

Original Article

Schools as Enabling Environments for Democratic Classroom Practices: A Reflective Case Study from South Africa

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Abstract: Although democracy is widely recognised as a fundamental principle of society, its implementation in educational settings remains inconsistent. This study examines how secondary school educators integrate democratic principles and values into teaching, learning, and assessment. Using a qualitative descriptive-reflective case study design informed by the Child-Friendly Schools framework and social reconstructionism, the study involved eight educators and twelve learners from two secondary schools in Mogoshi Circuit, Limpopo Province, South Africa. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews, focus group discussions, classroom observations, and document analysis, and analysed thematically. Six themes emerged: learner-centred pedagogy, inclusion, participation, discipline, educators' influence on learner development, and educational transformation. The findings reveal a gap between educators' endorsement of democratic principles and their implementation in classroom practices. This discrepancy highlights the need to translate democratic ideals into meaningful learner participation and inclusive pedagogical practices. The study recommends strengthening educators' professional development in democratic pedagogy to promote the consistent integration of democratic values into secondary education in South Africa.

Keywords :

Democratic classroom practices; Secondary education; Learner participation; Social reconstruction, South Africa



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Article History:

Received 16 January 2026; Revised 1 July 2026; Accepted 17 August 2026

Available online 20 October 2026

INTRODUCTION

A universal educational landscape advocating a democratic way of living is growing (Koopman & Laubscher, 2022). However, even in countries where democracy has been adopted as a way of life, promoting democratic practices in schools remains challenging. After more than two decades of constitutional democracy, South African schools are core

institutions expected to promote democratic principles and values, as reflected in the country's constitution and informing frameworks (Mkhomi, 2023). Democratic education refers to how schools are structured as democratic spaces to prepare learners for future participation in democracy (Brezicha *et al.*, 2023). Democratic principles are foundational beliefs and norms, such as respect, that enable responsible and respectful participation in living well together in a democratic society (Karakatsani & Pliogou, 2026). Likewise, democratic values refer to shared experiences, participation, and mutual respect, as reflected in social and national life, with an emphasis on individuals becoming democratic members in a community (Sobby & Yudha, 2023).

Various policies, such as the South African Constitution of 1996, the Bill of Rights, and the Children's Act No. 38 of 2005, promote human dignity, equality, and freedom as key stresses towards democracy. At the school level, the Manifesto on Values, Education and Democracy, and the South African Schools Act (SASA) No. 84 of 1996 provide guidance for educational practice. Collectively, these policies suggest that democratic principles ought to be promoted as a way of life. However, research indicates that such principles are not always upheld in schools (Dzavo *et al.*, 2021), even in democratic societies. Similarly, the Curriculum and Assessment Policy Statement (CAPS) was created to inspire democratic practices within schools, foster learners' sense of belonging, and promote autonomy, shared power, freedom, and equality (Larsen, 2024; Passenz, 2024).

Omodan (2024) argues that democratic classroom practices provide a foundation for effective classroom management and learner learning. Joubert *et al.* (2015) suggest that the operationalization of democracy in schools and classrooms warrants further investigation, especially in the South African curriculum context. Similarly, Mkhomi (2023) contends that the inculcation of these values should be adjusted to align with teaching and learning practices that do not discriminate against any group. Given that South Africa has been exposed to a new democratic dispensation, the active inculcation of democratic education remains important. As such, educators should continually reflect and develop equitable teaching approaches that equip learners to contribute responsibly to society (Karakatsani & Pliogou, 2026). Dzavo *et al.* (2021), Waheed *et al.* (2024), and Kim (2025) note that these principles have not been fully adopted in all schools. In this context, this study explores whether educators in two secondary schools in Limpopo create a democratic classroom environment and actively promote democratic principles.

THEORETICAL SUPPORT

Democracy is a process shaped and re-shaped over time and is practiced as a set of principles and values (Alshurman, 2015). In education, schools have become important democratic existing spaces (Dzavo *et al.*, 2021). A school is located within a society where it is a society itself; thus, a classroom is a small society within the school. There is a need for democracy to be prevalent in schools (Omodan, 2024). Schools provide a perfect setting for teaching learners about principles, interaction with others, debates, and collaboration from a very young age (Waheed *et al.*, 2024). Tzankova *et al.* (2023) examined civic and political attitudes among learners in European countries (Italy, Sweden, Germany, and the Czech Republic). The findings indicate that opportunities for

active involvement and critical reflection in a democratic school climate strengthen values such as trust and efficacy. However, the absence of meaningful learner participation suggests that democratic principles are not always interpreted into practice. This points to a gap between democratic principles and democratic practice within the school context.

Democratic education was developed in opposition to a rigid, restrictive form of authoritative education in schools. Research suggests that democratic practices interrupt authoritarian structures that can disempower learners to reach beyond their potential (Tuhuteru, 2023). Felicetti (2021) defines democratic practices as “an array of human activity that addresses political problems and is centrally organized around a shared practical understanding that is inclusive and egalitarian”, arguing that they offer valuable insights into the practice-based understanding of democracy. Patra (2022) and Hardiansyah and Mas'odi (2022) further contend that individual behavior within a society is shaped by the values, rules, and traditions learned through education, with educators playing an important role in the process. Within this context, Bidari (2025) identifies a democratic classroom as a space in which educators and learners work together to make decisions about curricular and structural matters, engage in discussion, and practice democratic values. This perspective is consistent with research emphasizing that meaningful student participation involves genuine influence over classroom decisions rather than merely being present or responding to teachers' questions (Heid et al., 2023; Mager & Nowak, 2012). Furthermore, democratic classroom practices require opportunities for students to express their views, engage in collaborative decision-making, and participate in shaping the educational environment (Fielding, 2012; Brunker, 2025).

