

**A CRITICAL PERSPECTIVE ON THE ROLE OF DEMOCRATIC AND
TRANSFORMATIVE PRINCIPLES IN PRIMARY EDUCATION SCHOOLING IN
GAUTENG**

by

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ABSTRACT

This research investigates the implementation of democratic and transformative education in South African primary schools, analysing the tension between ideals and realities. Framed by critical theory and Indigenous Knowledge Systems, it employs discourse and conversation analysis on interview and observational data from fourteen Gauteng teachers. The findings reveal that teachers possess a sophisticated, learner-centred understanding of democratic education, emphasizing voice, participation, and critical thinking. However, a significant gap exists due to systemic barriers: rigid Curriculum and Assessment Policy Statement pressures, standardized testing, administrative overload, resource limitations, and large classes. The study concludes that realizing democratic education requires a multi-level approach: policy reform for curricular flexibility, sustained teacher development, equitable resource redistribution, and supportive leadership. It advances Global South scholarship by analysing teacher agency within constraints and by offering evidence-based strategies to bridge the divide between theory and resource-limited practice.

Keywords: Democratic Education, Transformative Pedagogy, Primary Education, Teacher Agency, CAPS, Qualitative Research.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

CHAPTER 1: OVERVIEW OF THE STUDY.....	1
1.1 Introduction and background.....	1
1.2. Definition of key concepts	4
1.2.1 Democracy.....	4
1.2.2 Democratic Education	5
1.2.3 Transformative Education	6
1.2.4 Primary education	7
1.3 Problem statement.....	8
1.4 Significance of the study	12
Theoretical Significance.....	12
Practical Significance.....	12
Policy Significance	12
Social Justice Significance.....	12
1.5 Research objectives.....	13
1.5.1 Main objective	13
1.5.2 Sub objectives.....	13
1.6 Research questions	13
1.6.1 Main Research Question.....	13
1.6.2 Sub-Research Questions	13
1.7 Research design and methodology.....	13
1.7.1 Introduction	13
1.7.2 Research Paradigm: Interpretivism	14
1.7.3 Research Approach: Qualitative Methodology	15
1.7.4 Research Design: Case Study	16
1.7.5 Sampling Strategy.....	17
1.7.6 Data Collection Methods	19
1.7.7 Data Analysis	21
1.8 Ethical Considerations	23
1.8.1 Anonymity	24
1.8.2 Privacy and confidentiality.....	24
1.8.3 Voluntary participation.....	24
1.8.4 Positionality	25

1.8.5 Information sheets.....	25
1.8.6 Consent forms.....	26
1.8.7 Interview guides.....	26
1.8.8 Introduction letter.....	26
1.9 Delimitations of the Study.....	26
1.10 Conclusion.....	27
CHAPTER 2: LITERATURE REVIEW.....	29
2.1 Introduction.....	29
2.2 Catalysts for Democratic and Transformative Education: Global Frameworks and Local Practices.....	30
2.2.1 Policy Reforms and International Frameworks.....	30
2.2.2 Technological Innovations and Teacher Development.....	31
2.2.3 Curriculum Reform and Transformative Discourses.....	33
2.3 Systemic Barriers to Democratic Education.....	36
2.3.1 Political and Ideological Constraints.....	36
2.3.2 Socioeconomic Inequities and Resource Disparities.....	37
2.3.3 Cultural Resistance and Teacher Preparedness Challenges.....	38
2.3.4 Curricular Rigidity and Epistemic Injustice.....	38
2.4 Pathways to Implementation: Addressing Structural Barriers for Democratic Education.....	39
2.4.1 Curriculum and Pedagogical Implications.....	39
2.4.2 School Governance and Leadership.....	40
2.4.3 Resources and Equity Considerations.....	40
2.4.4 Teacher Development and Technology in Democratic Education.....	41
2.5 Theoretical Frameworks Informing This Study.....	41
2.5.1 Critical Theory and Emancipatory Pedagogy.....	41
2.5.2 Indigenous Knowledge Systems (IKS) and Ubuntu Philosophy.....	42
2.5.3 Integrating Critical Theory and Decolonial Frameworks in Primary Education	44
2.6 Conclusion.....	45
CHAPTER 3: RESEARCH METHODOLOGY.....	47
3.1 Introduction.....	47
3.2 Research Paradigm.....	47
3.3 Research Approach and Design.....	48
3.3.1 Qualitative Research Approach.....	48

3.3.2 Case Study Design	49
3.4 Research Setting.....	50
3.5 Sampling Strategy.....	50
3.5.1 Sampling Approach.....	50
3.5.2 Criteria for Sample Selection	51
3.5.3 Sampling Limitations	52
3.6 Data Collection Methods	53
3.6.1 Semi-Structured Interviews.....	53
3.6.2 Non-Participant Observation	54
3.7 Data Analysis	54
3.8 Trustworthiness.....	56
3.8.1 Credibility	56
3.8.2 Transferability.....	56
3.8.3 Dependability	57
3.8.4 Confirmability	57
3.9 Approval, Permission and Consent.....	57
3.9.1 Permission to Collect Data.....	57
3.9.2 Informed Consent.....	58
3.9.3 Confidentiality and Anonymity	58
3.9.4 Data Management and Risk Category	59
3.10 Researcher Positionality and Reflexivity	59
3.11 Conclusion	60
CHAPTER 4: DATA ANALYSIS AND PRESENTATION.....	62
4.1 Introduction	62
4.2 Overview of the Data Analysis Process	63
4.3 Presentation of Findings	64
4.3.1 Findings from Semi-Structured Interviews	65
4.3.2 Findings from Non-Participant Classroom Observations.....	72
4.4 Synthesis of Findings across Data Sources.....	77
4.4.1 Convergences: Where Interview and Observation Data Align	77
4.4.2 Divergences: Gaps between Stated Beliefs and Observed Practice.....	78
4.4.3 Complementarities: How Data Sources Enrich Understanding	79
4.5 Conclusion	80
CHAPTER 5: DISCUSSION, CONCLUSIONS, AND RECOMMENDATIONS	83

5.1 Introduction	83
5.2 Summary of Findings	83
5.2.1 Teachers' Conceptualizations of Democratic Education (Sub-Research Question 1)	84
5.2.2 Pedagogical Strategies Employed (Sub-Research Question 2).....	85
5.2.3 Factors Shaping Implementation (Sub-Research Question 3).....	86
5.2.4 Overall Synthesis	89
5.3 Discussion of Findings	90
5.3.1 Interpretation through Critical Theory Framework.....	90
5.3.2 Interpretation through Ubuntu and Indigenous Knowledge Systems Framework.....	92
5.3.3 Findings in Relation to Existing Literature	94
5.4 Implications of the Study	97
5.4.1 Implications for Policy	97
5.4.2 Implications for Practice	99
5.4.3 Implications for Theory.....	100
5.5 Contributions of the Study.....	101
5.5.1 Theoretical Contributions	101
5.5.2 Empirical Contributions	101
5.5.3 Methodological Contributions.....	102
5.5.4 Practical Contributions	103
5.6 Limitations of the Study.....	103
5.6.1 Methodological Limitations.....	103
5.6.2 Researcher Positionality and Reflexivity	104
5.6.3 Time and Resource Constraints.....	105
5.7 Recommendations	105
5.7.1 Recommendations for Policy Makers.....	106
5.7.2 Recommendations for School Leaders and District Officials.....	107
5.7.3 Recommendations for Teachers and Teacher Educators	108
5.7.4 Recommendations for Future Research	109
5.8 Conclusion	111
References.....	114
APPENDICES	127
APPENDIX A: ETHICS CLEARANCE.....	127
APPENDIX B: GDE RESEARCH APPROVAL LETTER.....	130

APPENDIX C: INTERVIEW QUESTIONS	132
APPENDIX D: OBSERVATION GUIDE	133
APPENDIX E: CONSENT LETTER	134
APPENDIX F: TRANSCRIBED SAMPLE INTERVIEWS	135
APPENDIX G: TURNITIN REPORT	139
APPENDIX H: EDITOR'S CERTIFICATE	140

ACRONYMS AND ABBREVIATIONS

- CAPS: Curriculum and Assessment Policy Statement
- DBE: Department of Basic Education
- IKS: Indigenous Knowledge Systems
- RCL: Representative Council of Learners
- SASA: South African Schools Act
- SGB: School Governing Body

CHAPTER 1: OVERVIEW OF THE STUDY

1.1 Introduction and background

South Africa was born in battle, has experienced significant crises and deep rifts throughout its history, and is once again perilous (Simpson, 2021). Apartheid was one of the crises that South Africans endured for a very long time, and, according to Smith (2023), apartheid, a state-enforced system of racial segregation and discrimination, governed South Africa from 1948 to 1994. The apartheid system's policies included making Afrikaans the official language at work and the language of instruction in education, requiring Black people to reside in different neighbourhoods from white people, and requiring them (Black people) to attend different schools from whites (Smith, 2023; Pietersen et al., 2023). In addition, apartheid eliminated the autonomy, agency, and voice of any group that was labelled as "non-white" by oppressing and dehumanising such people (Waghid & Davids, 2022).

In 1953, Hendrick Verwoerd, who served as the minister of Native Affairs at the time, expressed the view that he preferred South Africa to be racially homogeneous and economically poor rather than racially integrated and prosperous (Gallo, 2020). According to Gallo (2020), Verwoerd maintained a system that confined the Black population to work as hewers of wood and drawers of water. A deep socioeconomic and racial divide characterized South Africa, where a system granted Whites first-class citizenship and designated "Coloureds" and "Indians" as second-class citizens (Gallo, 2020). Verwoerd's policies prompted the creation of the Bantu Education Act in 1953. The education commission led by Dr. W. W. M. Eisselem advocated the continuation of Bantu education as a means of "civilizing" the majority of South African Blacks. Gallo (2020) argues that inasmuch as the education commission claimed to improve and educate children, open racism justified apartheid policies. In 1955, the Tomlinson Commission suggested making South African education separate and unequal (Gallo, 2020). Gallo (2020) goes on to say that as a result of apartheid, the system of apartheid education, referred to as Bantu education, did not provide Black individuals with the requisite technological and scientific competencies to participate effectively in national progress or personal development. Gallo (2020) links lower living standards for the majority to a workforce that lacks competitiveness. Amongst other things, democratic education entails making decisions and allowing children to be at the

centre of learning. The year 1996 was marked by significant rates of malnutrition and unemployment, alongside poor health outcomes in the country; more than 60% of South Africans lived in poverty based on national criteria (Hlongwane, 2025).

Before delving into the discussion of democracy and democratic education, we must acknowledge their interdependence. They are interdependent in the sense that democracy shapes the structure of democratic education, and that includes the policies of education and curriculum, while democratic education aids an individual's understanding of democracy. Sant (2019) asserts that there is a connection between democracy and democratic education. The purpose of this study is not to examine democracy itself but to utilize democracy as a conceptual framework to explore and comprehend the implementation of democratic education within primary schooling.

Throughout most of the twentieth century, democracy was portrayed as a universal right (Sant, 2019). Democracy is commonly associated with equality and the will of the people (Sant, 2019). According to Carpenter (2023), democracy is when people live in freedom, receive equitable treatment, and have free elections. Knutsen (2021) explains that democracy and freedom could have intrinsic normative value, and he further noted that a strong and dynamic relationship exists between democracy and growth. From the definitions above we learn that democracy allows people to be free to choose what they want. In a democratic dispensation, people must be treated equally irrespective of their race, gender, or class; and democracy gives people the opportunity to develop and be better people. Before 1994 there was no peace because Black people were forced by white people to do what white people wanted, for instance, using Afrikaans as a form of communication, which was also degrading Black people's culture, which includes language (Diko & Celliers, 2024; Pietersen et al., 2025). Sant (2019) points out that democracy makes life better and remediates what was happening in apartheid times because it provides stability, riches, and peace, as well as dignity, to citizens.

According to Gallo (2020), Democratic Education was anticipated to reduce disparities based on race, class, and gender. Gallo (2020) further asserts that the African National Congress, which governed the country since 1994, made pronouncements including the following: Education policy aims to create a society that serves the

interests and needs of all South Africans, the educational program should utilise advanced scientific knowledge, education should eliminate the division between mental and manual training, as well as the artificial separation of arts and science and lastly democratic practices should govern students and teachers.

According to Haynes and Suissa (2022), “enriching our discussions about the meaning and value of democratic education” is one way of rethinking and expanding democratic educational philosophy. Rather than being solely a formal prescription, democracy is constituted through daily practice (Motherway, 2022). This includes democratic schools, where learners should be given the opportunity to engage in democratic activities like critical thinking, finding information for themselves, comparing ideas, and sharing their findings with other learners and their teachers (Gordon, 2022). Songgayi (2020) also mentions that the education through democracy approach allows children to learn in a community where they may participate and have a say in decision-making. Gordon (2022) further mentions that, in democratic education, the curriculum must also be democratic, meaning it must allow learners to explore issues and problems and take collective action for positive change.

Primary school education is the foundation of democratic education and is therefore this study’s focal point. However, several complications exist and it is critical to examine and comprehend the attitudes and concepts that underpin democracy and problem-solving approaches, as well as to propose solutions to such concerns in primary education.

According to Gallo (2020), advancements have been achieved in offering democratic education to children in South Africa. Gallo (2020) argues that the South African government must be held accountable for improving educational quality. This urgency is highlighted by alarming statistics: 78% of ten-year-olds are unable to read, 61% of eleven-year-olds cannot perform basic math, and 17% of schools still use hazardous pit toilets—a sanitation crisis that has resulted in fatal drownings. The apartheid legacy instituted by Hendrik Verwoerd (then-minister of Native Affairs) remains a profoundly embedded challenge that South Africa must still address and that sustains significant disparities in the South African education system. South Africa is left with the legacy of apartheid on the education system.

1.2. Definition of key concepts

This section discusses democracy, democratic education, transformative education, and primary education to assist in understanding the study.

1.2.1 Democracy

A democracy is a form of government in which the people themselves, or their chosen representatives, hold the power, guaranteeing political equality, participation, and the defence of fundamental rights (Carpenter, 2023). Tanner and McCloskey (2023) argue that democracy is “more than a form of government” but, instead, “a mode of associated living, of conjoint communicated experience” that ought to be cultivated by schools. Democracy is fundamentally a form of government where power is held by the people, guaranteeing political equality and fundamental rights (Carpenter, 2023). This view corresponds with Gasper's (2023) modern emphasis on democracy as a force for accountability, inclusivity, and social justice. South Africa's constitution embodies this broader ideal, upholding democracy and fostering principles such as social justice and human dignity (Republic of South Africa 1996). However, South Africa's democratic project remains challenged by persistent issues such as inequality and corruption (McCandless, 2021).

A thriving civil society that holds politicians accountable, free and fair elections, an independent judiciary, and institutional checks and balances are characteristics of modern democracies (Gerston, 2023). Mouffe (2022) explains that democracy in primary schools is not only a political framework but also a cultural practice that requires continuous civic education and public participation. According to Mouffe's (2022) concept of democracy, for example, teachers use service-learning initiatives, such as establishing community gardens to address food issues, by sharing duties and teaching collaboration, as well as Ubuntu-based dispute mediation. As mandated by SASA (1996), learner representative councils (LRCs) provide a forum for students to voice their concerns (Harber, 2021). Human dignity, non-racism, and social reparation are prioritized under South Africa's constitutionally guaranteed democracy (Republic of South Africa 1996). However, its full implementation is hampered by enduring inequality, corruption, and inadequate public service delivery (McCandless, 2021).

1.2.2 Democratic Education

Deweyan ideals hold that schools serve as miniature versions of democracy; to ensure that the classroom reflects the ideals and customs of a democratic society, one must actively support student voice and collaborative learning. Democratic education is a pedagogical approach that encourages critical thinking, participatory decision-making, and civic engagement within schools (Larsen & Mathé, 2023; Lupien, 2022). In addition, Democratic education refers to the idea that all people, regardless of their socioeconomic status, should be given the opportunity to acquire information, civic values, and skills that are believed vital to maintaining and shaping democratic societies (Sonkqayi, 2020). In South Africa, democratic education is ingrained in policies such as the CAPS and SASA (1996), which support inclusive, learner-centred approaches (Jansen & Walters, 2022). Nevertheless, implementation gaps persist because of resource inequalities and authoritarian school cultures (Mbuisa, 2023). For instance, teachers still dominate discussions, contradicting CAP's key principle of learner engagement (Tryon, 2023). Additionally, students are hindered from assuming leadership roles and making decisions (Olawale et al., 2022). In contrast to CAPS's fundamental tenet of learner participation, teachers remain the focal point of discussions (Tryon, 2023).

Schools are encouraged to create RCLs, which foster youth accountability and leadership (Karlsson, 2021). However, differences in resources, teacher training, and institutional resistance frequently prevent full implementation of democratic education (Mampane, 2023). Critics contend that without systemic support, democratic education runs the risk of becoming symbolic rather than transformative (Motala et al., 2023). To help prevent students from solely depending on English study materials, mother tongue teaching resources (in line with the Language in Education Policy, 1997) must be made available and disseminated (Heugh, 2023). Instead of being overburdened with administrative tasks (such as CAPS paperwork), teachers should concentrate on creating engaging lessons. According to Jansen and Walters (2022), portfolio assessments that call for critical thinking and projects that require student discussion should replace CAPS's strict exams.

1.2.3 Transformative Education

Freirean critical pedagogy is the foundation of transformative education, which aims to dismantle oppressive systems and enable students to become change agents in society (Dutra, 2025; Cele et al., 2025). Critical consciousness, decolonization, and equity are its main focuses (Ndlovu-Gatsheni, 2021). Transformative education in South Africa is associated with post-apartheid reforms (CAPS), which incorporate inclusive materials such as African languages and histories, as well as oral traditions and African science that seek to address historical injustices by fostering African epistemologies and social cohesion through curricula (Maistry & Le Grange, 2023). However, its emancipatory potential is frequently undermined by standardized testing and neoliberal influences (Motala et al., 2023).

Current research highlights three fundamental aspects of transformational education: conative (ability to act), emotional (empathy and solidarity), and cognitive (critical thinking) (Stetsenko, 2023). In actuality, this entails dialogic teaching strategies that prioritize underrepresented knowledge systems, especially in post-colonial settings (Shahjahan et al., 2022). Furthermore, the COVID-19 pandemic has highlighted the need for transformative strategies to address the intertwined challenges of digital divides, inequality, and climate change (Torres et al., 2021). Decolonial curriculum changes and community-based participatory action research initiatives are examples of modern implementations (Zembylas, 2023).

Furthermore, transformative education refers to pedagogical approaches that challenge oppressive social structures and promote fundamental shifts in learners' consciousness and circumstances (Omodan & Addam, 2022). In the South African context, transformative education has three key dimensions:

1. Epistemological Transformation: Challenging Eurocentric knowledge systems and centring IKS and Ubuntu philosophy (Ndlovu-Gatsheni, 2021).
2. Pedagogical Transformation: Moving from authoritarian, teacher-centred methods to dialogic, learner-centred approaches where students are active knowledge producers (Freire, 2000).
3. Structural Transformation: Addressing systemic inequalities in resources, language policy, and access to quality education (Spaull & Pretorius, 2022).

Transformative education seeks not merely to improve outcomes within existing systems but to fundamentally reimagine education as a tool for social justice and decolonization.

1.2.4 Primary education

Primary education is the foundational stage of education (Grades R–7 in South Africa), with an emphasis on literacy, numeracy, and socio-emotional development (Spaull & Pretorius, 2022). While it is acknowledged as a human right worldwide (UNESCO, 2021), in South Africa, inequalities in access and quality still exist, especially in rural and township schools. The government has implemented reforms like the Early Grade Reading Study (EGRS) to improve results, but systemic issues like under-qualified teachers and inadequate infrastructure impede progress (Van der Berg et al., 2023).

Primary education (Grades R–7) in South Africa is characterised by both innovations and challenges. The suggestions made by the Department of Basic Education's (DBE), 2021 Reading Panel emphasise evidence-based approaches to solving the nation's reading crisis (Spaull & Pretorius, 2022). The Early Grade Reading Study (EGRS) and other recent initiatives demonstrate the effectiveness of structured pedagogies when paired with teacher mentoring (van der Berg et al., 2023). Nonetheless, systemic challenges, such as curriculum overload and infrastructure backlogs in township and rural schools still exist. An ambitious attempt to future-proof primary education is the gradual integration of robots and coding into intermediate phases (Mathebula, 2023). These technological innovations benefit democratic education by strengthening critical thinking and problem-solving skills. Coding promotes collaborative, learner-centred problem-solving skills (Tryon, 2023). It also prepares learners for democratic digital citizenship. For example, coding might offer them the confidence to explore ethical issues in digital democracies (Makananise & Madima, 2025).

The post-pandemic economic environment has heightened discussions about the structure and content of primary education. While some academics support more adaptable, community-based approaches (Motala et al., 2023), others emphasise the need to quickly establish basic competencies in overburdened systems (Taylor, 2023).

In democracy, democratic education, transformative education, and primary education are all related because they all aim to promote social justice, critical consciousness, and equal participation. Democratic education serves as a microcosm of a larger democratic society by fostering student participation, inclusive decision-making, and civic involvement in schools, thereby operationalizing democratic values (Millar, 2024). By questioning systemic injustices using critical pedagogies that enable students to question and modify oppressive structures, transformative education goes beyond this (Giroux, 2022). Because early exposure to participatory and justice-oriented learning environments moulds lifelong democratic dispositions and capacity for social transformation, primary education serves as the foundational stage when these values are fostered (Spaull & Pretorius, 2022; Le Grange, 2023). Primary school is the first stage in which these principles are cultivated, since early exposure to learning environments that are participatory and justice-oriented shapes lifelong democratic attitudes and the capacity for social transformation (Spaull & Pretorius, 2022; Le Grange, 2023).

1.3 Problem statement

Despite South Africa's post-apartheid commitment to democratic and transformational education, systemic injustices, pedagogical inconsistencies, and unfulfilled policy ambitions continue to plague the country's primary education system (Motala et al., 2023). While progressive policy frameworks such as CAPS and SASA (1996) explicitly promote inclusive pedagogies, social justice, learner participation, and critical thinking, a significant disconnect persists between legislative goals and classroom realities (Spaull & Pretorius, 2022; Jansen & Walters, 2022). This policy-practice implementation gap is particularly concerning in Gauteng's primary schools, where, despite relative resource advantages compared to other provinces, many classrooms—especially in historically disadvantaged communities—continue to reflect authoritarian, teacher-centred practices that limit student voice and agency.

The nature and persistence of this implementation gap can be understood at multiple levels. At the systemic level, neoliberal education reforms emphasizing outcomes-based accountability and standardized testing have weakened transformative objectives by reducing education to technical competencies rather than promoting critical consciousness (Jansen & Walters, 2022; Giroux, 2023). Furthermore, the high-

stakes examination culture embedded in CAPS assessment structures creates pedagogical tensions—teachers face pressure to "cover content" for testing, which often conflicts with time-intensive democratic practices such as deliberative dialogue, student-led inquiry, and collaborative decision-making (Motala et al., 2023). At the epistemological level, the continued exclusion of IKS from formal curriculum reinforces Eurocentric paradigms and alienates learners from their cultural heritage, perpetuating epistemic violence (Ndlovu-Gatsheni, 2021; Hoppers, 2025). While CAPS includes provisions for incorporating African languages, histories, and knowledge systems, classroom implementation remains limited. Teachers often lack resources, training, or confidence to meaningfully integrate IKS and Ubuntu philosophy into daily pedagogy (Le Grange, 2023). This represents a missed opportunity to ground democratic education in culturally relevant, African-centred frameworks that could resonate more authentically with learners' lived experiences.

At the institutional level, while policies mandate democratic school governance through structures such as SGBs and RCLs, research indicates that these institutions frequently reinforce hierarchical power dynamics rather than facilitating genuine participatory democracy (Karlsson, 2021; Mampane, 2023). In many primary schools, RCLs function symbolically rather than substantively. Student representatives are elected but lack meaningful decision-making power or influence over school policies affecting their daily experiences (Harber, 2021).

At the teacher level, many educators—particularly those trained during or shortly after the apartheid era—lack the professional development necessary to implement critical, learner-centred approaches effectively (Van der Berg et al., 2023). This is not simply a matter of insufficient training; teachers face complex, intersecting constraints including large class sizes (often 40-50 learners per class in township schools), limited physical resources (inadequate furniture, learning materials, and technology), demanding administrative workloads, and minimal ongoing pedagogical support (Spaull & Pretorius, 2022). Additionally, authoritarian classroom cultures inherited from Bantu education persist in many contexts, where questioning authority is discouraged, and learning remains centred on rote memorisation rather than critical inquiry (Omodan & Addam, 2022; Bhana, 2025).

The combined impact of these multilevel constraints is particularly acute in historically disadvantaged schools serving Black and Coloured communities, where overcrowded

classrooms, inadequate infrastructure, language barriers (with English medium instruction often alienating isiZulu, Sesotho, or Setswana-speaking learners), poverty-related challenges, and the enduring legacy of Bantu education create compounding barriers to democratic practice (Spaull & Pretorius, 2022). While policies like CAPS (2011) and SASA (1996) articulate democratic principles, they often fail to address the material, cultural, and contextual conditions necessary for their realization in these specific settings.

This problem matters for three critical reasons. First, the implementation gap perpetuates educational inequality—learners in under-resourced schools are denied access to the democratic, participatory learning experiences promised by policy, while their peers in better-resourced schools may experience more learner-centred pedagogies. This reproduces historical patterns of educational apartheid, where the quality of educational experience correlates with race and class rather than being universally accessible as constitutional principles demand. Second, the gap undermines South Africa's broader democratic project by failing to cultivate democratic dispositions, critical consciousness, and participatory capabilities in young citizens during the foundational primary phase—precisely when lifelong attitudes toward citizenship, authority, and social justice are being formed (Le Grange, 2023). Third, without understanding why implementation fails despite progressive policies, reform efforts will remain ineffective. Policy revisions that do not address on-the-ground realities will remain symbolic gestures rather than transformative interventions.

