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Rethinking Education 4 Inclusive Development

Examining Challenges and Opportunities for Effective Democratic Management Practices in University Classrooms

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Abstract: The study examines the challenges and opportunities in embedding democratic management practices in university classrooms. Grounded in the theoretical framework of Critical Pedagogy, as advocated by Paulo Freire, and utilising a transformative paradigm within a participatory research design, the study conducted semi-structured interviews with 15 participants, including 10 student teachers and 5 lecturers from a selected university in the Eastern Cape, South Africa. Thematic analysis was employed to analyse the data. The findings reveal significant challenges to the adoption of democratic practices, such as entrenched traditional teaching methods and a lack of institutional support and resources. However, the study also highlights the transformative potential of democratic practices in fostering critical thinking, personal growth, and a more inclusive educational environment. In conclusion, the study emphasises the need to reassess and revamp educational policies and practices to support the implementation of democratic principles in classroom management. It calls for a comprehensive approach that includes professional development for lecturers, curriculum redesign, and the provision of sufficient resources to overcome the identified challenges and leverage the opportunities for creating a more engaging, inclusive, and empowering learning experience for all students.

Keywords: Classrooms management, democratic practices, university classrooms, challenges and opportunities.

1. Introduction

The quality of educational frameworks worldwide, including those in South Africa, depends heavily on the proficiency and professionalism of teachers. Teachers at all levels are the cornerstone of the educational environment. It is crucial for a system that aims to foster enlightened and profound knowledge to create a democratic atmosphere that encourages open student interactions. Democratic approaches in classrooms are essential for promoting student participation, inclusivity, equitable collaboration, and critical thinking. These approaches allow for a thorough examination of assumptions from diverse perspectives and encourage active student engagement. These characteristics are closely connected to the policies and procedures that shape teacher education in the country and its academic institutions. Therefore, it is important to consider the regulatory paradigms, cultural ethos, and pedagogical practices that are integral to teacher education in universities (Mcube, 2018).

This perspective aligns with the proposition that the process of teacher education should develop teachers who are intrinsically motivated, conscientious, and skilled. They should possess the intellectual capacity and democratic values necessary for effective classroom management and adaptability in changing educational landscapes (Department of Education, 2002; Sentürk & Oyman, 2014). However, despite these ambitious goals, recent studies conducted in South Africa by Omodan and Ige (2021) highlight the apparent inability of universities to effectively promote democratised educational interactions and inclusive student participation. This raises concerns about the

achievement of truly democratic and inclusive learning environments in many teacher education institutions.

International research indicates that teacher education programmes worldwide face similar challenges, suggesting a widespread inadequacy in preparing teachers to effectively address the diverse needs of their students. In the United States, one longstanding critique is the perceived lack of emphasis on democratic practices within teacher education programmes. Morrison (2008) highlights the concern that these programmes do not foster equitable and inclusive learning environments that encourage active student participation. This deficiency negatively affects student learning and engagement, as well as teacher morale (Edwards, 2010). Similar challenge was observed in China, where issues related to identity hinder the establishment of democratic learning spaces. Sung (2020) describes the ongoing struggle in the Republic of China to establish a distinct Taiwanese identity and maintain autonomy from the prevailing Chinese historical narrative. This struggle is prominently displayed in debates that highlight the absence of democratic consciousness among educators, reflecting a wider challenge in reconciling national identity with principles and practices in education.

In Turkey, the hindrance to democratic practices within university classrooms is clearly evident. Numerous studies attribute the decline in critical engagement to the increasing authoritarian tendencies in societal structures and strict government restrictions on differing viewpoints (Esen & Gumuscu, 2021). These societal and political dynamics have significant impacts on educational environments and result in the intimidation of lecturers and students who express dissenting opinions, particularly those critical of government policies and practices (Taştan, Ördek, and Öz, 2020; Hünler, 2022). This pervasive atmosphere of constraint and repression has led to an academic landscape where students are exposed to a limited range of democratic management perspectives and are rarely prompted to critically scrutinise and reflect on the complex issues affecting their nation. Therefore, the lack of dynamic and diverse dialogues within the classroom is not only a symptom of external authoritarianism but also a significant obstacle to the development of analytical and democratic thinking among future contributors to Turkey's societal and political fabric.

From a continental perspective, the historical military dictatorships in West African nations like Ghana, Gambia, and Nigeria have had a significant impact on students' rights and freedom of speech (Agyemang, 2012). Enu and Eba (2014) support this view and advocate for a comprehensive reassessment of teaching methodologies in Nigeria. They emphasise the need for student-teachers to develop democratic discernment in order to instil democratic practices during instructional sessions.

