

BRIDGING CAPS POLICY AND ASSESSMENT PRACTICE FOR CRITICAL THINKING IN EKURHULENI NORTH ECONOMICS

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Abstract

South African Economics teachers are expected to develop learners who can analyse economic information, solve problems and make informed decisions, yet the 2024 National Senior Certificate Diagnostic Report shows that many candidates still struggle with higher-order questions that require analysis, comparison and explanation. This paper examines how FET Economics teachers in Ekurhuleni North understand and enact critical thinking within CAPS-aligned teaching and assessment, and which classroom, assessment and learner-context conditions enable or constrain this work. Guided by an adapted Paul and Elder critical-thinking framework, the study used a qualitative phenomenological design within an interpretivist paradigm. Data were generated through semi-structured interviews with three Economics teachers from public schools in Gauteng and document analysis of the Economics CAPS and the 2024 NSC Diagnostic Report. The interview data were coded thematically using Braun and Clarke's approach, with the framework's elements of thought and intellectual standards used as sensitising concepts. Findings show that teachers understood critical thinking as deep analysis, questioning, problem-solving and reasoned judgement. They attempted to promote it through learner-centred routines, including case studies, group discussion, budgeting tasks, scenario-based questions and explicit work with instructional verbs. However, these routines were constrained by curriculum pacing, overcrowding, limited resources, assessment practices that still privilege recall, uneven professional development and learner home-context pressures. The paper argues that critical thinking in Economics cannot be strengthened by policy intention alone; it requires assessment tasks, rubrics and professional learning communities that make reasoning visible within real classroom conditions.

Keywords: *Critical thinking, economics assessment, instructional verbs, CAPS, teacher pedagogy.*

1. Introduction

Economics is an important subject in school because it helps learners understand how people, firms, and governments make decisions about scarce resources. It also creates opportunities for learners to connect school knowledge with questions of employment, household budgeting, markets, prices and the broader economy. In this sense, Economics education is not only about preparing learners for examinations; it is also about preparing them to become citizens who can interpret economic problems and make informed decisions (Asarta & Butters, 2015; Moos van Wyk, 2015).

In South Africa, this expectation is reflected in the Curriculum and Assessment Policy Statement (CAPS) for Economics, which expects learners to collect, analyse and interpret production, consumption and exchange data, as well as other information, to solve problems and make informed decisions (Department of Basic Education (DBE), 2011). This aim clearly links Economics to critical thinking. Learners are expected to go beyond remembering definitions and to demonstrate that they can interpret information, evaluate relationships and justify economic reasoning.

However, the 2024 National Senior Certificate (NSC) Diagnostic Report shows that many Economics candidates still struggle with questions that require higher-order thinking. The report highlights difficulties with instructional verbs such as analyse, compare and explain. In some questions, candidates provided general descriptions, whereas they were expected to break down issues, weigh the positive and negative effects, and develop structured responses (DBE, 2024). The concern is not only that learners struggle with content, but that they often struggle to show the reasoning required by the question. South African research on Economics teaching has also highlighted concerns about teacher content knowledge

and teaching strategies at the Further Education & Training (FET) level, which makes it important to examine how teachers support reasoning as well as content coverage (Adu, 2023).

This gap between curriculum intention and classroom practice is not unique to Economics, but it is especially important in Economics because the subject expects learners to reason about social and economic choices. Previous work on critical thinking in South African classrooms has shown that teachers may recognise the value of critical thinking, yet struggle to translate it into everyday teaching because of large classes, limited resources, insufficient professional development and the pressure to complete the syllabus (Jager, 2014; Letshwene & du Plessis, 2021). For Economics teachers, these pressures are intensified by assessment practices that often reward recall more visibly than reasoning.

