



Unpacking Systemic Barriers in Commerce Education: A CHAT-Informed Study of Commercial Curriculum Delivery in Capricorn South District

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Abstract

This study aimed to map the systemic barriers undermining commercial-stream subjects in Capricorn South District. We examined how support deficits, staffing constraints, motivational challenges, and resource gaps interact. Employing a qualitative, interpretive design, the research was grounded in Cultural-Historical Activity Theory (CHAT). We employed semi-structured interviews and document analysis to gather rich, contextual data. Our methods included interviewing ten commercial departmental heads and analyzing policy memos, timetables, staffing records, and resource inventories.

Four interlocking contradictions emerged: STEM-biased policies, chronic teacher shortages, insecure leadership roles, and inadequate instructional resources. These findings underscore the need for coordinated interventions. Key recommendations include policy realignment, establishing permanent staffing structures, providing targeted professional development, modernizing resources, and strengthening

industry-community partnerships. These steps are vital to revitalize commerce education as a conduit for economic participation.

Keywords: Commerce, Curriculum, Barriers, Motivation, Resources, Qualitative

Introduction

South Africa's current economic conditions, marked by persistent poverty and high unemployment, reflect an economy in urgent need of revival (Spaull, 2013). Commerce education comprising business studies, economics, and accounting offers a critical avenue for equipping learners with the financial literacy, planning, and entrepreneurial skills necessary for self-sufficiency and societal participation (Mashau, Mutshaeni & Kone, 2016; Ritu, 2019; Bheemashekar, 2019; Taneja, 2008). Despite this potential, the commercial curriculum in secondary schools is fading from prominence, raising serious questions about the effectiveness of its delivery (Mathiba & Mamabolo, 2025).

Diagnostic reports and empirical studies highlight a downward trend in both enrolment and achievement in commercial subjects. This underperformance has been linked to systemic inefficiencies and inequities within the education system (Thaba-Nkadimene & Mmakola, 2020). Educators consistently report a lack of departmental support, acute teacher shortages, outdated teaching materials, and low morale, challenges often exacerbated by policy and promotion structures that prioritise STEM streams (Kruger, 2018; Romburgh, 2014; Nevenglosky, 2018).

There is, therefore, a pressing need to investigate not only these individual barriers but, more importantly, how they interact systemically to undermine curriculum delivery. This study responds to this gap by investigating the perceptions of commercial departmental heads in Capricorn South District, Limpopo Province, to:

1. Explore the support-related, motivational, staffing, and resource constraints that hinder effective delivery of commercial subjects.
2. Analyse the structural and systemic factors affecting teaching practices and learner outcomes in the commercial stream.
3. Develop context-specific recommendations for revitalising the commercial curriculum as a pathway to economic participation.

By revealing the complex interplay of these challenges, this research seeks to inform targeted interventions that can restore the commercial stream as a vital engine for both individual empowerment and broader economic renewal.

Theoretical Framework

This study is anchored in Cultural-Historical Activity Theory (CHAT), which views teaching and learning as socially situated, tool-mediated activities embedded in broader institutional contexts (Vygotsky, 1978; Engeström, 1987). An activity system comprises six interrelated nodes subject, object, tools, community, rules, and division of labour through which knowledge is co-constructed and practice evolves. Contradictions arising within or between these nodes illuminate structural tensions that either impede or catalyse change.

While other frameworks could be applied to this problem, CHAT offers a uniquely integrated and pragmatic lens. For instance, general systems theory effectively maps interconnected components but can lack a nuanced understanding of the historical, cultural, and motivational factors that mediate human activity within those systems. Critical theory powerfully exposes power imbalances and ideological oppression but can be less effective at providing a structured diagnostic tool for identifying specific, actionable points of intervention within a defined activity system. CHAT incorporates systemic and critical concerns but moves beyond critique by providing a structured heuristic the activity system model to empirically diagnose how specific contradictions manifest in practice.

In the context of secondary-school commercial subjects, CHAT will be used to map the perceived barriers identified by departmental heads onto these specific nodes.