In a South African context, student-teachers have reflected on a substantial democratic deficit in classroom activities, as elucidated by Omodan and Ige (2021). This deficit is characterised by a predominantly one-way transfer of knowledge, with teachers or lecturers being the sole providers. Echoing this democratic gap, de Jager (2019a) previously highlighted the lack of critical thinking and cooperative abilities among South African students, which hinders their engagement in reflective, student-centred learning. Lawrence and Maphalala (2021) further support this notion, arguing that a dedicated focus on democracy and social justice within university classrooms in South Africa is essential. The absence of such a focus poses a significant obstacle to achieving democratic education and has adverse effects on broader societal and governance structures.

While several solutions have been proposed to address the lack of democratic practices in educational settings, including practical guides for teachers (Davids & Waghid, 2012), improvements in teacher training and professional development (Mashau et al., 2016), and the promotion of experiential learning among student-teachers (de Jager, 2019b), the underlying issue remains unresolved. Observations reveal that many lecturers continue to adopt authoritarian and traditional classroom management styles. This ongoing problem can be attributed to a lack of focus in existing research on the crucial stage of student-teacher training at universities, where the seeds of democratic

management practices need to be sown and nurtured. Previous interventions have largely overlooked this foundational phase, neglecting the cultivation of democratic ethos and practices in the early stages of teachers' professional journeys. This study, therefore, examines the challenges and opportunities in embedding democratic management practices in university classrooms. Focusing on this uncharted territory, the research seeks to uncover transformative strategies that can fundamentally change the trajectory of classroom management paradigms, promoting democratic principles and practices from the outset of teacher education.

1.1 Research objectives

This research is underpinned by two objectives aimed at unravelling the complexities inherent in adopting democratic management practices within university classrooms:

- Identify the challenges of implementing democratic management practices in university classrooms.
- Evaluate the opportunities that effective democratic management practices present in enhancing learning experiences in university classrooms.

The first objective is to examine the challenges associated with implementing democratic management practices in academic settings. This includes analysing resistance to participatory learning, constraints arising from existing institutional structures, and limitations due to a lack of resources and capabilities. The aim is to identify the barriers that prevent the use of democratic pedagogies and interactions in university classrooms. The second objective is to evaluate the opportunities provided by effective democratic management practices in enhancing learning experiences within university environments. This involves exploring the role of participatory learning in promoting critical thinking and civic engagement, identifying ways to foster inclusive and equitable learning atmospheres, and examining the impact of democratic approaches on academic outcomes and student satisfaction. These objectives seek to investigate the challenges and opportunities involved in embedding democratic management practices in university classrooms and provide a framework for future academic interventions and enhancements.

2. Theoretical Framework

Critical Pedagogy, initially proposed by Paulo Freire in his influential work *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (Freire, 1970), serves as the fundamental theory underpinning this study. According to Freire, education is intrinsically political and can either liberate or oppress individuals. Critical Pedagogy aims to disrupt traditional pedagogical structures that reinforce societal inequalities. Instead, it seeks to empower students by cultivating their critical consciousness to question, challenge, and transform societal norms and power dynamics (Erevelles, 2000). This transformative educational approach highlights the importance of dialogue, reflection, and participatory learning, with the intention of creating an educational environment in which learners actively construct knowledge rather than passively receive information (Freire, 1970; Giroux, 2011). By advocating for an egalitarian and interactive learning atmosphere, Critical Pedagogy emphasises the significant role that teachers and lecturers play in fostering democratic principles within the learning process. It promotes a sense of agency, autonomy, and critical reflection among students.

In the context of this study, Critical Pedagogy provides a robust framework for analysing and interpreting the efficacy of democratic management practices in university classrooms. Through the application of this theory's principles, the study aims to investigate how classroom management practices can either challenge or perpetuate existing power structures and inequalities within educational institutions. The lens of Critical Pedagogy enables a detailed examination of the dynamics between lecturers and students, scrutinising whether current practices foster critical inquiry, reflective dialogue, and participatory learning (McLaren, 2003). Therefore, this theoretical framework facilitates a nuanced understanding of the democratic foundations of classroom

interactions and engagements, offering insights into the pedagogical transformations necessary for the realisation of an emancipatory, democratic educational paradigm.