This paper therefore reports on a qualitative study conducted with three FET Economics teachers in the Ekurhuleni North district of Gauteng. The study was guided by two refined research questions that are directly addressed by the interview and document data: (1) How do FET Economics teachers conceptualise and enact critical thinking within CAPS-aligned teaching and assessment? (2) What classroom, assessment and learner-context conditions enable or constrain the development of critical thinking in Ekurhuleni North Economics classrooms? By focusing on these two questions, the paper avoids making statistical claims based on a small sample and instead foregrounds teachers' lived experiences of teaching for critical thinking in real classroom conditions.

2. Theoretical framework

This paper uses the Paul and Elder critical-thinking framework as a conceptual lens. The framework is useful for this study because it gives teachers a language for thinking about both the structure and the quality of reasoning. Its elements of thought include purpose, assumptions, concepts, implications, information and point of view, while its intellectual standards include clarity, accuracy, relevance, depth, breadth, logic and fairness (Paul & Elder, 2020). These categories are relevant to Economics because learners are often required to identify a problem, interpret information, consider causes and effects, and justify an answer in relation to the wording of the question.

The study adapted the framework to the South African Economics classroom by placing it within CAPS expectations, classroom realities and pedagogical practices. In this adaptation, CAPS provides the policy intention; Paul and Elder's elements and standards provide the reasoning lens; classroom practices show how teachers attempt to make reasoning visible; and classroom realities show the constraints that teachers experience. The framework was not used as a fixed teaching script. Instead, it was used to interpret how teachers described critical thinking, how they used questions and scenarios, and how they judged the quality of learners' responses.

In this study, the framework also helped to connect teaching and assessment. If learners are expected to analyse, compare or evaluate, then classroom tasks and marking practices need to reward clarity, relevance, depth, logic and fairness. This connection is important because assessment can either open space for critical thinking or close it down when learners are rewarded mainly for quick recall. The adapted model used in this paper is presented in Table 1.

Table 1. A CAPS-centred alignment model for developing critical thinking in Economics.

CAPS expectations	Paul and Elder's reasoning lens	Classroom enactment	Contextual realities	Alignment supports
- analyse and interpret information - solve economic problems - make informed decisions	Elements of thought: - purpose - assumptions - concepts - implications - information - point of view Intellectual standards: - clarity - relevance - depth - logic - fairness	- unpack instructional verbs - case studies and scenarios - budgeting tasks - market failure debates - peer and group discussion	- curriculum pace - overcrowding - limited tools - recall-driven assessment - learner home-context pressures	- reasoning rubrics - claim-evidence prompts - comparison frames - PLCs and mentoring - assessment redesign

Table 1 shows how the study connected policy, theory, pedagogy and context. It also shows why critical thinking should not be treated as a separate activity added after content teaching. Rather, the quality of reasoning needs to be built into how Economics questions are explained, discussed, answered, and assessed.

3. Methodology

The study used a qualitative phenomenological design within an interpretivist paradigm. This design was appropriate because the study sought to understand teachers' lived experiences and meanings rather than to measure the frequency of practices across a large population. The focus was on how teachers made sense of critical thinking in relation to CAPS, assessment and classroom conditions.

Participants were selected purposively because they were directly involved in teaching Economics in the FET phase and in implementing CAPS. The sample included three teachers from public schools in Ekurhuleni North: two novice teachers with fewer than five years of experience and one Head of Department in the commerce stream with more than ten years of experience.

Data was generated through semi-structured interviews and document analysis. The interviews enabled teachers to describe how they understood critical thinking, the strategies they used, how learners responded, and what made integrating critical thinking difficult. Document analysis of the Economics CAPS and the 2024 NSC Diagnostic Report was used to read the interview data against curriculum and assessment expectations. The interview data were analysed thematically following Braun and Clarke's (2006) approach.

Ethical care was taken throughout the study. Participation was voluntary. Participants were informed that they could withdraw without penalty. Pseudonyms are used in this paper, and school names are not included.

4. Findings and discussion

4.1. Critical thinking as reasoned economic sense-making

All three teachers viewed critical thinking as an important skill in Economics, although they expressed this understanding differently. ET2 defined it as "the ability to analyse information objectively, evaluate evidence and make reasoned judgement". ET1 described it more practically as "being able to think deeply, ask questions, and not just accept things at face value". ET3 connected critical thinking with problem-solving and decision-making and clarified difficult Economics terminology for learners.

