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Students' Involvement in Voice Practices, Democratic Participation, And Peer-Led Restorative Practices in Ghanaian Higher Education Institutions

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Abstract

This study investigated the relationship among student-level voice practices, democratic participation, and peer-led restorative practices within HEIs in Ghana. The study employed a quantitative cross-sectional design, where a structured online survey was administered to 480 respondents. The data was analysed using factor analyses and structural equation modelling. The analysis revealed that student-level voice practices strongly predicted both democratic participation ($\beta = .596$, $p < .001$) and peer-led restorative practices ($\beta = .417$, $p < .001$). Among the components of voice, participation was the strongest predictor of democratic participation, while opportunities for input and perceived responsiveness acted in accord to foster restorative behaviours. This study adds to the increasing international literature on participatory education by providing evidence from Ghana, where student representation is typically limited to advisory roles. It is recommended that higher education institutions institutionalise student voice practices into their governance structures, offer leadership and restorative practices training for students, and embed participatory decision-making within policy frameworks in HEIs. These practices can support and contribute to inclusive, democratic, and restorative campus cultures aligned with the broader principles of citizenship, and

social cohesion.

Keywords: Student Voice, Democratic Participation, Peer-Led Restorative Practices, Higher Education, Ghana, Participatory Education, Civic Engagement, Structural Equation Modelling

Introduction

Student-related challenges and problems are a consistent aspect of the 21st-century learning environment. Such challenges and problems may occur due to the absence of students' participation in school management activities (e.g., among students or between students and school managers). When this happens, it becomes, in the long run, a conflict that requires a resolution. As Johnson and Johnson (2002, p. 37) have stated, "All students have to learn how to manage conflicts in a constructive way. Without proper instruction, many may never develop this important skill. The more time the students spend in learning and practicing a number of conflict resolution processes, the more skilled they will be at using those processes in their learning environment and in their lives outside of the corridors of their learning environment". This implies that students can be part of a problem but they can just as easily be part of a resolution to the problem or challenges they face with the appropriate training and support from significant others. This is because, in a democratic society, developing socially and emotionally empowered future citizens is needed. Consequently, guiding students through conflict negotiation and resolution during their developmental time in life (e.g., childhood and adolescence), should be seen as a significant educational strategy for building a platform for social change, because of its effect on the present and future societies (Ibarrola-García, 2023). In the pursuit of social change, peace and harmony in higher educational institutions, this calls for intentional strategies that promote school-level voice procedures/practices, democratic participation and peer-led restorative circles.

Practices of student voice at the school level are contexts in which students are given opportunities to engage in decisions about their education, from providing feedback in classrooms to participating in the formation of school-wide policies (Holquist et al., 2023). Student voice practices have been employed in various educational contexts with the goal of increasing student interest and improving student achievement (Biddle & Huffnagel, 2019; Giraldo-Garcia et al., 2020; Salisbury et al., 2019). The literature has also identified the positive implications of student voice practices among students, including student's leadership skills (Lyons & Brasof, 2020), students' critical thinking and self-reflection (Geurts et al., 2023; Hipolito-Delgado et al., 2022), and improvement in students' communication skills (Bahou, 2012). Again, extant literature associate student voice with increased engagement, metacognition, and academic achievement (Beattie & Rich, 2018; Geurts et al., 2023).

Student democratic participation represents a collective self-governance, where

members work collaboratively while constrained only by rules that they have democratically and collectively established (Heid et al., 2023). For this to be authentic self-determination, individuals must have authority over the processes and rules that govern the deliberations and decisions that govern the deliberations and decision-making (Beckman, 2021; Seeber & Seifried, 2022; Culp et al., 2023). In this sense, democracy is guided by two basic concepts: "reciprocity" and "self-determination," which are necessary in characterising democratic participation. Democratic participation in an educational context means allowing students to participate actively in decision-making that affects their life and their involvement in student governance, conversation, and advocacy with respect to issues that matter to them (Rammbuda & Mafukata, 2025). In this context, students can develop civic competencies and agency. For students to realise their civic capacities, they need systemic supports from societies that are willing to share their authority and create inclusive spaces, that genuinely listen to and honour the voices of students. In recent times, students' democratic participation has been widely emphasised, where there is a growing need to strengthen institutional resources that would enable all students to engage actively in societal decision-making procedures (Council of the European Union & Representatives of the Governments of the Member States, 2021). According to Ribeiro and Menezes (2022), although students sometimes assert their right to meaningful democratic participation, there are instances whereby prevailing public educational policies thwart students' efforts in this process.