Critical Pedagogy has significant relevance in the promotion of democratic classroom management. It allows pre-service teachers to critically analyse and question the hierarchical structures that have traditionally existed in educational settings. By creating a learning environment where authority is decentralised and participatory dialogue is encouraged, students are given the opportunity to engage critically with the subject matter and contribute to the learning process (Freire, 1970). This approach is essential for fostering a sense of shared responsibility and collective learning, both of which are crucial components in shaping classrooms that adhere to democratic principles. Additionally, this theory promotes an inclusive environment that recognises and incorporates diverse perspectives and voices. By employing this critical teaching method, obstacles to equitable participation in the classroom can be dismantled, ensuring that the learning process is both inclusive and empowering (Giroux, 2011). It is imperative that pre-service teachers understand and apply these democratic and egalitarian principles in order to cultivate professional competencies that align with contemporary educational needs and values.

From an academic perspective, the adoption of Critical Pedagogy within teacher education programmes has a profound impact on the professional development of pre-service teachers as they transition into the workforce. Incorporating this theoretical framework equips aspiring teachers with the necessary skills and knowledge to foster critical thinking, reflection, and democratic engagement in their future classrooms (Giroux, 2010). Furthermore, it shapes their pedagogical approaches to be more student-centred, creating an environment that encourages active participation, collaboration, and ongoing dialogue — all essential for meaningful learning experiences. These experiences, which are rooted in democratic practices, are integral in preparing pre-service teachers to navigate the diverse and ever-changing educational landscapes they will encounter. Ultimately, this promotes adaptability, continuous learning, and a commitment to social justice and educational equity (McLaren, 2003). Therefore, it is crucial to incorporate principles of Critical Pedagogy into the teacher education curriculum to align professional development with the evolving needs and expectations of modern education.

Critical Pedagogy is a foundational theoretical framework for this study due to its ability to address the objectives in a clear and comprehensive manner. First, it provides a robust perspective for identifying the challenges associated with implementing democratic management practices in university classrooms. By delving into power dynamics, structural inequalities, and hierarchical norms, we gain a deeper understanding of the barriers that may hinder the realisation of democratic principles in educational settings (Freire, 1970; Darder et al., 2023). Moreover, this framework illuminates the areas that necessitate transformative interventions in order to foster more participatory, inclusive, and egalitarian learning environments.

Additionally, critical pedagogy facilitates a thorough evaluation of the opportunities presented by democratic management practices to enhance learning experiences. It highlights the potential of these practices to establish environments characterised by critical reflection, participatory dialogue, and mutual respect. These attributes contribute significantly to the development of student-centred, inclusive, and reflective learning experiences (Giroux, 2004; McLaren, 2015). By considering the implications of democratic practices on student engagement, knowledge construction, and critical thinking, this framework aligns the investigative process with the intricate complexities involved in educational democratisation.

3. Methodology

This study is rooted in the transformative research paradigm, which aims to bring about transformative shifts in teaching and learning. The ontological foundation of this paradigm involves

examining the interaction of social and historical realities, providing a platform to critically analyse and challenge existing hegemonies in educational contexts (Chilisa, 2019). This paradigm is closely connected to Critical Pedagogy, which seeks to dismantle established teaching and learning hegemonies to facilitate transformative changes in education. Epistemologically, the transformative paradigm emphasises the importance of building trustful relationships between the researcher and the participants (Mertens, 2019). It promotes inclusive dialogues and reflections to uncover diverse perceptions of reality and power dynamics. The emphasis on inclusive knowledge generation and exploration of power relations inherent in this paradigm leads to the adoption of Participatory Research (PR) as the preferred research design. This aligns with the study's commitment to facilitating egalitarian knowledge co-construction and transformative insights to address the challenges of democratic management practices in university classrooms.

Positioning this study within a qualitative research approach is crucial for exploring democratic practices in teacher education classrooms. A qualitative research approach focuses on exploring individuals' experiences, understandings, and interpretations in their natural settings, giving importance to the meanings and contexts that shape these phenomena (Yilmaz, 2013). Given the study's aim to examine the challenges and opportunities involved in embedding democratic management practices in university classrooms, the qualitative approach provides a comprehensive framework to investigate the lived experiences and complex dynamics of the participants. This approach is supported by the use of inductive reasoning, which allows for the generation of theories and descriptions of phenomena, as suggested by Creswell and Poth (2016). It offers a holistic approach to interpreting the multifaceted nature of democratic practices in educational settings. The adoption of qualitative methodologies is vital for acquiring detailed, contextual insights that enable a thorough exploration of the depth and breadth of democratic practices within teacher education classrooms. This ensures a comprehensive understanding of the underlying phenomena (Almalki, 2016).