Our paper focuses on how educators incorporate and promote democratic principles and values into teaching, learning, and assessment environments. We argue that educators who incorporate democratic practices into their teaching inculcate these values in their learners. Leach et al. (2023) argue that in the United States, democratic ways of living can be cultivated in schools, while Dobson (2021) emphasise critical thinking and learner empowerment as key features of democratic classrooms. Through participation and development, learners achieve deeper reasoning, self-improvement, and moral principles (Mugambi, 2022).

A study conducted in Nigeria by Biamba et al. (2021) reveals that when learners leave school to join the wider society, they have the will to contribute greatly as their interests and well-being are nurtured. This suggests that schools play a key role in inculcating democratic principles beyond the classroom. In contrast, Patra (2022) in India highlights concerns about the state of democratic principles and values in education. Learner participation in school governance led to improvements in skills, dialogue, and responsibility. However, findings by Dzavo et al. (2021) in Zimbabwe indicate that schools still face challenges in teaching democratic values to learners. Consistent with our argument, the incorporation of democratic principles is evident in some cases but absent in others. These findings highlight different levels of success in implementing democratic education across contexts and provide a basis for comparison with South Africa.

In South Africa, public schools are given roles and responsibilities by the Department of Basic Education and Training. Waheed et al. (2024) found that democratic

values are promoted, but learner participation could be enhanced. [Moyo, et al. \(2023\)](#) contend that learner participation is hindered due to different influences. Democratic participation is a key concept for experiencing democracy in practice through voluntary dialogue that influences decision-making and promotes inclusive participation ([Larsen, 2024](#)). However, tensions between democratic ideals and real classroom practices do exist.

In yet another study in South Africa, [Omodan et al. \(2025\)](#) found that challenges to implementing effective democratic practices in the classroom included traditional teaching methods, limited learner participation, and large class sizes, making democratic education difficult to achieve in practice. This aligns with concerns raised by [Watson et al. \(2025\)](#), who argue that values are fundamental in shaping an inclusive school culture and positive learning conditions. [Passenz \(2024\)](#) revealed that educators' understanding and perception influence their classroom practice. Similarly, upper secondary education sets a platform for pupils to enact and promote democracy despite any socio-economic background ([Larsen, 2024](#)). Collectively, these studies indicate a gap between democratic ideals and their implementation, resulting in inconsistent practices. Against this backdrop, this study explored whether South African educators promote democratic principles and values in their classrooms during teaching, learning, and assessment.

THEORETICAL SUPPORT

We referred to the Child-Friendly Schools (CFS) framework purported by the United Nations International Children's Emergency Fund (UNICEF) (2012) for education systems and schools that 'serve the whole child' in 1999, and the Social Reconstructionism (SR) approach pioneered by Theodore Brameld (1904-1987) as a lens of the study. The CFS concept is a holistic system-wide approach in the promotion of child-friendly schooling and educational quality at the center of education reform. The concept aims to foster educational access, improve the quality of schooling, promote participation, respect, inclusivity, and redress educational inequalities through equity and equal educational access ([Iskandar, 2024](#)). SR is a concept in education that underpins curriculum-making to create social transformation, social reform, and social order. SR recognises institutions such as schools, where educators play a role in reconstructing society through education ([Kandemir, 2021](#)).

Notably, in the context of the study, the combination of CFS and SR provides a robust framework for analysing and interpreting the efficacy of democratic practices in the secondary school classroom. By applying these frameworks, the study aims to investigate how educators promote the inculcation of democratic principles in their classroom practices. The lens of CFS and RS will enable a more thorough examination of the dynamics between educators and learners, looking deeper into whether current practices promote democratic principles in the classroom. The theoretical frameworks will help address the study's objectives by providing a comprehensive lens through which democratic principles underpin the implementation of democratic practices in secondary classrooms. Therefore, this theoretical framework will serve as a fundamental starting point for understanding democratic principles in classroom engagement and offers insight into the transformative practices necessary to enable a more achievable democratic

classroom. In this study, the aim is to examine how educators promote democratic principles and values in their classrooms through teaching, learning, and assessment.

METHOD

This study was guided by the interpretive paradigm, which holds that individuals seek understanding of the world in which they live and work ([Dangal & Joshi, 2020](#)). We attempted to provide greater clarity on how educators make meaning of democratic principles in a specific context, aiming to foster greater understanding through their own interpretive lens ([Braun & Clarke, 2022](#)). This paradigm is closely connected to CFS and SR, which seek to promote teaching and learning practices that advance transformative change in education by advancing participation, inclusion, social justice, and democratic engagement. We employed a descriptive case study design, which emphasises a rich, thick, holistic description of the phenomenon under study and is particularly important because it allows the researcher to act as an observer and preserve the situation as it naturally occurs ([Lim, 2024](#)). We considered a case study in which the researcher seeks to observe the phenomenon in its actual circumstances.