- Insufficient departmental support and outdated methods expose contradictions in the rules node.
- Acute teacher shortages and acting appointments reveal tensions in the division of labour.
- Low morale and limited professional development highlight issues within the subject node.
- Inadequate ICT, textbooks, and workshops point to primary contradictions in tools.

By locating each barrier within this framework, thematic coding will explicitly link interview data and document analysis to CHAT's structure. This will not only describe the barriers but also diagnose their systemic origins, guiding the identification of targeted, system-level interventions that can resolve key contradictions and strengthen commercial curriculum delivery.

Literature Review

To frame the barriers to commercial curriculum delivery within a systemic lens, this review is organised around the six nodes of Cultural-Historical Activity Theory (CHAT): Subject, Tools, Rules, Community, and Division of Labour. By mapping existing scholarship onto these categories, we gain a coherent understanding of how individual, material, policy, social, and organisational factors interact to impede or facilitate effective commercial curriculum delivery. This structure provides the analytical foundation for diagnosing systemic contradictions in the empirical findings.

Subject: Teachers' Beliefs, Motivation, and Professional Identity

Teachers are the primary agents (Subjects) who translate curriculum into classroom practice but face mounting demands as pedagogies shift from behaviourist to constructivist models (Akkoç, 2008). Confidence and intrinsic motivation are crucial, as high self-efficacy correlates with better learner outcomes (Nevenglosky, 2018). This underscores that teacher agency is a central mediator of curriculum success. However, excessive workloads, financial pressures, and a lack of recognition systematically erode morale (Cobbold, 2017; Bohn, 2014), while limited time for rest in rural settings further undermines professional growth (Cheung & Wong, 2012). This indicates that systemic constraints on subject motivation such as unsustainable workloads and a lack of support directly mirror the primary contradictions within the Subject node that CHAT is designed to expose, where the educator's drive to teach effectively conflicts with demotivating structural conditions.

Tools: Instructional Materials and Professional Development

Effective learner-centred delivery relies on mediating tools like up-to-date textbooks, ICT infrastructure, and structured training (Park & Sung, 2013). The adequacy of these tools is a primary determinant of pedagogical practice. Yet, rural schools frequently lack adequate digital resources and use outdated guides, which constrains pedagogical innovation (Eraslan, 2013). While teachers demonstrate agency by compensating through peer collaboration and online self-learning (Apsari, 2018), the absence of systematic workshop provision highlights a systemic failure to uphold curriculum fidelity. This gap between the required tools for modern commerce education and the reality of their availability represents a fundamental primary contradiction within the Tools node, forcing educators to bridge resource gaps through personal effort rather than systemic support.

Rules: Policy Mandates and Promotion Criteria

Formal norms including promotion structures, timetabling protocols, and curriculum mandates are the Rules that shape educators' capacity to prioritise commercial subjects. These rules often act as hidden barriers that legitimise inequity. STEM-biased promotion policies, for instance, marginalise commercial teachers and limit their career progression (Badugela, 2012). Furthermore, rigid timetables and oversight mechanisms restrict the experiential learning approaches central to commerce education (Cobbold, 2017; Mandukwini, 2016). This demonstrates a secondary contradiction between the formal Rules (which prioritise STEM) and the object of the activity system (effective commerce education), revealing how policy itself can be a source of systemic impediment.

Community: Stakeholder Support and Collaborative Networks

Curriculum delivery flourishes within a supportive Community of administrators, district officials, parents, and private-sector partners. Administrators' facility assessments and partnership brokering can offset resource gaps (Hickey, 2005). The strength of this community is thus a critical mediating factor. However, in contexts like Capricorn South District, state funding shortfalls and weak private-sector engagement often leave commercial educators isolated, impeding the exchange of best practices (Olamo, Mengistu & Dory, 2019; Mokhele, 2012). This isolation points to a rupture within the Community node, where the potential for collaborative support is contradicted by the reality of fragmented and insufficient stakeholder networks.