Adopting Participatory Research (PR) as the research design for this study is essential. It facilitates a nuanced exploration of the internal practices and processes within the teacher education process (MacDonald, 2012), specifically within the classroom. This design is particularly important as it promotes equality and collaboration between the researcher and the participants, empowering them to actively address the identified issues (Bergold & Thomas, 2012; Pain & Francis, 2003; Omodan et al., 2019). The collaborative dynamics inherent in PR are instrumental in mitigating power disparities between lecturers and student-teachers. This fosters an environment where participants are encouraged to actively transform their social realities (Pain & Francis, 2003). This inclusive and collaborative approach not only highlights the relevance of PR in addressing the complexities of the educational context but also emphasises its role in facilitating transformative solutions through collaborative knowledge construction between lecturers and students. This allows for a comprehensive and shared understanding of democratic practices in teacher education classrooms (MacDonald, 2012).

3.1 Method of data collection

This study employs semi-structured interviews to gather detailed information from participants, including both students and university lecturers. Semi-structured interviews are deemed suitable as they create an environment where participants can freely share more information about the study's focal issues (Baumbusch, 2010). This method closely aligns with the principles of Participatory Research (PR), which promote participant collaboration and facilitate a collective exploration of challenges within institutions. Additionally, it allows for the development of practical solutions through collaboration (Omodan & Dastile, 2023). This approach not only fosters a deeper understanding of the participants' individual perspectives but also enhances the collaborative nature of the research, enabling a comprehensive exploration of the subject matter.

3.2 Participants and Selection of Participants

This study included a participant pool of 15 individuals, comprising 10 student-teachers and 5 lecturers from a selected university in the Eastern Cape province of South Africa. The student-teachers were all third-year students in the Faculty of Education, while the lecturers had at least two years of teaching experience at the university level. Participants were chosen using the Convenient Participant Selection Technique, a method known for its efficiency and accessibility. This approach facilitates the quick and easy recruitment of subjects, which is particularly beneficial due to its time-saving nature (Etikan, Musa, & Alkassim, 2016; Alvi, 2016).

3.3 Method of data analysis

In this research, thematic analysis was employed to examine the data obtained from observations and interviews. Thematic analysis is a qualitative analytical method that plays a crucial role in identifying, analysing, and interpreting patterns within the data. It helps to uncover recurring themes that address the research questions and objectives (Omodan, 2024). The themes or patterns identified in the data provide valuable insights relevant to the research questions and objectives, enabling a detailed understanding of the subject matter. Guest et al. (2011) state that this method is versatile and adaptable, making it suitable for various data sources, including interviews. Furthermore, this study followed the six procedural steps for thematic analysis outlined by Braun and Clarke (2006), which include becoming familiar with the data, coding the data, identifying themes, reviewing themes, naming themes, and interpreting and synthesising the themes. This approach ensures a careful and comprehensive interpretation of the interview data.

3.4 Ethical considerations

In accordance with the ethical protocol established by the University of the Free State, a comprehensive set of measures was implemented to safeguard the well-being of all study participants. Participation in the study was entirely voluntary, granting individuals the freedom to choose whether or not to participate and allowing them to withdraw at any time they deemed necessary. A detailed consent form was distributed to the participants, who were required to sign it to provide informed consent. This form meticulously outlined the study procedures, potential risks, and the rights of the participants, as a thorough understanding of these elements is crucial before deciding to participate in any research endeavour. The confidentiality and privacy of the participants were strictly maintained in accordance with the ethical standards outlined by Okeke, Omodan, and Dube (2022). Furthermore, permission from the relevant university, acting as a gatekeeper, was obtained to further legitimatise the research process. To ensure the protection of the participants' identities, pseudonyms such as L1, L2, and L3 were assigned to the lecturers, while S1, S2, S3, etc., were given to the students.

4. Presentation and Analysis of Data

This section presents and analyses data that align with the study's objectives. Each objective corresponds to a theme, which is divided into two sub-themes. Objective one focuses on identifying the challenges of implementing effective democratic management practices in university classrooms, while objective two aims to evaluate the opportunities that these practices provide for enhancing learning experiences. Please refer to the table below.

Table 1: Thematic representation of data analysis

Objectives	Themes
Identify the challenges of implementing democratic management practices in university classrooms.	• Resistance to Participatory Learning Due to Traditional Teaching Methods

	• Institutional Constraints and Lack of Resources
Explain the opportunities that democratic management practices present in enhancing learning experiences in university classrooms.	• Personal and Professional Development
	• Enhanced Learning Environment and Inclusivity

4.1 Objective 1, theme 1: Resistance to participatory learning due to traditional methods

As indicated by the data collected from the participants, one of the challenges to implementing effective democratic management practices in university classrooms is resistance to participatory learning due to the traditional teaching methods used in these settings. This is evidenced by the following transcripts from participants:

> S1: *"In my experience, the main challenge has been the traditional lecture style that dominates most classes, leaving little room for student participation not to talk of dialogue."*