Existing research has documented the existence of this policy-practice gap broadly (Jansen & Walters, 2022; Motala et al., 2023) and identified systemic barriers such as neoliberal accountability pressures, resource constraints, and inadequate teacher preparation (Van der Berg et al., 2023). However, a critical knowledge gap remains. Current research on democratic education in South Africa tends to focus on policy analysis or secondary/higher education contexts, with limited empirical investigation of how primary school teachers—the primary implementers of democratic education policy—actually understand, interpret, and attempt to enact democratic and transformative principles in their daily classroom practice (Jansen & Walters, 2022). Specifically, I lack detailed, contextual understanding of:

1. How teachers themselves conceptualize and define democratic and transformative education within their own pedagogical frameworks. Do

they understand these concepts as policy mandates articulate them, or do they construct alternative, locally meaningful interpretations?

2. What specific pedagogical strategies teachers employ (or attempt to employ) to foster democratic participation, critical thinking, and transformative learning in resource-constrained, high-pressure classroom environments—and how they navigate tensions between democratic ideals and practical constraints.
3. What factors actually enable successful implementation where it occurs—what material resources, institutional support, professional development experiences, collegial cultures, or personal commitments allow some teachers to enact democratic principles despite systemic barriers.
4. What specific, contextualised barriers constrain teachers' efforts? Beyond broad categories like "resource constraints" or "inadequate training", what are the precise, lived obstacles that teachers encounter, and how do these obstacles interact with one another to create complex implementation challenges?
5. How—if at all—Ubuntu philosophy and IKS inform teachers' conceptualizations and enactment of democratic education, given that these African epistemologies offer culturally grounded alternatives to Western democratic education models but may not be explicitly foregrounded in teacher education or curriculum materials?

This study addresses these knowledge gaps by investigating how primary school teachers in two Gauteng schools—representing different socioeconomic contexts within the province—understand, interpret, and implement democratic and transformative educational principles in their classroom practice. Understanding teachers' lived experiences, interpretations, and the specific enabling factors and constraints they encounter is essential because teachers are the primary mediators between policy intentions and classroom realities. Without empirical insight grounded in teachers' perspectives and daily pedagogical decisions, policy interventions will remain disconnected from implementation contexts, and the gap between democratic rhetoric and educational reality will persist. Furthermore, by centring teachers' voices and examining their practice through the lenses of Critical Theory, IKS, and Ubuntu philosophy, this study contributes to decolonizing educational research—moving

beyond deficit narratives that blame teachers for policy failures, toward nuanced understanding of how structural, material, and cultural factors shape pedagogical possibilities in post-apartheid South African primary schools.

This study addresses these knowledge gaps by investigating how primary school teachers in two Gauteng primary schools—one located in town, one outside town—understand, interpret, and implement democratic and transformative educational principles in their classroom practice

1.4 Significance of the study

This study holds significance at multiple levels:

Theoretical Significance

By centring IKS and Ubuntu philosophy alongside critical theory, this study contributes to decolonizing educational research in South Africa, moving beyond Eurocentric frameworks to embrace African epistemologies. The study also addresses a gap in the literature, as there is limited research on democratic education in primary schools, as most research studies focus on secondary/tertiary levels.

Practical Significance

The study provides validation for teachers' efforts and offers practical insights for colleagues facing similar constraints. Findings can inform teacher education programs and professional development initiatives, helping prepare educators to implement democratic pedagogy. School leaders gain evidence-based understanding of what teachers need to successfully implement democratic practices.

Policy Significance

The study provides empirical evidence of the gap between policy intentions (CAPS, SASA) and implementation realities, offering concrete data to inform policy revision. By documenting material and resource constraints, the study contributes evidence for advocacy around equitable school funding and infrastructure development.

Social Justice Significance

The study contributes to ongoing efforts aimed at educational equity in South Africa by documenting how systemic inequalities continue to constrain democratic education in historically disadvantaged schools. By exploring IKS and Ubuntu-informed

pedagogies, it contributes to broader societal efforts to decolonize South African institutions.

1.5 Research objectives

1.5.1 Main objective

To examine the role of democratic and transformative principles in primary education in two Gauteng primary schools

1.5.2 Sub objectives

1.5.2.1 To explore how teachers in the two schools conceptualize democratic and transformative education principles

1.5.2.2 To identify what pedagogical strategies teachers employ to implement democratic and transformative principles

1.5.2.3 To examine what factors shape teachers' implementation of democratic and transformative principles

1.6 Research questions

1.6.1 Main Research Question

What is the role of democratic and transformative principles in primary education in two Gauteng primary schools?

1.6.2 Sub-Research Questions

1.6.2.1 How do teachers in the two schools conceptualize democratic and transformative education principles?

1.6.2.2 What pedagogical strategies do teachers employ to implement democratic and transformative principles?

1.6.2.3 What factors shape teachers' implementation of democratic and transformative principles?

1.7 Research design and methodology

1.7.1 Introduction

Research design is the specific method that the researcher uses to collect data (Leavy, 2022). Slater & Hasson (2025) defines research design as a study plan used to collect

and analyse data, or a map usually created to guide the research. Slater & Hasson (2025) further states that research design is the structure and methods of investigation designed to answer research questions and control variance. Moreover, research methodology is a combination of methods and theory, which is a plan for how research will proceed (Leavy, 2022). Research methodology is a collection of strategies, tactics, and the order in which they are used. It is also a plan or strategy for completing a set of tasks (Likhhanov et al., 2022).

This study employed a qualitative research approach to investigate how primary school teachers in two primary schools understand and implement democratic and transformative educational principles. The following sections present the methodological approach taken in this study, organised logically: research paradigm, qualitative approach and justification, case study design, sampling strategy, data collection methods, data analysis procedures, trustworthiness measures, ethical considerations, and researcher positionality.

1.7.2 Research Paradigm: Interpretivism

A research paradigm, according to Khatri (2020), is a fundamental and all-encompassing set of beliefs to view the research phenomenon. Khatri (2020) further contends that a paradigm is a set of beliefs about how particular problems exist and a set of agreements on how such problems can be investigated. A paradigm for study is a lens through which the world is perceived (Chafe, 2024). It is a mental orientation that dictates how one views the world rather than a system of laws guiding thought (Chafe, 2024).

The interpretive paradigm allows researchers to analyse behavioural elements based on participant experiences, which can help characterise reality based on their assumptions and beliefs (Alharahsheh & Pius, 2020). The interpretivist paradigm allows researchers to view each research scenario as unique, taking into account the specific conditions and people involved. Adopting the interpretivist paradigm will lead to high-level validity of the data because it is based on human experience, considering many variables (Alharahsheh & Pius, 2020). In this study, the interpretivist perspective seeks to understand how teachers interpret their own practice in relation to the specific situations in which they work.

This study was situated within the interpretive paradigm for three key reasons. First, the research questions focused on understanding teachers' subjective experiences, meanings, and interpretations of democratic education—phenomena requiring interpretive inquiry rather than positivist measurement. Second, the interpretivist paradigm recognizes that classroom realities are socially constructed through teachers' interactions with policies, learners, colleagues, and material conditions—acknowledging multiple, context-dependent realities rather than a single objective truth. Third, interpretivism is aligned with the study's theoretical frameworks (Critical Theory, IKS, and Ubuntu philosophy), all of which emphasise situated knowledge, lived experience, and understanding phenomena within their social, cultural, and historical contexts (Tisdell et al., 2025).

1.7.3 Research Approach: Qualitative Methodology

This study adopted a qualitative approach, which is interpretive or constructive, and seeks to reveal the "what," "why," "when," "where," "who," and "how" underlying social behaviours and interactions, rather than simply counting occurrences (Lim, 2025). According to Lim (2025), the qualitative approach is a scientific investigation methodology that prioritises the richness and depth of voice and context when comprehending social phenomena. A fundamental characteristic of qualitative research methodologies, according to Allan (2020), is that, to provide adequate explanations of social actions, a thorough understanding of the viewpoints, cultures, and "worldviews" of the players involved is necessary. Qualitative research embraces openness and uses a range of comparable techniques, including participant observation, in-depth and focus group interviews, and open-ended questions, to ensure a thorough investigation of the phenomena in the study of the subjective experiences, viewpoints, and meanings that people ascribe to their social environment (Lim, 2025). Qualitative research's flexibility and adaptability are crucial, as is its dedication to documenting a broad range of human experiences and viewpoints (Lim, 2025).

1.7.3.1 Justification for Qualitative Approach

A qualitative research approach was appropriate for this study for four interconnected reasons:

First, the nature of the research questions demanded qualitative inquiry. This study sought to understand teachers' lived experiences, interpretations, meaning-making processes, and the complex contextual factors shaping their practice—subjective, experiential phenomena that cannot be captured through quantitative measurement. As Suriandjo (2024) argues, qualitative research is appropriate when the goal is to explore how people make sense of their experiences and the meanings they attach to them.

Second, understanding the policy-practice implementation gap required a rich, contextual description of classroom realities. The disconnect between democratic education policy and practice is not a matter of quantifying "how much" implementation occurs, but rather of understanding "how," "why," and "under what conditions" teachers attempt to implement democratic principles—qualitative questions that require in-depth exploration (Tisdell et al., 2025).

Third, the study's theoretical foundations—Critical Theory, IKS, and Ubuntu philosophy—are aligned with qualitative epistemology. These frameworks emphasise contextual knowledge, lived experience, relational understanding, and validation of marginalised voices—all core principles of qualitative research. Ubuntu's emphasis on dialogue, interconnectedness, and communal knowledge-building particularly resonated with qualitative methods' relational, participatory orientation (Chilisa & Mertens, 2021).

Fourth, the post-apartheid South African educational context requires research approaches sensitive to power dynamics, colonial legacies, and cultural specificity. Qualitative methods, when informed by decolonial methodologies, allowed for this sensitivity and honoured teachers' contextual knowledge without imposing predetermined categories or external measurements (Ndlovu-Gatsheni, 2021).

1.7.4 Research Design: Case Study

This study employed a case study design to examine the implementation of democratic education in two primary schools. Case study design is particularly appropriate when research focuses on contemporary phenomena (democratic education implementation) within real-life contexts (primary school classrooms), and when context is crucial to understanding the phenomenon (Annamalah et al., 2025).

The bounded nature of this study—two specific schools, specific teachers, specific time period—aligned with the case study's focus on bounded systems (Schoch et al., 2020). Examining two schools revealed similarities and differences in culture, policies, and experiences, thereby improving understanding of how context influences findings (Tisdell et al., 2025). According to Hirose and Creswell (2023), data from two schools can validate recurring themes while limiting bias from a single environment.

Case study design enabled the integration of multiple data sources (classroom observations and semi-structured interviews) to build a rich, holistic understanding of democratic education implementation in each school context—essential for addressing the study's complex research questions (Tisdell et al., 2025).

1.7.5 Sampling Strategy

This study employed a convenience sampling strategy. As a statistical approach for selecting a subset from a population to draw conclusions (Narayan et al., 2023), convenience sampling involves collecting data from a research population that is easily accessible to the researcher. This strategy was selected because, compared to other non-random sampling techniques, it requires less effort to select participants and can be executed at a minimal cost (Stratton, 2021). Furthermore, it reduces the time spent on selection as the sample is drawn from an easily available segment of the target population, and it eliminates the need for the researcher to prepare a list of every demographic element. This method is recognised for providing abundant qualitative data and, in various circumstances, can yield a good sample (Golzar et al., 2022). According to Mweshi and Sakyi (2020), convenience sampling involves selecting people who are readily available to the researcher and can provide the necessary data. This method is cost-effective for gathering preliminary data but may not yield generalizable conclusions.

1.7.5.1 School Selection

The schools were selected based on the accessibility principle central to the convenience sampling approach. Two primary schools participated in this study (referred to as School 1 and School 2 throughout the findings to maintain confidentiality). One school was located in town and one outside town, providing some contextual variation between the two cases.

1.7.5.2 Teacher Participant Selection

The primary criterion for teacher selection was to ensure representation from across the primary school spectrum. Consequently, the researcher chose 14 teachers, spanning all grade levels from Grade One to Grade Seven. This approach aimed to capture a range of experiences and perspectives from teachers teaching different age groups within the primary school system. The researcher interviewed teachers with at least 3 years of experience, as they could provide accurate answers and have a sense of what is happening in democratic education (Graham et al., 2020).

Participants were assigned codes T1-T14 (Teacher 1-Teacher 14) to maintain anonymity throughout data collection, analysis, and reporting. Seven teachers were recruited from each school, ensuring balanced representation across both school contexts.

1.7.5.3 Sample Size Justification

The determination of the sample size was guided by established qualitative research principles. According to Guest et al. (2020), 80–90% of themes typically emerge within the first six to twelve interviews. While six to eight interviews are often sufficient, twelve to twenty are recommended to achieve maximum variation (Bekele & Ago, 2022), with this range being optimal for seeking broad representation of perspectives, backgrounds, and characteristics (Wutich et al., 2024). Based on this scholarly consensus, a final sample size of fourteen teachers was selected for this study.

1.7.5.4 Limitations of the Sampling Approach

While convenience sampling was pragmatically necessary given time and resource constraints, this approach has several acknowledged limitations:

First, convenience sampling limits the generalizability and transferability of findings. Because participants and schools were selected based on accessibility rather than strategic criteria designed to maximize variation or representativeness, the findings are specific to these particular contexts and cannot be assumed to apply to all primary schools in Gauteng or South Africa.

Second, self-selection bias may be present. Teachers who volunteered may have been more interested in, knowledgeable about, or committed to democratic education

than those who declined to participate. This could result in findings that over-represent positive attitudes or awareness of democratic education principles.

Third, the two schools were not selected to represent specific types of contexts, such as well-resourced versus under-resourced schools, township versus suburban schools, or different quintile levels. The variation obtained—one school in town, one outside town—was incidental rather than purposefully designed to explore how different contexts shape implementation.

Fourth, convenience sampling does not allow for claims about the prevalence or distribution of particular practices or challenges across broader populations of teachers or schools.

Despite these limitations, the sample provided rich, detailed qualitative data that enabled in-depth exploration of how the fourteen teacher participants understood and attempted to implement democratic education principles within their specific school contexts. The study's goal was not statistical generalisation but rather contextual understanding and theoretical insight—goals that qualitative case study research can achieve even with convenience sampling (Tisdell et al., 2025). The findings offer valuable insights into the complexities of democratic education implementation that can inform future research, teacher professional development, and policy refinement. Readers must judge the transferability of these findings to their own contexts based on the thick descriptions provided in Chapters 3 and 4.

1.7.6 Data Collection Methods

According to Taherdoost (2021), data collection is the process of gathering information to gain an understanding of the research issue. Data collection is one of the most critical aspects of any research study (Nii Laryeafio & Ogbewe, 2023). Data collection, according to Nii Laryeafio and Ogbewe (2023), is the systematic process of obtaining information on the variables of interest to answer the research question and evaluate the research results.

This study employed two data collection methods. Both methods were used to gather rich qualitative data addressing the research questions about teachers' understandings, practices, and experiences related to democratic and transformative education.

1.7.6.1 Semi-Structured Interviews

This study employed semi-structured interviews due to their established benefits in educational research (Ruslin et al., 2022). This method was selected for its several advantages, including the capacity to observe nonverbal cues such as facial expressions, encourage unstructured elaboration beyond the predefined questions, and allow for a more in-depth exploration of complex educational concepts, thereby providing a safe space for participants to react openly and thoughtfully. According to Ruslin et al. (2022), the flexibility of this approach enables a researcher to elicit hidden information, which is valuable for the final thematic data analysis, by following up on both spoken and non-verbal reactions, including silence, laughing, and intuition. Furthermore, the interactive element of the semi-structured interview allows interviewees to respond freely (Kakilla, 2021), facilitating a deeper understanding of their perspectives and experiences.

According to Henriksen et al. (2022), in-person interviews are the most effective because they allow the interviewees to share their opinions and allow the discussion to progress beyond the predetermined format of structured survey questions; therefore, the researcher used in-person interviews. The researcher recorded the interviews and wrote down the teachers' comments.

All fourteen teacher participants (T1-T14) were interviewed individually using a semi-structured interview guide. The interview guide included core questions organised thematically to address the three research sub-questions: teachers' conceptualisations of democratic and transformative education; pedagogical strategies employed by teachers to foster democratic participation and critical thinking; and factors that enabled or constrained their implementation of democratic principles. The semi-structured format allowed for deeper probing of participants' responses, following emergent lines of inquiry, and adapting questions to each teacher's unique experiences and context. Interviews were conducted at times and locations convenient for participants, typically after school hours in private spaces at the schools to ensure confidentiality and minimize disruption.

1.7.6.2 Non-Participant Classroom Observations

The second method of data collection was non-participant observation. Observation is the deliberate, methodical, and selective activity of observing and recording

interactions as they occur (Muzari et al., 2022). According to Muzari et al. (2022), non-participant observation involves passively monitoring and listening to group activity before drawing judgements. Non-participant observation was deemed the most appropriate data collection strategy for this study because it allowed the researcher to observe and focus on how teachers conduct their lessons and interact with learners. Employing non-participant observation allowed the researcher to uncover the systems that teachers use in the classroom. In addition, this method helped identify barriers to improving democratic education in primary schools, for instance, by observing whether there were democratic environments and resources that would allow children to find information for themselves. Furthermore, employing non-participant observation enabled the researcher to take analytic notes on the actual events that occurred during observation while following an observation guide. It entailed paying attention to teachers in order to learn more (Muzari et al., 2022).

A primary advantage of this method is that it allows the researcher to view the phenomenon under study more objectively due to immediate detachment, which helps to mitigate biases that can arise from intimate involvement in the situation being observed. This approach is particularly useful for analysing social interactions, as it enables the researcher to gather information and observe activities without disrupting the natural dynamics of the group. Furthermore, as noted by Beries (2024), non-participant observation is a reliable means of collecting precise and comprehensive information about behaviour as it occurs in its authentic context.

During observations, the researcher focused on: pedagogical strategies employed by teachers; student participation patterns; teacher-student interactions and power dynamics; the physical classroom environment and available resources; and evidence of democratic practices or constraints visible in the classroom setting. The researcher positioned themselves unobtrusively in the classroom to minimize disruption and avoid influencing teacher or student behaviour. Detailed field notes were taken during and immediately after observations, capturing both descriptive accounts of what happened and reflective notes recording the researcher's initial interpretations and questions.

1.7.7 Data Analysis

Data analysis involves transforming raw data into understandable concepts and established facts (Alem, 2020). According to Mezmir (2020), data analysis involves

the systematic classification and interpretation of language-based material to deduce conclusions about the representations it contains and the explicit and implicit patterns through which meaning is created. Malik et al. (2021) assert that data analysis often incorporates numerous distinct procedures, which can involve various command-line tools or scripting languages. Hennink et al. (2020) clarify that data analysis involves interpreting key information gathered from interviews, field observations, and texts, and then responsibly presenting the results by describing, categorising, and conceptualising the data to build coherent insights.

The study utilized the discourse analytic method (DA) and the conversational analytic (CA) method. Discourse analysis is a form of social constructionism that focuses on how discourses about certain things or processes can be used to study how social reality is made (Mezmir, 2020). Studies that focus on discourse analysis examine problems more closely related to social science subjects than those in conversation analysis (Mezmir, 2020). They go beyond the structural features of language, combining linguistic analysis with an examination of knowledge-building and production processes (Mezmir, 2020). The empirical focus of conversation analysis, which is named after its beginning point, is more on the topic matter, substance, and social organization of speech than on its grammatical structure. This enables the analysis to include social domains (Mezmir, 2020).

Conversation Analysis is a study approach that examines social contact as a dynamic process that creates and maintains social order (Mezmir, 2020). Conversation analysis assumes that actors analyse the situation and context of their actions, interpret their own actions, and ensure situational appropriateness, intelligibility, and effectiveness in their communication, whether linguistic or non-linguistic (Mezmir, 2020).

The data analysis process began with open coding, a foundational step in qualitative research. Open coding, an inductive method, involves creating analytical concepts directly from the raw data rather than using a pre-existing theoretical framework (Charmaz, 2021). The interview transcripts and field notes from observations were divided into smaller segments, each assigned a short, descriptive label, or "code." At this initial stage, the goal was to generate a wide range of ideas, focusing on exploration and discovery (Saldaña, 2021).

Following open coding, the analysis progressed to identifying themes and patterns. Codes were grouped into provisional themes, which were then reviewed against the entire dataset to ensure they accurately represented the data. Themes were refined, defined, and named to directly address the research questions. This process followed established principles of thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2021), organizing the rich qualitative data into logical thematic patterns grounded in the empirical evidence.

The discourse and conversation analytic approaches were applied particularly to examine: how teachers linguistically positioned democratic education in their talk; power dynamics embedded in language use; interactive patterns in teacher-student classroom discourse observed during classroom observations; and how dominant educational discourses shaped teachers' narratives.

Integration of Data Sources: The researcher triangulated findings from interviews and observations. This triangulation identified convergences where interview and observation data aligned, divergences where they differed, and complementarities where observations provided context for understanding interview data and vice versa. Divergences were treated as analytically significant rather than as problems, as they revealed tensions between teachers' ideals and the constraints they faced in practice.

Throughout the analysis, the researcher interpreted findings through the study's theoretical frameworks (Critical Theory, IKS, Ubuntu philosophy), asking: What do these themes reveal about power dynamics and structural constraints? How does local, contextual knowledge inform practice? Where are relational, communal pedagogies present or absent?

1.8 Ethical Considerations

The discipline of research ethics is concerned with developing guidelines for investigators, assessing research projects, and implementing enforcement systems to guarantee ethical conduct (Head, 2020). As outlined by Head (2020), two principal approaches are used to evaluate the ethics of research actions. From a utilitarian viewpoint, actions are considered ethical if they are anticipated to result in more benefits than harm (Head, 2020). Secondly, deontology is an ethical approach that emphasises the strict adherence to universal moral duties rather than the consideration of consequences (Head 2020). Nii Laryeafio and Ogbewe (2023) posit

that research ethics is fundamentally concerned with the principles of doing good, upholding participant rights, and avoiding harm.

In this study, the researcher will apply for ethical clearance at CEDU REC. The researcher will ensure anonymity, confidentiality, and harm for participants and voluntary participants (Nii Laryeafio & Ogbewe 2023).

1.8.1 Anonymity

Considering the recommendations made by Nii Laryeafio and Ogbewe (2023), anonymity was safeguarded by:

Ensuring that all collected data is stripped of any personally identifiable information, including names, addresses, email addresses, and other details that could reveal a teacher's identity.

Safeguarding the anonymity of gathered data shields participants and empowers them to share crucial information, which underpins the dependability of the results. This process upholds the confidentiality of the individuals who volunteered for the study.

1.8.2 Privacy and confidentiality

The researcher guaranteed the privacy and confidentiality of all teacher-derived information, preventing unauthorized access to the raw data by any external party.

The researcher stored information in Google Drive and the researcher was the only one who had the password.

The researcher had backups and multiple locations (Dropbox) to store information.

1.8.3 Voluntary participation

Ensuring teacher participation is voluntary is essential for obtaining credible information, as mandatory involvement can lead to unwillingness to share authentic insights beyond what might be prompted by financial incentive.

The right of teachers to withdraw from the study at any point during data collection was fully respected. In such an event, all data previously collected from that teacher would be destroyed. This process guaranteed that no teacher was compelled to continue participation should any questions conflict with their personal values (Mumford et al., 2021).

The researcher's judgement is a crucial ethical concern that can impact the quality of interviews. It was crucial to cross-check interview results to avoid bias in data interpretation.

1.8.4 Positionality

Positionality is commonly understood as the stance a researcher occupies in relation to three key domains: the specific topic being investigated, the individuals involved in the study, and the overall methodological framework, setting, and procedures of the research (Holmes, 2020). However, positionality is influenced not only by the researcher's own choice of position, but also by how others (teachers who are participants) position them (Wilson et al., 2022).

Positionality is defined as a reflexive practice where a researcher critically examines, investigates, and accepts responsibility for their origins, viewpoints, experiences, and prejudices in order to improve study quality (Secules et al., 2021). The researcher respected and listened to the teachers, regardless of their religion, beliefs, race, or perception of the topic and this helped in eliciting exhaustive information from teachers.

Nii Laryeafio and Ogbewe (2023) state that the established protocol for conducting research interviews with teachers requires a researcher to prepare and provide four key documents in advance: consent forms, information sheets, interview guides, and introduction letters.

1.8.5 Information sheets

The consent form stated briefly that the study was about a critical viewpoint on the role of democratic and transformative principles in primary education learning, and that any primary school teacher could participate in answering questions and making recommendations. The form further stated that the information acquired would be utilised as an important component of the research and would be shared only with the university, not with any other person or entity.

1.8.6 Consent forms

Upon reviewing the information sheet and understanding the project details, teachers were asked to sign a consent form to confirm their voluntary participation in the research.

1.8.7 Interview guides

The interview guides outlined the key topics the researcher intended to address during the interviews.

The core research questions were designed to adequately fulfil the study's objectives.

1.8.8 Introduction letter

The researcher submitted a letter to the principal of each of the participating schools requesting permission for the teachers to participate in the study.

Once all the paperwork had been submitted, the researcher forwarded the invitation to the teachers.

1.9 Delimitations of the Study

The deliberate boundaries established by the researcher to specify the study's scope are known as delimitations (Bloomberg, 2022). The following boundaries are applicable to this study:

1. **Geographic Scope:** Only primary schools in the South African province of Gauteng are included in this study. The results are not meant to be indicative of all South African primary schools, especially those located in other provinces with different socioeconomic and cultural backgrounds or deep rural areas.
2. **Participant Focus:** Only teachers with at least three years of experience provided data for the study. The opinions of district officials, parents, students, and school principals were not included. The pedagogical implementers in the classroom were the main focus.
3. **Conceptual Boundaries:** The role of transformative and democratic principles was the main focus of the inquiry. Although similar ideas, such as multicultural education

or inclusive education, might have arisen, they were mostly analysed from the perspective of the fundamental ideas under review.

4. Methodological Limitations: The study's qualitative methodology and the particular techniques of semi-structured interviews and non-participant observation set it apart. It prioritised depth of knowledge over breadth and avoided using quantitative surveys or extensive data analysis.

5. Theoretical Framework: Critical Theory and IKS served as the framework for the data analysis and interpretation. Although they might have been useful, other theoretical frameworks were kept outside the specific purview of this investigation.

