and assessments discourage many of them."*

Teacher 9: *"Economics is not performing well at the moment, and it is difficult for learners. The worst part is it demands a lot of time and practice."*

Teacher 11: *"Underperformance is a great contributor. Learners complain they always get worse marks in Economics than in Business Studies, Accounting, or science subjects."*

Reflection

The association between poor performance and declining enrolment reflects the self-reinforcing cycle of disadvantage. Learners internalise failure, perceiving the subject as beyond their capacity, reducing motivation and perpetuating enrolment decline. From a Critical Theory perspective, this reveals how assessment systems and curriculum structures act as gatekeeping mechanisms, systematically excluding learners rather than supporting their success.

Performance is not simply an individual issue but reflects broader systemic barriers: overloaded syllabi, inadequate teacher preparation, and limited pedagogical innovation. These structural constraints disproportionately affect learners in under-resourced schools, perpetuating inequality between urban and rural contexts.

Reflecting on this, improving learner performance requires more than remedial teaching; it requires transformative pedagogy. Economics must be taught in ways that connect abstract theory to lived realities—linking, for example, inflation to food prices in local markets, or unemployment to community struggles. Such contextualisation improves comprehension and affirms the relevance of Economics to everyday life. Through this approach, poor performance can be reframed not as learner failure but as a systemic issue that requires pedagogical and structural reform.

Limited Career Awareness in Economics

Teachers reported that learners often perceive Economics as offering few career opportunities, particularly when compared to science subjects. A lack of structured career guidance in schools exacerbates these perceptions, leaving learners unaware of the diverse fields Economics can lead to.

Teacher 12: *“The main reason why many learners choose not to enrol in Economics is that they think it is not an easy way into the world of work.”*

Teacher 7: *“Learners see Economics as a subject with limited career opportunities. They lack knowledge about jobs that Economics can open up.”*

Teacher 9: *“Sometimes learners do not like Economics because they believe it has low career utility.”*

Reflection

This finding underscores the instrumental logic that increasingly governs subject choice in education: learners select subjects based on perceived employability rather than intellectual curiosity or civic relevance. Within a Critical Theory lens, this reflects how neoliberal ideologies reduce education to a commodity, valued primarily for its market returns. As a result, subjects like Economics—ironically central to understanding labour markets and development—are sidelined.

The lack of career guidance is not simply an informational gap but a structural inequity. Schools in rural and under-resourced contexts rarely provide comprehensive exposure to diverse career trajectories, leaving learners with narrow and often inaccurate perceptions. This marginalisation particularly affects learners from disadvantaged backgrounds, who may lack external networks to compensate for absent guidance.

Reflecting on this, Economics education must be repositioned as both career-relevant and socially transformative. Beyond linking Economics to professions in finance, policy, or management, teachers must highlight its role in fostering critical citizenship—enabling learners to interrogate inequality, understand development challenges, and participate in democratic decision-making. Reframing career awareness in this broader sense can reposition Economics as a subject of empowerment rather than exclusion.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Drawing on the findings and reflections, this study advances the following recommendations for policymakers, school leaders, and educators.

Strengthen Career Guidance Structures: Schools should institutionalise career guidance programmes that expose learners to the diverse career pathways Economics can support (e.g., finance, public policy, entrepreneurship, academia). Guidance should not be limited to Grade 9 subject selection but should begin earlier, integrating career awareness into the EMS curriculum in Grades 8–9.

Reposition Economics as Relevant and Empowering: Teachers should adopt transformative pedagogies that connect the contents of Economics with the learners’ lived experiences (e.g., linking inflation to local food markets, unemployment to community realities). Thus, contextualising content, Economics can be repositioned as both practically relevant and intellectually empowering.

Counteract Negative Influences of Peers, Parents, and Teachers: Professional development workshops should sensitise teachers—especially in non-commercial subjects—about the consequences of dissuading learners from Economics. Schools should implement inclusive decision-making processes where learners’ voices are central in subject choice, supported but not overridden by parents or teachers.

Address Structural Inequities in Curriculum and Assessment: The Department of Basic Education should **review the Economics curriculum** to ensure it is not excessively overloaded, abstract, or assessment-heavy. Policy reforms must aim to balance rigour with accessibility, ensuring that learners from diverse contexts can succeed without perceiving the subject as insurmountable.

Invest in Teacher Development and Support: Continuous professional development in Economics pedagogy should be prioritised, emphasising interactive, learner-centred methods. Incentives should be provided to retain and motivate skilled Economics teachers, particularly in rural schools.

Promote Curriculum Justice and Equity: Subject choice policies should be reviewed to guard against systemic hierarchies that privilege sciences at the expense of commerce. Curriculum justice requires ensuring that Economics is valued alongside other disciplines, reflecting its unique contribution to critical citizenship and socio-economic participation. Furthermore, if the above issues remain unresolved, South Africa will face a significant shortage of Economists, financial analysts, international trade specialists and other related professionals, ultimately hindering the country's economic growth and development.

CONCLUSION

This study aimed to reflect on teachers' perceptions of the factors influencing declining learner enrolment in Economics within Koloti Circuit, Limpopo Province. Guided by Critical Theory, the inquiry revealed that learner subject choices are not neutral or individualised decisions but are profoundly shaped by intersecting forces of social influence, structural inequity, and systemic injustice. Three dominant themes emerged: 1) External influence from parents, peers, and teachers restricts learner agency and perpetuates the marginalisation of Economics; 2) Poor academic performance reinforces perceptions of difficulty and sustains withdrawal cycles; and 3) Limited career awareness reflects systemic failures in guidance and neoliberal pressures that reduce education to narrow the utility of the labour market. Each finding, when reflected on, points to deeper issues of curriculum justice, equity, and power. Learners in under-resourced schools are disproportionately affected, with their voices and aspirations frequently subordinated to the authority of parents, peers, or institutional norms. Consequently, Economics is currently sidelined when economic literacy is most urgently needed to address South Africa's inequality, unemployment, and development challenges. The study concludes that without deliberate, transformative interventions, Economics risks further marginalisation in the secondary curriculum, depriving learners and society of its critical intellectual and civic value.

This study demonstrates that declining enrolment in Economics is not merely a statistical trend but a reflection of deeper socio-educational inequities. The reflections offered here point to the need for systemic transformation: an educational project that recognises Economics not as a marginal option but as a critical subject for cultivating socially conscious, economically literate citizens. To realise this vision, schools must embrace learner agency, dismantle unjust hierarchies of knowledge, and cultivate pedagogies affirming Economics's intellectual and practical value. Economics education can be repositioned as a site of empowerment that equips learners not only for careers but also for the broader task of engaging critically with the economic and social challenges of their communities and nation.

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