> L1: *"Balancing deep engagement with large class sizes is a constant struggle, limiting the opportunity for individual interaction. This is the case in most of our classes."*

> S2: *"Most lecturers, mostly the part-time ones, seem to prefer delivering long lectures without engaging with students, which stifles open discussion and critical thinking."*

> S7: *"Sometimes you watch some online lecturers on YouTube, but when you get to class, you are taught with outdated teaching methods that don't encourage interaction among us. To me, this a barrier to democratic practices in the classroom."*

> S4: *"I have noticed a lack of encouragement for us as students to ask questions or challenge ideas, which is crucial for us to feel among the knowledge process."*

> L3: *"Though, this is not our fault because to foster a democratic classroom requires a shift in mindset that's hard to achieve in a curriculum that's rigid and exam focused."*

> S5: *"The classroom atmosphere is often not conducive to participatory learning; it feels like there's an invisible barrier between students and lecturers because we are even afraid sometimes to talk to the lecturers."*

> L8: *"Students' reluctance to engage critically with content is often compounded by their previous educational experiences, which valued rote over reflection."*

> S10: *"From what I've seen, the educational system still heavily favours a top-down approach to teaching, which limits our engagement."*

> L4: *"Creating an environment where every student feels comfortable to speak up is challenging, especially in diverse classrooms where students protest day and night in order to get away with their laziness."*

The statements made by the participants clearly highlight a significant challenge in implementing effective democratic management practices within university classrooms. This challenge is the resistance to participatory learning, which is largely attributed to the persistence of traditional teaching methods. Participants' testimonies reveal a widespread reliance on lecture-based instruction, prioritising the delivery of information over interactive learning. As a result, opportunities for student participation and dialogue are minimised. Both students and lecturers acknowledge this traditional approach, noting that large class sizes, lengthy lectures preferred by part-time lecturers, and outdated teaching methods create an environment that hinders open discussion and critical thinking. The observations made by students S1, S2, S4, S5, S7, and S10, along with insights from lecturers L1, L3, and L4, underscore a prevalent educational model that undervalues student engagement and critical inquiry. Consequently, this model fosters an

atmosphere where students often feel disconnected from the learning process and are hesitant to challenge or contribute to discussions.

Furthermore, the feedback received points to systemic issues within university classrooms that impede the adoption of more democratic and participatory teaching practices. These issues include inflexible curricula and assessment methods focused on exams. Lecturer L3's admission that the lack of a democratic classroom is not solely the fault of lecturers but is also influenced by curricular constraints suggests that achieving transformative change requires more than just adjustments to pedagogy; it necessitates a comprehensive shift in educational philosophy and structure. Additionally, the mention of students' previous educational backgrounds, which may have emphasised rote learning over critical engagement (as noted by L8), further complicates efforts to foster a more inclusive and interactive learning environment. The participants' reluctance to participate, fear of engaging with lecturers, and perception of a top-down teaching approach highlight the multifaceted barriers to realising truly democratic classroom practices. This analysis indicates an urgent need for educational reform that not only reevaluates teaching methods but also addresses the broader pedagogical and institutional frameworks that shape learning experiences in universities.

4.2 Objective 1 theme 2: Institutional constraints and lack of resources

The data collected from the participant indicates that one of the challenges to implementing effective democratic management practices in university classrooms is the presence of institutional constraints and a lack of resources. This is evident in the following transcripts from participants:

> *S3: "Another major challenge is the large class sizes, which make it difficult for any meaningful interaction between us and the lecturers."*
>
> *L2: " Even naturally, the absence of necessary technological resources makes it difficult for me to implement diverse teaching strategies in classrooms. Sometimes the projector is not available, and sometimes, you cannot find a socket to connect things."*
>
> *S5: "In our classrooms, it is obvious that there are not enough resources, which may have hindered our lecturers; you know we can not always blame them. It appears there is no support for implementing more interactive teaching methods."*
>
> *L3: "The concept of democratic teaching is not something that you can know as a result of being a lecturer; I think without adequate training in democratic teaching methods, many of us will be left to navigate these waters blindly."*
>
> *S9: "Yeah, even the curriculum structure doesn't leave much space for innovative teaching practices that foster democracy in the classroom. This is not only true in universities but also in schools. You have too much to attend to, and you must cover it all."*
>
> *L5: "As I said earlier, the major issue here is resource constraints, especially in previously disadvantaged universities like ours, severely limit our capacity to create interactive and engaging learning environments."*
>
> *L4: "You don't know, at times, when you are teaching too many modules, the pressure to cover the syllabus will shorten your plan to implement engaging practices within limited time frames."*
>
> *L1: "The lack of institutional support for innovative pedagogies often means defaulting to traditional lecture methods."*