These responses show that teachers did not understand critical thinking only as an abstract concept. They connected it to how learners should engage with economic information, social problems, and examination questions. This is consistent with the Paul and Elder framework, because critical thinking requires learners to identify the purpose of a task, work with information, examine assumptions and reach reasoned conclusions (Paul & Elder, 2020). It also aligns with broader literature that sees critical thinking as a combination of reasoning, evaluation and judgement in educational practice (Huang & Sang, 2023; Lombardi et al., 2022).

The teachers also recognised that CAPS creates some space for critical thinking, but they differed on how easily it can be used. ET2 felt that the curriculum provides flexibility because teachers can design lessons around real-world issues. ET3 similarly argued that CAPS does not limit learner-centred teaching. ET1, however, emphasised the pressure of content coverage: "The curriculum is very full, there is a lot to do and to teach, so sometimes there's not enough time to focus on thinking skills." This difference is important because it shows that the same curriculum can be experienced as enabling or constraining depending on teacher experience, school conditions and available support.

4.2. Classroom routines that make reasoning visible

The second theme shows how teachers attempted to enact critical thinking in everyday lessons. The strategies described by the teachers were mainly learner-centred and included group work, discussions, case studies, real-life examples, scenarios and problem-solving activities. ET1 explained: "I like using group work, discussions, and examples from real life." ET3 described using "different questions with different verbs, such as describe, distinguish, evaluate", together with case studies and scenarios. These strategies were intended to move learners away from memorising and toward explaining their thinking.

Two examples from the interviews show how teachers tried to make reasoning visible. ET2 described a Grade 11 lesson on market failure and externalities in which learners worked in groups to develop solutions, such as taxes or rules. The teacher reported that "they had a good debate" and that learners "shared ideas and thought deeply", although some confused pollution with other social problems and some learners did not speak. ET1 described a budgeting lesson in which learners planned a family budget and distinguished between needs and wants. Most learners were engaged, but some looked lost, which led the teacher to conclude that clearer instructions would be needed next time.

These examples show both the value and the difficulty of teaching for critical thinking. The activities were meaningful because they connected Economics content to lived experiences and economic decision-making. At the same time, they required scaffolding. ET1 supported struggling learners by giving

examples they could relate to, explaining in “step-by-step” terms, and checking in with them often. ET2 supported learners by breaking down tasks, using visuals and encouraging peer support. This finding is important because critical thinking does not develop simply from being given open-ended questions. Learners need structured opportunities to practise reasoning, receive feedback and improve their responses (Gunawardena & Wilson, 2021).

Teachers’ practices are also closely related to assessment. Working with instructional verbs helped learners understand what was expected of them in a question. Case studies and scenarios helped them connect content to economic contexts. Group discussion and debate provided learners with space to test ideas before writing. These routines are important because the 2024 NSC Diagnostic Report shows that learners often lose marks when they respond with general descriptions instead of analysis or structured arguments (DBE, 2024).

4.3. Conditions that limited sustained critical-thinking practice

The third theme concerns the classroom, assessment and learner-context conditions that made it difficult for teachers to sustain critical-thinking practices. The most common classroom conditions were overcrowding, limited resources and curriculum pacing. ET1 stated that “overcrowding makes it hard to do group work or discussions” because learners are easily distracted. ET2 similarly noted that overcrowded classrooms make it difficult to manage activities that require space and focus. These comments show why a strategy that looks effective in theory may be difficult to implement consistently in a crowded classroom.

Resource constraints also shaped practice. ET1 used textbooks, worksheets and sometimes videos shared through a WhatsApp group, but wished the school had more digital tools. ET3 indicated that damaged smart boards, limited Wi-Fi, insufficient furniture and learners’ lack of data made research tasks difficult. These conditions affected learners’ ability to participate in tasks that required independent research or extended preparation. The issue was therefore not only the availability of teaching materials, but also learners’ access to the resources required to complete tasks beyond the classroom.