Division of Labour: Staffing Levels and Role Allocation

The Division of Labour, the equitable distribution of teaching posts and leadership roles underpins coherent curriculum delivery. Chronic teacher shortages force individuals to cover multiple commercial subjects, diluting instructional depth (Thaba-Nkadimene & Mmakola, 2020). This misallocation of labour is a direct systemic barrier. Acting appointments, which lack formal authority and benefits, further obscure accountability and hinder departmental leadership (Mutungwa, 2007; Modiba, 2016). These issues reveal a primary contradiction within the Division of Labour node, where the required workload and roles for effective delivery are mismatched with the actual human resource allocations and employment structures.

Synthesis

Organising the literature around CHAT's activity-system nodes reveals that barriers to commercial curriculum delivery are not isolated but deeply interwoven. The scholarship shows clear linkages: motivational deficits (Subject) are exacerbated by resource shortfalls (Tools) and policy biases

(Rules); these are compounded by weak stakeholder networks (Community) and staffing imbalances (Division of Labour). This synthesis authorises that a CHAT-informed analysis is not merely an organising device but a necessary diagnostic framework. It sets the stage for an empirical analysis that locates each reported obstacle within the activity system, pinpointing the specific leverage points where targeted systemic intervention can have the greatest impact.

Research Methodology

Research Design

This study employed a qualitative, interpretive design explicitly informed by Cultural-Historical Activity Theory (CHAT), which frames commercial curriculum delivery as a mediated activity system (Vygotsky, 1978; Engeström, 1987). An interpretive approach was chosen for its capacity to capture participants' lived experiences in context and to surface systemic tensions (Mouton, 2010; Creswell, 2013). This design allowed the researcher to unpack how contradictions among CHAT's six nodes Subject, Object, Tools, Community, Rules, and Division of Labour impede effective commercial curriculum delivery in Capricorn South District.

Sampling

Purposeful sampling was used to select ten commercial departmental heads, one from each secondary school in Capricorn South District (Preissle, 2010; Rosnow, 2014). Schools were chosen for their recurring performance and implementation challenges in commercial subjects. This criterion ensured participants had firsthand insights into the barriers shaping curriculum delivery within their activity systems.

Appointment Status	Subjects Taught	Experience (Years)	Quote Codes
Acting DH	Business Studies, Economics, Accounting	8	R1.1
Permanent DH	Business Studies, Accounting	12	R1.2
Permanent DH	Economics, Accounting	10	D2.1
Acting DH	Business Studies, Economics	7	D2.2
Permanent DH	Business Studies	15	D2.3
Acting DH	Economics, Accounting	9	S3.1
Permanent DH	Business Studies, Economics	14	S3.2
Acting DH	Accounting	6	T4.1
Permanent DH	Business Studies, Accounting	11	T4.2
Acting DH	Economics	5	—

Data Collection

Data were gathered via semi-structured interviews and document analysis (Creswell, 2013).

- ***The Semi structured- interview***

The interview guide was structured around CHAT nodes, prompting educators to reflect on tools (e.g., ICT, textbooks), rules (e.g., promotion policies), community supports, and role allocations. Interviews were audio-recorded with consent and later transcribed verbatim.

To triangulate and contextualize the interview data, key documents were collected, including timetables, official policy memos, staffing records, and resource inventories. These documents were tagged according to their relevant CHAT node (Apsari, 2018).

- ***Document Analysis***

The document analysis served a crucial function in both confirming and extending the findings from the interviews. For instance, educator reports of teacher shortages (from interviews) were confirmed by analyzing staffing records and timetables that showed one teacher assigned to multiple subjects. Conversely, documents also extended the interview data by revealing contradictions not always visible to participants. A policy memo promoting STEM subjects (Rules) could be directly contrasted with an inventory list showing a lack of computers for commercial subjects (Tools), providing tangible evidence of a systemic contradiction between different nodes of the activity system. In this way, the documents provided an objective evidentiary basis that moved beyond self-reporting, strengthening the validity of the identified barriers.