The data highlights a significant obstacle to the adoption of democratic management practices in education: institutional constraints and limited resources. Both students and lecturers express various challenges posed by these constraints, including large class sizes that hinder interactive learning and a lack of technological resources and support for innovative teaching strategies. For

example, S3 and S5 emphasise how large classes and insufficient resources directly impact the quality of interaction between students and lecturers. Meanwhile, L2 and L5 express frustration over the logistical hurdles that prevent the implementation of diverse teaching methodologies. These constraints are not only logistical but also pedagogical. L3 points out the deficiency in training for democratic teaching methods, indicating a gap in professional development that leaves lecturers ill-equipped to foster participatory classrooms. Additionally, S9 notes that the inflexibility of the curriculum highlights a systemic issue within educational institutions that prioritise material coverage over the quality of learning experiences, further limiting opportunities for democratic engagement.

Furthermore, the participants' reflections reveal a deeper underlying issue: a pervasive lack of institutional support for pedagogical innovation. L1 identifies this as a significant factor that leads lecturers to rely on traditional, lecture-based teaching methods. L4 corroborates this observation by mentioning the pressure to cover extensive syllabi as a deterrent to engaging teaching practices. These institutional and resource-related challenges are even more pronounced in contexts of previously disadvantaged universities, where resource scarcity is particularly acute, as mentioned by L5. This analysis highlights the complex interplay of institutional, resource, and cultural factors that collectively hinder the realisation of democratic and participatory learning environments in higher education. Addressing these challenges requires a comprehensive approach that involves not only infrastructure and resource improvements but also cultural and systemic changes within educational institutions to support and value democratic pedagogies.

4.3 Objective 2, theme 1: Personal and professional development

Based on the data collected, one of the inherent opportunities in effective democratic management practices is the enhancement of personal and professional development, as presented by the participants below:

> S1: "*I think when teaching and learning is democratic, it could make learning more interactive, where every student's opinion is valued. Also, it will enhance our friendship and engagement.*"

> L1: "*Speaking as a professional now, when this is implemented, it can strongly enhance critical thinking and a deeper exploration of topics, leading to more insightful discussions.*"

> S3: "*When we as students are encouraged to participate actively, it can boost confidence and public speaking skills in us and also help us to become the good teachers we always want to be.*"

> S4: "*I always love to have a say everywhere I find myself, so having a say in the learning process makes me feel more relevant. And I am sure I am not the only one feeling this*"

> S5: "*Well, what I know is when there is a level of friendship between lecturers and us, it brings opportunities to lead discussions without feeling timid and also can prepare us for leadership roles in our future careers when we get a job.*"

> S7: "*According to what you said about democratic classrooms, this kind of practice in classrooms will let me have more respectful and understanding interactions with other students, most especially those with diverse backgrounds.*"

The data strongly supports the benefits of effective democratic management practices in university classrooms for personal and professional development. Participants, including students and lecturers, unanimously emphasise the various growth opportunities that this approach can offer. S1 and S5 highlight the role of democratic teaching in increasing interactivity and fostering camaraderie among students, which can enhance their social skills and prepare them for future leadership roles. L1 provides a professional perspective, emphasising the academic benefits such as improved critical

thinking skills and the ability to delve deeper into topics, leading to more insightful classroom discussions. Additionally, S3 and S4 discuss the personal gains from active participation, such as increased confidence, improved public speaking skills, and a stronger sense of relevance and autonomy in their learning journey. S7 extends this idea to social interactions, noting that democratic classrooms can promote more respectful and understanding exchanges among students from diverse backgrounds. Overall, these insights highlight the transformative potential of democratic management practices in education, suggesting that such approaches not only enhance academic learning but also equip students with crucial life and professional skills.

4.4 Objective 2, theme 2: Enhanced learning environment and inclusivity

Based on the data collected, another opportunity inherent in effective democratic management practices is the enhancement of the learning environment and inclusivity, as presented by the participants below:

> *S2: "In my understanding, a democratic classroom is an opportunity and such opportunities for group discussions and debates can really help us understand complex subjects or assignments because we will learn a lot."*

> *L2: "Yeah, this will surely foster a sense of responsibility and autonomy among students and will also make them understand and prepare them for real-world challenges, not only in their future workplace but in all endeavours."*

> *L3: "It is definitely the best method for more inclusive classroom activities, where diverse perspectives enrich learning experiences."*

> *L4: "In my own opinion, this practice can lead to innovative problem-solving as students learn to approach issues from multiple angles from multiple perspectives."*

> *L5: "I used to advise my colleagues to listen to their students because by valuing student's input, we can create a more engaged and motivated learning community."*