Cultural context is important, but the data in this study show that learners’ home and social contexts shaped their readiness to complete research tasks, participate, and sustain effort. ET3 explained that some learners arrived at school without completing research due to family background difficulties, limited parental involvement, limited finances, and a lack of data or funds for internet access.

Assessment was another constraint. ET1 argued that “assessments mostly test memory” and that it is hard to include tasks that show deep thinking. ET2 similarly felt that assessment should allow learners to “explain their thinking, not just choose the right answer”. ET3, however, felt that a variety of assessment methods can support the evaluation of critical thinking. Taken together, these responses show that teachers are not rejecting assessment; rather, they are asking for assessment practices that reward the reasoning CAPS expects. This finding is supported by work showing that assessment can promote learning when it provides learners with opportunities to explain, revise and improve their thinking (Maier & Ruder, 2024).

Professional development was uneven. ET1 reported that workshops usually focus on administration, marks and assessment rather than on how to teach critical thinking or difficult content. ET2 also stated that professional development had not focused on critical thinking. By contrast, ET3 described workshops in which teachers shared challenging topics with facilitators and colleagues, then discussed possible methods for teaching them. This difference matters because teachers in the same district did not experience support in the same way. If critical thinking is to be strengthened, professional development needs to move beyond policy reminders and focus on practical routines, examples, rubrics and assessment design.

4.4. Bridging CAPS policy and assessment practice

The findings show that the policy-practice gap is not solely due to teachers failing to understand CAPS. Teachers in this study understood the importance of critical thinking and were already using strategies such as learner-centred discussion, scenario-based teaching, budgeting tasks, market failure debates and explicit teaching of instructional verbs. The gap emerged when these strategies were placed under pressure from full curricula, large classes, limited tools, assessment routines, and challenges in learners’ home contexts.

For this reason, the main contribution of the study is a practical alignment argument. CAPS expects learners to reason with economic information, but classroom and assessment systems must make such reasoning visible and worthwhile. The Paul and Elder framework provides a useful language for doing this because it can help teachers ask whether a learner’s answer is clear, relevant, deep, logical and fair, rather than only whether it contains memorised content. In a resource-constrained classroom, this does not require a complete redesign of teaching. It requires small but deliberate routines: unpacking verbs, using claim-evidence-reasoning prompts, asking learners to compare positive and negative effects, and using short rubrics that reward justification (Johnson et al., 2023).

5. Conclusion and recommendations

This paper examined how three FET Economics teachers in Ekurhuleni North conceptualised and enacted critical thinking, and what conditions enabled or constrained this work. In response to the first research question, the study found that teachers understood critical thinking as deep analysis, questioning, problem-solving and reasoned judgement. They enacted it through learner-centred strategies, including group work, case studies, real-life examples, scenario-based questioning, budgeting activities and explicit attention to instructional verbs. In response to the second research question, the study found that critical-thinking practices were constrained by curriculum pacing, overcrowding, limited resources, assessment practices that still emphasise recall, uneven professional development and learner social/home-context pressures.

The study has limitations. It included only three teachers from one district, and no learners were interviewed. The findings, therefore, cannot be generalized statistically.

The findings suggest four recommendations. First, Economics teachers should continue using learner-centred strategies, but these should be structured through short reasoning routines such as claim-evidence-reasoning prompts, comparison frames and step-by-step modelling of instructional verbs. Second, assessment tasks should be redesigned so that learners receive credit for explaining their reasoning, weighing alternatives and justifying conclusions. Third, professional development should focus less on administration alone and more on practical classroom routines for teaching difficult Economics concepts through critical thinking. Fourth, school and district support should consider learner context by strengthening access to teaching resources, digital tools where possible, mentoring and professional learning communities. Such support would make it easier for teachers to align CAPS intentions with classroom practice and assessment.

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