Data Analysis

Analysis followed Creswell's (2013) thematic-content model, augmented by a two-stage CHAT coding strategy. First, all transcripts and documents were coded into CHAT's six nodes. Second, segments illustrating primary, secondary, tertiary, or quaternary contradictions were identified (Engeström, 2001). Within each node, thematic patterns were extracted to reveal how misalignments such as outdated tools or inequitable division of labour undermine curriculum delivery. An audit trail of coding memos and reflective notes was maintained, and member checks with three participants enhanced credibility.

Ethical Considerations

Ethical clearance was granted by the University of Limpopo . Written informed consent was obtained, and participants were assured of anonymity, confidentiality, and their right to withdraw at any time without penalty. All data are stored on a secured drive and will be deleted after five years in line with institutional policy (Creswell, 2013; Cohen, Manion & Morrison, 2004).

Trustworthiness

Credibility was ensured through triangulation of interviews and document evidence. Member checks were conducted by sharing node-coded summaries with three participants for validation. An audit trail, including reflective field notes and coding memos, enhanced transparency and dependability.

Results

The findings are organised by CHAT nodes Rules, Division of Labour, Subject, and Tools and enriched with interpretive commentary to illuminate the systemic contradictions each barrier represents. Codes (e.g., R1.1) link illustrative quotes to specific tensions.

Rules: Inadequate Departmental Support

Within CHAT, Rules encompass policies, priorities, and formal norms that guide educators' work. Participants consistently reported that departmental directives and resource allocations privilege STEM streams, leaving commercial subjects under-resourced and undervalued.

R1.1 *"I feel like we do not get enough support from the department on the delivery of commercial subjects...some of the methods we are using are outdated and are not helping our learners be in a position to start their own businesses."*

R1.2 *"The department does not provide enough workshops for us and it is important for commercial teachers to have confidence in their subjects, so that they can take a step forward to deliver the commercial curriculum to learners and enable them to run their own businesses using knowledge acquired."*

Interpretation

- Secondary contradiction (Rules ↔ Tools): Policy emphasis on science deprives commercial educators of modern pedagogical tools (Cobbold, 2017).
- Impact: This misalignment perpetuates outdated instructional methods, undermining the curriculum's learner-centred aims (Department of Basic Education, 2008).

Division of Labour: Teacher Shortages & Acting Posts

The Division of Labour node reflects how tasks, roles, and authority are distributed. Chronic understaffing and unfilled posts force individuals to assume multiple responsibilities, while "acting" appointments erode formal authority.

D2.1 *"We have all three commercial subjects at the schools with only two commercial educators, which means that we must have one commercial educator offering two subjects in one grade."*

D2.2 *"The schools have two commercial subjects, and I am the only commercial teacher at the school. I am responsible for both business studies and economics from grades 10 to 12."*

D2.3 *"Our commercial subjects are complete in the school, with all three commercial subjects available to learners, but unfortunately, we lost one of our teachers last year, and I have since been responsible for all three subjects while we are still waiting to fill his post."*

Interpretation

- Primary contradiction (Division of Labour): Insufficient staffing allocations overburden teachers, compromising depth of instruction (Thaba-Nkadimene & Mmakola, 2020).
- Secondary contradiction (Division of Labour ↔ Subject): Acting roles undermine educators' professional identity and motivation, as they lack formal recognition (Mutungwa, 2007).

- Impact: Overstretching teachers reduces opportunities for subject-specific expertise and collaboration.

Subject: Low Motivation & Professional Identity

The Subject node addresses teachers’ beliefs, motivations, and sense of agency. Without formal appointment or growth pathways, acting departmental heads reported diminished morale and commitment.

S3.1 *“I can’t even say I’m leading the commercial stream; I am just acting because of the experience I have in commerce, but we don’t even have opportunities for growth in this department.”*

S3.2 *“I am not really a departmental head; I am just the only commercial teacher at the school, and by virtue of that, it is my responsibility to look after the subjects I am teaching; otherwise, I cannot say I am a departmental head.”*

Interpretation

- Primary contradiction (Subject): Teachers’ intrinsic drive to lead and innovate conflicts with lack of formal status and career progression (Bohn, 2014).
- Impact: Eroded professional identity hinders sustained commitment to curriculum improvement (Nevenglosky, 2018).