> *S9: "I used to consult my students before taking some vital decisions even to make learning more aligned with students' interests."*

> *S7: "Through democratic practices, classrooms can become spaces where every voice matters because we need a sense of belonging."*

The data clearly show that effective democratic management practices offer a significant opportunity to enhance the learning environment and foster inclusivity. Both students and lecturers agree that facilitating group discussions and debates is essential for dissecting complex subjects and deepening students' understanding. L2 and L3 stress that these democratic practices also cultivate a sense of responsibility and autonomy among students, preparing them for real-world challenges by encouraging the exploration of diverse perspectives. As noted by L3 and L5, this leads to more inclusive classroom dynamics where every student's viewpoint is considered valuable. Additionally, L4 highlights the focus on innovative problem-solving strategies, demonstrating the potential for democratic management practices to inspire creativity and a multifaceted approach to learning and problem-solving. The student contributions, particularly from S2, S7, and S9, affirm the benefits of these practices, including enhanced engagement, a sense of belonging, and alignment of learning with students' interests. Therefore, one can argue that these insights demonstrate the transformative impact of democratic management practices on creating a learning environment that is not only more engaging and inclusive but also better prepares students for the complexities of the modern world.

5. Discussion of Findings

As deduced from the data analysis for theme one, the study reveals that one of the challenges in implementing effective democratic management practices in university classrooms is resistance to participatory learning due to traditional teaching methods. This finding aligns with Mcube's (2018)

observation that the quality of educational frameworks relies heavily on the proficiency and professionalism of educators, emphasising the crucial role of teaching methodologies in shaping educational outcomes. Similarly, Morrison (2008) criticises teacher education programmes for their failure to foster democratic practices, highlighting a lack of equitable and inclusive learning environments that promote active student participation. This critique emphasises the gap between educational aspirations and the prevailing pedagogical approaches, which favour traditional lecture-based teaching methods instead of interactive, participatory learning. Furthermore, this study found that students are resistant to participatory approaches that require more effort. The theoretical framework of Critical Pedagogy, as posited by Paulo Freire (1970), further supports this finding by advocating for education as a practice of freedom rather than domination. Freire suggests that traditional teaching methods may unintentionally perpetuate hierarchical dynamics that suppress student voice and engagement. He emphasises the importance of dialogue and problem-posing education, which contrasts sharply with the "banking" model of education, where knowledge is deposited into students without fostering critical thinking or active participation. Additionally, Giroux (2011) extends Freire's critique by highlighting the necessity of empowering students to become active participants in their learning processes. Giroux argues that democratic education should challenge the power dynamics inherent in traditional pedagogical practices. These theoretical perspectives shed light on the fundamental conflict between traditional teaching methods and the principles of democratic management practices, which aim to cultivate an educational environment characterised by critical engagement, inclusivity, and collaborative learning.

The study found that one of the challenges in implementing effective democratic management practices in university classrooms is the "Institutional Constraints and Lack of Resources." This aligns with concerns raised by Agyemang (2012), who emphasised the impact of historical and systemic factors on the educational environment, particularly in regions with a legacy of authoritarian regimes that have significantly influenced educational policies and practices. Enu and Eba (2014) further support the idea that the lack of democratic understanding among student-teachers and insufficient resources are significant obstacles to incorporating democratic practices during instructional sessions. From the theoretical perspective of Critical Pedagogy, Freire (1970) emphasises the importance of moving beyond traditional boundaries of education to embrace a more liberatory practice hindered by rigid institutional structures and a lack of supportive resources. Giroux (2011) strengthens this argument by advocating for the transformation of educational institutions into spaces for critical inquiry and democratic engagement—a transformation that is greatly limited by existing institutional constraints and resource deficiencies. These insights collectively highlight the critical need for systemic change within educational institutions to eliminate barriers to democratic education, emphasising the importance of institutional support and adequate resources in facilitating such a shift.

The study reveals that Personal and Professional Development presents an opportunity to implement effective democratic management practices in university classrooms. This finding supports the views expressed by the Department of Education (2002) and Sentürk & Oyman (2014), who emphasise the transformative power of education in equipping individuals with the intellectual acumen and democratic ethos needed for effective classroom management and adaptability to changing educational landscapes. These perspectives highlight the role of democratic practices in creating a learning environment that not only promotes academic excellence but also contributes to the holistic development and professional relationships between students and lecturers. From a Critical Pedagogy perspective, Paulo Freire (1970) advocates for an education that cultivates critical consciousness, enabling individuals to question, challenge, and transform societal norms and power dynamics. This approach positions education as a crucial arena for personal growth and societal engagement. Additionally, Henry Giroux (2011) builds on Freire's foundations to argue for the potential of education to empower students and teachers to become agents of change, thereby contributing to their personal and professional development. By fostering an environment that

encourages dialogue, reflection, and participatory learning, democratic management practices in education can significantly enhance the personal and professional capacities of all participants, preparing them for active and engaged citizenship.