In each of the two schools in the rural area of the selected Mogoshi Circuit, purposive sampling was used, focusing on Grade 10-12 pupils, including four educators from each school (eight educators) and six learners per school (twelve learners) in focus groups. The participants in the study allowed us to deliberately discover individuals and sites that would help them learn or understand the central matter ([Lim, 2024](#)). The participants were information-rich, as they were likely to provide the best answers to how educators promoted democratic principles and values in classroom practice. We focused on research participants willing to share their perspectives, interests, and experiences regarding the phenomenon to gather important data and purposively select them ([Stratton, 2024](#)). Consequently, the participants were located in a similar rural setting, which facilitated quick recruitment in closer proximity to the researcher.

Data were collected to examine how educators' experiences made sense in the promotion of democratic principles in their classroom practice ([Braun & Clarke, 2022](#)) through semi-structured and focus group interviews, classroom observations, and document analysis. Interviews are vital tools for uncovering rich, complex information from participants, where ideas are exchanged between two or more individuals ([Waheed et al., 2024](#)). The interviews developed by researchers asked questions about the incorporation of democratic principles and values among educators and learners within the school environment, and each lasted an average of 30-45 minutes. They were transcribed and analysed. There is growing recognition among qualitative researchers that observations allow them to capture behaviors, interactions, and contexts in real-world settings, revealing patterns that questioning alone cannot access ([Chand, 2025](#)). As a non-participant observer, a different lens on how educators and learners interact in the classroom was provided. Researchers developed an observation schedule to assist in collecting the necessary information without losing focus on the incorporation of democratic principles and values among educators and learners in the classroom. On the other hand, document analysis provided access to existing textual and visual materials,

such as reports, which offer valuable historical, institutional, and contextual insights (Chand, 2025). We used document analysis to shed light on these principles and values as reflected in written materials and to corroborate findings from other methods. Thus, in this study, the various sources used ensured that we could gather more data, enabling us to interpret the phenomenon (Dangal & Joshi, 2020). The data were collected in participants' natural settings at different times of day, mainly in the mornings and afternoons.

Various authors suggest that collection and data analysis form the basis for effectively answering research questions (Braun & Clarke, 2022; Dangal & Joshi, 2020). We used Thematic Analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006) to analyse data from semi-structured and focus group interviews, and document analysis (Bowen, 2009) to analyse data obtained from records. Braun and Clarke's (2006) six step-by-step guide is a data analysis method that identifies, analyses and reports themes within data. Firstly, by familiarising oneself with data, each transcript was read and re-read thoroughly. Secondly, during the process of generating initial codes, a list of preliminary codes was produced. Thirdly, in searching for themes, similar codes were clustered together to create potential themes. Fourthly, the themes were reviewed, refined, and further developed through continuous coding. Fifthly, in the step of defining and naming themes, evidently articulated themes and categories were generated. Lastly, in the final step, a report was generated, determining the order in which to present the themes (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Using Bowen's (2009) document analysis, skimming, reading and interpretation provided data on the context within which the purpose of the study is investigated. Firstly, I read the CAPS, the Manifesto and assessment policy with the aim of getting the overall picture. Secondly, I did a thorough examination of the documents. Lastly, I then interpreted the documents in relation to the promotion of democratic principles and values by educators into their classroom practices.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

Presentation of findings from the educators

The meaning of democracy in education.

The educators expressed different views. It became clear that some held that democratic education involved concepts such as equality, participation, freedom, inclusion, and democratic rights in the classroom, while others regarded it as a set of rules to follow or a guide for school policies, such as the CAPS document. Six of the eight educators believe that they are democratic in their classroom contexts. S2E1 said: *"I think it means principles of democracy and rules should be followed by all costs in education"*. The participants' practice may indicate that educators are aware of upholding democratic education in their teaching, learning, and assessment.

However, some participants expressed democratic values in the classroom as contingent on the challenges that may arise. One participant was even honest and admitted that he sometimes uses corporal punishment to maintain order in the classroom. The practice of participants administering such forceful discipline in the classroom may be viewed as a way to exert control over a class, and if learners do not abide by educators' rules, violence will be inflicted. This may have serious implications for learners' developmental and social well-being, potentially increasing aggression and unpredictable

behavior (Heekes *et al.*, 2022). Such learning contexts may create negative democratic impacts within our society. As schools, democratic values such as equality, participation, and justice should be practiced, but are lacking in some. Thus, this indicates that certain practices among some educators contradict what democratic education for South Africans in a post-apartheid setting really means: that a power-and-control relationship between the educator and the learner should not exist (Joubert *et al.*, 2015).