Tools: Insufficient Teaching Resources

In CHAT, Tools include both physical materials and symbolic artifacts that mediate teaching. Participants highlighted severe gaps in ICT, textbooks, and professional-development workshops.

T4.1 *“We are living in a time where technology has taken over and in a lot of ways made things easier...Unfortunately, our school is still behind when it comes to that.”*

T4.2 *“Our rural schools are very under-resourced. It has been said that soon we will have one teacher with one laptop and one learner with one tablet, but it seems like that is a far-fetched dream because here at our schools with 12 teachers and over 300 learners, we still have only 3 laptops, and that is delaying us.”*

Interpretation

- Primary contradiction (Tools): Lack of ICT and updated materials directly obstructs learner-centred pedagogy and interactive methods (Park & Sung, 2013; Eraslan, 2013).
- Impact: Educators revert to teacher-centred approaches, diminishing student engagement and skill acquisition.

Summary of Barriers by CHAT Node

Barrier	CHAT Node	Contradiction Type	Implications
Inadequate departmental support	Rules	Secondary (Rules ↔ Tools)	Outdated pedagogy; low workshop uptake
Teacher shortages & acting appointments	Division of Labour	Primary; Secondary (with Subject)	Overloaded teachers; diminished expertise
Low motivation due to acting roles	Subject	Primary	Eroded commitment; limited innovation

Insufficient ICT instructional materials	&	Tools	Primary	Reversion to didactic teaching
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Discussion

Building on the empirical findings, this discussion uses Cultural-Historical Activity Theory (CHAT) to unpack how systemic contradictions across four core nodes Rules, Division of Labour, Subject, and Tools impede commercial curriculum delivery (Engeström, 1987). For each node, we contrast participants' lived experiences with extant literature, identify the specific type of contradiction (primary or secondary), and consider how these tensions thwart the study's objectives of diagnosing structural barriers and informing context-specific interventions (Creswell, 2013). By synthesising these insights, we highlight strategic leverage points for revitalising the commercial stream as a driver of socio-economic renewal

Rules: Contradictions between Policy Priorities and Pedagogical Tools

The findings reveal that departmental policies heavily favour STEM streams, resulting in minimal professional development and outdated commercial-pedagogy tools (R1.1; R1.2). This secondary contradiction between Rules and Tools mirrors Cobbold's (2017) observation that policy biases direct resources toward privileged subjects, leaving others underfunded. Consequently, commercial educators lack the support needed to implement learner-centred methods, undermining the curriculum's intended outcomes and stalling structural improvements. Addressing this tension will require policy realignment to ensure equitable workshop provision and resource allocation.

Division of Labour: Staffing Allocations versus Professional Agency

Persistent teacher shortages and acting appointments generate a primary contradiction within Division of Labour, compounded by a secondary contradiction with Subject roles (D2.1–D2.3). Mutungwa (2007) demonstrated how acting posts erode departmental authority, while Thaba-Nkadimene and Mmakola (2020) linked understaffing to diluted instructional depth. These structural imbalances compromise educators' capacity to specialise and collaborate, impeding cohesive curriculum delivery. Interventions should prioritise formalising commercial-stream posts and recruiting dedicated staff.

Subject: Tensions in Motivation and Professional Identity

Acting departmental heads reported diminished morale due to lack of formal status and career pathways (S3.1; S3.2). This primary contradiction within the Subject node aligns with Nevenglosky's (2018) finding that insecure appointments lower teacher self-efficacy, and Bohn's (2014) evidence on the link between career progression and intrinsic motivation. When professional identity is weakened, educators are less likely to innovate or sustain pedagogical improvements, thwarting systemic change (Objective 2). Strengthening formal leadership roles and offering clear advancement pathways can help restore motivation.

Tools: Resource Availability and Pedagogical Innovation

Severe shortages of ICT, textbooks, and workshops expose a primary contradiction within Tools (T4.1; T4.2). Park and Sung (2013) emphasise how inadequate technology hampers interactive, learner-centred approaches, and Eraslan (2013) links resource deficits to reliance on didactic teaching. Without up-to-date materials, educators revert to teacher-centred methods, undermining curriculum objectives and stalling pedagogical reform. Strategic investment in digital

infrastructure and open educational resources is essential for enabling modern commercial-stream pedagogy.