1.10 Conclusion

This research lays the foundation for examining the function of democratic and transformative principles in Gauteng's primary education system. The study is set against the backdrop of South Africa's complicated historical legacy, which, in spite of a progressive policy framework meant to promote social justice and learner agency, still shows up as enduring inequalities and pedagogical difficulties. The gap between policy goals, like those outlined in CAPS and the SASA, and the actual situation in many classrooms, where authoritarian methods, a lack of funding, and inadequate teacher support frequently thwart democratic and transformative objectives, is eloquently expressed in the problem statement.

This study is well-suited to explore the nuanced perspectives of teachers, guided by a qualitative research design informed by critical theory and IKS. By using an interpretivist paradigm, the research focused on the personal experiences and subjective interpretations of the teachers who are responsible for putting these principles into action. The research utilized a methodology that integrates non-participant observation and semi-structured interviews, succeeded by discourse and conversation analysis, to produce comprehensive, contextual insights into the obstacles, facilitators, and pragmatic realities of cultivating democratic, transformative learning environments.

The positionality statement and ethical considerations demonstrate a dedicated and introspective approach, guaranteeing that the study was carried out with honesty, respect for participants, and a critical understanding of the researcher's own role in

the process of knowledge creation. This study ultimately provides significant, empirical data that can guide curriculum development, teacher professional development, and educational policy, supporting the ongoing endeavour to establish a truly democratic and transformative South African primary education system.

CHAPTER 2: LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Introduction

In primary education, democratic and transformative principles signify a transition from conventional, authoritarian approaches toward methods that focus on social justice, learner agency, and participatory learning. According to Apple (2022), democratic education is built on the core premise that schools ought to serve as miniature replicas of democratic communities, where students actively participate in critical discourse, decision-making, and cooperative problem-solving. By exposing systemic inequities and enabling students to become change agents in their communities, transformative education expands on this premise (Takona, 2024). These concepts seek to build not only academic talents but also the civic and ethical capacities needed to navigate and improve an increasingly complex society (Giroux, 2020). These themes are particularly relevant in South Africa, where historical legacies of inequality persist. They offer a framework for addressing long-standing disparities and fostering inclusive, equitable learning environments (Motala et al., 2023).

Furthermore, democratic and transformative principles serve multiple functions beyond information transmission; they promote critical consciousness and engaged citizenship. Schools that implement student councils or peer-led debates, for example, provide students with opportunities to practice democratic engagement. In Western Cape township schools, "Equal Education Groups" (EEYG) are implemented. Khayelisha students and councils have regularly advocated for library enhancements through petitions, community marches, and meetings with provincial officials (Veriava, 2024). These councils have conversations with kids utilizing Ubuntu ideals (Makoelle et al., 2021).

Additionally, transformative education integrates critical discourses on gender, race, and class into ordinary classroom instruction, challenging the status quo (Ndlovu-Gatsheni, 2021). To produce engaged and responsible citizens, democratic education emphasizes inclusive pedagogies, participatory governance, and learner voice (Karlsson, 2021). In principle, CAPS promotes inclusive education; yet, in practice, its tight assessment framework and teacher-centred approach might restrict opportunities for active student engagement and democratic pedagogies. Transformative education

goes a step further, allowing students to challenge and fight oppressive structures both within and outside of the classroom (Ndlovu-Gatsheni, 2021). Transformative pedagogies, for example, could bridge the theoretical and practical divide by integrating students in efforts addressing regional social issues such as gender inequity or environmental degradation (Bhana, 2025). These strategies are particularly useful in primary school, where early exposure to transformative and democratic activities can shape lifelong attitudes toward education, citizenship, and social responsibility (Le Grange, 2023).

This chapter reviews literature on democratic and transformative education in primary schooling, with particular attention to the South African context. The review is organized as follows: Section 2.2 examines catalysts that enable democratic and transformative education (policy reforms, technological innovations, curriculum reforms, and transformative discourses); Section 2.3 identifies systemic barriers that constrain implementation (political, socioeconomic, cultural, and curricular obstacles); Section 2.4 discusses pathways to implementation; Section 2.5 presents the theoretical frameworks (Critical Theory, IKS, and Ubuntu philosophy) that inform this study; and Section 2.6 concludes by synthesizing key themes and identifying gaps the present study addresses.

2.2 Catalysts for Democratic and Transformative Education: Global Frameworks and Local Practices

This study uses both international theoretical frameworks and local empirical research to critically analyse how democratic and transformational education concepts are conceived, used, and debated in South African primary schooling environments. While considerable challenges to democratic education remain, several essential variables have aided its advancement in primary school. This section examines important facets that promote democratic education in South Africa, including policy reform, technological and teacher innovations, curriculum reform, and key transformative discourses such as student agency, global citizenship, critical teacher education, technology, and Indigenous epistemologies.

2.2.1 Policy Reforms and International Frameworks

Global attempts to enhance democratic education ideals have gained traction through significant policy frameworks and cross-national changes. UNESCO's Reimagining

Our Futures Together report (2021) has had a significant impact, pushing for inclusive, equity-centred curricula that have informed systemic changes in countries such as Chile and New Zealand. Similarly, the OECD's Education Policy Outlook (2020) has influenced participatory curricular reforms in Portugal, stressing stakeholder involvement in educational decision-making (Bo, 2025). These multinational projects show the growing acknowledgment of education as a catalyst for political involvement and social transformation.

In South Africa, regulations such as the National Education Policy Act (1996) and the Inclusive Education Policy (2001) provide strong policy foundations for democratic education. Recent efforts, such as the Department of Basic Education's Gender-Responsive Strategy (2020), have enhanced pledges to equity by combating gender-based violence and building inclusive educational settings (Ismail et al., 2022). Language policy implementation has also progressed, with mother-tongue instruction pilot projects in the Foundation Phase increasing learner involvement and cultural affirmation (Tshehla, 2023). Furthermore, South Africa's 2023 curriculum revisions have made substantial progress toward cultural diversity by incorporating IKS (Department of Basic Education, 2023). Parallel trends elsewhere, such as Sweden's emphasis on climate justice education (UNICEF, 2022), indicate a global movement toward a curriculum that prepares kids for engaged, informed citizenship. These improvements represent a revolutionary pedagogical philosophy that values diversity, participatory learning, and responsiveness to local and global concerns.

2.2.2 Technological Innovations and Teacher Development

Educational technology (EdTech) has considerably increased access to personalized learning, democratizing instructional practices in a variety of contexts. Even though this is a worldwide development, not all South African schools have access to the internet; according to (Mxatule, 2024), 80% of township schools lack electricity, and just 22% of rural schools have internet (Mazibuko, 2024). Eneza Education in Kenya exemplifies this progress, providing interactive, learner-centred curricula to nearly 500,000 pupils while encouraging autonomy and involvement (Adeniran et al., 2023). Siyavula's Thuto Trust supports EdTech in advancing democratic education in South Africa by offering flexible Science and Math programs that are in line with CAPS to the country's learners (Padayachee, 2021). The COVID-19 pandemic has hastened the

shift toward hybrid learning models, reinforcing individualized instruction and student autonomy, allowing teachers to adjust their methods to each learner's specific requirements.

Concurrently, investments in teacher training and professional development have been critical in developing democratic education. South Africa's National Policy Framework for Teacher Education and Development (NPFTED) prioritises ongoing professional development, while pandemic-era programs have broadened their focus to include digital literacy, trauma-informed practices, and inclusive pedagogy (Krishnannair, A. & Krishnannair, S. 2023). Given the high rates of poverty, violence, and past trauma, trauma-informed teaching methods are crucial in South African primary schools to promote psychological safety and cognitive development and create inclusive, pleasant learning environments (Mampane, 2023). Collaborations between NGOs and universities have improved teacher preparedness by providing teachers with culturally relevant ways to address varied classroom requirements (Krishnannair et al., 2022; Chiramba, 2024). For instance, the Funza Literacy Trust, in collaboration with the University of KwaZulu-Natal (UKZN), trains teachers to employ local youth narratives and African folktales to improve literacy in underserved schools (Krishnannair et al., 2022; Chiramba, 2024). As a result, student involvement has increased, particularly in rural areas.

Moreover, research has demonstrated the effectiveness of integrative models that combine theory and practice, presenting teachers as facilitators of democratic learning environments (Darling-Hammond et al., 2021; Carney, 2022). However, these global improvements underscore a continuing gap (failure to bridge policy required theoretical training) in South African teacher education, where legislation frequently separates theoretical knowledge from classroom practice. Internships for students pursuing a Bachelor of Education (B.Ed.) are frequently reduced because they watch other teachers employing antiquated teaching techniques, such as lecturing (Banoo, 2021). In contrast, international examples show how institutional support can realign teacher training with democratic principles—a vital factor for South Africa's continuing reform efforts.

2.2.3 Curriculum Reform and Transformative Discourses

Grassroots activism has emerged as a significant catalyst for curricular reform, with movements such as Black Lives Matter pressuring U.S. history curricula to highlight disadvantaged narratives (Banks, 2021). Youth movements such as #RhodesMustFall (2015) and #FeesMustFall (2016-2017) called for curriculum changes, including a shift to the decolonial curriculum (CAPS), in order to achieve equal transformation in South Africa (Hlatshwayo, 2024). International partnerships, such as EU-funded STEM programs and UNICEF-supported psychosocial therapies, have magnified bottom-up initiatives by providing vital resources and facilitating cross-border information sharing.

As fundamental theoretical frameworks for primary education, democratic education and transformative pedagogies are becoming more widely acknowledged. This raises the question, "What are the conditions for successful implementation of democratic and transformative practices in primary school education?" These methods, which are based on participatory democracy (Apple, 2022) and critical pedagogy (Giroux, 2020), rethink education as a place to foster inclusive behaviours, critical consciousness, and agentic citizenship at the most fundamental levels. While transformational discourses use critical curricular and pedagogical approaches to confront systemic injustices, democratic education theory expressly places a strong emphasis on student voice and equitable participation as tools for societal change. Their combined use in primary education is especially important because it forms lifelong attitudes toward social justice and democratic participation, which is crucial for successfully putting these principles into practice. The conflict between these liberating theories and traditional educational paradigms highlights the necessity of systemic change in order to fully realize their transformative potential.

2.2.3.1 Student Agency and Global Citizenship

Based on constructivist and critical educational traditions, the idea of student agency is a key theoretical tenet of democratic education. The concept of "subjectification" proposed by Biesta (2021) theorizes agency as the ability of students to express themselves as democratic subjects and challenge normative educational hierarchies. This is expanded upon by Riddle's (2024) concept of "radical collegiality," which views agency as a practice of knowledge co-construction that may be done both individually and collectively. Through the implementation of peer feedback systems, student-led

inquiry, or participatory classroom governance, these theoretical approaches alter established power structures and establish the framework for what Giroux (2020) refers to as "critical democratic praxis," in which educational practices foster both academic proficiency and emancipatory political consciousness.

Democratic education theory stresses collaborative knowledge production and challenges established pedagogical hierarchies through reciprocal teacher-student relationships (Biesta, 2021). While empirical studies show that such approaches are effective in creating democratic dispositions (Perry-Hazan & Somech, 2023), their Western epistemic roots demand rigorous examination in postcolonial contexts. Critical theory challenges the uncritical adoption of these frameworks, emphasizing the importance of historical awareness of power imbalances that might perpetuate epistemic violence in the classroom (Ndlovu-Gatsheni, 2021). This theoretical contradiction highlights the importance of contextually grounded frameworks in transitional nations that balance democratic aspirations with decolonial imperatives.

In addition, the concept of global citizenship education (GCE) is gaining popularity as a transformative discourse in primary education. According to UNESCO (2021), GCE is a framework that provides children with the information, skills, and values they need to tackle global issues, including climate change, poverty, and inequality. Therefore, by incorporating GCE into basic curricula, schools can help children acquire a feeling of responsibility for both their local and global societies. Hitzelberger et al. (2023) found that early exposure to global challenges promotes a sense of interconnectedness and motivates young people to take meaningful action.

2.2.3.2 Critical Teacher Education and Digital Justice

Critical teacher education study is necessary to theorize the role of teachers in democratic and transformational learning. The "transformative teacher preparation" approach proposed by Darling-Hammond et al. (2021) reframes professional development as a place to foster critical consciousness and pedagogical competence. Freirean ideas of teachers as cultural workers who support learning while also addressing systemic injustices are consistent with this method (Giroux, 2020). The theory of "democratic pedagogical content knowledge" (Irwin et al., 2021) makes teacher education a key tool for bringing democratic principles into practice in the

classroom. To support teachers' ability to be both instructional and social change agents, systemic support beyond technical training is needed.

Additionally, teacher preparation and professional development are essential for the successful implementation of transformational discourses and democratic education in primary schools. It is imperative that teachers have the skills and expertise to provide inclusive and interactive learning environments (Makoelle et al., 2021). This means understanding the foundations of democratic education and being able to accommodate the diverse needs of pupils in a multicultural setting. Recent research indicates that continuing professional development programs that support social justice, critical pedagogy, and inclusive education are essential (Awodiji, 2025). By investing in teacher development, South Africa can ensure that teachers are better prepared to help students acquire democratic values and critical thinking skills.

Effective implementation of democratic and transformational pedagogies in primary school necessitates rigorous teacher professional development based on theoretical frameworks. Makoelle et al. (2021) argue that "inclusive pedagogical content knowledge" is crucial for developing both technical skills and critical consciousness, which is consistent with Giroux's (2020) view of teachers as transformational intellectuals. Awodiji's (2025) "sustained critical professional development" goes beyond this, emphasizing continual interaction with social justice concepts. This theoretical approach goes beyond skill-based training to help teachers develop critical thinking, cultural responsiveness, and democratic leadership skills, which are vital for South Africa's post-apartheid educational change.

Furthermore, the concept of digital justice has emerged as a crucial aspect of democratic education in the 21st century. Digital justice addresses issues of equitable access to technology, digital literacy, and the ethical use of digital resources (Zembylas, 2023). In South African primary schools, where technological infrastructure is often unevenly distributed, digital justice becomes particularly salient. Ensuring that all learners have access to digital tools and develop digital literacy skills is essential for preparing them to participate fully in democratic society (Padayachee, 2021).

2.2.3.3 Ubuntu and Indigenous Epistemologies

Ubuntu philosophy and IKS represent distinctly African catalysts for democratic and transformative education. Ubuntu, often articulated through the Zulu proverb "umuntu ngumuntu ngabantu" ("a person is a person through other people"), emphasizes relationality, communal values, and collective responsibility (Metz 2023). When integrated into primary education, Ubuntu pedagogies foster democratic participation through collaborative learning, peer support, and restorative approaches to discipline rather than punitive measures (Waghid, 2023).

IKS provide epistemological alternatives to Western-centric curricula, validating local languages, cultural practices, and ways of knowing that have been historically marginalized. Le Grange (2023) argues that IKS integration represents a decolonial project that is essential for transformative education in postcolonial contexts. Examples include: oral storytelling traditions (intsomi, inganekwane) used to teach values and history; traditional games like Morabaraba integrated into mathematics teaching; ecological knowledge from Indigenous communities incorporated into science curricula; and Ubuntu-based restorative justice practices (lekgotla circles) replacing authoritarian discipline (Ngulube, 2021; Ngubane & Makua, 2021).

These Indigenous epistemologies align with democratic education principles by centring learner identities, validating community knowledge, and fostering collaborative rather than competitive learning environments. However, their integration into formal curricula remains limited, constrained by curriculum rigidity and teacher preparedness challenges discussed in Section 2.3.

2.3 Systemic Barriers to Democratic Education

Despite the catalysts identified above, significant systemic barriers constrain the implementation of democratic and transformative education in South African primary schools. This section examines four categories of barriers: political and ideological constraints, socioeconomic inequities, cultural resistance and teacher preparedness challenges, and curricular rigidity and epistemic injustice.

2.3.1 Political and Ideological Constraints

According to Motala et al., (2023), neoliberal education policies, which emphasize standardized testing, competition, and performance-based accountability, frequently

conflict with democratic education ideas. This ideological barrier manifests itself in South African primary schools through CAPS' high-stakes assessment system, which encourages teaching to the test rather than fostering critical thinking or learner participation (Motala et al., 2023). Furthermore, lingering hierarchical school administrations from the apartheid era reinforce top-down decision-making methods that exclude both instructors and students from meaningful participation (Jansen & Walters, 2022).

Political constraints also include insufficient political will to invest adequately in education transformation. While policies articulate democratic ideals, resource allocation often does not match these commitments, particularly in historically disadvantaged schools. Karlsson (2021) argues that despite policies mandating SGBs and RCLs, these structures often function symbolically rather than substantively, with limited actual decision-making power granted to learners or communities.

2.3.2 Socioeconomic Inequities and Resource Disparities

Socioeconomic imbalances are a significant impediment to democratic education in South Africa. Spaull and Pretorius (2022) point out that South Africa continues to have one of the world's most unequal educational systems, with low-income schools receiving disproportionately fewer resources than their richer counterparts. This resource imbalance manifests in overcrowded classrooms (often 40-60 learners per class in township schools), inadequate physical infrastructure (lack of libraries, laboratories, and technology), insufficient learning materials (textbooks, teaching aids), and limited extracurricular opportunities for learners to practice democratic participation.

Van der Berg et al. (2023) demonstrate that these material conditions directly constrain democratic pedagogies. Teachers facing large class sizes and limited resources default to teacher-centred, transmission modes of instruction simply to manage classroom realities. Poverty also affects learners directly: hungry, stressed, or traumatized children struggle to engage in participatory learning regardless of pedagogical approach (Bhana, 2025). Thus, socioeconomic barriers operate at both institutional (school resources) and individual (learner circumstances) levels.

2.3.3 Cultural Resistance and Teacher Preparedness Challenges

Cultural resistance to democratic education stems from multiple sources. Harber (2021) identifies persistent authoritarian school cultures inherited from Bantu Education, where questioning authority is discouraged and learning centres on rote memorization. Many teachers, particularly those trained during or shortly after apartheid, lack exposure to democratic pedagogies in their own education or initial teacher training (Banoo, 2021). Additionally, some cultural contexts emphasize adult authority and child obedience, creating tension with learner voice and participatory approaches central to democratic education (Omodan & Addam, 2022).

Teacher preparedness challenges compound cultural resistance. Van der Berg et al. (2023) found that many South African primary teachers lack confidence and competence in implementing learner-centred, participatory pedagogies. Pre-service teacher education often remains theoretical, failing to provide practical training in democratic teaching methods. In-service professional development opportunities are limited, particularly in rural and township schools. Without adequate preparation, teachers struggle to implement democratic approaches even when committed to them conceptually.

2.3.4 Curricular Rigidity and Epistemic Injustice

The CAPS curriculum, while progressive in principle, is criticized for its rigidity in practice. Jansen and Walters (2022) argue that CAPS' dense content coverage requirements and strict pacing schedules leave little time for the deliberative dialogue, collaborative inquiry, and critical reflection essential to democratic education. Assessment structures prioritize memorization and recall over critical thinking or problem-solving, reinforcing transmission pedagogies (Motala et al., 2023).

Epistemic injustice represents a deeper curricular barrier. Despite policy commitments to IKS integration, the CAPS curriculum remains fundamentally Eurocentric, marginalizing African languages, IKS, and local histories (Ndlovu-Gatsheni, 2021). Le Grange (2021) argues that this constitutes epistemic violence, alienating learners from their cultural identities while privileging Western knowledge as universal and superior. This epistemic exclusion contradicts transformative education's commitment to validating marginalized knowledge and preparing learners to challenge rather than accept dominant narratives.

Waghid (2023) additionally notes that Ubuntu philosophy, despite its cultural salience, remains largely absent from formal curriculum. When Indigenous knowledge appears, it is often tokenised included superficially in single lessons rather than integrated systematically throughout teaching and learning.

2.4 Pathways to Implementation: Addressing Structural Barriers for Democratic Education

Having identified both catalysts (Section 2.2) and barriers (Section 2.3), this section examines pathways forward. How might structural barriers be addressed to advance democratic and transformative education in South African primary schools? Four key domains require attention: curriculum and pedagogy, school governance and leadership, resources and equity, and teacher development.

2.4.1 Curriculum and Pedagogical Implications

Curriculum reform must address the tension between content coverage demands and democratic pedagogies. Riddle et al. (2023) propose "slow pedagogy" approaches that prioritize depth over breadth, allowing time for deliberative discussion, collaborative inquiry, and critical reflection. Apple (2022) advocates for curriculum co-construction involving teachers, learners, and communities rather than top-down mandates, ensuring curriculum reflects learners lived experiences and local contexts.

Pedagogical implications include: integrating student voice in curriculum design and classroom decision-making; employing inquiry-based, problem-based, and project-based learning approaches that position learners as knowledge co-constructors; connecting curriculum to learners' lives and communities through place-based education; and incorporating IKS and Ubuntu pedagogies systematically rather than tokenistically (Le Grange, 2023; Waghid, 2023).

Assessment reform is equally crucial. Moving beyond high-stakes standardized testing toward formative, portfolio-based, and authentic assessment approaches would create space for democratic pedagogies (Jansen & Walters, 2022). Assessment focused on critical thinking, problem-solving, and collaborative competencies rather than mere content recall would align better with transformative education goals.

2.4.2 School Governance and Leadership

Karlsson (2021) emphasizes that democratic school governance structures—SGBs and RCLs—must move from symbolic to substantive participation. This requires: genuine decision-making power granted to these bodies rather than mere consultative roles; capacity building for student, parent, and community representatives to participate effectively; transparent communication and accountability mechanisms; and leadership willing to share power and embrace participatory decision-making.

Transformative educational leadership is essential. Mampane, (2023) argues that school leaders must model democratic values, create enabling environments for teacher experimentation with democratic pedagogies, and buffer teachers from excessive bureaucratic demands. Distributed leadership approaches that involve teachers, learners, and communities in school improvement processes align with democratic principles while building collective capacity (Makoelle et al., 2021).

2.4.3 Resources and Equity Considerations

Addressing resource disparities is fundamental to advancing democratic education. Spaul and Pretorius (2022) argue for equitable funding formulas that allocate resources based on need rather than maintaining historical inequalities. This includes: adequate physical infrastructure (safe, well-equipped classrooms, libraries, laboratories); sufficient learning materials (textbooks, technology, teaching aids); manageable class sizes enabling individualized attention and collaborative work; and support services (psychosocial support, nutrition programs) addressing barriers to learning.

Beyond material resources, Unterhalter (2023) emphasizes capacity resources—professional development, collaborative planning time, access to pedagogical support. Grassroots movements like Equal Education have successfully advocated for improved school infrastructure and resources through community mobilization, demonstrating the power of participatory advocacy aligned with democratic education principles.

2.4.4 Teacher Development and Technology in Democratic Education

Comprehensive teacher development is crucial for democratic education implementation. Awodiji (2025) proposes "sustained critical professional development" that goes beyond one-off workshops to ongoing, practice-based learning communities. This includes: pre-service education integrating democratic pedagogies with substantial practicum experience in schools modelling these approaches; in-service professional development focused on critical pedagogy, inclusive education, and culturally responsive teaching; collaborative professional learning communities (PLC) where teachers share practices and support one another; and mentorship programs pairing novice teachers with experienced democratic educators (Krishnannair et al., 2022).

Technology, when equitably accessible, offers tools for democratic education. Padayachee (2021) describes how Siyavula's digital platforms enable personalized, learner-paced instruction aligned with CAPS. However, Zembylas (2023) cautions that technology must be approached through a digital justice lens, ensuring equitable access, critical digital literacy, and pedagogical uses that empower rather than surveil or control learners. In the South African context, where 80% of township schools lack electricity and only 22% of rural schools have internet access (Mxatule, 2024), addressing infrastructure gaps is a prerequisite to technology-enabled democratic education.

2.5 Theoretical Frameworks Informing This Study

This study is informed by two complementary theoretical frameworks: Critical Theory and IKS, specifically Ubuntu philosophy. These frameworks provide conceptual lenses for understanding democratic and transformative education in South African primary schools, analysing power dynamics that constrain implementation, and envisioning emancipatory alternatives grounded in both critical consciousness and African epistemologies.

2.5.1 Critical Theory and Emancipatory Pedagogy

Critical theory is essential for examining and transforming South African primary education because it highlights structural injustices and promotes emancipatory teaching methods. Critical theory critiques the Eurocentric, neoliberal systems that still

govern post-apartheid education. Its foundations are found in Freire's (Pedagogy of the Oppressed) work and have been expanded upon by more recent scholars like Giroux (2020). Racial and socioeconomic disparities in education persist in South African classrooms, where critical theory aids in the deconstruction of power dynamics (Spaull & Pretorius, 2022). Among the difficulties is a curriculum that silences Black and Indigenous voices, teacher-centred pedagogies, and standardized testing (Motala et al., 2023).

Critical theory's emphasis on critical pedagogy, which challenges social norms and power structures, is one of its main applications. For example, teachers who employ Freirean methods in Gauteng township schools may have conversations with children about local problems, such as housing inequality or water scarcity, and relate them to more general historical and systemic causes (Jansen & Walters, 2022). Additionally, students can employ indigenous knowledge to solve problems in their communities, examine history, and become active change makers rather than passive beneficiaries (Le Grange, 2023). The commodification of education under neoliberal policies, such as the excessive dependence on standardized tests (ANA examinations, for example), which frequently favour memorization over critical thinking, is another issue that critical theory criticizes (Le Grange, 2023). Critical theory emphasizes the discrepancies between policy and practice while supporting student agency and social justice awareness, which is consistent with South Africa's constitutional objectives of equity and transformation.

This study employs Critical Theory to analyse the policy-practice implementation gap in democratic education, examining how neoliberal accountability pressures, bureaucratic control, and resource inequities function as structural barriers. Critical Theory also provides tools for understanding teachers as potential agents of transformation who enact democratic pedagogies despite systemic constraints, exercising what Giroux (2020) terms "pragmatic resistance" within oppressive structures.