Incorporation of democratic principles in the classroom

We found that learners' participation is commonly encouraged by seven of the eight educators, and that certain attributes, such as respect, equality, and inclusivity, were also promoted in a casual, voluntary manner. S2E3 stated: *“Well usually when I am in class teaching, I install little things such as being inclusive. You need to understand that your fellow learners might be different... When I am teaching I always remind them of things like xenophobia, that we do not need this kind of things. Simply because you are black doesn't mean you are less better than white people. I always tell them this kind of things when I teach”*. Most educators reflected that learners are reminded to exercise compassion and values, and to be aware of the decisions they make that shape how they view others. Learners get to understand certain behaviors that are expected from them through democratic principles. Learners are taught to respect others, follow the law, and be considerate, which means they need to be inclusive. However, it is noted that practices among educators vary; this may be due to the beliefs, values, and principles that influence the educators' decision-making concerning instruction and curriculum choices.

In contrast, one educator participant differed as he highlighted that sometimes one cannot actually maintain a democratic status, especially when teaching adolescents. Thus, incorporating democratic principles consistently is not realistic. This was confessed by S1E4: *“Their some of challenges you meet actually when it comes to teaching, rea kwana. Sometimes you forced to actually apply corporal punishment. In that case, principles actually are sadi obeya akere”*. The findings of the study reveal that other tactics, such as corporal punishment, are still used and normalised. Participants' acknowledgment of corporal punishment, despite its prohibition, reveals tensions between educational policy, classroom realities, and educators' beliefs about discipline. Such practices may harm learners' physical and psychological well-being and undermine democratic values. Their persistence also suggests that some educators lack effective non-violent classroom-management strategies. Promoting democratic education therefore requires positive discipline and violence-free classrooms that foster learners' communication, critical thinking, and meaningful participation (Phillips, 2025).

Understanding democratic education in the school curriculum

This study found diverse differences in responses in the educators' understanding of how the integration of democratic education and curriculum can take place. Some participants argued that the CAPS document embodies democratic principles and values that give rise to democratic education, which could be done in groups, or simply informing the learners what they need to know regarding their academic work. S2E2 said: *“Yes, yes*

this is where in you find the learners question how we assess them...". The participants' response show that educators use the CAPS to encourage learners to engage with the content, ask questions, and participate in the group. To some extent, CAPS is reflected through equipping learners with the necessary abilities, knowledge, and values for meaningful participation in society. However, tension between learner participation and curriculum authority is evidently strong and is a concern for educators.

In contrast to the participant above, we found that some participants disagreed and maintained that not all learners are willing to comply with activities that will develop them. S1E2 remarked: *"...some are too lazy to do their work. Nowadays, kids need to be checked timeously, whether they do their work or not"*. Some educators are of the subjective view that incorporating democratic values, which give learners a chance to participate in activities and be autonomous, is not easy for them. The learners do not do their best to take charge of their work on time, which may prevent them from becoming capable, responsible, and active citizens. Secondary educators face a range of challenges when teaching democratic principles to learners (Waheed *et al.*, 2024). This may negatively influence educators' willingness to adopt democratic approaches in teaching, further creating a challenge, as learner-centered teaching ideals may not be widely encouraged. On the other hand, some educators acknowledge that the curriculum cannot be negotiated with learners, but it must be applied in everyday work. The following educator reflected: S1E1: *"No, the curriculum is not a question of negotiations with learners. It's just that the Government is responsible for the curriculum. So the teachers and the learners are just to learn what is set"*. Some educators argued that promoting a democratic environment is constrained by a prescribed curriculum, which leaves limited opportunities for negotiation, negatively affecting critical dialogue, decision-making, and participation.

The democratic use of instruction in the classroom

All educator participants believe they facilitate their lessons and promote learner-centredness in the classroom. S1E2, for example said: *"I facilitate with the learners being centred in the lesson. Learners learn to work on their own, engaging one another in the form of debates, doing group work, teaching one another"*. However, two (2) of the educator participants emphasised that applying learner-centredness would depend on the classroom environment, and that in some instances learners needed to be disciplined for a proper class to take place. S2E3 highlighted the following: *"Bit of both. I prefer facilitating but at the same time they are troublesome kids in the class..."*.

Some educators indicated that while they make every effort to promote a democratic environment in schools through facilitation, they sometimes find themselves in a difficult position to maintain a democratic atmosphere among learners in class. The findings reveal a notable inconsistency between educators' stated commitment to learner-centered and democratic teaching practices and their views regarding rights and discipline. Although all participants reported promoting learner-centered learning through strategies such as debates, group discussions, and collaborative activities, the extent to which these methods genuinely embody democratic pedagogy should be explored.

Additionally, most educators acknowledge that a challenge exists: learners are given too many rights and end up taking advantage by not completing their schoolwork, and at times, they are disrespectful. S1E2 explained that: *“Indiscipline learners. They are abusing their rights and say they no longer need punishment which will make them no longer fearful”*. Some educators believe learners are afforded excessive rights and argue that punishment is necessary to maintain classroom discipline. This finding resonates with [Mpofu and Machingauta’s \(2024\)](#) finding that an overemphasis on rights without a consistent emphasis on responsibility may contribute to the cultivation of a breed of self-centered, disruptive behavior among learners. Educators desire democratic principles to be promoted in schools; however, although opportunities and justice are provided to support learners, many do not appear to appreciate or recognise the benefits of these efforts. These perspectives expose underlying tensions between democratic educational principles and a more traditional authoritarian approach to classroom management.