Integrative Synthesis

Across these CHAT nodes, systemic contradictions policy biases (Rules), staffing inequities (Division of Labour), identity crises (Subject), and resource gaps (Tools) interlock to impede commercial curriculum delivery. This multi-layered tension underscores the need for coordinated, system-level interventions spanning policy realignment, staffing models, professional-development frameworks, and resource infusions. By resolving these contradictions, the commercial stream can be revitalised as a robust pathway to economic participation.

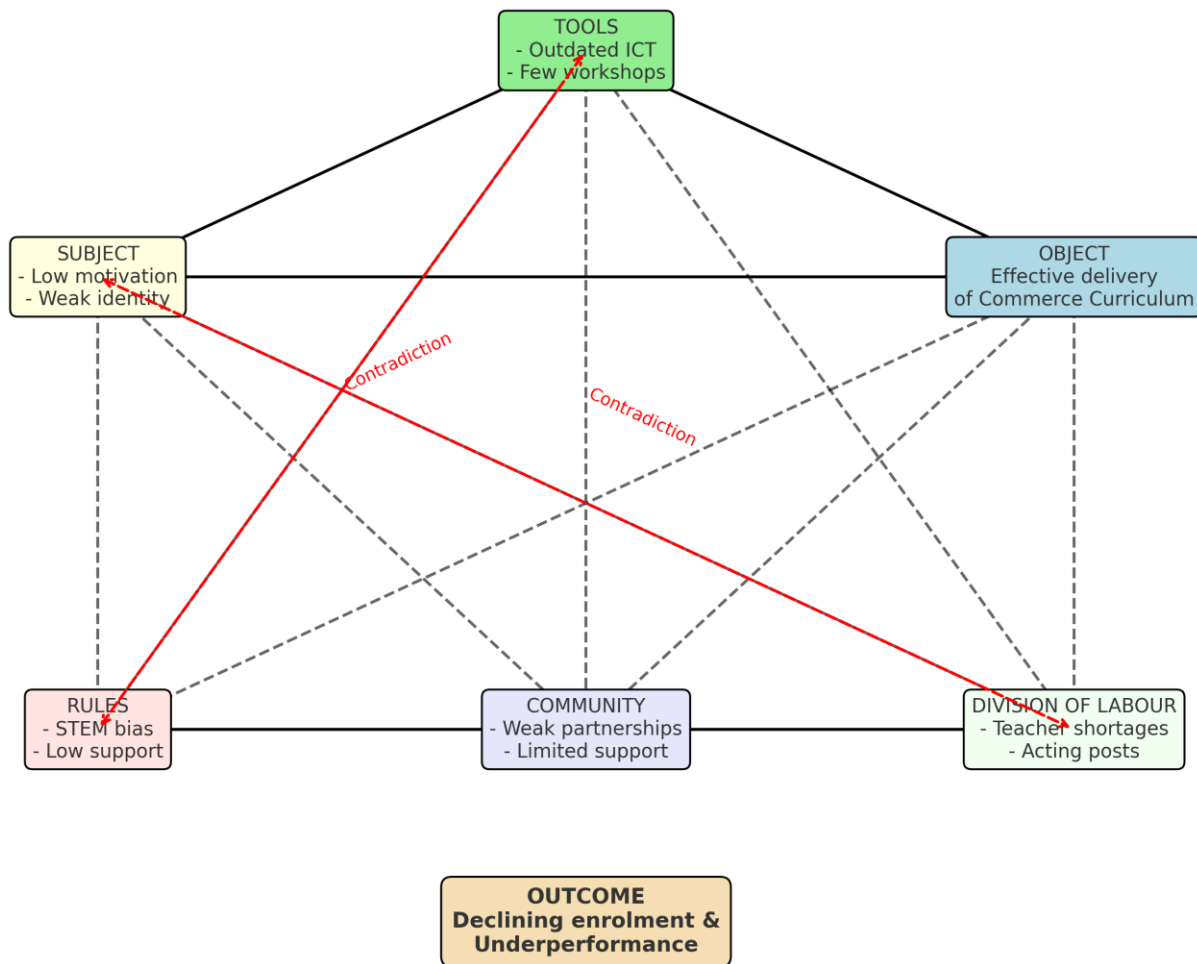


Figure 1: (CHAT model of systemic barriers to commercial curriculum delivery.