2.5.2 Indigenous Knowledge Systems (IKS) and Ubuntu Philosophy

Similarly to critical theory, IKS plays an important role because it emphasizes African languages, epistemologies, and collective values, providing a decolonial alternative to education that is centred on the West. Many South African customs are incorporated

into IKS, including land-based ecological knowledge that helps pupils with farming and water conservation. Additionally, Ubuntu-based conflict mediation teaches children how to listen and collaborate to resolve problems in the community (Waghid, 2023). Oral storytelling teaches students to transition between written and spoken narratives (Hoppers, 2025). Incorporating IKS into primary school enhances instruction with comprehensive, regionally appropriate pedagogies while also validating students' cultural identities.

Examples of IKS in Action

Oral Storytelling (Intsomi/Inganekwane): Xhosa elders work with teachers in Eastern Cape schools to narrate folktales that impart social values, historical knowledge, and environmental conservation. For instance, the tale of the trickster figure Uhlakanyana is utilised to connect life skills courses to ethical decision-making (Ngulube, 2021).

Additionally, lekgotla, or traditional dialogue circles, have replaced severe discipline in KwaZulu-Natal schools as part of Ubuntu-Based Restorative Justice. Students collaborate to settle disputes in these circles by emphasizing empathy and communal healing (Bennett, 2022). This approach fosters social cohesiveness, which aligns with the goals of transformative education.

Furthermore, Limpopo teachers use the board game "Morabaraba" to teach spatial reasoning and strategic thinking, and they use Zulu beadwork patterns to illustrate symmetry in geometry classes, giving abstract ideas a tangible and culturally relevant form (Ngubane and Makua, 2021). Northern Cape primary schools work with San knowledge holders to combine science curricula with local cosmologies by teaching astronomy using Indigenous star lore (such the !Xamma constellation) (Le Grange, 2023).

Ubuntu philosophy, frequently articulated through the proverb "umuntu ngumuntu ngabantu" ("a person is a person through other people"), emphasizes interconnection, relationality, and communal ethics (Metz, 2023). When applied to education, Ubuntu reframes learning as fundamentally relational and communal rather than individualistic and competitive. Ubuntu pedagogies prioritize collaborative learning, mutual support, care ethics, and restorative rather than punitive approaches to discipline (Waghid, 2023).

This study employs IKS and Ubuntu as complementary frameworks to Critical Theory, providing culturally grounded, decolonial perspectives on democratic education. Where Critical Theory exposes oppressive structures, IKS and Ubuntu offer emancipatory alternatives rooted in African epistemologies. This dual framework recognizes that transformative education in post-apartheid South Africa requires both critical consciousness (challenging dominant structures) and cultural affirmation (validating Indigenous knowledge and values).

2.5.3 Integrating Critical Theory and Decolonial Frameworks in Primary Education

Critical theory's focus on agency and social justice is consistent with democratic ideals in primary education, such as equitable access and learner involvement (Apple, 2022). IKS-informed transformative principles require curricula that validate local histories and knowledge while promoting critical consciousness (Le Grange, 2023). The CAPS curriculum in South Africa, for instance, makes an effort at this integration but frequently fails because of bureaucratic inflexibility (Jansen & Walters, 2022). Thus, IKS and critical theory emphasize the importance of education that enables students to challenge injustices while reaffirming their cultural identities.

Integrating these frameworks provides a robust conceptual foundation for analysing democratic education in South African primary schools. Critical Theory enables examination of power dynamics, structural inequities, and ideological contradictions between democratic rhetoric and authoritarian practice. IKS and Ubuntu provide culturally grounded alternatives emphasizing relationality, communal values, and Indigenous epistemologies. Together, they offer both critique (what constrains democratic education) and vision (what emancipatory, culturally affirming education could look like).

This integrated framework informs the study's research questions, guiding attention to: teachers' conceptualizations of democratic education (do they draw on Western democratic theory, Ubuntu philosophy, or both?); pedagogical strategies employed (do practices reflect critical pedagogy, Ubuntu relationality, or both?); and structural factors that enable or constrain implementation (how do neoliberal pressures, resource constraints, and epistemic exclusion interact?).

2.6 Conclusion

This literature review has examined democratic and transformative education in South African primary schools through multiple lenses: catalysts that enable these approaches (policy reforms, technological innovations, curriculum reforms, and transformative discourses); systemic barriers that constrain implementation (political, socioeconomic, cultural, and curricular obstacles); pathways forward addressing these barriers (curriculum reform, school governance, resource equity, and teacher development); and theoretical frameworks (Critical Theory and IKS/Ubuntu) that inform analysis of these phenomena.

Several key themes emerge from the literature. First, there is broad consensus that democratic and transformative education—emphasizing learner agency, participatory governance, critical consciousness, and social justice—represents the ideal vision for South African primary schooling, aligned with constitutional values and post-apartheid transformation imperatives. Second, significant policy frameworks and catalysts exist to support democratic education, including progressive policies (CAPS, Inclusive Education Policy), international frameworks (UNESCO, OECD), technological innovations, grassroots activism, and Indigenous epistemologies (Motala et al., 2023).

However—and this represents the central problem this study addresses—substantial barriers constrain the translation of democratic ideals into classroom practice. Neoliberal accountability pressures prioritize standardized testing over critical thinking (Jansen & Walters, 2022); socioeconomic inequities create vastly unequal learning conditions (Spaull & Pretorius, 2022); authoritarian school cultures inherited from Bantu Education persist (Harber, 2021); teacher preparation remains inadequate (Van der Berg, Gustafsson & Malindi, 2023); and curriculum rigidity combined with epistemic exclusion marginalizes Indigenous knowledge while constraining democratic pedagogies (Ndlovu-Gatsheni, 2021; Waghid, 2023).

Critical gaps in the literature include: limited empirical research examining how primary school teachers—the primary implementers of democratic education—actually understand and attempt to enact democratic principles in their daily practice; insufficient attention to teachers' lived experiences navigating tensions between democratic ideals and systemic constraints; and minimal research investigating how

IKS and Ubuntu philosophy inform (or could inform) teachers' conceptualizations and enactment of democratic education in South African contexts.

CHAPTER 3: RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

3.1 Introduction

The research strategy and technique employed in the study are examined in this chapter, which also describes the procedure for data collection and analysis. The research design outlines the structure for carrying out the investigation, whereas the methodology describes the methods and processes used to answer the research questions. Additionally, this chapter examines the research paradigm, trustworthiness, and ethical considerations.

This chapter provides a detailed account of how the research was conducted, allowing for assessment of the study's rigor and enabling others to understand and potentially replicate the research process. The chapter is organized as follows: Section 3.2 presents the research paradigm that guided the study; Section 3.3 describes the qualitative research approach and case study design employed; Section 3.4 describes the research setting; Section 3.5 explains the sampling strategy and sample selection; Section 3.6 details the data collection methods; Section 3.7 outlines the data analysis procedures; Section 3.8 addresses trustworthiness; Section 3.9 discusses ethical considerations; and Section 3.10 concludes the chapter.

3.2 Research Paradigm

A paradigm is a set of fundamental assumptions and a theoretical framework; in other words, it is how people study and comprehend the world. A research paradigm is a shared framework of beliefs and methods that guides scientists in how they understand and investigate problems (Kumatongo & Muzata, 2021). This study uses the interpretivism paradigm for the following reasons: For researchers adhering to interpretivism, reality is understood to be founded upon the subjective viewpoints individuals hold about their external environment. Interpretivists maintain that all knowledge is inherently subjective and contingent on human thought and that there are multiple valid approaches to understanding rather than a single definitive method.

Furthermore, researchers have found the interpretive paradigm to be a useful tool for addressing issues with social interaction and uncovering the truth about the subject under study. In contrast to positivist perspectives, interpretivists argue that

knowledge is built on meaning, thereby questioning notions of objective truth and broad generalisation (Kumatungo & Muzata, 2021). Interpretivism is understood as the epistemological view that individuals build knowledge via their personal experiences and interpretations. In order to comprehend social phenomena, it highlights the significance of subjective meanings and viewpoints. A central tenet of interpretivism is its recognition of research's inherent subjectivity, where the objective is to understand individuals' unique viewpoints and lived experiences and how these shape their interpretation of reality. Within the interpretivist paradigm, qualitative methods such as interviews, focus groups, and observations are utilized to collect in-depth data on individual experiences and meanings. This approach underscores the critical influence of social, historical, and cultural context in shaping human understanding and perspectives (William, 2024).

This study was situated within the interpretive paradigm because the research questions focused on understanding teachers' subjective experiences, meanings, and interpretations of democratic education—phenomena requiring interpretive inquiry rather than positivist measurement. The interpretivist paradigm recognizes that classroom realities are socially constructed through teachers' interactions with policies, learners, colleagues, and material conditions, acknowledging multiple, context-dependent realities rather than a single objective truth.

3.3 Research Approach and Design

This study used qualitative research techniques and implemented a multiple-case study design to explore the lived experiences and complicated realities of teachers practicing democratic education in primary school settings.

3.3.1 Qualitative Research Approach

According to Ansari et al. (2022), research design serves as an overarching conceptual structure that details the complete methodological strategy for an investigation. A research design constitutes the framework of methodological approaches and strategic choices made to implement an investigation (Wisenthige, 2023). The research design outlines how evidence pertinent to the research question will be collected; specifically, the evidence needed to assess a problem, examine a hypothesis, or depict a phenomenon. Effective designs must produce research

findings that are both precise and objective. Kumatongo and Muzata (2021) interpret a research design as an outline, plan, or scheme that a researcher uses to generate answers to research questions.

This study uses the qualitative approach, which is a technique for gaining in-depth knowledge and insights about complicated phenomena. This approach investigates the complex layers of human experience and viewpoints, preserving contexts and subtleties that numerical translations frequently miss (Mutanga, 2024). Qualitative research thus constitutes more than a methodological decision; it is a dedication to probing the depths of social phenomena and relating to respondents' subjective experiences (Lim, 2025).

A qualitative research approach was deemed appropriate for this study for several interconnected reasons. First, the nature of the research questions demanded qualitative inquiry—the study sought to understand teachers' lived experiences, interpretations, meaning-making processes, and the complex contextual factors shaping their practice. Second, understanding the policy-practice implementation gap required rich, contextual description of classroom realities. Third, the study's theoretical foundations (Critical Theory, IKS, and Ubuntu philosophy) aligned with qualitative epistemology, emphasizing contextual knowledge, lived experience, and validation of marginalized voices. Fourth, the post-apartheid South African educational context required research approaches that are sensitive to power dynamics, colonial legacies, and cultural specificity.

3.3.2 Case Study Design

Examining two schools enabled the researcher to observe similarities and differences in terms of cultures, policies, and experiences. This comparison improved understanding of how context influences findings (Tisdell, Merriam, and Stuckey-Peyrot 2025). According to Hirose and Creswell (2023), data from two schools can validate recurring themes while limiting bias from a single environment. As a result, the researcher chose two schools: one in town and one outside town.

This study employed a case study design, examining democratic education implementation in two primary schools as cases. Case study design is particularly appropriate when research focuses on contemporary phenomena (democratic education implementation) within real-life contexts (primary school classrooms), and

when context is crucial to understanding the phenomenon. The bounded nature of this study—two specific schools, specific teachers, specific time period—aligned with case study's focus on bounded systems. Case study design enabled the integration of multiple data sources (classroom observations and semi-structured interviews) to build a rich, holistic understanding of democratic education implementation in each school context.

3.4 Research Setting

This study was conducted in two primary schools in Gauteng province, South Africa. The schools are referred to throughout this study as School 1 (S1) and School 2 (S2) to maintain confidentiality. One school was located in town and one outside town, providing contextual variation between the two cases. This dual-school approach allowed for examination of democratic education implementation across different settings within Gauteng, enabling identification of both context-specific factors and patterns that are common across contexts.

The selection of these two schools as research sites was guided by both practical and conceptual considerations. Practically, the schools were accessible to the researcher and granted permission for the study to be conducted. Conceptually, selecting two schools rather than one allowed for cross-case comparison while maintaining the depth of investigation characteristic of qualitative case study research. The variation between a school located in town and one outside town provided an opportunity to explore how different contextual settings might shape teachers' understandings and implementation of democratic education principles.

3.5 Sampling Strategy

A purposive, convenience sample method was used as the sampling technique to recruit fourteen primary school teachers from the chosen schools in Gauteng.

3.5.1 Sampling Approach

This study utilized a convenience sampling approach, which entails gathering data from the most readily accessible segment of the research population—a statistical method for selecting a sample to make inferences about the whole (Narayan et al., 2023). This strategy was selected because, compared to other non-random sampling techniques, it requires less effort to select participants and can be executed at a minimal cost (Stratton, 2021). Furthermore, it reduces the time spent on selection as

the sample is drawn from an easily available segment of the target population, and it eliminates the need for the researcher to prepare a list of every demographic element. This approach is widely used for generating substantial qualitative data and is capable of producing a robust sample across diverse situations (Golzar et al., 2022).

3.5.2 Criteria for Sample Selection

The selection of participants for this study was governed by defined criteria aimed to ensure that the sampled educators could contribute rich, relevant, and contextually grounded perspectives on the research subject.

3.5.2.1 School Selection

The schools were selected based on the principle of accessibility central to the convenience sampling approach. Two primary schools participated in this study (School 1 and School 2). The schools' accessibility and willingness to participate allowed for sustained engagement necessary for conducting classroom observations and interviews over the data collection period. One school was located in town, while the other was located outside of town, providing some contextual variation.

3.5.2.2 Teacher Participant Selection

The primary criterion for teacher selection was to ensure representation from across the primary school spectrum. Consequently, the researcher chose fourteen teachers encompassing all grade levels, from Grade One to Grade Seven. This approach aimed to capture a range of experiences and perspectives from teachers teaching different age groups within the primary school system.

Additional selection criteria included: teachers with at least three years of teaching experience, as they could provide informed perspectives on democratic education implementation based on substantial classroom experience; voluntary participation, ensuring that all participants engaged willingly with the research process; and representation from both schools, with seven teachers selected from each school to ensure balanced data collection across both research sites.

Participants were assigned codes T1 through T14 (Teacher 1 through Teacher 14) to maintain anonymity throughout data collection, analysis, and reporting.

3.5.2.3 Sample Size Justification

The determination of the sample size was guided by established qualitative research principles. According to Guest et al., (2020), 80–90% of themes typically emerge within the first six to twelve interviews. While six to eight interviews are often sufficient, twelve to twenty are recommended to achieve maximum variation (Bekele & Ago, 2022), with this range being optimal for seeking broad representation of perspectives, backgrounds, and characteristics (Wutich et al., 2024). Based on this scholarly consensus, a final sample size of fourteen teachers was selected for this study.

This sample size of fourteen teachers (seven from each school) was considered appropriate for several reasons: it falls within the recommended range for qualitative studies seeking thematic saturation; it allows for adequate representation across grade levels (Grades 1-7) and both school contexts; it enables in-depth data collection through multiple observations and interviews with each participant; and it remains manageable within the constraints of a master's level research project in terms of time, resources, and analytical depth.

3.5.3 Sampling Limitations

While convenience sampling was pragmatically necessary given time and resource constraints, this approach has several acknowledged limitations. First, convenience sampling limits the generalizability and transferability of findings—because participants and schools were selected based on accessibility rather than strategic criteria designed to maximize variation, findings are specific to these particular contexts and cannot be assumed to apply to all Gauteng primary schools. Second, self-selection bias may be present, as teachers who volunteered to participate may have been more interested in or committed to democratic education than teachers who declined. Third, the two schools were not purposefully selected to represent specific types of contexts (e.g., different quintile levels, township versus suburban schools); meaning contextual variation obtained was incidental rather than strategically designed.

Despite these limitations, the sample provided rich, detailed qualitative data enabling in-depth exploration of how the fourteen teacher participants understood and attempted to implement democratic education principles within their specific school contexts. The study's goal was not statistical generalization but rather contextual

understanding and theoretical insight—goals that qualitative case study research can achieve even with convenience sampling.

3.6 Data Collection Methods

The data for this study were gathered through two primary qualitative methods, selected for their capacity to provide rich, detailed insights into the research problem. Both methods were employed to address the study's research questions comprehensively: semi-structured interviews captured teachers' conceptualizations, experiences, and reflections, while non-participant observations documented actual classroom practices and material conditions.

3.6.1 Semi-Structured Interviews

This study employed semi-structured interviews due to their established benefits in educational research (Ruslin et al., 2022). This method was selected for its several advantages, including the capacity to observe nonverbal cues such as facial expressions, encourage unstructured elaboration beyond the predefined questions, and allow for a more in-depth exploration of complex educational concepts, thereby providing a safe space for participants to react openly and thoughtfully. According to Ruslin et al. (2022), the flexibility of this approach enables a researcher to elicit hidden information that is valuable for the final thematic data analysis by following up on both spoken and non-verbal reactions, including silence, laughing, and intuition. Furthermore, the interactive element of the semi-structured interview allows interviewees to respond freely (Kakilla, 2021), facilitating a deeper understanding of their perspectives and experiences.

All fourteen teacher participants (T1-T14) were interviewed individually using a semi-structured interview guide. The interview guide included core questions organized thematically to address the three sub-research questions: teachers' conceptualizations of democratic and transformative education, pedagogical strategies employed, and factors that enabled or constrained implementation. The semi-structured format allowed flexibility to probe deeper into participants' responses, follow emergent lines of inquiry, and adapt questions based on each teacher's unique context and experiences.

Interviews were audio-recorded with participants' consent and supplemented with researcher notes. They were conducted at times and locations that were convenient

for participants, typically after school hours in private spaces at the schools to ensure confidentiality and minimize disruption to teaching schedules. Interview duration ranged from 30 to 40 minutes, depending on the depth of participant responses and discussion.

3.6.2 Non-Participant Observation

The second method utilized in this study was non-participant observations. A primary advantage of this method is that it allows the researcher to view the phenomenon under study more objectively due to immediate detachment, which helps to mitigate biases that can arise from intimate involvement in the situation being observed. This approach is particularly useful for analysing social events or meetings, as it enables the researcher to gather information and observe activities without disrupting the natural group dynamics. Furthermore, as noted by Beries (2024), non-participant observation is a reliable means of collecting precise and comprehensive information about behaviour as it occurs in its authentic context.

Classroom observations were conducted to document teachers' actual pedagogical practices and classroom dynamics. The researcher observed each teacher participant conducting at least one lesson, with some teachers observed multiple times. Observations focused on: pedagogical strategies employed (e.g., group work, whole-class discussion, questioning patterns); student participation patterns and engagement levels; teacher-student interactions and power dynamics; physical classroom environment (seating arrangements, resources, displays); and evidence of democratic practices or constraints visible in the classroom setting.

The researcher positioned themselves unobtrusively in the classroom to minimize disruption and avoid influencing teacher or student behaviour. Detailed field notes were taken during and immediately after observations, capturing both descriptive accounts (what happened) and reflective notes (the researcher's initial interpretations and questions). The non-participant stance allowed the researcher to observe classroom dynamics as they naturally unfolded without intervening or altering the teaching-learning environment.

3.7 Data Analysis

Interpreting, deconstructing data into digestible topics, and identifying and analyzing patterns, themes, trends, and linkages in textual data are all components of qualitative

data analysis. Moreover, it ascertains how these themes and patterns contribute to a deeper comprehension of a problem or phenomenon in order to address the research issues at hand (Muzari et al., 2022). Rather than forecasting or elucidating, qualitative analysis places more focus on "sense-making," or comprehending a phenomenon (Islam & Aldaihani, 2022).

According to Gee and Handford (2023), discourse analysis is a qualitative method that looks at how language in spoken, written, or multimodal texts influences ideologies, power relations, and social realities. The researcher used it because it exposes power dynamics and demonstrates how dominant groups use language to marginalize others. Additionally, it addresses contemporary concerns (Gillespie, 2024).

Conversation analysis, according to Wong and Waring (2021), is an approach for studying the mechanics and structure of spoken interaction, with a focus on turn-taking, pauses, repairs, and sequential order. The researcher adopted it because it focuses on real-world interactions (Heritage & Maynard, 2022). It also uncovers unwritten and implicit social norms.

The data analysis process began with open coding, where interview transcripts and observation field notes were divided into segments and assigned descriptive codes. Following open coding, codes were grouped into provisional themes, which were then reviewed against the entire dataset. This iterative process of coding, theme development, and refinement followed established principles of thematic analysis. Throughout analysis, the researcher interpreted findings through the study's theoretical frameworks (Critical Theory, IKS, and Ubuntu philosophy), asking: What do the themes reveal about power dynamics and structural constraints? How does local, contextual knowledge inform practice? Where are relational, communal pedagogies present or absent?

Integration of data sources: The researcher triangulated findings from interviews (what teachers said about their understandings and practices) and observations (what actually occurred in classrooms). This triangulation identified convergences where interview and observation data aligned, divergences where they differed, and complementarities where observations provided context for understanding interview data and vice versa.

3.8 Trustworthiness

According to Ahmed (2024), the following are the most important factors that qualitative research uses to define trustworthiness: credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability. Following Lincoln and Guba's (1985) foundational framework for qualitative research quality, this study employed multiple strategies across these four dimensions to ensure the rigor and trustworthiness of findings.

3.8.1 Credibility

Using a range of data-gathering methods or sources to validate information from multiple perspectives increases credibility and reduces the impact of potential biases from a single method or data source (Haq et al., 2023). This study used interviews and observation to collect data to ensure credibility.

Specifically, credibility was enhanced through: (1) method triangulation—using both interviews and observations allowed for cross-checking findings across different data sources; (2) data source triangulation—collecting data from fourteen different teachers across two schools enabled identification of patterns versus idiosyncratic individual perspectives; (3) prolonged engagement—conducting both observations and interviews with each participant allowed for building rapport and deeper understanding of context; and (4) thick description—providing rich, detailed descriptions of contexts, participants, and findings enables readers to assess the credibility of interpretations.

3.8.2 Transferability

By describing the sampling methods and participant selection criteria, it is easier to assess whether the findings may be applicable or transferable to similar populations or environments outside of the study context (Subedi, 2023).

The researcher provided detailed descriptions of: school contexts (one in town, one outside town; referred to as S1 and S2); participant characteristics (fourteen teachers, T1-T14, encompassing Grades 1-7, minimum 3 years' experience); research procedures (semi-structured interviews and non-participant observations); and findings with extensive verbatim quotes and observational descriptions (Chapter 4). These thick descriptions will enable readers in similar contexts to judge whether and how findings might transfer to their own settings. While the study's use of convenience sampling limits claims about representativeness, the detailed contextual information allows for assessment of contextual similarity and potential transferability.

3.8.3 Dependability

Maintaining thorough records of each step of the research process encourages openness and makes it possible for others to replicate the study or assess the results' dependability by applying the same techniques and understanding the rationale behind decisions made (Ahmed, 2024; Haq et al., 2023).

The researcher maintained an audit trail including: interview recordings and transcripts, observation field notes, coding records and theme development notes, analytic memos documenting interpretive decisions, and documentation of all research procedures and timelines. This systematic documentation allows for external examination of the research process and assessment of its consistency and rigor.

3.8.4 Confirmability

Obtaining feedback from peers or specialists lessens individual prejudices and aids in the validation of interpretations. Furthermore, providing a variety of perspectives enhances objectivity and confirms the accuracy of the results (Ahmed, 2024).

Confirmability was addressed through: (1) data-grounded interpretation—all claims and themes presented in findings (Chapter 4) are supported by extensive verbatim quotes from participants and detailed descriptions from observations, allowing readers to assess whether interpretations are warranted by the data; (2) reflexivity—the researcher maintained ongoing critical self-awareness about personal assumptions, biases, and how positionality might shape interpretations (discussed below in Section 3.10); and (3) negative case analysis—the researcher actively sought data that contradicted or challenged emerging themes, ensuring that findings represented the full complexity of the data rather than confirming preconceived expectations.

3.9 Approval, Permission and Consent

This study was conducted in strict accordance with the ethical guidelines outlined in Unisa's research ethics policy. The following measures were implemented to ensure the protection, dignity, and rights of all participants.

3.9.1 Permission to Collect Data

Formal ethical approval for this study was secured prior to the commencement of any data collection activities. This was granted by the College of Education Ethics Review

Committee under reference number 7118 (Appendix A). This official sanction confirmed that the research design and procedures met the required ethical standards.

In addition to institutional ethical approval, the researcher obtained permission from: the Gauteng Department of Education for conducting research in public schools; school principals at both participating schools; and individual teacher participants who consented to participate in interviews and observations.

3.9.2 Informed Consent

Prior to their participation, all individuals were fully informed about the nature, purpose, and procedures of the research. As emphasized by Nii Laryeafio and Ogbewe (2023), participants provided their informed consent to demonstrate their voluntary willingness to partake in the study. Furthermore, in alignment with the principles outlined by Mumford et al., (2021), participants retained the right to withdraw at any time during the data collection process without facing any penalty. This ensured that no participant was coerced into continuing their involvement, particularly if they encountered questions that conflicted with their personal values.

The researcher prepared and distributed information sheets and consent forms to all potential participants. Information sheets detailed: the study's purpose (investigating democratic and transformative principles in primary education), procedures (interviews and classroom observations), time commitment required, potential risks and benefits, confidentiality measures, and voluntary participation rights including the right to withdraw. Participants signed consent forms after receiving this information and having opportunities to ask questions. Separate consent was obtained for audio recording of interviews.

3.9.3 Confidentiality and Anonymity

To protect the identity of the participants, stringent measures for confidentiality and anonymity were implemented. Participants were assured that all information provided would remain confidential and that no third party would have access to the raw data (Mumford et al., 2021). Furthermore, in line with the practices described by Nii Laryeafio and Ogbewe (2023), all data was anonymized through the use of pseudonyms. This protection is crucial as it allows participants to share important information freely, thereby enhancing the reliability of the research findings and ensuring confirmability by separating the data from individual identities.

Participants were assigned codes (T1 through T14 for teachers; S1 and S2 for schools) used consistently throughout data presentation and analysis. No identifying information appears in the dissertation or any publications arising from this research. Raw data (recordings, transcripts, field notes) were stored in password-protected devices and encrypted cloud storage accessible only to the researcher and research supervisor. School principals and district officials did not have access to individual teacher data—only aggregated, anonymized findings were shared with participating schools upon request.