Findings from the learners

Incorporating democratic principles and values in the classroom

Different views were given by participants from the two schools. Most learner participants stated that democratic principles depend on a school's cultural practices. This is reflected by S1L6, who said: *“If outside of the class you grumpy like how they see you badly, in class they won’t mind your answers. They won’t pay attention to you or listen to your answers. No they judge you...”*. Another learner participant S1L5 said: *“Sometimes they are treating some other learners unfairly...”* How well democratic principles are incorporated into learners’ everyday lives depends on educators' views of their learners. When learners fail to cooperate and respect one another outside the classroom, it affects how they are treated and perceived by educators in the classroom. These contrasting learner experiences differ greatly from the educators' view, which seven of the eight educators advocate: learners' inclusion in their classroom practices. Learners must be in a learning space where fairness, respect, and participation are encouraged. This view may highlight that it is not easy for learners to experience democracy when there is no good relationship between educators and learners.

In contrast, some participants were of the view that educators encouraged participation, and learners became part of the lesson when teaching was taking place. This was established by responses from S2L2, for example, who said: *“The teachers provide each and every student with a chance to speak what they know and what they don’t understand, and whatever they did not understand, they should just ask”*. Learners’ views were shaped according to their shared experiences with the educators’ encounter. Some participants were of the view that they could freely express their opinions to the educators. Others argue that only a few learners are given the opportunity to participate in the lesson, depending on their classroom experience. These indicate that some learners perceive their classroom as democratic while others experience exclusion, judgment, or limited participation. So, inconsistencies in educators' practices and the uneven implementation of democratic values across classrooms constitute a significant challenge.

Furthermore, most of the learner participants were concerned about noisemaking in classes. S2L3 said: *“Most learners in class when the teacher is teaching, they don’t listen, they disrespect the teacher also they don’t do their schoolwork, also they make noise...”*. We discovered that discipline in most classes remains a problem, hindering learning. These findings align with some educators' pressing concerns about learners not fully utilising the opportunities provided. These challenges may lead educators to rely on stricter disciplinary measures, offering a more direct approach to maintaining control in the classroom. In this case, educators may not effectively promote democratic principles in schools because they find themselves in situations that require strict disciplinary practices amid challenging classroom conditions.

Instruction in the classroom

Participants expressed similar views of educators' role in giving positive advice. S2L4 stated: *“Yes because some teachers like say come to school wearing a proper uniform, don’t come to school late. We must study”*. S1L6 exclaimed: *“It is good because it helps when learners do some works on their own. It shows that there’s progress on our class”*. This encourages autonomy with less reliance on educators. S1L3 said: *“Other subjects we do the same thing, we do not choose”*. So there is little room for negotiation. However, contrary views are that some educators seem to engage their learners as they are given a platform to participate. S2L4 gave an example and said: *“Yes because they ask questions after the lesson. They give us opportunity to participate in class...”*. We found that some learner participants in some schools are given room to interact with their educators, while other participants are not fully given or have limited space for negotiation. Learners' experiences may differ across classrooms and schools, resulting in variations in observable behaviours that affect learning. Such variations may also influence educators' beliefs about the extent to which democratic principles and values can be successfully incorporated into educational practices within a particular environment.

Findings from classroom observations

Educator-learner behaviour

Regarding the behaviour of participants in the study, it was revealed that not all educators in the two schools have the same culture of conduct. In both schools, the learners seemed to be on their best behavior and showed respect towards their educators. In most of the classes observed, there did not seem to be any form of ill-discipline from the learners, as everyone seemed to be paying attention. Some classes were more learner-centered, while some were teacher-centered. At its core, democratic education is grounded in integrating learners' voices into teaching and learning through direct, meaningful experience and participation ([Collins et al., 2019](#)). However, one classroom observation revealed events that contradicted democratic principles, leading to unfair practices. S1E2 Participant removed learners who had left resources, such as textbooks, at home from the classroom. According to the participant, these resources were given to every learner at the beginning of the year. These issues of leaving resources (textbooks), as highlighted by the participant, might indicate disciplinary problems in schools and affect effective teaching

and learning. It was observed that learner support materials, which remain a major challenge in South Africa, appear to negatively affect the infusion and incorporation of democratic principles in schools. Nonetheless, resources were distributed equitably among learners in this particular class; various contextual and individual factors may have hindered some learners from showing or effectively using these resources, thereby limiting their opportunities to engage with and benefit from democratic educational practices. The educator occupied a central position of power in the classroom and guided classroom management and the learning process. These actions go against South African laws and the CFS framework, which guarantee learners the right to learn.

Classroom assessment tasks

Regarding classroom assessments that educators had to give their learners, all educator participants gave their learners work to do either at home or during the class. From what was observed, many educator participants seem to use the “question and answer” style to assess knowledge that learners already had, including during teaching and learning. This promoted learner participation as they had to respond to the educators. Furthermore, it created a platform for learners to voice their opinions about the topic under discussion. Learners were not given any opportunities to negotiate or discuss any changes to the assessments.