The study demonstrated that implementing democratic management practices in university classrooms can lead to an improved learning environment and foster inclusiveness. This finding supports the insights of Omodan and Ige (2021), who argued that democratic educational interactions significantly impact promoting inclusivity and active student participation. This, in turn, contributes to creating truly democratic and inclusive learning environments. Lawrence and Maphalala (2021) also emphasised the importance of prioritising democracy and social justice within university classrooms in order to overcome obstacles to democratic education. This aligns with the potential of democratic practices to generate more inclusive and engaging learning environments. According to the participants, democratic classroom management provides additional opportunities for innovative problem-solving as students learn to approach issues from multiple angles and perspectives. Within the theoretical framework of Critical Pedagogy, as proposed by Paulo Freire (1970), teachers are encouraged to create learning environments that recognise and value the diverse voices and experiences of all students, thereby promoting liberation and inclusivity. Giroux (2011) further extends this discourse by highlighting the role of lecturers in fostering educational spaces that challenge existing inequalities and empower students to participate actively in their learning processes. Taken together, these perspectives collectively suggest that effective democratic management practices, by enhancing the learning environment and promoting inclusivity, have the potential to transform classrooms into spaces where diversity is celebrated and every student is engaged and valued.

6. Conclusion and Recommendations

In conclusion, this study highlights the complex interplay between the challenges and opportunities of implementing effective democratic management practices in university classrooms. Key challenges identified include resistance to participatory learning due to entrenched traditional teaching methods and institutional constraints, as well as a notable lack of resources. These barriers significantly hinder the adoption and effectiveness of democratic pedagogies. Conversely, the study also illuminates the potential of democratic practices to foster personal and professional development, improve the learning environment, and promote inclusivity. These practices promise a more engaged, reflective, and cohesive educational experience, demonstrating the transformative impact of democratic management on both lecturers and students alike.

Based on these findings, the study puts forth several recommendations:

- Firstly, educational institutions and policymakers are urged to prioritise professional development programmes that equip educators with the necessary skills and knowledge to implement democratic teaching methods effectively.
- Additionally, there is a pressing need to reassess and redesign the curriculum and assessment methods to better support participatory learning and critical thinking.
- Moreover, addressing the resource disparities and institutional barriers is crucial to ensure that all classrooms are adequately equipped to support dynamic and inclusive educational experiences.

6.1 Implication for classroom management

The findings of this study have significant implications for classroom management in rural universities. These institutions often face challenges in implementing effective democratic management practices due to limited resources and institutional constraints. The study identified resistance to participatory learning, stemming from traditional teaching methods and a lack of resources. These findings emphasise the critical need for innovative approaches to classroom

management that extend beyond conventional pedagogies. Rural universities, operating within tight budgetary constraints and facing unique logistical challenges, are particularly affected by these issues, which can hinder efforts to create inclusive and engaging learning environments. The study highlights the potential of democratic practices to enhance personal and professional development while promoting inclusivity in classrooms. Therefore, it is urgent for rural universities to adopt these methods as part of a broader strategy to improve educational outcomes in these settings. The findings call for action from rural universities to recruit resources, invest in professional development for lecturers, creatively leverage technology and community resources, and advocate for policy changes that support the integration of democratic practices into classroom management. By doing so, rural universities can overcome inherent challenges and unlock the transformative potential of education, aligning classroom management strategies with the evolving needs and aspirations of their diverse student populations.

7. Declarations

Authors contributions: Conceptualisation (T.C.O.); Literature review (T.C.O., S.D.M. & C.T.T.); methodology (T.C.O., S.D.M. & C.T.T.); software (N/A); validation (S.D.M. & C.T.T.); formal analysis (T.C.O.); investigation (T.C.O., C.T.T. & S.D.M.); data curation (T.C.O.) drafting and preparation (T.C.O.); review and editing (T.C.O., S.D.M. & C.T.T.); supervision (S.D.M. & C.T.T.); project administration (T.C.O.); funding acquisition (N/A). All authors have read and approved the published version of the article.

Conflict of Interest: The authors declare no conflict of interest.

Data Availability: The data are not publicly available due to confidentiality agreements with participants and ethical restrictions imposed by the Institutional Review Board. However, de-identified data can be made available from the corresponding author upon reasonable request, subject to approval by the ethics committee.

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