3.9.4 Data Management and Risk Category

All electronic data collected during this study is stored securely in a password-protected Google Drive account. In compliance with the policy of research ethics (2024, item 4.12), this data will be permanently deleted after a period of fifteen years. The study was categorized as minimal risk, as the questions posed were not expected to cause psychological or emotional harm beyond what might be encountered in everyday life. The aforementioned measures of confidentiality, anonymity, and the right to withdraw were the primary strategies employed to manage this risk effectively. Additional risk mitigation strategies included: emphasizing to participants that the researcher was not evaluating teaching quality but seeking to understand experiences and challenges; conducting observations unobtrusively to minimize anxiety; maintaining strict confidentiality so school leaders could not identify individual participants' contributions; and avoiding deficit narratives that blame teachers for systemic problems in data interpretation and reporting.

3.10 Researcher Positionality and Reflexivity

Throughout the research process, the researcher maintained critical awareness of personal assumptions and biases that might shape data collection, analysis, and interpretation. This reflexive stance involved ongoing examination of how the researcher's identity, professional background, and theoretical commitments influenced interactions with participants and interpretations of data.

The researcher's professional role as a teacher provided an insider perspective to this research. As a fellow educator, the researcher shared professional identity and lived experiences with teacher participants, potentially facilitating rapport, trust, and mutual

understanding of the challenges and realities of primary school teaching. This insider positioning allowed for deeper empathy and recognition of the contextual factors shaping participants' practice. The researcher remained mindful of these dynamics throughout data collection and analysis.

A reflexive journal was maintained documenting: reactions to data (surprise, concern, inspiration); moments where the researcher's expectations were challenged; questions about how personal assumptions might be shaping interpretations; and instances where negative cases or contradictory evidence required reconsidering emerging themes. This reflexivity enhanced the confirmability of findings by making visible the researcher's role in knowledge construction and by actively seeking data that contradicted initial assumptions.

The researcher approached participants with respect and humility, recognizing teachers' expertise and contextual knowledge, consistent with Ubuntu principles of relationality and mutual regard. This positioning sought to avoid extractive research relationships, instead honouring teachers' contributions and framing the research as learning from their experiences rather than evaluating their performance.

3.11 Conclusion

This study approach has been carefully developed as a strategic framework intended to shed light on the core principles of democratic education, not just as a procedural road map. This study is well-positioned to go beyond abstract theorization and into the lived, complicated reality of the classroom by promoting a qualitative approach based on semi-structured interviews and non-participant observations. Teachers' complex, frequently unsaid narratives—their strongly held beliefs, their creative acts of pedagogical resistance, and the structural restrictions they endure on a daily basis—can be captured using these methodologies, which are not neutral instruments. Teachers had the opportunity to explain how they perceive democracy, voice, and transformation in their own words during the semi-structured interviews, which disclosed the conceptual frameworks that inform their work. Concurrently, the non-participant observations functioned as a critical check, documenting the concrete expressions—or revealing deficiencies—of these principles in the dynamic classroom ecology, ranging from desk arrangement to the character of student-teacher communication.

As a result, this study's methodological approach is primarily concerned with listening—to both loud assertions and silent struggles. It is designed to highlight the stark and often sobering contrasts that define the pursuit of democratic education in an unequal world: the dissonance between policy and practice, the tension between democratic ideals and authoritarian legacies, and the gap between a teacher's aspirations and their material reality. Using this dual-lens method, the study employed a rigorous, compassionate, and contextually grounded investigation. It was designed not merely to collect statistics but to develop a nuanced and authentic testimony of possibility and constraint, ultimately giving a robust evidence base from which to reimagine and reconstruct a truly worthy education system.

The methodological choices detailed in this chapter—interpretivism, qualitative case study design, semi-structured interviews, non-participant observations, thematic analysis informed by discourse and conversation analysis, and rigorous attention to trustworthiness and ethics—worked together to create a research approach suited to answering the study's questions about how democratic and transformative principles function in two Gauteng primary schools. Chapter 4 presents the findings that emerged from this methodological approach.

CHAPTER 4: DATA ANALYSIS AND PRESENTATION

4.1 Introduction

This chapter presents a thorough analysis of the qualitative data collected to study how democratic education is implemented in South African primary schools. The data, gathered through semi-structured interviews and non-participant observations (see Chapter 3, Section 3.6), is analysed using a combined approach that integrates Discourse Analysis (DA) and Conversation Analysis (CA) (see Chapter 3, Section 3.7). This combined approach allows for a detailed exploration, examining not only the main ideas in what participants say but also the interactive and language-based features that shape these accounts. This chapter is structured to guide the reader through a systematic process. It begins by explaining the analytical methods used, then identifies key themes and patterns, and finally brings together the main findings that answer the research questions (see Chapter 1, Section 1.7).

The main research question guiding this study is: "What is the role of democratic and transformative principles in primary education in two Gauteng primary schools?" (see Chapter 1, Section 1.7.1). This overarching question is explored through three sub-research questions:

1. How do teachers in the two schools conceptualize democratic and transformative education principles? (see Chapter 1, Section 1.7.2.1)
2. What pedagogical strategies do teachers employ to implement democratic and transformative principles? (see Chapter 1, Section 1.7.2.2)
3. What factors shape teachers' implementation of democratic and transformative principles in the two school contexts? (see Chapter 1, Section 1.7.2.3)

The findings presented in this chapter are analysed through the theoretical lenses of Critical Theory and IKS, specifically Ubuntu philosophy (see Chapter 2, Section 2.5). These frameworks enable examination of power dynamics, structural constraints, and culturally grounded pedagogical alternatives relevant to South African primary education.

4.2 Overview of the Data Analysis Process

The data analysis began with open coding, a foundational step in qualitative research. Open coding, an inductive method, involves creating analytical concepts directly from the raw data, rather than using a pre-existing theoretical framework (Charmaz, 2021). The main goal of this stage was to thoroughly examine the data, looking for the underlying concepts, meanings, and actions it contained. The data, including interview transcripts and field notes, were first divided into smaller parts. Then, each part was given a short, descriptive label, or "code." At this initial stage, the main goal was to generate a wide range of ideas, focusing on exploration and discovery. The main concern was not how these ideas would eventually be organized or related to each other (Saldaña, 2021).

Table 4.1: Data Analysis Process

Steps	Process	Purpose
1.	Data familiarisation	Reading and re-reading interview transcripts and observation field notes. Immersion in data; noting initial patterns.
2.	Open Coding	Assigning descriptive codes to data segments. Identifying concepts, meanings, and actions in raw data.
3.	Focused Coding	Grouping related codes into provisional categories and organizing codes into potential themes.
4.	Theme Development	Identifying patterns across categories; formulating themes, answering research questions through thematic patterns.
5.	Theme Review	Checking themes against coded data and entire dataset, ensuring themes are grounded in data.
6.	Theme Refinement	Defining and naming final themes. Clarifying meaning and scope of each theme.

7.	Interpretation	Analysing themes through theoretical lenses (Critical Theory, IKS/Ubuntu) Connecting findings to broader theoretical and contextual understandings
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Table 4.1 summarizes the iterative data analysis process employed in this study, from initial open coding through theme development and refinement. The analysis followed established qualitative research principles (Braun & Clarke, 2021) while remaining grounded in the study's theoretical frameworks (see Chapter 2, Section 2.5).

4.3 Presentation of Findings

The findings are organized systematically to address the core research questions guiding this investigation (see Chapter 1, Section 1.7). Section 4.3.1 presents findings from semi-structured interviews, while Section 4.3.2 presents findings from non-participant classroom observations. Section 4.4 synthesizes findings across both data sources, and Section 4.5 provides concluding reflections.

The findings are organised systematically to address the core research questions guiding this investigation. The chapter begins by exploring teachers' conceptual understandings of democratic education and its perceived role in primary schooling. It then progresses to examine the specific factors that both hinder and advance the implementation of democratic principles in classroom practice. Subsequent sections analyse the challenges faced by learners in experiencing democratic education and conclude with the implications for successful implementation and transformation. Throughout the presentation, direct quotations from participants and detailed observational notes provide evidentiary support for the themes identified, ensuring that the analysis remains firmly grounded in the empirical data while offering theoretically informed interpretations that contribute to broader educational discourse.

The study's empirical results are presented in this chapter, which provides a methodical examination of the conception, execution, and experiences of democratic and transformative education in South African primary schools. According to Saldaña (2021), presenting qualitative findings necessitates both a true portrayal of participant voices and rigorous analytical reasoning. This chapter organizes the rich qualitative data collected through semi-structured interviews and non-participant observations

into logical theme patterns that directly answer the study objectives, adhering to the thematic analysis criteria described by Braun and Clarke (2021).

The following codes are used throughout this chapter: "T" denotes participants who are teachers; as fourteen teachers were observed and interviewed (see Chapter 3, Section 3.5.2.2), the codes range from T1 to T14. The code "S" denotes school; two schools participated (see Chapter 3, Section 3.4), denoted as S1 and S2.

4.3.1 Findings from Semi-Structured Interviews

This section presents thematic findings from semi-structured interviews conducted with fourteen teacher participants (T1-T14) across two schools (S1 and S2). The interviews explored teachers' understandings, experiences, and practices related to democratic and transformative education (see Chapter 3, Section 3.6.1 for interview methodology).

4.3.1.1 The Role of Democratic Education

This section addresses Sub-Research Question 1: How do teachers conceptualize democratic and transformative education principles? (see Chapter 1, Section 1.7.2.1).

The teachers' definitions of democratic education coalesce around a powerful discourse that positions the learner as an active agent, directly challenging traditional, authoritarian pedagogical models documented in the literature as legacies of apartheid-era Bantu Education (see Chapter 2, Section 2.3.3).

Voice and Participation as Core Tenets

T1: "Democratic education emphasizes learners participating in a class; my learners having a voice, a choice, collaborating..."

T5: "...making the learners the centre of everything. So, it's more active learning, letting the learners be able to question things and answer things and solve problems..."

T9: "...allowing the kids to have their own voice in the classroom, voice out their own opinions, their own way of understanding..."

The recurrence of "voice," "choice," and "centre" constructs a subject position for the learner that is empowered and agentic. This discourse directly opposes what T5 labels it as "spoon-feeding," a metaphor that frames traditional education as passive and

disempowering. The emphasis is on the learner as the primary actor in the educational process. These conceptualizations align closely with democratic education theory, emphasizing student agency and participatory learning (see Chapter 2, Section 2.2.3.1).

The Teacher as Facilitator

T7: "I'm not only a teacher; I'm more or less like a facilitator to them. I'm someone they can come to and air their views, and I can also go to them and ask."

T11: "I believe learning does not have one path... They do not learn things from me but also from their peers."

This represents a significant shift in the teacher's role from the sole knowledge authority ("sage on the stage") to a guide or co-constructor of knowledge ("facilitator"). T11's statement is particularly potent, de-centring the teacher and advocating for a pluralistic, peer-based learning epistemology. This reconceptualization of the teacher's role reflects transformative pedagogies discussed in the literature (see Chapter 2, Section 2.2.3.2) and aligns with critical pedagogy's vision of teachers as facilitators rather than authoritarian knowledge transmitters (see Chapter 2, Section 2.5.1).

Democratic Praxis as Civic Analogy

T12: "Their participation in class is also a form of democratic education... as far as we go back to our voting times, when you go to your voting stations and you cast your vote, you are voicing out what you want... to bring change..."

T12 makes an explicit inter-discursive link between classroom practice and broader political democracy. This analogy frames the classroom as a microcosm of society, where participation is not just an educational strategy but a rehearsal for civic engagement and social change. This elevates democratic education from pedagogy to a political and moral imperative. This connection between classroom democracy and broader civic participation reflects theoretical understandings of democratic education as preparation for engaged citizenship (see Chapter 2, Section 2.1).

4.3.1.2 Hindrances to Democratic Education

This section addresses Sub-Research Question 3: What factors constrain teachers' implementation? (see Chapter 1, Section 1.7.2.3).

When discussing barriers, teachers' language reveals a discourse of powerlessness and frustration, positioning themselves as subjects of an oppressive bureaucratic system. These constraints mirror systemic barriers identified in the literature review (see Chapter 2, Section 2.3).

Administrative and Curricular Strangulation

T2: "Lack of flexibility. Need to adhere to rigid timelines for curriculum completion... Control over knowledge, for instance, our curriculum planning and evaluation are often centralized."

T4: "The main focus at our school is results, curriculum coverage, and test performance... democratic approaches are seen as less efficient because they not producing immediate results."

T5: "It discourages it very much, because there's a lot of administration that we need to do... it's a repetition of the same things... You have to do this in this template..."

The language used—"rigid," "centralized," "template"—portrays the system as an inflexible, unchanging entity. The discourse pits the values of democratic education ("engagement," "critical thinking") against the system's values of "efficiency" and "results." This creates a subject position for the teacher as a bureaucrat, burdened by compliance, rather than a professional teacher. These findings confirm literature describing neoliberal accountability pressures and curricular rigidity as major barriers to democratic education in South African primary schools (see Chapter 2, Sections 2.3.1 and 2.3.4).

The listing in T2's response ("Lack of... Lack of... Need to...") functions as a cumulative, persuasive device, overwhelming the listener with the multiplicity of constraints and building a case for the impossibility of their task.

Resource Deprivation as Structural Violence

T1: "limited resources, time constraints, and lack of training."

T4: "limited resources... there's also an immense pressure by the management to produce results. And then there's no internet access..."

This is not merely a description of scarcity but a discourse of systemic injustice. The consistent mention of resource lack, contrasted with the pressure for results, highlights a fundamental contradiction that critical theory would identify as a feature of a neoliberal system, where outputs are demanded without providing the necessary inputs. This finding resonates strongly with Critical Theory's analysis of structural inequities in education (see Chapter 2, Section 2.5.1) and empirical evidence of resource disparities in South African schools (see Chapter 2, Section 2.3.2).

4.3.1.3 Advancing Democratic Education: A Discourse of Pragmatic Agency

This section addresses Sub-Research Questions 2 and 3: What pedagogical strategies do teachers employ? What factors enable implementation? (see Chapter 1, Sections 1.7.2.2 and 1.7.2.3)].

Despite systemic barriers, teachers articulate a counter-discourse of pragmatic resistance, detailing small-scale, actionable strategies to foster democracy within the cracks in the system. This finding reveals teachers' agency in navigating constraints, reflecting literature on pathways to implementation despite barriers (see Chapter 2, Section 2.4).

Pedagogical Micro-Interventions

T2: "I create safe and inclusive environments... give them open-ended questions... Promote critical thinking skills... 'If yes, why? If no, why?'... I also incorporate technology thoughtfully..."

T4: "I try to start each lesson with a class discussion, and then I give them open-ended questioning... I try to do collaborative group work..."

T14: "I let my kids also participate in what class rules we are going to have... I let them think about it first, and then I let them talk to their partner... open-ended discussions..."

The frequent use of the active voice ("I create," "I give," "I try") signals teacher agency. These are not grand revolutionary acts but practical, repeatable "micro-practices" of democracy. The focus on "open-ended questions" and discussion creates a discourse

where knowledge is negotiable and co-constructed, directly challenging the "one correct answer" paradigm of standardized curricula. These strategies align with curriculum and pedagogical implications discussed in the literature for fostering democratic participation (see Chapter 2, Section 2.4.1).

The pervasive use of "I try" (T4, T14) is a significant conversational feature. It acts as a hedge, acknowledging the potential for failure and the conditional nature of their success within a constraining environment. It reveals a mindset of perseverance rather than assured triumph.

Relational and Affective Foundations

T12: "The first thing is to build a strong relationship with your kids... They know that, okay, I'm allowed to come to the teacher anytime I have a problem... I need to give my learners that space where they are sure that, okay, I trust this person a lot."

T12 frames the prerequisite for democratic participation not as a pedagogical technique but as an affective and relational bond. This aligns strongly with the IKS of Ubuntu. The discourse here is that democracy in the classroom is built on a foundation of trust, care, and mutual humanity, positioning the teacher as a caregiver and mentor first. This finding demonstrates Ubuntu philosophy in practice—the emphasis on relationality, trust, and communal ethics central to African pedagogies (see Chapter 2, Section 2.5.2). The teacher's approach reflects Ubuntu's core principle: "umuntu ngumuntu ngabantu" (a person is a person through other people).

4.3.1.4 Challenges for Learners: A Discourse of Epistemic and Material

Exclusion

This section addresses Sub-Research Question 3: Additional constraining factors affecting learners (see Chapter 1, Section 1.7.2.3).

The challenges identified for learners highlight a system that actively undermines the democratic ideals of voice and inclusion. These learner-level challenges compound the systemic barriers discussed earlier (see Section 4.3.1.2) and mirror literature on socioeconomic and cultural barriers (see Chapter 2, Sections 2.3.2 and 2.3.3).

Linguistic Marginalisation

T2: "Language barriers. Most learners are not taught in their home language..."

T6: "Language barriers, especially for learners who are not fluent in English... their participation and confidence suffer."

This discourse frames language policy as a form of epistemic violence, where learners' home languages and associated knowledge systems are devalued or erased. This directly contradicts the IKS framework's emphasis on local linguistic resources. This finding confirms literature on language barriers and epistemic injustice in South African education, where English-dominant instruction marginalizes speakers of African languages (see Chapter 2, Section 2.3.4). The erasure of home languages represents the epistemic violence discussed in relation to IKS exclusion (see Chapter 2, Section 2.5.2).

Socioeconomic Exclusion and Structural Inequality

T3: "Some learners are from disadvantaged backgrounds; they don't have resources at home..."

T8: "Poverty. Many learners come to school hungry or stressed about problems at home..."

T13: "Some learners lack basic materials like books, even a school uniform..."

The consistent mention of poverty, hunger, and material deprivation reveals a structural condition where democratic education is conceptualized as a luxury; only accessible once basic survival needs are met. This is a Marxist understanding of how material conditions determine consciousness and agency. These findings illustrate how socioeconomic inequities identified in the literature (see Chapter 2, Section 2.3.2) directly constrain learners' ability to participate in democratic education, regardless of pedagogical approach. Critical Theory's analysis of how material conditions shape educational possibilities is confirmed empirically (see Chapter 2, Section 2.5.1).

Overcrowding and Invisibility

T6: "Class sizes are too large. With 50 or 60 learners in one class, it's impossible to give everyone individual attention..."

T9: "In a class of 55, some learners become invisible... quiet ones never get to participate..."

Overcrowding is described not merely as a logistical challenge but as a denial of recognition and voice. Large class sizes make democratic participation—premised on individual voice and agency—practically impossible. This finding reinforces literature documenting resource constraints and their pedagogical consequences (see Chapter 2, Section 2.3.2). The study's sampling strategy noted these realities in selecting participant schools (see Chapter 3, Section 3.5.2.1).

4.3.1.5 Implications for Implementation: A Discourse of Systemic Overhaul vs. Grassroots Change

Teachers identified two competing visions for advancing democratic education; reflecting tensions in the literature between systemic reform and grassroots agency (see Chapter 2, Section 2.4).

Systemic Overhaul

T2: "The system needs to change from the top. We need smaller class sizes, better resources, less administrative burden..."

T4: "The government needs to invest more in education, provide more training for teachers, and redesign the curriculum to allow flexibility..."

This discourse positions systemic reform—structural, policy-level changes—as a prerequisite for democratic education. It reflects a structural understanding that individual teacher efforts cannot overcome systemic barriers. These teacher perspectives align with literature arguing for systemic support, including equitable funding, curriculum reform, and policy changes to enable democratic education (see Chapter 2, Sections 2.4.1, 2.4.2, and 2.4.3).

Grassroots Change and Teacher Agency

T12: "We cannot wait for the system to change. We need to do what we can now, even if it's small..."

T14: "I believe change starts in our classrooms, with our daily choices about how we teach..."

This counter-discourse emphasizes teacher agency and localized, incremental change. It reflects a pragmatic, activist orientation—working within and against the system simultaneously. This grassroots perspective reflects the "pragmatic agency" discussed throughout this section, where teachers employ micro-interventions despite systemic constraints. It also resonates with literature on teacher agency and bottom-up reform efforts (see Chapter 2, Section 2.2.2).

4.3.2 Findings from Non-Participant Classroom Observations

This section presents findings from non-participant observations of classroom practice in both schools (S1 and S2). Observations documented actual pedagogical practices, classroom environments, and student engagement patterns, providing triangulation with interview data (see Chapter 3, Section 3.6.2 for observation methodology).

4.3.2.1 Introduction

Classroom observations provide critical evidence of how democratic education is enacted (or not enacted) in actual practice, allowing comparison between teachers' stated beliefs (see Section 4.3.1) and their observable practices. Observations also documented material conditions and contextual factors shaping pedagogical possibilities, revealing the "classroom realities" teachers described in interviews.

4.3.2.2 Classroom Environment and Physical Arrangements

The majority of classrooms exhibited conventional physical setups. Observations noted:

"Traditional rows, desks facing the front, teacher at the chalkboard" (T1S1, T3S1, T8S2, T10S2)

"Learners sitting in groups of four" (T2S1, T11S2)

"Desks arranged in a U-shape" (T7S1)

"Learners were sitting in circles... discussing with their teacher" (T5S1)

Physical arrangements predominantly reflected traditional, teacher-centred configurations, with rows of desks facing the front, thus positioning the teacher as the central authority and knowledge source. However, some classrooms (T2S1, T5S1, T7S1, T11S2) demonstrated alternative arrangements—groups, circles, U-shapes—that facilitated peer interaction and collaborative learning, creating spatial conditions

for democratic participation. These physical arrangements represent material manifestations of pedagogical philosophy; traditional rows reinforce authoritarian pedagogy while circles and groups enable collaborative learning (see Chapter 2, Section 2.4.1 for discussion of pedagogical implications).

The physical environment thus constitutes a material constraint or enabler of democratic practice. Traditional row arrangements structurally limit student-to-student interaction, while circular or grouped arrangements materially enable dialogue and collaboration.

4.3.2.3 Pedagogical Approaches and Teaching Methods

Observations revealed a spectrum of pedagogical approaches, ranging from traditional, teacher-centred methods to more interactive, student-centred practices. This spectrum confirms that democratic education exists on a continuum rather than as binary present/absent, as discussed in the literature (see Chapter 2, Section 2.1).

Traditional, Teacher-Centred Instruction

"Teacher-centred, the teacher was talking, and learners were listening" (T1S1).

"The teacher was teaching, and learners were answering" (T3S1, T8S2, T9S2).

"The teacher was explaining, and learners were listening" (T10S2).

"The teacher stood in front of the class, explaining the lesson while learners sat and listened" (T13S2).

These observations document traditional transmission models where knowledge flows unidirectionally from teacher to student. Learners are positioned as passive recipients rather than active participants. This directly contradicts teachers' stated commitments to "learner voice" and "facilitator" roles articulated in interviews (see Section 4.3.1.1), revealing a gap between ideals and practice. This theory-practice gap confirms the implementation challenges discussed in the literature, particularly how systemic constraints force teachers toward transmission pedagogies despite democratic commitments (see Chapter 2, Section 2.3).

Interactive and Dialogic Approaches

Some classrooms demonstrated more participatory methods:

"In class discussion, the teacher asked learners questions, and they responded" (T4S1).

"Learners are asked questions, given the time to think, and then helped to answer" (T4S1).

"Learners were raising their hands when answering, and were discussing with their teacher" (T5S1).

"She reads to the learners and discusses with the learners" (T6S1).

"Learners were given time to think, especially on the why questions" (T11S2).

These practices demonstrate moves toward dialogic teaching, creating space for student voice and collaborative meaning-making. The emphasis on thinking time and "why" questions suggests attention to cognitive engagement rather than mere recall. These practices align with democratic pedagogical strategies identified in interviews (see Section 4.3.1.3) and reflect pedagogical approaches advocated in the literature for fostering critical thinking and participation (see Chapter 2, Section 2.4.1).

4.3.2.4 Learning Resources and Material Environment

Symbolic Democratic Representation

Classroom displays often featured democratic and inclusive symbolism:

"Posters, religions of the world, equal rights, equal responsibilities, children's rights, and the national coat of arms" (T1S1).

"Heritage Day poster, rights and responsibility, children under 18 years need to be protected" (T6S1).

"There are Math, English, and Life Skills posters" (T13S2).

While these visual elements symbolically endorse democratic values, their impact appears limited when pedagogical practices remain traditional. The disconnect between symbolic representation and actual practice highlights the challenge of superficial versus substantive implementation. This finding illustrates the difference between symbolic policy commitments and actual democratic practice, a tension discussed throughout the literature review (see Chapter 2, Sections 2.3.1 and 2.3.4).

Resource Constraints and Adaptation

Observations revealed varied resource access and utilization:

"This class also has a smart board" (T2S1).

"They were using the textbook" (T2S1, T3S1, T5S1, T13S2).

"She uses pencils to explain the subtraction concept... learners use worksheets and abacus" (T6S1).

"There were no posters at all" (T10S2).

"They were using pencils and colouring pencils as the counters" (T14S2).

Resource disparities significantly impact pedagogical possibilities. While some teachers had access to technology, others relied on basic materials, demonstrating resilience and creativity in resource-constrained environments. These observations confirm teachers' interview accounts of resource deprivation (see Section 4.3.1.2) and empirical evidence of resource inequities documented in the literature (see Chapter 2, Section 2.3.2). The creative adaptations also demonstrate the teacher agency discussed in Section 4.3.1.3.

4.3.2.5 Student Engagement and Participation Patterns

Passive Compliance

Many observations noted limited student engagement:

"Learners are sitting passively" (T1S1).

"Learners listened passively" (T9S2).

"Other learners were bored and started having conversations" (T10S2).

"One learner cried because he misplaced his book" (T10S2).

Passive student positioning suggests disengagement and limited ownership of learning. Emotional distress incidents (T10S2) indicate environments where student well-being may be compromised. These patterns illustrate the consequences of teacher-centred pedagogies that deny student voice and agency; contradicting democratic education principles (see Chapter 2, Section 2.1). They also reflect the

impact of large class sizes and resource constraints on learner experience (see Section 4.3.1.4).

Active Participation

Some classrooms demonstrated vibrant engagement:

"Learners were enjoying the lesson" (T7S1).

"Children were participating in class; they were raising their hands to answer... Children were also asking questions and were all participating, and the lesson was interesting" (T12S2).

"Learners were awarded for giving the right answer" (T11S2).