Findings from document analysis

The CAPS document is abstracted from the National Curriculum Statement Grades R-12, which is created for each subject area. CAPS aims to produce learners who are not merely passive listeners but are active in identifying and solving problems using critical and creative thinking. Moreover, it aims to create learners who work in groups and communicate effectively. These are attributes that need to be practiced in the daily teaching, learning, and assessment in democratic South African schools. From the interviews, it is clear that certain principles are being practised by some educators. However, tensions between democratic education principles such as participation, collaboration, and respect envisioned within CAPS and their enactment remain a challenge. Democratic ideals are evident when educators incorporate learner-centered activities in the classroom, allowing learners to ask questions freely and participate in decision-making. Non-democratic ideals and practices were also evident when a few educators admitted that they still incorporate corporal punishment as a means of control to promote good behaviors in learners. In some cases, the methodology used for teaching and learning varies according to what the educator believes is the best approach to teaching the curriculum content in the classroom that day.

The Manifesto on Values, Education and Democracy is a policy document created in an effort to flesh out the South African ideals in the education arena. The document suggests how life in the classroom can incorporate democratic ideals and concepts of democracy, Ubuntu, and reconciliation by educators. Respect is an important precondition for communication, for teamwork, and productivity in schools. Some educators advocate integrating values into classroom teaching and learning, and these values are evident when

learners are engaged in the classroom. The findings are similar to [Ajayi \(2023\)](#), where the principles of the Manifesto and the curriculum highlight the potential for educators to inculcate values in their pedagogical practices. Yet, the perception that emerges from the study, despite the Manifesto's call for a democratic climate to prevail, has not been fully realised in the school environment. Other observed practices, such as telling learners to leave the classroom when they failed to bring their textbooks, indicate a lack of balance between policy enactment and practice. In this regard, equality was threatened, as some learners were set aside and prevented from acquiring the same knowledge as others. Also, educators perceived that most learners lacked the autonomy required to work independently and with others, as well as the capability to take responsibility for their own work. Moreover, some learners acknowledged disruptive classroom behavior, with some failing to engage with and complete the assigned activities. This indicates an uneven implementation of democratic practices across contexts.

Both schools had assessment policy documents intended to guide educators in testing and evaluating learners, indicating institutional recognition of the importance of structured assessment practices. The findings showed that educators provided the required assessment activities; however, the quality and democratic potential of these activities varied across classroom contexts. The policies encouraged educators to stimulate learners' thinking, promote questioning and discussion, and develop critical-thinking skills. These aims are consistent with assessment for learning, which emphasizes dialogue, constructive feedback, learner agency, and the active involvement of learners in evaluating and improving their learning ([Black & Wiliam, 2009](#); [Arnold, 2022](#)). Nevertheless, the findings revealed inconsistencies between policy intentions and classroom practices, including teacher-centred instruction, disciplinary challenges, and differences in educators' beliefs and pedagogical approaches. Such inconsistencies suggest that the existence of formal assessment policies does not necessarily guarantee their effective implementation. As [UNESCO \(n.d.\)](#) emphasizes, assessment should inform teaching decisions and support improvements in learning. Therefore, implementing democratic assessment requires more than establishing policy frameworks; it also demands consistent pedagogical practices that enable learners to express their views, engage in dialogue, and participate meaningfully in the assessment process. Overall, the findings indicate a gap between the intended objectives of assessment policies and their practical enactment, highlighting the need for sustained professional support and a stronger commitment to learner-centred and democratic assessment practices.

Democratic principles and values that educators promote into their classroom practice

The findings indicate that educators consistently emphasised equality, participation, respect, decision-making, and democratic rights, suggesting awareness of the democratic ideas embedded in CAPS. This aligns with the literature, which argues that democratic classrooms provide opportunities for learners to express their ideas, participate in decision-making, and develop a shared voice in learning ([Biamba et al., 2021](#); [Ajayi, 2023](#)). Educators' understanding of children's rights seems to be shaped by policy frameworks such as SASA, highlighting the influence of educational legislation on classroom practice.

However, educators also perceive principles as policy-prescribed guides for pedagogical conduct, suggesting that democratic education may be viewed more as a compliance requirement than as a transformative pedagogy. This finding supports [Mkhomi's \(2023\)](#) argument that policy systems influence everyday educational practices.

The study revealed that while educators frequently complained that learners were afforded too many rights, some did not acknowledge their own responsibilities to promote and protect those rights. For example, a similar study done by [Alshurman \(2015\)](#) found that democratic principles are often misused by learners and educators. In the present study, this perception is linked to educators' concerns that learner discipline is a challenge, which may result in the abuse of authority and, subsequently, the abuse of democratic principles. Furthermore, such practices may negatively affect inclusion, access to learning, and democratic educational practices. Learners being excluded from classroom instruction due to resource shortages, such as textbooks, may limit their participation in learning opportunities and undermine the principles of learner-centered education. This does not align with the CFS framework, which advocates for a school environment in which learners are placed at the center of the educational process ([UNICEF, 2012](#)).

Democratic principles and values promoted in teaching activities

It became evident that educators did not necessarily teach principles and values as a specific subject content. They identified teaching strategies that could promote democratic practices, depending on the lesson. Findings suggest that few educators valued learners' involvement, inclusion, and recognition within the classroom. This supports [Waheed et al. \(2024\)](#) and [Watson et al. \(2025\)](#), who argue that democratic ideals are created through opportunities for learners to express their views and engage in learning activities. While some learners reported being able to voice their misunderstandings during lessons, opportunities for participation reveal inconsistencies across all learners. Moreover, the advocacy of strict classroom control suggests a tension between promoting democratic practices and maintaining educators' authority.