The diagram maps barriers such as low teacher motivation, outdated tools, STEM-biased policies, weak community support, and staffing shortages onto CHAT nodes, highlighting key contradictions that undermine effective curriculum delivery.)

Limitations to the study

Despite its in-depth, CHAT-informed insights into systemic barriers, this study has several limitations. By focusing only on ten commercial departmental heads in Capricorn South District, the findings may not generalise to other regions or stakeholder groups such as classroom teachers,

learners, or private-sector partners whose perspectives could reveal additional tensions within the activity system. Furthermore, the research team's positionality and shared interest in educational equity, while informing a sensitive analysis, could have unconsciously influenced the framing of questions during interviews and the interpretation of the data, potentially foregrounding certain systemic barriers over others. Reliance on self-reported interviews, without classroom observations or quantitative measures, introduces potential bias and limits methodological triangulation. The cross-sectional design captures barriers at a single moment in time, precluding analysis of how policy changes or resource allocations evolve.

Recommendations

Drawing on the CHAT-based diagnosis of systemic contradictions, the following targeted interventions can reconcile key tensions and revitalise commercial curriculum delivery in Capricorn South District.

1. **Policy Reform**
Realign departmental policies to support commerce education equitably. This includes creating a task force to ensure fair resource allocation, revising promotion criteria to value commercial teaching, and allowing flexible timetabling for experiential learning.
2. **Staffing Stabilisation**
Address chronic shortages and insecure roles by creating and filling permanent commercial-stream posts. Implement a mentorship program and workload monitoring to prevent overextension and build leadership capacity.
3. **Teacher Empowerment**
Boost morale and agency through a structured professional development pathway offering micro-credentials in key areas. Introduce recognition awards and financial incentives for innovation and achievement, and facilitate peer-learning forums.
4. **Resource Modernisation & Partnerships**
Equip schools with reliable ICT infrastructure and curate open-access digital learning materials. Formalise partnerships with local businesses for internships and projects, and engage the community through innovation days to secure support and resources.

By implementing these multi-node interventions realigning policies, clarifying roles, empowering teachers, modernising tools, and strengthening community ties the district can resolve the systemic contradictions inhibiting commercial curriculum delivery. This coordinated approach promises not only to enhance teaching quality and learner engagement but also to position commercial education as a vital engine for local economic renewal.

Conclusion

This study applied Cultural-Historical Activity Theory to examine how systemic contradictions impede the delivery of commercial subjects in Capricorn South District secondary schools. By structuring our inquiry around CHAT's nodes Rules, Division of Labour, Subject, and Tools we

unpacked how policy priorities, staffing allocations, professional identity, and resource availability collectively undermine learner-centred, entrepreneurship-focused pedagogy.

Our findings reveal that secondary contradictions between departmental rules and available mediating tools perpetuate outdated instructional approaches, while primary contradictions within the division of labour and subject nodes erode teachers' capacity and motivation. Resource shortfalls in ICT and instructional materials further constrain innovative practice. These interlocking tensions explain observed declines in enrolment and performance, highlighting why piecemeal fixes have fallen short.

Future research should extend this CHAT-informed lens across diverse contexts and stakeholder groups, incorporate longitudinal designs to track change over time, and explore complementary theoretical perspectives on motivation and organisational change. This study demonstrates that without systemic redress, commerce education risks continued decline, undermining South Africa's capacity to prepare economically active citizens. By continuing to diagnose and address activity-system tensions, policymakers and practitioners can ensure that commerce education fulfils its promise as a catalyst for both individual empowerment and broader socio-economic renewal.

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