These environments fostered positive emotional climates and active involvement. The use of recognition and encouragement (T11S2) suggests attention to motivational aspects of learning. These classrooms exemplify the "learner voice" and "active participation" those teachers conceptualized as democratic education (see Section 4.3.1.1). They demonstrate that democratic pedagogies are possible even within systemic constraints when teachers exercise agency (see Section 4.3.1.3).

4.3.2.6 Democratic Education Implementation Spectrum

Observations revealed that democratic education implementation exists on a continuum rather than as a binary present/absent phenomenon. This finding confirms theoretical understandings of democratic education as existing on a spectrum (see Chapter 2, Section 2.1).

Partial Democratic Practices

Some classrooms showed mixed approaches:

"Partial democratic education" (T4S1)

"Learners read the drama, and learners were used to demonstrate and explain; other learners who were seated helped the two that were in front to tell them what to do" (T4S1).

"The teacher walks around after giving children work. Learners are allowed to ask where they don't understand" (T2S1).

These practices represent transitional approaches where traditional and democratic elements coexist. Peer assistance and movement around the classroom suggest moves toward more collaborative, student-supported learning. These partial implementations illustrate teachers' efforts to enact democratic pedagogies within systemic constraints (see Section 4.3.1.3), reflecting the "micro-interventions" teachers described in interviews.

Authentic Democratic Engagement

A few classrooms demonstrated substantial democratic practices:

"Learners were sitting in circles, and they were discussing with their teacher" (T5S1).

"They were using other children to make patterns" (T7S1).

"The teacher was able to bring life situations into the lesson" (T12S2).

These observations show learning as social, contextualized, and experiential. Connecting lessons to life situations (T12S2) demonstrates relevance and authentic application of knowledge. These practices exemplify the democratic and transformative pedagogies advocated in the literature (see Chapter 2, Sections 2.2.3 and 2.4.1), demonstrating that substantive democratic education is achievable in South African primary schools when enabling conditions align.

4.4 Synthesis of Findings across Data Sources

This section synthesizes findings from interviews (Section 4.3.1) and observations (Section 4.3.2), identifying convergences where different data sources support the same conclusions, divergences where they differ, and complementarities where they provide mutually enriching perspectives. This triangulation enhances the credibility and trustworthiness of the findings (see Chapter 3, Section 3.8.1).

4.4.1 Convergences: Where Interview and Observation Data Align

Both interviews and observations confirmed several key findings:

Teachers possess sophisticated conceptual understandings of democratic education: They articulated clear, theoretically-grounded definitions emphasizing

learner voice, participatory learning, and the teacher-as-facilitator role (see Section 4.3.1.1).

Resource constraints and large class sizes significantly limit implementation:

Both data sources documented overcrowded classrooms, inadequate materials, and limited technology access (interview data: Section 4.3.1.2 and 4.3.1.4; observation data: Sections 4.3.2.2 and 4.3.2.4).

Democratic education exists on a continuum: Neither interviews nor observations suggested all-or-nothing implementation; rather, practices ranged from minimal to substantial democratic engagement (interview data: Section 4.3.1.5; observation data: Section 4.3.2.6 and Table 4.2).

Teacher agency enables democratic practices despite constraints: Both data sources revealed teachers' creative "micro-interventions" fostering democratic participation despite systemic limitations (interview data: Section 4.3.1.3; observation data: Sections 4.3.2.3 and 4.3.2.5).

Systemic barriers are pervasive: Both interviews (explicit teacher accounts) and observations (visible manifestations) documented curriculum pressure, administrative burden, and resource inequities as major constraints (see Sections 4.3.1.2 and 4.3.2.3).

These convergences enhance confidence in the findings, as both data sources independently supported the same conclusions (see Chapter 3, Section 3.8.1 on credibility through triangulation).

4.4.2 Divergences: Gaps between Stated Beliefs and Observed Practice

Notable gaps emerged between what teachers said (interviews) and what was observed (classroom practice):

Facilitator role vs. transmission practice: Teachers articulated strong commitments to "learner voice" and "facilitator" roles (Section 4.3.1.1), yet many observed lessons remained predominantly teacher-centred with passive student positioning (Section 4.3.2.3).

Critical thinking emphasis vs. recall-based questioning: Teachers emphasized the importance of critical thinking and open-ended questions (Section 4.3.1.3), yet

observations showed considerable closed, recall-based questioning in practice (Section 4.3.2.3).

Ubuntu awareness vs. limited relational pedagogy: Teachers, particularly T12, expressed awareness of Ubuntu principles and relational foundations (Section 4.3.1.3), yet few classrooms demonstrated substantive relational, communal pedagogies in practice (Sections 4.3.2.3 and 4.3.2.5).

These divergences do not indicate teacher dishonesty or lack of commitment. Rather, they highlight the constraining power of systemic factors. Even teachers who deeply value democratic principles struggle to enact them consistently given curriculum pressures, time constraints, large class sizes, and assessment demands (see Chapter 2, Section 2.3). As Critical Theory would predict, structural conditions shape practice despite individual intentions (see Chapter 2, Section 2.5.1).

The divergences also suggest that teacher professional development focusing solely on changing beliefs or attitudes will be insufficient without addressing structural barriers (see Chapter 2, Section 2.4.4 on teacher development needs).

4.4.3 Complementarities: How Data Sources Enrich Understanding

Interviews and observations provided different but mutually enriching perspectives:

Interviews revealed internal experiences; observations documented external realities: Interviews captured teachers' sophisticated understanding, reflective awareness, frustrations, and aspirations (Section 4.3.1). Observations documented actual classroom dynamics, material conditions, and student experiences (Section 4.3.2). Together, they paint a complete picture of both teachers' subjective worlds and objective classroom realities.

Interviews explained "why"; observations showed "what": Interviews explained why teachers struggle to implement democratic education, revealing their awareness of systemic constraints (Section 4.3.1.2). Observations showed what those constraints look like in practice; overcrowded rooms, limited resources, curriculum pressure manifested as rushed pacing (Sections 4.3.2.2, 4.3.2.4).

Interviews provided aspirational visions; observations grounded them in reality: Teachers' interview accounts expressed aspirational democratic pedagogies (Section 4.3.1.1 and 4.3.1.3). Observations showed where those aspirations are enacted

(Section 4.3.2.6, substantive practices) and where they remain unrealized (Section 4.3.2.3, traditional practices).

Together, interviews and observations enable nuanced understanding of teachers as knowledgeable, committed educators working within oppressive structural conditions—neither blaming teachers for "failure" nor romanticizing their practice, but recognizing both their agency and the very real constraints they face. This balanced perspective aligns with the study's theoretical frameworks, which emphasize both structural critique (Critical Theory) and recognition of Indigenous wisdom and agency (IKS/Ubuntu) (see Chapter 2, Section 2.5).

4.5 Conclusion

This chapter presented findings addressing the study's main research question: "What is the role of democratic and transformative principles in primary education in two Gauteng primary schools?" (see Chapter 1, Section 1.7.1). Through systematic analysis of interview and observation data, the study has provided empirically-grounded answers to each sub-research question:

Sub-Research Question 1 (see Chapter 1, Section 1.7.2.1): How do teachers conceptualize democratic and transformative education principles?

Teachers conceptualize democratic education as fundamentally about learner voice, participatory learning, and repositioning teachers as facilitators rather than authoritarian knowledge transmitters (Section 4.3.1.1). They understand democratic classroom practice as connected to broader civic engagement and social transformation (Section 4.3.1.1, civic analogy). Some teachers also draw on Ubuntu philosophy, framing democratic participation as grounded in relational trust and communal values (Section 4.3.1.3, relational foundations). These conceptualizations demonstrate sophisticated theoretical understanding aligned with democratic education literature (see Chapter 2, Sections 2.2.3.1 and 2.5.2).

Sub-Research Question 2 (see Chapter 1, Section 1.7.2.2): What pedagogical strategies do teachers employ to implement democratic and transformative principles?

Teachers employ "micro-interventions" including open-ended questioning, collaborative group work, class discussions, student participation in rule-setting, and

relationship-building based on trust and care (Section 4.3.1.3). Observations confirmed some teachers using dialogic approaches, giving thinking time, connecting lessons to life situations, and creating collaborative learning arrangements (Sections 4.3.2.3 and 4.3.2.6). These strategies reflect the pedagogical implications discussed in the literature (see Chapter 2, Section 2.4.1) and demonstrate teacher agency in implementing democratic practices despite systemic constraints.

Sub-Research Question 3 (see Chapter 1, Section 1.7.2.3): What factors shape teachers' implementation of democratic and transformative principles?

Constraining factors include:

- Administrative and curricular rigidity—standardized testing pressure, inflexible timelines, bureaucratic compliance demands (Section 4.3.1.2);
- Resource deprivation—overcrowded classrooms, inadequate materials, limited technology, lack of professional development (Sections 4.3.1.2, 4.3.1.4, 4.3.2.4);
- Linguistic marginalization—English-dominant instruction alienating speakers of African languages (Section 4.3.1.4);
- Socioeconomic barriers—poverty, hunger, material deprivation affecting learners (Section 4.3.1.4)

Enabling factors include:

- Teacher agency and commitment—teachers' determination to "do what we can" despite barriers (Section 4.3.1.3)
- Relational foundations—Ubuntu-informed trust and care, creating conditions for participation (Section 4.3.1.3)
- Creative adaptations—teachers' resourcefulness in using available materials and creating democratic spaces despite constraints (Sections 4.3.1.3, 4.3.2.4)

These findings confirm the literature's identification of systemic barriers (see Chapter 2, Section 2.3) while also revealing teachers' pragmatic agency in navigating them (see Chapter 2, Section 2.4).

In synthesizing findings across data sources (Section 4.4), the study reveals:

- Theory-practice gaps: Teachers articulate democratic commitments but struggle to enact them consistently, not due to lack of understanding or commitment but due to structural constraints (Section 4.4.2).
- Democratic education as a continuum: Implementation ranges from minimal to substantive, with many teachers enacting "partial" democratic practices—attempting to integrate participatory elements within traditional frameworks (Table 4.2, Section 4.3.2.6).
- Teachers as constrained agents: Teachers possess knowledge, commitment, and creativity but operate within oppressive systems that limit pedagogical possibilities. They are neither heroes nor failures but professionals navigating complex realities (Sections 4.4.1, 4.4.3).

These findings are interpreted through the study's theoretical frameworks (see Chapter 2, Section 2.5). Critical Theory helps explain how neoliberal accountability, bureaucratic control, and resource inequities function as structural barriers (see Chapter 2, Section 2.5.1). IKS and Ubuntu philosophy illuminate culturally-grounded alternatives—relational, communal pedagogies that some teachers already practice and that offer pathways forward (see Chapter 2, Section 2.5.2).

The findings reveal that advancing democratic education in South African primary schools requires addressing both material conditions (resources, class sizes, curriculum flexibility) and epistemological foundations (validating IKS, embracing Ubuntu pedagogies, resisting Eurocentric knowledge hierarchies). Teacher professional development, while necessary, is insufficient without systemic reform (see Chapter 2, Sections 2.4.1, 2.4.3, 2.4.4).

Chapter 5 will discuss these findings in relation to the broader literature, explore their theoretical and practical implications, acknowledge study limitations, and offer recommendations for policy, practice, and future research.

CHAPTER 5: DISCUSSION, CONCLUSIONS, AND RECOMMENDATIONS

5.1 Introduction

This concluding chapter synthesizes the key findings from the study investigating the implementation of democratic and transformative education in South African primary schools. Drawing from rich qualitative data gathered through interviews and observations (see Chapter 3, Sections 3.6.1 and 3.6.2), this chapter presents a comprehensive summary of the research outcomes, discusses their theoretical and practical implications, outlines the study's contributions to knowledge, and provides actionable recommendations for policy, practice, and future research. The chapter serves as a culmination of the research journey, reflecting on how the findings address the initial research questions (see Chapter 1, Section 1.7) while proposing pathways for educational transformation.

This chapter is organized as follows: Section 5.2 summarizes the key findings addressing each research question; Section 5.3 discusses these findings in relation to existing literature and theoretical frameworks (see Chapter 2, Section 2.5); Section 5.4 examines the implications for policy, practice, and theory; Section 5.5 articulates the study's contributions to knowledge; Section 5.6 acknowledges the study's limitations; Section 5.7 provides recommendations for various stakeholders and future research; and Section 5.8 concludes by reflecting on the significance of the study for democratic education transformation in South African primary schools.

5.2 Summary of Findings

This section summarizes key findings organized by the study's research questions (see Chapter 1, Section 1.7). The main research question guiding this study was: "What is the role of democratic and transformative principles in primary education in two Gauteng primary schools?" This was explored through three sub-research questions addressing teachers' conceptualizations, pedagogical strategies employed, and factors shaping implementation.

5.2.1 Teachers' Conceptualisations of Democratic Education (Sub-Research Question 1)

This section addresses the following question: How do teachers in the two schools conceptualize democratic and transformative education principles? (see Chapter 1, Section 1.7.2.1)

The study made several important findings about the state of democratic education in Gauteng primary schools. First, teachers displayed a sophisticated knowledge of democratic education, characterizing it in terms of learner voice, choice, involvement, and critical thinking (T1, T5, T14). They saw their position as evolving from traditional teachers to facilitators of learning (T7), with a focus on building inclusive environments in which learners feel respected and heard.

Teachers' conceptualizations coalesced around three dominant themes (see Chapter 4, Section 4.3.1.1):

Voice and Participation as Core Tenets: Teachers consistently emphasised "learner voice," "choice," and making learners "the centre of everything" (T1, T5, T9). This discourse directly opposed "spoon-feeding" pedagogies, positioning learners as empowered agents rather than passive recipients. Teachers understood democratic education as fundamentally about shifting power from teacher to learner, enabling student participation in knowledge construction and classroom decision-making (see Chapter 2, Section 2.2.3.1 for theoretical discussion of student agency).

The Teacher as Facilitator: Teachers reconceptualized their role from authoritarian knowledge transmitter to facilitator and co-constructor of knowledge. T7 stated, "I'm not only a teacher, I'm more or less like a facilitator," while T11 emphasized that "learning does not have one path... They do not learn things from me but also from their peers." This represents a significant ideological shift from traditional, hierarchical pedagogies toward more egalitarian, collaborative approaches (see Chapter 2, Section 2.2.3.2 on critical teacher education).

Democratic Praxis as Civic Analogy: Some teachers, particularly T12, explicitly connected classroom democratic practices to broader civic participation and social transformation. T12 stated: "Their participation in class is also a form of democratic education... as far as we go back to our voting times when you go to your voting stations and you cast your vote you are voicing out what you want... to bring change."

This elevated democratic education from mere pedagogy to a political and moral imperative, framing the classroom as a rehearsal space for engaged citizenship (see Chapter 2, Section 2.1 on democratic education as preparation for civic engagement).

These sophisticated conceptualizations demonstrate that teachers possess strong theoretical understanding of democratic education principles, aligning closely with literature on student agency, participatory learning, and transformative pedagogy. However, as subsequent findings reveal, conceptual understanding does not automatically translate into consistent implementation—a theory-practice gap explored in Section 5.3.

5.2.2 Pedagogical Strategies Employed (Sub-Research Question 2)

This section addresses: What pedagogical strategies do teachers employ to implement democratic and transformative principles? (see Chapter 1, Section 1.7.2.2)

Techniques to promote democratic ideas despite the constraints encountered: pedagogical innovations include open-ended questions, collaborative group work, and technological integration (T2, T4, T14).

Relational approaches: building strong teacher-student relationships and fostering psychologically secure places (T12).

Curriculum adaptations: including real-world settings and culturally appropriate content (T1, T10).

Despite facing significant systemic constraints (discussed in Section 5.2.3), teachers articulated and demonstrated various strategies to enact democratic principles within their classrooms (see Chapter 4, Section 4.3.1.3):

Pedagogical Micro-Interventions: Teachers described practical, repeatable "micro-practices" of democracy including: open-ended questioning that promotes critical thinking ("if yes, why? If no, why?" – T2); collaborative group work and class discussions that enable peer learning (T4, T14); student participation in classroom rule-setting and decision-making (T14); and thoughtful technology integration where resources permitted (T2). The pervasive use of "I try" (T4, T14) revealed teachers' awareness of the conditional, constrained nature of their efforts—they persevere despite uncertainty about success (see Chapter 4, Section 4.3.1.3 for detailed analysis).

Relational and Affective Foundations: T12 articulated an approach informed by Ubuntu, stating: "The first thing is to build a strong relationship with your kids... They know that, okay, I'm allowed to come to teacher anytime I have a problem... I need to give my learners that space where they are sure that, okay, I trust this person a lot." This frames democratic participation not as technique but as relational bond grounded in trust, care, and mutual humanity—reflecting IKs' emphasis on communal, relational pedagogies (see Chapter 2, Section 2.5.2 on Ubuntu philosophy).

Curriculum Adaptations: Some teachers connected lessons to learners' lived experiences and local contexts (T1, T10, T12), bridging the gap between abstract curriculum and learners' realities. T12's ability to "bring life situations into the lesson" demonstrated culturally responsive, contextually relevant pedagogy (see Chapter 2, Section 2.4.1 on curriculum and pedagogical implications).

Observations confirmed some of these strategies in practice (see Chapter 4, Section 4.3.2): dialogic approaches with thinking time, especially for "why" questions (T11S2); circular seating arrangements facilitating discussion (T5S1); peer assistance and collaborative learning (T4S1); and connecting lessons to life situations (T12S2). However, observations also revealed that many classrooms remained predominantly teacher-centred with traditional transmission pedagogies, indicating a theory-practice gap discussed in Section 5.3.

5.2.3 Factors Shaping Implementation (Sub-Research Question 3)

This section addresses the question: What factors shape teachers' implementation of democratic and transformative principles? (see Chapter 1, Section 1.7.2.3)

Despite teachers' awareness of democratic and transformative principles, execution encountered substantial hurdles, including systemic constraints, which include heavy administrative responsibilities, standardized testing demands, and strict curriculum timetables (T1, T2, T5). Also, they are constrained by resource restrictions such as a lack of technology, huge class sizes, and inadequate teaching materials (T4, T11, T12). Cultural and structural constraints include learner opposition to participatory approaches, language barriers, and inadequate parental participation (T4, T7, T11).

The study identified multiple constraining and enabling factors operating at systemic, institutional, and individual levels:

5.2.3.1 Constraining Factors

Administrative and Curricular Strangulation (see Chapter 4, Section 4.3.1.2): Teachers described being positioned as "bureaucrats" rather than professional educators, burdened by inflexible curriculum timelines, standardized testing pressure, and repetitive administrative requirements. The language used—"rigid," "centralized," "template"—portrayed the system as unchanging and oppressive. T4 noted that "democratic approaches is seen as less efficient because it's not producing immediate results," revealing how neoliberal accountability pressures pit democratic values against efficiency imperatives (see Chapter 2, Sections 2.3.1 and 2.3.4 on political and curricular constraints).

Resource Deprivation as Structural Violence

Teachers consistently mentioned "limited resources, time constraints and lack of training" (T1), "lack of internet access" (T4), and pressure to "produce results" without adequate inputs. This represents what Critical Theory identifies as systemic injustice—outputs demanded without providing necessary inputs (see Chapter 2, Section 2.3.2 on socioeconomic inequities). Observations confirmed stark resource disparities: some classrooms had smart boards (T2S1) while others lacked basic posters (T10S2) and relied on improvised materials like pencils as counters (T14S2) (see Chapter 4, Section 4.3.2.4).

Linguistic Marginalisation and Epistemic Violence

Teachers identified "language barriers" as a significant constraint, noting that "most learners are not taught in their home language" (T2) and that English-dominant instruction causes "participation and confidence" to suffer (T6). This frames language policy as epistemic violence, devaluing learners' home languages and associated knowledge systems (see Chapter 2, Section 2.3.4 on curricular rigidity and epistemic injustice; Chapter 4, Section 4.3.1.4).

Socioeconomic Exclusion

Teachers described how poverty, hunger, and material deprivation constrain learners' ability to participate. "Some learners are from disadvantaged backgrounds; they don't have resources at home" (T3); "Many learners come to school hungry or stressed about problems at home" (T8). Material conditions shape consciousness and agency.

Democratic education becomes a "luxury"; accessible only when survival needs are met (see Chapter 4, Section 4.3.1.4).

Overcrowding and Invisibility

Large class sizes (50-60 learners per class in some contexts) make individual attention and meaningful participation practically impossible. T9 noted: "In a class of 55, some learners become invisible... quiet ones never get to participate." This denies such learners recognition and voice that is fundamental to democratic participation (see Chapter 2, Section 2.3.2; Chapter 4, Section 4.3.1.4).

5.2.3.2 Enabling Factors

Teacher Agency and Pragmatic Resistance

Despite the barriers encountered, teachers demonstrated commitment to "do what we can now, even if it's small" (T12). Their "micro-interventions" represent pragmatic agency—working within and against oppressive systems simultaneously. Teachers' use of active voice ("I create," "I give," "I try") signals individual and collective agency (see Chapter 4, Section 4.3.1.3).

Relational Foundations and Ubuntu Philosophy

Ubuntu-informed relationships of trust, care, and mutual humanity create conditions for democratic participation. T12's emphasis on relationship-building as "the first thing" reflects Indigenous epistemologies centring relationality and communal values (see Chapter 2, Section 2.5.2).

Creative Adaptation and Resourcefulness

Observations revealed teachers' creativity in resource-constrained environments—using pencils to teach subtraction concepts (T6S1), creating patterns with children's bodies (T7S1), and improvising materials. This demonstrates teachers' professional resilience and problem-solving (see Chapter 4, Section 4.3.2.4).

Supportive School Cultures (Where Present)

While not widespread, some schools and leaders appeared to create enabling environments. Classrooms demonstrating substantive democratic practices (T5S1, T7S1, T12S2) suggest that a supportive institutional culture makes a difference (see Chapter 4, Section 4.3.2.6 and Table 4.2).

Triangulation of interview and observation data (see Chapter 4, Section 4.4) revealed both convergences (where data sources aligned) and divergences (theory-practice gaps). Teachers possess sophisticated understanding and express strong commitment, yet struggle to enact democratic principles consistently due to structural constraints. This finding—that teachers are neither heroes nor failures but constrained agents navigating oppressive systems—has important implications discussed in Section 5.3.

5.2.4 Overall Synthesis

Classroom observations revealed a gap between theoretical understanding and practical execution, with most classrooms still using traditional seating arrangements and teacher-centred instruction; however, others showed promise in participatory learning techniques.

Democratic education implementation exists on a continuum rather than binary present/absent (see Chapter 4, Section 4.3.2.6 and Table 4.2). Observations documented minimal democratic practice (predominantly traditional, teacher-centred), partial democratic practice (mixed approaches with some participatory elements), and substantive democratic practice (learner-centred, dialogic, collaborative). This spectrum reflects teachers' varying capacities to navigate constraints, varying resource contexts, and varying institutional support.

In answering the main research question—"What is the role of democratic and transformative principles in primary education in two Gauteng primary schools?"—the findings reveal that democratic principles exist primarily at conceptual/aspirational level in teachers' understandings, with implementation ranging from minimal to substantive depending on intersection of teacher agency, material conditions, and systemic constraints. The role of democratic principles is thus characterized by tension: ideologically valued but practically constrained; conceptually sophisticated but inconsistently enacted; individually championed by teachers but systemically undermined by neoliberal accountability structures, resource inequities, and curricular rigidity.

5.3 Discussion of Findings

This section discusses the study's findings in relation to existing literature (Chapter 2) and interprets them through the study's theoretical frameworks: Critical Theory and IKS/Ubuntu philosophy (see Chapter 2, Section 2.5). The discussion explores what the findings mean theoretically and empirically, how they confirm or challenge existing knowledge, and what unexpected insights emerged.

5.3.1 Interpretation through Critical Theory Framework

Critical Theory provides a powerful lens for interpreting this study's findings, particularly regarding structural barriers, power dynamics, and the gap between democratic rhetoric and authoritarian reality (see Chapter 2, Section 2.5.1).

5.3.1.1 Neoliberal Accountability as Structural Constraint

The finding that standardized testing pressure and "results-driven" school cultures constrain democratic education (see Section 5.2.3) confirms Critical Theory's analysis of how neoliberal education reforms prioritize measurable outcomes over transformative learning. Teachers' description of being evaluated on "curriculum coverage and test performance" rather than democratic pedagogies (T4) illustrates what Apple (2022) terms the "audit culture" that reduces education to technical competencies and measurable outputs. This finding aligns with literature documenting neoliberal constraints on democratic education in South African contexts (see Chapter 2, Section 2.3.1; Motala, et al., 2023; Jansen & Walters, 2022).

However, this study advances understanding by documenting specific mechanisms through which neoliberal pressures operate at classroom level: rigid curriculum timelines that prevent deliberative dialogue; standardized assessments that privilege recall over critical thinking; and administrative burdens that position teachers as "bureaucrats" rather than professional educators. The language teachers used—"rigid," "centralized," "template"—reveals how bureaucratic control functions as hegemonic force, shaping not only pedagogical possibilities but also teachers' professional identities and sense of agency.

5.3.1.2 Resource Deprivation as Structural Violence

Critical Theory's Marxist roots emphasize how material conditions shape consciousness and agency. This study's findings on resource disparities—

overcrowded classrooms, inadequate materials, lack of technology—confirm literature on socioeconomic inequities in South African education (see Chapter 2, Section 2.3.2; Spaul & Pretorius, 2022). What this study adds is empirical documentation of how these material conditions directly constrain democratic pedagogies: large class sizes make individual attention impossible; lack of resources forces transmission pedagogies; poverty and hunger prevent learner engagement regardless of pedagogical approach.

The finding that teachers face "immense pressure to produce results" without adequate "inputs" (T4) exemplifies what Critical Theory identifies as systemic contradiction fundamental to capitalist education systems—exploitation of labour (teachers expected to perform) without provision of necessary means of production (resources, support, time). This contradiction is particularly acute in historically disadvantaged schools serving Black and working-class communities, perpetuating educational apartheid despite post-1994 policy reforms.