Furthermore, most educators believed they facilitated learning through questioning techniques to encourage learners' responses, a finding similar to that of [Bafaneli and Setibi \(2015\)](#), who used an inquiry-based teaching method that encourages learners to ask questions and share ideas. However, this contrasts with opinions that a democratic classroom goes beyond question-and-answer to build citizens who are conscious of democratic principles embedded in the country's Constitution ([Mugambi, 2022](#)). Consequently, educators' understanding of facilitation may be limited, focusing primarily on learners' responses rather than collaborative learning and shared authority.

The findings suggest that democratic principles are promoted not solely through the formal curriculum but also through elements of hidden curriculum. Educators addressed social issues that form part of their daily lives, such as cultural differences and xenophobia, encouraging learners to respect and care for others regardless of their backgrounds. The emphasis on respect and care for others recognises the need for transforming our society through compassion. This concurs with the SR approach, where focus on curricula endorses the creation of a new social transformation. However, [Passenz's \(2023\)](#) findings

that educators and learners hold different understandings of values in education suggest that values may not be interpreted the same way.

The educators acknowledged that democratic principles are not consistently upheld in practice, implying a gap between policy expectations and classroom realities. Even though corporal punishment is not allowed, it is still used in some schools, showing the persistence of an authoritative approach to discipline. Educators may justify that strict discipline is necessary to maintain order, ensure learning, and uphold traditional views of educators as authority figures. These findings suggest that democratic practices may be limited through prioritising control and obedience over participation and mutual respect. This aligns with [Tuhuteru \(2023\)](#), who identify authoritarian management as a significant barrier to democratic education. Additionally, the continued use of corporal punishment raises deep concerns about the enactment of democratic practices in schools and its implications for learners' rights and dignity. The constant use of this practice despite its ban since 1996 suggests that policy reform alone may not be enough to transform entrenched school practices ([Heekes et al., 2022](#)).

Furthermore, these findings appear to contrast with the Manifesto, which attests to educators' role in cultivating good moral values, such as respect and collaboration, to combat disciplinary issues in the classroom. As the Manifesto envisages promoting democratic principles through everyday educational practices, the findings suggest that educators' adoption of democratic classroom management is inconsistent. This indicates a gap between the democratic ideals advocated in policy and their implementation in practice. The findings further suggest that educators' responses to challenges encountered in their day-to-day classroom activities may influence the extent to which democratic principles are enacted during lessons, leading to variation in the promotion of democratic practices across classrooms.

Democratic principles and values merging in learning activities

The findings suggest that involving learners in discussions creates a shift that contributes to learner-centered education as envisaged by the Manifesto. Question-and-answer style encourages participation in the learning process. Furthermore, some educators indicated that they act as role models, which may foster learners' responsibility and confidence. These practices reflect an open society where respect, equality, and responsibility are brought to life in the classroom ([Koopman & Laubscher, 2022](#)). The findings further suggest opportunities for learners' discussion and expression ([Alshurman, 2015](#)). Thus, involving learners may promote inclusivity and equal opportunities, a principle consistent with CFS and SR.

Although some educators promoted classroom interaction, learner influence remained limited. Participation was largely restricted to responding to educators' questions, suggesting that classroom dialogue often remained teacher-controlled rather than supporting meaningful learner agency ([Thornberg, 2010](#); [Emanuelsson & Sahlström, 2008](#)). Democratic participation requires more than opportunities to speak; it also involves learners expressing their views, influencing learning processes, and engaging in collaborative decision-making ([Leach, 2018](#); [Heid et al., 2023](#)). However, research

indicates that student voice and shared decision-making remain limited in many classroom settings (Conner et al., 2024). The findings also suggest that difficulties in implementing democratic learning activities may reinforce teacher-centred instruction and restrictive disciplinary practices. These tensions highlight the challenge of balancing teacher authority with learner agency and meaningful participation (Rajala et al., 2016).

Furthermore, inconsistencies were evident in educators' practices, including the exclusion of learners, corporal punishment, and the maintenance of dominance, which contradicted the advocated principles of inclusivity and learner-centeredness. These findings are consistent with Bafaneli and Setibi's (2015) study, which found that learners were excluded from classrooms due to misbehavior, suggesting that such practices may persist in school contexts. Similarly, Dzavo et al. (2021) noted the continued use of authoritative teaching styles. Thus, these findings indicate that the implementation of democratic principles and values was inconsistent across classrooms, revealing a gap between the democratic ideal promoted by educators and their classroom practices.

Democratic principles and values promoted and infused into assessment tasks

Findings reveal that most educator participants view assessment as merely as a tool for assessing what learners have been taught in the classroom. This aligns with CAPS, which acknowledges that completing tasks individually or in groups is common. Similar to Bidari's (2025) findings, group work is very instrumental in promoting democratic principles. The findings are like this study, as participation by learners is highly promoted through either individual work to enable autonomy or group work. Findings reveal that assessment was used to provide constructive feedback aimed at upholding social justice, human dignity, and moral judgement, including encouraging respect for others and addressing social issues such as xenophobia. Educators provided detailed, holistic feedback to promote critical thinking. In this regard, this aligns with the vision articulated in CAPS and the Manifesto, which advocate the development of learners grounded in social justice and human dignity.