5.3.1.3 Pragmatic Resistance and Teacher Agency

A critically important finding from this study is teachers' "pragmatic resistance"—their determination to implement democratic practices despite systemic barriers (see Section 5.2.2 and Chapter 4, Section 4.3.1.3). This advances Critical Theory by documenting how oppressed subjects exercise agency within oppressive structures. Teachers' "micro-interventions"—open-ended questions, collaborative work, relationship-building—represent what Giroux (2020) terms "critical democratic praxis," where educators work simultaneously within and against the system.

The pervasive use of "I try" in teachers' accounts is theoretically significant. It reveals neither triumphant heroism nor defeated resignation; but rather persistent, conditional effort, acknowledging structural constraints while refusing complete capitulation. This finding complicates deficit narratives that blame individual teachers for implementation failures, instead recognizing teachers as knowledgeable, committed professionals navigating oppressive conditions largely beyond their control.

5.3.1.4 Theory-Practice Gap as Structural Phenomenon

The divergence between teachers' sophisticated conceptual understanding and their often-traditional classroom practices (see Chapter 4, Section 4.4.2) could be interpreted as teacher failure or hypocrisy. Critical Theory offers a more structurally-

informed interpretation: the gap results not from individual deficiency but from systemic constraints that force compromise. Even teachers who are deeply committed to democratic principles struggle to enact them consistently when facing large classes, curriculum pressure, and assessment demands. This confirms literature arguing that teachers' beliefs are necessary but insufficient for pedagogical change if structural conditions are not addressed (see Chapter 2, Section 2.4.4; Van der Berg et al., 2023).

In summary, Critical Theory illuminates how neoliberal capitalism, bureaucratic control, and resource inequities function as structural barriers to democratic education. However, the theory's emphasis on oppression and constraints must be balanced with recognition of teacher agency—which is where the Ubuntu/IKS framework provides complementary perspective.

5.3.2 Interpretation through Ubuntu and Indigenous Knowledge Systems Framework

While Critical Theory explains constraints, Ubuntu philosophy and IKS illuminate culturally-grounded alternatives and sources of resilience in teachers' practice (see Chapter 2, Section 2.5.2).

5.3.2.1 Relational Pedagogies and Ubuntu Philosophy

Perhaps the most significant finding from the Ubuntu/IKS perspective is T12's articulation of democratic education as fundamentally relational: "The first thing is to build a strong relationship with your kids... I need to give my learners that space where they are sure that, okay, I trust this person a lot" (see Chapter 4, Section 4.3.1.3). This frames democratic participation not as technique or procedure but as emerging from affective bonds of trust, care, and mutual humanity.

This finding demonstrates Ubuntu philosophy in practice—the principle that "umuntu ngumuntu ngabantu" (a person is a person through other people) applied to educational contexts. Ubuntu reframes democratic education from Western liberal emphasis on individual rights and autonomy toward African communal emphasis on relationality, interdependence, and collective responsibility. Democracy, from the Ubuntu perspective, is not about isolated individuals exercising choice but about community members relating to each other with dignity, care, and mutual recognition.

The study advances IKS/Ubuntu literature by providing empirical documentation of how these philosophies inform teachers' actual practice. While scholars like Waghid

(2023) and Metz (2023) theorize Ubuntu pedagogies, this study shows how teachers operationalize them—through relationship-building, cultivation of trust, and creation of psychologically safe spaces. However, the finding during the observations, that few classrooms demonstrated substantive relational pedagogies, (see Chapter 4, Section 4.4.2) suggests that while teachers possess Ubuntu awareness, systemic constraints limit their ability to enact it fully.

5.3.2.2 Epistemic Violence and IKS Exclusion

Teachers' accounts of "language barriers" where "most learners are not taught in their home language" (T2, T6) confirm literature on epistemic violence and linguistic marginalization in South African education (see Chapter 2, Section 2.3.4; Ndlovu-Gatsheni, 2021; Le Grange, 2023). English-dominant instruction devalues African languages and associated knowledge systems, alienating learners from their cultural identities while privileging Western/colonial epistemologies.

This finding illustrates what IKS scholars' term "epistemic injustice"—the systematic devaluation and exclusion of Indigenous ways of knowing. Despite the South African constitution's recognition of 11 official languages and policy commitments to mother-tongue instruction, classroom reality remains English-dominant. This represents continuation of colonial education's violence, where African knowledge systems, languages, and identities are positioned as inferior to European norms.

However, some teachers demonstrated culturally responsive practices—connecting lessons to "life situations" (T12), incorporating "real-world settings and culturally appropriate content" (T1, T10). These practices, while limited, represent decolonial pedagogy centring learners lived experiences and local contexts. They illustrate the potential for IKS integration even within the constraining CAPS curriculum framework.

5.3.2.3 Ubuntu as a Source of Resilience

An unexpected insight is how Ubuntu philosophy appears to sustain teachers' commitment despite adversity. Teachers' emphasis on relationships, care, and communal values suggests that African epistemologies provide moral and emotional resources for persevering in difficult conditions. While Western critical pedagogy emphasizes structural critique and resistance, Ubuntu offers complementary emphasis on human connection, dignity, and community as foundations for transformative practice.

This finding suggests that decolonizing democratic education in South African contexts requires not only critiquing Western-imposed structures (Critical Theory) but also recovering and centring African epistemologies like Ubuntu that offer culturally-grounded alternatives. The study demonstrates that teachers already possess Ubuntu wisdom; the challenge is creating systemic conditions enabling its full expression.

5.3.2.4 Limitations of Ubuntu in Practice

The study also reveals the limitations of Ubuntu rhetoric. While teachers articulated Ubuntu values, observations showed limited translation into consistent relational, communal pedagogies. Large class sizes, time pressure, and curriculum demand constrain relationship-building. Moreover, Ubuntu can be romanticized or superficially invoked without addressing structural inequities. Simply calling for "Ubuntu pedagogies" without confronting resource disparities, overcrowding, and policy rigidity amounts to empty rhetoric.

In summary, the Ubuntu/IKS framework reveals culturally-grounded pedagogical alternatives rooted in African philosophies of relationality, communal values, and holistic development. It demonstrates that teachers possess Indigenous wisdom; however, systemic barriers prevent its full realization. Integrating Critical Theory (structural critique) with Ubuntu/IKS (cultural affirmation) provides a comprehensive framework for understanding both constraints and possibilities for democratic education in South African contexts.

5.3.3 Findings in Relation to Existing Literature

This subsection situates the study's findings within broader literature on democratic education, identifying where findings confirm, challenge, or extend existing knowledge (see Chapter 2 for full literature review).

5.3.3.1 Confirming Findings: This study confirms several patterns documented in existing literature:

- **Policy-Practice Implementation Gap:** The finding that there is a significant gap between progressive policies (CAPS, Inclusive Education Policy) and actual classroom practice confirms extensive South African literature (Jansen & Walters, 2022; Motala et al., 2023). Like previous studies, this research

documents how neoliberal accountability pressures, resource constraints, and bureaucratic control undermine democratic intentions.

- **Resource Inequities as a Barrier:** The documented findings regarding overcrowded classrooms, inadequate materials, and technology gaps (see Section 5.2.3) confirms Spaul and Pretorius's (2022) findings on persistent educational inequality in South Africa (see Chapter 2, Section 2.3.2). The study provides additional granular detail on how these inequities manifest at classroom level and directly constrain pedagogical possibilities.
- **Teacher Preparedness Challenges:** The finding that teachers lack adequate professional development in democratic pedagogies confirms literature on gaps in teacher education (Van der Berg et al., 2023; see Chapter 2, Section 2.3.3). Teachers' mention of "lack of training" (T1) and observations of predominantly traditional pedagogies align with previous research.
- **Curricular Rigidity as a Constraint:** Teachers' accounts of "rigid timelines," "standardized testing demands," and pressure for "curriculum coverage" (T2, T4) confirm literature critiquing CAPS implementation for constraining democratic pedagogies (see Chapter 2, Section 2.3.4; Jansen & Walters, 2022).

5.3.3.2 Extending Findings: The study extends existing literature in several important ways:

- **Conceptual Sophistication despite Implementation Challenges:** While previous studies document implementation gaps, this study reveals that teachers possess highly sophisticated conceptual understanding of democratic education. They articulate complex ideas about learner voice, teacher-as-facilitator roles, and connections to civic participation. This challenges deficit narratives suggesting that teachers do not understand democratic principles. The problem is not lack of understanding but structural barriers preventing implementation.
- **Pragmatic Agency and Micro-Interventions:** The documented findings of teachers' "micro-practices" of democracy—open-ended questions, collaborative work, relationship-building—advances literature by showing how teachers exercise agency despite the constraints. Previous research tends to emphasize either structural barriers OR teacher agency; this study

demonstrates their simultaneous occurrence. Teachers are neither powerless victims nor heroic change agents but pragmatic actors navigating complex realities.

- **Ubuntu in Practice:** While literature on Ubuntu is extensive, empirical documentation of how teachers actually operationalize Ubuntu philosophy in primary classrooms is limited. This study contributes by showing T12's relational approach and connecting it to Ubuntu principles (see Section 5.3.2). It also honestly documents limitations. Awareness about Ubuntu does not automatically translate into Ubuntu practice due to systemic constraints.
- **Democratic Education Spectrum:** The finding that implementation exists on a continuum from minimal to substantive (see Chapter 4, Table 4.2) advances beyond the binary present/absent frameworks that are common in existing literature. This nuanced understanding recognizes partial implementations, mixed approaches, and contextual variation.

5.3.3.3 Challenging Findings: The study also challenges some assumptions in literature:

- **Technology as an Enabler of Democratic Education:** While literature often positions technology as a democratizing force (Padayachee, 2021; see Chapter 2, Section 2.2.2), this study reveals that unequal access to technology exacerbates rather than reduces inequity. Without addressing the digital divide ("80% of township schools lack electricity"), technology integration may benefit privileged schools while leaving marginalized schools further behind.
- **Simple Professional Development Solutions:** Some literature suggests improved teacher training will solve implementation challenges. This study reveals that even knowledgeable, committed teachers struggle to implement democratic pedagogies when facing large classes, resource constraints, and curriculum pressure. Professional development is necessary but insufficient if structural conditions are not addressed.

5.3.3.4 Unexpected Findings: Several findings emerged unexpectedly:

- **Civic Analogy Framing:** T12's explicit connection between classroom participation and civic voting was unanticipated and it revealed that some teachers understand democratic education as directly political—preparing

engaged citizens rather than merely using "good pedagogy." This elevates the significance of democratic education.

- "I Try" as a Hedging Device: The pervasive use of "I try" in teachers' accounts emerged through discourse analysis as a significant conversational feature revealing teachers' awareness of the conditional, constrained nature of their success. This linguistic finding demonstrates the value of discourse/conversation analysis methodology (see Chapter 3, Section 3.7).
- Invisibility due to Overcrowding: T9's description of learners becoming "invisible" in classes of 50 - 60 learners frames overcrowding not merely as a logistical challenge but as denial of recognition that is fundamental to human dignity. This powerful insight adds a moral dimension to the discourse about resource equity.

In summary, this study confirms much of the information contained in existing literature but also expands it in important ways—particularly regarding teachers' conceptual sophistication, pragmatic agency, and Ubuntu in practice. It challenges simplistic solutions centred on teacher training alone, revealing systemic structural change as a prerequisite for democratic education's realization.

5.4 Implications of the Study

The findings have important implications for policy, practice, and theory in South African primary education.

5.4.1 Implications for Policy

The results have important implications for how schools work and how they make decisions. There is an urgent need to find a way to make standardized testing requirements and transformative educational goals work together at the policy level. The study suggests that laws should be more flexible when it comes to how the curriculum is taught and tested in order to support democratic teaching methods.

Specifically, this study suggests that CAPS curriculum requires substantial revision to enable democratic pedagogies:

5.4.1.1 Reduce Content Overload and Pacing Pressure

Teachers' accounts of "rigid timelines for curriculum completion" (T2) and pressure for "curriculum coverage" (T4) indicate that CAPS prescribes too much content for the

available time. Policy makers should audit the curriculum to identify essential content versus what could be streamlined, allowing time for deliberative dialogue, collaborative inquiry, and critical reflection that is central to democratic education (see Chapter 2, Section 2.4.1 on curriculum and pedagogical implications). Precedent exists in international contexts like Finland, where less-is-more curricular approaches enable deeper, more democratic learning.

5.4.1.2 Reform Assessment Structures

The finding that "democratic approaches is seen as less efficient because it's not producing immediate results" (T4) reveals how high-stakes standardized testing undermines democratic education. Policy should shift toward formative, portfolio-based, and authentic assessment approaches valuing critical thinking, problem-solving, and collaborative competencies rather than mere content recall. Reducing the frequency and stakes of standardized tests would relieve pressure forcing teachers toward transmission pedagogies.

5.4.1.3 Resource Equity as Policy Priority

The documented evidence of stark resource disparities—overcrowded classrooms, inadequate materials, technology gaps—demonstrates that policy commitments to equity remain unfulfilled (see Chapter 2, Section 2.4.3). Government must allocate resources based on need rather than maintaining historical inequalities. Specifically, government needs to: reduce class sizes, particularly in historically disadvantaged schools, to a maximum of 30 learners per class; ensure adequate physical infrastructure, learning materials, and access to technology; and provide funding for ongoing teacher professional development.

5.4.1.4 Language Policy Implementation

Teachers' accounts of "language barriers" where learners are not taught in their home languages indicate failure to implement constitutional commitments to mother-tongue instruction. Policy makers should enforce existing language-in-education policy, provide resources for mother-tongue instruction, particularly in Foundation Phase, and develop learning materials in African languages to support epistemic justice (see Chapter 2, Section 2.3.4).

5.4.1.5 Accountability Reform

The finding that teachers feel that they are positioned as "bureaucrats" burdened by "repetitive" administrative requirements suggests a need for accountability reform. Rather than bureaucratic compliance, accountability should focus on supporting teacher professional judgment and pedagogical growth. Reducing the administrative burden would free time and energy for democratic teaching.

5.4.2 Implications for Practice

The research shows that present professional development opportunities for teachers are insufficient to improve capability in democratic education. There is an urgent need for continuing, context-specific training that addresses both the conceptual foundations and practical applications of transformational pedagogies.

5.4.2.1 For School Leaders

The findings emphasize how crucial it is for school administrators to foster cultures that encourage teachers to try out democratic methods without worrying about sacrificing academic performance. To encourage creativity, school administrators must strike a balance between accountability and autonomy.

Specifically, principals should create enabling environments where teachers can experiment with democratic pedagogies without fear of negative evaluation; buffer teachers from excessive bureaucratic demands; facilitate collaborative professional learning communities where teachers share democratic practices; and model democratic leadership through participatory decision-making in School Governing Bodies and staff meetings (see Chapter 2, Section 2.4.2 on school governance and leadership).

5.4.2.2 For Teachers

The study validates teachers' existing knowledge and commitment while suggesting specific practices, such as employing the "micro-interventions" documented as effective—open-ended questioning, collaborative group work, student participation in rule-setting (see Chapter 4, Section 4.3.1.3); prioritizing relationship-building as a foundation for democratic participation, following Ubuntu principles articulated by T12; connecting the curriculum to learners' lived experiences and local contexts; and collaborating with colleagues to share strategies and provide mutual support.

5.4.2.3 For Teacher Educators

Pre-service teacher education should integrate democratic pedagogies throughout coursework, not as separate topic; provide substantial practicum experiences in schools, modelling democratic practices; emphasize critical reflection on power, privilege, and structural inequities; and incorporate Ubuntu philosophy and IKS as foundational to African pedagogies rather than tokenistic additions (see Chapter 2, Section 2.4.4 on teacher development).

5.4.3 Implications for Theory

This study has several theoretical implications:

5.4.3.1 Integrating Critical Theory and Ubuntu/IKS

The study demonstrates the value of integrating Western critical frameworks with African Indigenous epistemologies (see Section 5.3). Critical Theory illuminates structural constraints and power dynamics, and Ubuntu/IKS provides culturally grounded alternatives emphasizing relationality and communal values. Future research should continue developing these integrated frameworks rather than privileging Western theory.

5.4.3.2 Reconceptualising Agency

The finding regarding teachers' "pragmatic resistance" advances the theorization of agency within oppressive structures. Rather than heroic resistance or powerless victimhood, teachers demonstrate conditional, contextual agency by simultaneously working within and against the system. This nuanced understanding challenges both deficit narratives blaming teachers and romantic narratives celebrating individual heroism.

5.4.3.3 Democratic Education as a Spectrum

The finding that implementation exists on continuum challenges binary theoretical frameworks. Future theory should conceptualize democratic education as multidimensional, contextual, and varying in degree rather than simply being present or absent. The report also highlights how important resource equity is to democratic schooling. The application of transformative ideas in under-resourced settings is limited by the digital divide and poor resource allocation among schools, which perpetuate educational disparities.

5.5 Contributions of the Study

This study advances the area of democratic education in a number of significant ways.

5.5.1 Theoretical Contributions

In theory, it broadens our comprehension of the interpretation and application of democratic values in Global South contexts, especially in post-colonial educational settings. The discovery of "pragmatic resistance" tactics used by teachers gives current theoretical frameworks more depth.

Specifically, this study contributes:

- Empirical documentation of Ubuntu philosophy in primary classroom practice, advancing IKS literature beyond theoretical discussion to showing how Ubuntu actually informs teachers' relational approaches and pedagogical decisions (see Sections 5.2.2 and 5.3.2).
- The concept of "pragmatic resistance" as way of understanding teacher agency within oppressive structures—neither heroic triumph nor defeated resignation but persistent, conditional effort acknowledging constraints while refusing complete capitulation (see Sections 5.2.2, 5.3.1, and Chapter 4, Section 4.3.1.3).
- Integrated Critical Theory-Ubuntu/IKS framework demonstrating the value of combining Western critical perspectives (structural critique) with African Indigenous epistemologies (cultural affirmation and relational pedagogies) for understanding post-colonial educational contexts (see Section 5.3 and Chapter 2, Section 2.5).
- Theoretical understanding of democratic education as a spectrum rather than binary, recognizing minimal, partial, and substantive implementations as points on a continuum shaped by intersecting factors (see Chapter 4, Table 4.2 and Section 5.2.4).

5.5.2 Empirical Contributions

This study provides rich empirical evidence regarding:

- Teachers' sophisticated conceptual understanding of democratic education in South African primary schools, challenging deficit narratives suggesting that teachers lack knowledge (see Section 5.2.1 and Chapter 4, Section 4.3.1.1).

- Specific "micro-interventions" teachers employ to enact democratic principles despite constraints—providing concrete examples other educators can adapt (see Section 5.2.2 and Chapter 4, Section 4.3.1.3).
- Detailed documentation of structural barriers at multiple levels (policy, institutional, classroom), specifying how neoliberal accountability, resource inequities, and curricular rigidity constrain democratic education (see Section 5.2.3 and Chapter 4, Section 4.3.1.2).
- Theory-practice gaps between teachers' conceptual commitments and actual classroom practices, revealing these gaps result from structural constraints rather than individual deficiency (see Chapter 4, Section 4.4.2 and Section 5.3.1).
- Contextual, grounded understanding of democratic education in specific South African context—two Gauteng primary schools with particular resource conditions, policy contexts, and cultural settings.

5.5.3 Methodological Contributions

In terms of methodology, the study shows how useful it is to combine discourse analysis with conversation analysis in order to look at the form as well as the substance of teachers' experiences and understandings. Compared to each strategy alone, this combined approach offers deeper insights.

The study demonstrates value of:

- Triangulating interviews and observations to reveal both teachers' internal experiences (beliefs, understandings, frustrations) and external realities (actual practices, material conditions) (see Chapter 3, Sections 3.6.1 and 3.6.2; Chapter 4, Section 4.4).
- Discourse and conversation analysis for examining not only what teachers say but how they say it—linguistic features like "I try" revealing deeper meanings (see Chapter 3, Section 3.7; Chapter 4, Section 4.3.1.3).
- Grounding analysis in theoretical frameworks (Critical Theory, Ubuntu/IKS) to provide interpretive depth beyond descriptive reporting (see Chapter 2, Section 2.5; Chapter 4, Section 4.5).

5.5.4 Practical Contributions

For curriculum designers, teachers and school administrators looking to promote democratic education in settings with limited resources, the research provides evidence-based insights. The documented tactics and obstacles offer a practical basis for creating interventions that are suited for the given setting.

Specifically, the study provides:

- Concrete examples of pedagogical strategies teachers can employ despite the constraints—open-ended questioning, collaborative work, relationship-building, curriculum adaptation (see Section 5.7.3 for detailed recommendations).
- Honest documentation of implementation challenges enabling realistic planning rather than naive optimism (see Section 5.6 for limitations and Section 5.2.3 for constraints).
- Evidence-based recommendations for policy makers, school leaders, teachers, and teacher educators grounded in empirical findings from South African contexts (see Section 5.7).
- Validation of teachers' knowledge and commitment, shifting discourse from blame to recognition of structural constraints requiring systemic solutions.

5.6 Limitations of the Study

While this study provides valuable insights into democratic education in South African primary schools, several limitations must be acknowledged to appropriately contextualize the findings and interpret their significance.

5.6.1 Methodological Limitations

5.6.1.1 Sampling Approach: This study employed convenience sampling, selecting two schools and fourteen teachers based on accessibility and willingness to participate (see Chapter 3, Section 3.5.1). While pragmatically necessary given time and resource constraints, convenience sampling limits the generalizability and transferability of findings. The two schools cannot be assumed to represent all Gauteng primary schools, much less all South African primary schools. The findings are specific to these particular contexts and cannot be claimed to apply universally. Additionally, self-selection bias may be present—teachers who volunteered may be more interested in or committed to democratic education than teachers who declined, potentially

presenting more optimistic picture than would emerge from random or purposeful sampling.

5.6.1.2 Scope Limitations

The study examined only two schools in Gauteng province, in the same geographic region (one in town, one outside town). This limited scope means the study cannot capture variation across different provinces, quintiles (socioeconomic levels), urban versus rural contexts, or different cultural/linguistic communities. Democratic education implementation in Western Cape township schools, rural KwaZulu-Natal schools, or affluent Johannesburg suburbs may differ substantially from what was documented here. Readers should exercise caution in transferring findings to dissimilar contexts (see Chapter 3, Section 3.5.3).

5.6.1.3 Self-Reported Data

Semi-structured interviews captured teachers' self-reported beliefs, experiences, and practices. While observations provided triangulation, interview data represents teachers' perspectives rather than objective reality. Teachers may have presented themselves more favourably than actual practice warranted (social desirability bias), or their stated beliefs may not align with unconscious assumptions shaping practice. The theory-practice gaps documented (see Chapter 4, Section 4.4.2) suggest some divergence between what teachers say and what they do, though this gap itself represents a significant finding rather than a simple methodological limitation.

5.6.2 Researcher Positionality and Reflexivity

The researcher's identity, background, and theoretical commitments inevitably shaped data collection, analysis, and interpretation (see Chapter 3, Section 3.10). As a teacher and education professional, the researcher shared insider identity with participants, facilitating rapport and understanding. However, this positionality also carried potential for over-identification—assuming shared meanings or missing perspectives that differed from researcher's own experiences.

The study's theoretical frameworks—Critical Theory and Ubuntu/IKS—functioned as interpretive lenses shaping what was noticed and how it was understood (see Chapter 2, Section 2.5). While these frameworks enabled theoretically-grounded analysis, they also constrained attention. Phenomena not fitting these frameworks may have been overlooked or under-analysed. For example, the study's critical orientation toward

neoliberalism and emphasis on structural barriers may have paid insufficient attention to productive aspects of accountability or individual teacher limitations beyond structural constraints.

Reflexivity throughout the research process (maintaining a reflexive journal, seeking negative cases) mitigated, but could not eliminate, researcher influence. Readers should interpret findings recognizing they represent one researcher's theoretically-informed construction of meaning from the data, rather than objective truth.

5.6.3 Time and Resource Constraints

As a Master's-level study conducted within a limited timeframe, this research could not achieve the depth and comprehensiveness of doctoral research or large-scale funded projects. Each teacher was observed conducting one or few lessons, providing a snapshot rather than extended understanding of their practice. More prolonged engagement would enable richer understanding of how democratic practices develop over time, vary across different topics or grade levels, and respond to changing conditions. Additionally, the study did not include student perspectives—examining how learners experience and interpret democratic (or undemocratic) classroom practices would provide valuable complementary data.

Financial and temporal constraints also limited sample size (14 teachers, 2 schools). Larger samples across more diverse contexts would strengthen confidence in the transferability of the findings, though trade-off between breadth and depth is inherent in qualitative research design.

Despite these limitations, the study achieves its aims: providing detailed, contextually-grounded understanding of how teachers in two Gauteng primary schools understand and attempt to implement democratic education principles. The limitations do not invalidate the findings but rather define their scope and appropriate interpretation. The study offers valuable insights for these specific contexts while acknowledging that broader claims require additional research across diverse settings.

5.7 Recommendations

This section provides specific, actionable recommendations for various stakeholders based on the study's findings. Recommendations are organized by primary audience, though many are interrelated.

5.7.1 Recommendations for Policy Makers

Based on the findings regarding curricular rigidity, assessment pressure, resource inequities, and language barriers (see Sections 5.2.3 and 5.3.1), the following policy recommendations are made:

5.7.1.1 Reform CAPS Curriculum to Reduce Content Overload

Conduct a comprehensive curriculum audit to identify essential versus peripheral content. Reduce prescribed content by at least 20-25% to create space for deliberative dialogue, critical thinking, and participatory learning. Provide flexible pacing guidelines rather than rigid timelines, trusting teacher professional judgment to adapt to learner needs and contextual realities.

5.7.1.2 Shift Assessment Paradigm Away from High-Stakes Standardized Testing

Reduce the frequency and stakes of standardized assessments. Develop and validate alternative assessment approaches—portfolios, projects, authentic performance tasks—that assess critical thinking, collaboration, and problem-solving rather than mere recall. Provide professional development and resources to support teachers in implementing these assessments.

5.7.1.3 Prioritise Resource Equity Through Needs-Based Funding

Revise school funding formulas to allocate resources based on need rather than historical inequities. Set maximum class sizes (target: 30 learners per primary class, particularly in Foundation Phase), with additional funding for schools exceeding limits. Ensure all schools have adequate physical infrastructure, learning materials, technology, and internet access. Establish dedicated funding stream for ongoing teacher professional development.