However, observations and participants' quotations indicated that these democratic ideals were not substantially enacted during the assessment process. While assessment was used to communicate values through feedback, learners were not actively involved in decision-making. This contrasts with Nieminen and Ketonen's (2024) view that learners actively participate in knowledge creation and decision-making, thereby fostering agency and assessment participation. Instead, assessment remained largely under educators' control, with little evidence of shared responsibility between educators and learners. As a result, traditional assessment practices measure learners' performance, such as grading, accountability, and standardisation, whereas democratic assessment provides learners with more active participation in knowledge creation, implementation, and decision-making, thereby fostering agency (Ismael, 2024). Contrary to Larsen's (2024) conception, democratic education requires learners to construct their own voices through classroom activities. Findings suggest that despite advocating democratic ideals, inconsistencies in educators' commitment and implementation during assessment limit learners' opportunities to experience fairness, participation, and democratic engagement.

Hindrance of democratic principles and values

The findings reveal that educators faced several challenges in incorporating democratic principles and values in the classroom practice. One of the most prominent challenges was educators' perception of what they loosely referred to as “child rights”, which some believed undermined adult authority, leaving them feeling “powerless” in managing learner behavior. These findings suggest that educators' beliefs and perceptions may be characterized by misconceptions or inconsistent interpretations of democratic practices. Instead of viewing learners' rights and educators' authority as complementary, some educators appeared to perceive them as competing interests. These findings concur with [Mpofu and Machingauta \(2024\)](#), who found that some learners misuse these rights, creating challenges for educators in determining appropriate teaching and learning strategies. Suggesting that the implementation of democratic principles may lead to discipline problems in the classroom. Furthermore, learner participants are aware of the presence of disruptive behaviours, including noise-making by some learners. This suggests that disciplinary challenges are a significant feature of the classroom environment and may interfere with effective teaching and learning. The findings reveal that classroom discipline plays a significant role in shaping educators' ability to constantly implement democratic principles and values.

CONCLUSION

The study examined how selected schools in Limpopo Province, South Africa, foster democratic principles in classroom practice. The findings revealed that although some educators promoted participation, inclusion, equality, and learner development, others continued to employ authoritarian and undemocratic practices. Key challenges included corporal punishment, learner exclusion, resistance to learners' rights, inconsistencies between educators' reports and learners' experiences, and inadequate resources. Despite the integration of democratic principles into the national curriculum, these principles were not consistently translated into classroom practice. The findings highlight the need for professional development to strengthen educators' capacity to implement democratic pedagogies, effective discipline strategies that respect learners' rights, and adequate resources to create inclusive and supportive learning environments.

This study identified significant implications for promoting democratic principles in rural secondary schools. The findings suggest that educators often encounter challenges in maintaining a balanced democratic atmosphere due to perceptions of rights, resource constraints, and ongoing discipline difficulties. Furthermore, the study found that educators' beliefs and views influence how they respond to classroom situations, which, in turn, affects the extent to which democratic principles are implemented in practice. These findings emphasise the critical need for workshops on classroom management and how values can be positively integrated to manage discipline. Also, educators need to be empowered to interpret the curriculum so that democratic principles can be meaningfully integrated into teaching and learning. In addition, intervention strategies should address both educators' attitudes toward corporal punishment and learners' behaviors in schools, as well as recognising the role of the broader community. The study identified challenges

associated with limited resources and further suggested that schools should engage proactively with the Department of Education through ongoing requests and follow-up. Therefore, the findings call for rural secondary schools to strengthen resource provision, invest in continuous professional development, and advocate for policy changes that support the effective integration of democratic practices into classroom discipline.

Acknowledgments

The authors thank the Turfloop Research Ethics Committee, the Limpopo Provincial Department of Education, all research participants, Professor Kubayi for editorial assistance, and the anonymous reviewers for their valuable feedback.

Author Contributions

Habasisa Molise, Xitshembiso Petunia Mugari, and Joel Mamabolo contributed to the study and manuscript preparation. All authors approved the final manuscript and accepted accountability for its content.

Funding

This study was conducted without financial support from external funding agencies.

Conflict of Interest

The authors declare that they have no competing interests that could have influenced the conduct, analysis, or reporting of this research.

Data Availability Statement

The data supporting the findings of this study may be obtained from the corresponding author upon reasonable request, subject to applicable ethical and confidentiality requirements.

Declaration of Generative AI and AI-Assisted Technologies

The authors declare the use of generative AI and AI-assisted technologies in the preparation of this manuscript, where applicable. The authors take full responsibility for the accuracy, originality, integrity, and final content of the manuscript and remain accountable for all aspects of the work.

Ethical Approval and Informed Consent

Ethical approval was granted by the University of Limpopo's Turfloop Research Ethics Committee (TREC/77/2019). Permission was obtained from the relevant education authorities and participating school principals. Informed consent was secured from educators, learners, and parents or guardians, as applicable. Participation was voluntary, and confidentiality and anonymity were maintained through pseudonyms and coding (E, L, S1, and S2).

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