5.7.1.4 Enforce and Resource Mother-Tongue Instruction

Implement existing constitutional and policy commitments to mother-tongue instruction, particularly in Foundation Phase. Provide funding for developing learning materials in African languages. Support teacher training in multilingual pedagogies. Challenge English hegemony through concrete policy actions rather than symbolic commitments.

5.7.1.5 Reduce the Bureaucratic Burden on Teachers

Audit administrative requirements to eliminate redundant or low-value compliance tasks. Streamline reporting, reduce paperwork, and create space for teacher professional work—planning, collaboration, reflection. Trust teacher professionalism rather than micromanaging through excessive bureaucratic control.

5.7.2 Recommendations for School Leaders and District Officials

Based on the findings regarding school cultures, teacher agency, and enabling conditions (see Sections 5.2.3 and 5.3.2), the following recommendations are made to:

- **Create Enabling School Cultures:** School principals should foster cultures where teachers can experiment with democratic pedagogies without fear of negative evaluation. Explicitly communicate that democratic approaches are valued even if they do not produce immediate test score gains. Buffer teachers from excessive bureaucratic demands by handling administrative tasks efficiently and advocating for teachers with district officials.
- **Model Democratic Leadership:** Practice what you preach—implement participatory decision-making in School Governing Bodies, staff meetings, and school policy development. Give teachers meaningful voice in decisions affecting their work. Model Ubuntu principles of relationality, care, and communal responsibility in school leadership (see Chapter 2, Section 2.5.2).
- **Facilitate Professional Learning Communities:** Create structures and time for teachers to collaborate, observe each other's practice, and share democratic teaching strategies. Facilitate peer mentoring where teachers who are experienced in democratic pedagogies support colleagues. Allocate resources (substitute teachers, dedicated time) for collaborative professional learning.
- **Provide Targeted Support:** Identify and support teachers attempting democratic pedagogies but struggling with implementation. Provide classroom resources, pedagogical coaching, and problem-solving support. Celebrate and amplify examples of democratic practice within the school.
- **Advocate for Systemic Change:** School leaders and district officials should advocate with provincial and national authorities for policy reforms enabling democratic education—curricular flexibility, resource equity, assessment

reform. Use collective voice to challenge policies constraining democratic pedagogies.

5.7.3 Recommendations for Teachers and Teacher Educators

Based on findings regarding teachers' agency, pedagogical strategies, and professional development needs (see Sections 5.2.2 and 5.4.2), the following recommendations are made:

5.7.3.1 For Practicing Teachers

- **Employ Documented "Micro-Interventions":** The study documented specific strategies teachers successfully use despite constraints: ask open-ended questions requiring explanation rather than recall ("if yes, why? If no, why?"); facilitate collaborative group work and peer learning; invite student participation in classroom rule-setting and decision-making; connect curriculum to learners' lived experiences and local contexts; and prioritize relationship-building as a foundation for democratic participation (Ubuntu approach) (see Chapter 4, Section 4.3.1.3).
- **Collaborate with Colleagues:** Form or join professional learning communities with fellow teachers committed to democratic education. Share strategies, observe each other's practice, and provide mutual support. Collective action is more sustainable than isolated individual efforts.
- **Practice Critical Reflection:** Regularly reflect on your practice through a critical lens: Who has voice in my classroom? Whose knowledge is valued? How do power dynamics operate? How do my practices challenge or reinforce inequities? Use reflexive journaling or collegial dialogue to deepen awareness.
- **Advocate for Systemic Change:** While doing what you can in your classroom, also advocate collectively (through unions, professional associations) for policy reforms enabling democratic education. Teachers' voices are crucial in policy debates.

5.7.3.2 For Teacher Educators

- **Integrate Democratic Pedagogies Throughout Teacher Education:** Rather than teaching democratic education as a separate topic, model democratic pedagogies in university/college classrooms. Give student teachers voice in

curriculum decisions, facilitate collaborative learning, engage critical reflection on power and inequality.

- Provide Substantial Practicum in Democratic Classrooms: Partner with schools that are successfully implementing democratic practices for student teacher placements. Ensure that student teachers observe and practice democratic pedagogies rather than only experiencing traditional transmission models (see Chapter 2, Section 2.4.4).
- Centre Ubuntu and IKS in Teacher Education: Rather than treating African epistemologies as marginal or supplementary, position Ubuntu philosophy and IKS as foundational to teacher education in South African contexts. Explore how relationality, communal values, and Indigenous knowledge inform pedagogy.
- Address Structural Constraints Explicitly: Prepare student teachers realistically for the challenges they will face—resource constraints, policy pressures, large classes. Provide problem-solving tools and adaptive strategies rather than idealistic visions that are divorced from reality.

5.7.4 Recommendations for Future Research

The limitations and findings of the study suggest a number of avenues for future research, including longitudinal studies that track the application of democratic education strategies over time to assess their impact on student outcomes and institutional culture. Also, in future studies, teachers should participate in action research as co-researchers to develop and improve democratic teaching methods tailored to South African settings. Future studies could identify implementation-related context-specific traits by comparing the implementation of democratic education across different provinces and school quintiles.

In order to understand how primary school students perceive democratic education and what components they find most relevant, research that focuses on learner perspectives needs to be conducted. Furthermore, forms of technology integration, such as the use of mobile devices and offline digital materials, should be investigated to see how they can help democratic education in low-resource settings. Research on community and parental participation in democratic education programs would create comprehensive forms of school-community collaboration.

More specifically, the following studies are recommended. These are

5.7.4.1 Longitudinal Studies

Track teachers and schools over multiple years to examine how democratic practices develop, what enables sustainability, and what long-term impacts result for students. The current study provides a snapshot; longitudinal research would reveal trajectories and developmental patterns.

5.7.4.2 Comparative Studies across Contexts

Conduct systematic comparisons across provinces, quintiles, urban/rural settings, and cultural/linguistic communities to identify contextual factors shaping implementation. Such research would enable more nuanced understanding of how democratic education operates in different South African contexts.

5.7.4.3 Student Perspective Research

Centre learners' voices—how do primary students experience and interpret democratic versus authoritarian classroom practices? What do they value? How does democratic education affect their sense of agency, engagement, and civic identity? Current research has privileged teacher perspectives; student voices are essential complementary data.

5.7.4.4 Action Research Partnerships

Collaborate with teachers as co-researchers to design, implement, and study democratic pedagogies tailored to their contexts. Action research enables practitioner knowledge generation while supporting pedagogical development—research serving immediate improvement while producing generalizable insights.

5.7.4.5 Ubuntu Pedagogies in Practice

Conduct in-depth studies on how Ubuntu philosophy translates into specific classroom practices, relationships, and learning experiences. The current study has identified Ubuntu awareness; detailed investigation of Ubuntu pedagogy in action would advance IKS literature and provide models for other educators.

5.7.4.6 Policy Implementation Studies

Examine policy reform processes—when policies enabling democratic education are introduced, how are they implemented? What factors facilitate or hinder translation

from policy text to classroom reality? Such research would inform evidence-based policy design.

5.7.4.7 *Technology for Democratic Education in Resource-Constrained Contexts*

Investigate innovative uses of mobile technology, offline digital resources, and low-cost tech solutions to support democratic education where infrastructure is limited. How can technology enable rather than exacerbate inequities?

5.8 Conclusion

This study has shed light on the complicated terrain of democratic education in South African primary schools, highlighting both the teachers' strong dedication to transformational ideas and the major structural obstacles that stand in their way. The results show that systemic factors such as resource constraints, assessment pressures, and bureaucratic requirements continue to impede the full realization of democratic education, even though teachers have a sophisticated understanding of it and use innovative strategies to implement it despite the constraints.

The study emphasizes the need for a multi-level strategy that concurrently addresses regulatory frameworks, resource allocation, teacher development, and school culture in order to successfully implement democratic education. It recommends that teachers and politicians should concentrate on context-appropriate adaptations that progressively develop toward more transformative practices rather than giving up on democratic ideals in the face of limitations.

This research journey has revealed that democratic and transformative education in South African primary schools exists in a state of productive tension—ideologically valued yet structurally constrained, conceptually sophisticated yet inconsistently enacted, individually championed by dedicated teachers yet systemically undermined by neoliberal accountability regimes, resource inequities, and curricular rigidity (see Sections 5.2 and 5.3). Rather than being a simple story of success or failure, the findings reveal a complex reality where teachers exercise pragmatic agency within oppressive conditions, employing "micro-interventions" to foster democratic participation even as structural barriers limit their efforts.

The study makes several key contributions (see Section 5.5). Theoretically, it demonstrates the value of integrating Critical Theory (structural critique) with

Ubuntu/IKS (cultural affirmation) for understanding post-colonial educational contexts. It advances the concept of "pragmatic resistance" as a way of theorizing teacher agency within oppressive structures. Empirically, it provides rich documentation of teachers' sophisticated understanding, specific pedagogical strategies, and multilevel constraints, while revealing how Ubuntu philosophy informs some teachers' relational approaches. Methodologically, it demonstrates the value of triangulating interviews and observations, employing discourse analysis, and grounding analysis in theoretical frameworks.

The implications are clear (see Section 5.4): advancing democratic education in South African primary schools requires systemic, multilevel intervention. Policy reforms must address curricular rigidity, assessment structures, resource inequities, and language marginalization. School leaders must create enabling cultures, model democratic leadership, and support teacher experimentation. Teachers need to employ available strategies within classrooms and advocate collectively for structural change. Teacher educators must prepare new teachers realistically while centring African epistemologies. None of these interventions alone suffices; transformation requires coordinated action across all levels.

Importantly, the study challenges deficit narratives blaming teachers for implementation failures (see Section 5.3.1). Teachers are not the problem—they possess knowledge, commitment, and creativity. The problem lies in systemic conditions constraining their practice. Solutions must address structural barriers rather than simply trying to "fix" teachers through professional development divorced from material realities.

In the end, this study adds to the continuing discussion about South Africa's educational transition by arguing that the path to democratic education entails continual, context-sensitive negotiation between ideals and reality rather than finding ideal solutions. It confirms that educational strategies that respect student agency, encourage critical thinking, and equip kids for engaged citizenship in a democracy can be gradually advanced.

The journey toward democratic education in South African primary schools will be long, contested, and uneven. It requires patience, persistence, and pragmatism alongside vision, critique, and hope. This study honours teachers who labour daily in

difficult conditions, maintains faith in education's transformative potential, and insists that structural change is both necessary and possible. Democratic education is not an idealistic fantasy but a practical necessity for post-apartheid South Africa's future—a future where all children, regardless of race or class, experience education honouring their dignity, cultivating their agency, and preparing them for engaged citizenship in a truly democratic society.

The question is not whether democratic education is desirable—the answer is unequivocally yes (see Chapter 1, Section 1.2). The question is whether South Africa as a nation will commit the resources, policy reforms, and institutional changes necessary to make democratic education a common reality rather than a rare exception. This study suggests that teachers are ready; the system must catch up.

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APPENDICES

APPENDIX A: ETHICS CLEARANCE



College of Education _ETHICS REVIEW COMMITTEE

Date: 25/04/2025

Dear: Ms Matsoauoa Maraisane

**Decision: Ethics Approval from
25/04/2025 to 25/04/2028**

NHREC Registration # : (if applicable)
Ref #: 7118
Name: Ms Matsoauoa Maraisane
Student #: 57679622
Staff #:

Researcher: Ms Matsoauoa Maraisane
28 Pioneer Ave Florida Park
Roodepoort

5. The researcher will ensure that the research project adheres to any applicable national legislation, professional codes of conduct, institutional guidelines and scientific standards relevant to the specific field of study. Adherence to the following South African legislation is important, if applicable: Protection of Personal Information Act, no 4 of 2013; Children's act no 38 of 2005 and the National Health Act, no 61 of 2003.
6. Only de-identified research data may be used for secondary research purposes in future on condition that the research objectives are similar to those of the original research. Secondary use of identifiable human research data requires additional ethics clearance.
7. No field work activities may continue after the expiry date (25/04/2028). Submission of a completed research ethics progress report will constitute an application for renewal, for Ethics Research Committee approval.

Additional Conditions

1. Disclosure of data to third parties is prohibited without explicit consent from Unisa.
2. De-identified data must be safely stored on password protected PCs.
3. Care should be taken by the researcher when publishing the results to protect the confidentiality and privacy of the university.
4. Adherence to the National Statement on Ethical Research and Publication practices, principle 7 referring to Social awareness, must be ensured: "Researchers and institutions must be sensitive to the potential impact of their research on society, marginal groups or individuals, and must consider these when weighing the benefits of the research against any harmful effects, with a view to minimising or avoiding the latter where possible." Unisa will not be liable for any failure to comply with this principle.
5. Kindly note that the College of Education _ERC requires the submission of regular progress reports to be submitted **annually**. Inline with section 7.2 of the Unisa Policy on Research Ethics (2024).

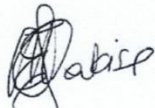
Note

The reference number 7118 should be clearly indicated on all forms of communication with the intended research participants, as well as with the Committee.

Kind regards,



Prof JO August
Chair of College of Education _ERC
E-mail: augusjo@unisa.ac.za



Prof Mpine Makoe
Executive Dean College of Education
E-mail: qakisme@unisa.ac.za

APPENDIX B: GDE RESEARCH APPROVAL LETTER



GAUTENG PROVINCE
Department: Education
REPUBLIC OF SOUTH AFRICA

8/4/4/1/2

GDE RESEARCH APPROVAL LETTER

Date:	07 July 2025
Validity of Research Approval:	08 February 2025– 30 September 2025 2025/217
Name of Researcher:	Maraisane M
Address of Researcher:	91 Olienhout Street Fochville
Telephone Number:	0833886285
Email address:	jmaraisane@gmail.com
Research Topic:	A critical perspective on the role of democratic and transformative principles in primary education schooling in Gauteng.
Name of University:	UNISA
Type of qualification	Masters
Number and type of schools:	2 Primary Schools
District/s/HO	Gauteng West

Re: Approval in Respect of Request to Conduct Research

This letter serves to indicate that approval is hereby granted to the above-mentioned researcher to proceed with research in respect of the study indicated above. The onus rests with the researcher to negotiate appropriate and relevant time schedules with the school/s and/or offices involved to conduct the research. A separate copy of this letter must be presented to both the School (both Principal and SGB) and the District/Head Office Senior Manager confirming that permission has been granted for the research to be conducted.

The following conditions apply to GDE research. The researcher may proceed with the above study subject to the conditions listed below being met. Approval may be withdrawn should any of the conditions listed below be flouted:

1

Making education a societal priority

Office of the Director: Education Research and Knowledge Management

7th Floor, 17 Simmonds Street, Johannesburg, 2001

Tel: (011) 355 0488

Email: Faith.Tshabalala@gauteng.gov.za

Website: www.education.gpg.gov.za

1. Letter that would indicate that the said researcher/s has/have been granted permission from the Gauteng Department of Education to conduct the research study.
2. The District/Head Office Senior Manager/s must be approached separately, and in writing, for permission to involve District/Head Office Officials in the project.
3. **Because of the relaxation of COVID 19 regulations researchers can collect data online, telephonically, physically access schools or may make arrangements for Zoom with the school Principal. Requests for such arrangements should be submitted to the GDE Education Research and Knowledge Management directorate.**
4. **The Researchers are advised to wear a mask at all times, Social distance at all times, Provide a vaccination certificate or negative COVID-19 test, not older than 72 hours, and Sanitise frequently.**
5. A copy of this letter must be forwarded to the school principal and the chairperson of the School Governing Body (SGB) that would indicate that the researcher/s have been granted permission from the Gauteng Department of Education to conduct the research study.
6. A letter / document that outline the purpose of the research and the anticipated outcomes of such research must be made available to the principals, SGBs and District/Head Office Senior Managers of the schools and districts/offices concerned, respectively.
7. The Researcher will make every effort obtain the goodwill and co-operation of all the GDE officials, principals, and chairpersons of the SGBs, teachers and learners involved. Persons who offer their co-operation will not receive additional remuneration from the Department while those that opt not to participate will not be penalised in any way.
8. Research may only be conducted after school hours so that the normal school programme is not interrupted. The Principal (if at a school) and/or Director (if at a district/head office) must be consulted about an appropriate time when the researcher/s may carry out their research at the sites that they manage.
9. Research may only commence from the second week of February and must be concluded before the beginning of the last quarter of the academic year. If incomplete, an amended Research Approval letter may be requested to conduct research in the following year.
10. Items 6 and 7 will not apply to any research effort being undertaken on behalf of the GDE. Such research will have been commissioned and be paid for by the Gauteng Department of Education.
11. It is the researcher's responsibility to obtain written parental consent of all learners that are expected to participate in the study.
12. The researcher is responsible for supplying and utilising his/her own research resources, such as stationery, photocopies, transport, faxes and telephones and should not depend on the goodwill of the institutions and/or the offices visited for supplying such resources.
13. The names of the GDE officials, schools, principals, parents, teachers and learners that participate in the study may not appear in the research report without the written consent of each of these individuals and/or organisations.
14. On completion of the study the researcher/s must supply the Director: Knowledge Management & Research with one Hard Cover bound and an electronic copy of the research.
15. The researcher may be expected to provide short presentations on the purpose, findings and recommendations of his/her research to both GDE officials and the schools concerned.
16. Should the researcher have been involved with research at a school and/or a district/head office level, the Director concerned must also be supplied with a brief summary of the purpose, findings and recommendations of the research study.

The Gauteng Department of Education wishes you well in this important undertaking and looks forward to examining the findings of your research study.

Kind regards



Mr. David Bapela
CES: Education Research and Knowledge Management

DATE: 10/07/2025

2

Making education a societal priority

Office of the Director: Education Research and Knowledge Management

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APPENDIX C: INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

- 1.1 What does democratic education mean to you in the context of your classroom?
- 1.2 Could you elaborate on the precise tactics you employ to encourage learners voice and engagement in your lessons?
- 1.3 What difficulties do you run into while putting interactive teaching strategies into practice?
- 1.4 How does the administration at your school encourage or discourage democratic teaching methods?
- 1.5 How does your program include critical thinking about social issues?
- 1.6 What are the obstacles that keep you from implementing more transformative teaching strategies?
- 1.7 How do you resolve conflicts that arise between the need for standardised testing and the objectives of transformational education?
- 1.8 What opportunities have you had for professional growth in the field of democratic/transformational education?
- 1.9 How do differences in resources impact your capacity to use these teaching strategies?
- 1.10 What educational strategies does your school use to address cultural diversity?
- 1.11 What adjustments would best enable you to more successfully apply transformational and democratic principles?
- 1.12 What one area of Gauteng primary education would you restructure to better embody these ideals?

APPENDIX D: OBSERVATION GUIDE

Observation Guide

1. Dynamics between Teachers and learners: Determine whether teachers promote critical thinking, open communication, or passive knowledge acquisition. Take note of situations where teaching methods are more participative than dictatorial.
2. Evaluate how often and what kind of learner's contributions—such as group projects or debates—are used as markers of democratic involvement.
3. Applying Critical Pedagogy: Determine whether the classes focus on rote memorization or real-world social issues.
4. Take note of whether complaints are settled via restorative justice techniques or punitive methods.
5. Classroom layouts: Evaluate whether rows of seats support teacher authority or encourage collaboration (e.g., circles).
6. Examine if posters and artwork on wall displays—such as human rights charts—reflect democratic ideas or are merely decorative or commercialized.
7. Allocation of Resources: Take note of how various schools have access to resources (such textbooks and digital tools).
8. Teacher Agency: Record how teachers adjust to or oppose transformative demands in the face of curriculum demands.

APPENDIX E: CONSENT LETTER



CONSENT TO PARTICIPATE IN THIS STUDY

I, Jabulile Mchhuli (participant name), confirm that the person asking my consent to take part in this research has told me about the nature, procedure, potential benefits and anticipated inconvenience of participation.

I have read (or had explained to me) and understood the study as explained in the information sheet.

I have had sufficient opportunity to ask questions and am prepared to participate in the study.

I understand that my participation is voluntary and that I am free to withdraw at any time without penalty

I am aware that the findings of this study will be processed into a research report, journal publications and/or conference proceedings, but that my participation will be kept confidential unless otherwise specified.

I agree to the recording of the A semi-structured interview and non-participant observation.

I have received a signed copy of the informed consent agreement.

Participant Name & Surname Jabulile Mchhuli (please print)

Participant Signature [Signature] Date 18/06/2025

Researcher's Name & Surname Matscausa Marisa (please print)

Researcher's signature [Signature] Date 18/06/2025



APPENDIX F: TRANSCRIBED SAMPLE INTERVIEWS

Transcribed interview

Study: A critical perspective on the role of democratic and transformative principles in primary education schooling in Gauteng.

Participant: T1 (Teacher 1),

Date: 18 June 2025

Location: School 1, (S1)Gauteng

Researcher: What does democratic education mean to you in the context of your classroom?

T1: Democratic Education emphasizes learners participating in a class, my learners having a voice, a choice, collaborating, emphasize on social responsibilities and also inclusive education

Researcher: Could you elaborate on the precise tactics you employ to encourage learners voice and engagement in your lessons?

T1: I use positive reinforcement that is praise effort progress, and achievement, personalised feedback, I provide specific and constructive feedback to the learners, and then I use case studies for learning tool real life scenario and then collaborative learning which is encouraging group work and peer support.

Researcher: What difficulties do you run into while putting interactive teaching strategies into practice?

T1: We got learning gaps, our learners have different levels of understanding, they don't have the same Iq, attention, engagement, student confidence, motivation, and time is the factor.

Researcher: How does the administration at your school encourage or discourage democratic teaching methods?

T1: It actually discourages democratic due to the fact that we got limited resources, time constraints and in some cases even lack of training.

Researcher: How does your program include critical thinking about social issues?

T1: once again case studies. We use case studies that re real life scenarios, allow learners to put themselves in those situations, allow learners to picture themselves in those situations.

Researcher: What are the obstacles that keep you from implementing more transformative teaching strategies?

T1: We have got lots of obstacles. I think I can discuss obstacles at the lower level as a teacher, like I have said we do not have not enough times, we are trained to teach but teachers are not trained to teach different learners with different personalities, we got large classes, we have diversity, we have to evaluate, we have to assess, some learners learn by seeing some by hearing some learn by writing and they have to put all that in one lesson.

Researcher: How do you resolve conflicts that arise between the need for standardised testing and the objectives of transformational education?

T1: Yoh! This is the difficult one because like I said, all of these constraints, you have to put everything in one. So, at the end, there will never be a satisfying answer for this question. We've got objectives that we set for a specific lesson. We assess to see what is it that our learners know. In some cases, we identify that our learners know nothing. Most of the time we identify that our learners actually know nothing. So, it's very difficult because I don't think we can resolve conflicts that arise between the need for testing. Because testing, assessing our learners is a must. It's something that has to happen during the year, at the end of the year, during the lesson. And also, the objectives. There's not enough time for us to do all of this. It's just not possible.

Researcher: What opportunities have you had for professional growth in the field of democratic/transformational education?

T1: There are very limited opportunities especially in the subject she teaches being life orientation. But in terms of personal and professional growth, it's studying further, not being in the field for too long. You need to know integrating technology in your lesson. Kids are always advanced with the cell phones, with the AI and all that. So, we try by all means to include all of that in order to have transformational education.

Researcher: How do differences in resources impact your capacity to use these teaching strategies?

T1: Yoh! Because of limited resources there are certain things that I can't do, for example if I had a projector, I would show learning videos of, for example, life rotations, before people using drugs and how they look. I can't do that because I have to paint the picture in their mind. And in some cases, our learners don't even know what a person who abuses drugs looks like. Sometimes a person can look as normal as me and still be abusing. So, there are a lot of concerns in these resources' things because at the end of the day, you have to use what you have in the classroom. It is what it is.

Researcher: What educational strategies does your school use to address cultural diversity?

T1: Do we have that? I think what we do, we have, what do we call this, a cultural day. We have a cultural day where we incorporate different and diverse perspectives of experiences or material. I remember there was a lesson that we had, that we're also going to have again in term 3, where I asked the learners to create a poster regarding their culture. Anything and everything there is to know about their culture, what they wear, the food they eat, what are some of the laws, what are some of the things that they do in their culture in order to incorporate the diversity that we have.

Researcher: What adjustments would best enable you to more successfully apply transformational and democratic principles?

T1: Number one, transparency. We have to maintain open communication and provide clear information. We have to do inclusive participation. That is ensuring that all the stakeholders have a voice. That means the learners, the parents, the educators, the SMT, the SGB empowerment, delegate authority and encourage decision making at all levels. We have to also encourage accountability, provide resources for skills development and also knowledge sharing.

Researcher: What one area of Gauteng primary education would you restructure to better embody these ideals?

T1: To be honest, it's not like we don't know have the skills or the development to implement democratic education. We just have a lot of administration, a lot of paperwork. Majority of the time, we are pursuing to meet the deadline that we cannot implement the correct methods in our classes. We cannot do the things that are required for the level. Sometimes you see that it's not that the learner doesn't know or understand, they just need a little bit more time. But we don't have time for that. There is always something to submit. There s always the paper, you have to fill in, I think most of the time, actually 75% we are doing admin and the other 25% we are teaching. So there is no time.

APPENDIX G: TURNITIN REPORT

Similarity Report

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APPENDIX H: EDITOR'S CERTIFICATE

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PROFESSIONAL EDITING CERTIFICATE

Date: 26 January 2026

I hereby certify that I have done comprehensive language and technical editing of the following Master's dissertation:

Student: Matsoauoa Moleko (57679622)
Title: A Critical Perspective on the Role of Democratic and Transformative Principles in Primary Education Schooling in Gauteng
Degree: Master of Education
University: University of South Africa
Supervisor: Prof C Pietersen
Co-supervisor: Dr D Langeveldt

Kefilwe Makhanya
Editor

I started my career as a Lecturer in the Department of Communication at the University of Fort Hare in 1986. My areas of specialization are Communication, Education and Applied Linguistics. I have extensive, senior-level writing and editing experience in a broad spectrum of disciplines. For the past 11 years, I have focused specifically on editing non-fiction book manuscripts and academic work for senior students, researchers and early career academics from various SA universities and other parts of Africa.