Peer-led restorative circles are community-based conflict resolution processes involving individuals, often with shared lived experiences, to engage in structured dialogue with the goal of creating community and healing (Clifford, 2015; Lodi et al., 2021). Peers establish a safe, peer-led processes where respondents may share an experience, think about its impact, and work toward repair instead of punishment. Restorative circles can be found in classrooms and communities to build social-emotional competence, cultivate trust, and help respondents take responsibility in actions, and the safety of the collective (Huguley et al., 2022; Pham, 2024).

Literature Review

School-level Voice Practices, Democratic Participation, and Peer-Led Restorative Practices

Within the construct of schooling, students have opportunities to engage in various expressions of voice. Research has consistently illustrated that an open classroom climate (e.g., one that encourages discussion regarding political, social, or controversial issues and entertainment of multiple perspectives) is an important aspect of the development of students' citizenship behaviour (Hannuksela et al., 2025; Sun et al., 2024; Sun & Janmaat, 2025). In reality, this can involve students taking part in student councils, serving on advisory committees, or participating in discussions related to policy at the institution or

organisational level. For example, Reichert et al. (2018) shows that student engagement in consideration of collective decisions on school matters positively impact citizenship-related behaviour (e.g., civic engagement and democratic attitudes). A primary goal of citizenship education is to support students in developing and internalising democratic attitudes, which are closely linked to active engagement in democratic societies (Tuhuteru, 2023). Additionally, since democratic attitudes of students tend to stabilise with age, there is a responsibility on educators to intentionally offer students the opportunity to develop these dispositions during this developmental stage (Freire, 2025). That is, when the role of educational institutions is considered to place people in training for citizenship, both the opportunities for students to learn, in addition to the behaviours of teachers and school leaders, becomes paramount (Veugelers & de Groot, 2019). Consequently, a whole-school approach, or one that values the experiences of all educational community members, can make it easier to understand how schools enhance students' civic capacities (Sanders & Galindo, 2022). Expanding on this notion, Holst (2023) explains that students' learning experiences evolve not just from instructional engagement in the classroom, but they are also shaped by the implicit values and norms promoted as the institutional culture of the school and the behaviours of its professional community within the institution. Wood (2014) introduces the notion of a school's "participatory capital" (which is the extent to which participation is encouraged and enacted across the institution), as heterogeneous engagement is the collective practice of participation to improve a school community, where both staff and students are also operating within a shared habitus of participation (Wood, 2014). However, while teachers' and administrators' behaviours to participate in their work may not "improve" students' engagement about their own voice, they play a substantial contextual role in establishing tone for participation. In support of this, Cheng et al. (2020) showed that school governance structures with a higher proportion of teachers who participated in governance processes do correlate with student participation in classroom discussions and student councils.

Further, building on this democratic orientation to school culture, restorative practices are positively oriented to school culture through relational accountability and empathy rather than punitive practices of discipline. Christopher (2015) suggested that restorative practices encourage students' experiences in school while zero-tolerance policies (including suspension and expulsion) perpetuate negative cycles of disengagement and alienation (Ramsey, 2024; Safi, 2025). When students are repeatedly removed from either the classroom or the school community, they tend to adopt hostile attitudes towards schooling. This further exacerbates behaviour issues and increases the gap in achievement (Pyne, 2019). Restorative practices encourage the development of empathy, dignity, and personal responsibility for disrupting negative cycles of behaviour and reducing power struggles in the student and child authority relationship in school (Lodi et al., 2021). Lustick (2021) points out that restorative practices can be considered as a proactive and

reactive discipline system thereby strengthening school communities. In the school environment, restorative practices help to reduce misbehaviour and bullying amongst the student and school leadership body by providing a structured opportunity for reflection, dialogue, and collaborative problem resolution. Restorative practices also proactively promote social cohesiveness among students in their involvement in collaborative decision-making and shared problem solving (Mahama, 2025). As these functions of restorative practices evolve over time, they contribute to a stronger sense of belonging and a more positive school environment. At the same time, Lumadi (2025) emphasises that misbehaviour cannot only be considered a student issue, as the reactions or behaviours of the teacher and school leader also contribute to schooling dynamics. In this regard, there is a need for an interwoven approach that encourages behavioural reflection of the behaviour of the school leader, teacher, and student [e.g., Culture of Care] (Wang'ombe, 2023). A Culture of Care is activated when everyone in the school community accepts responsibility for their actions within the community, and they demonstrate mutual respect. Developing a Culture of Care enhances relationships in school, produces empathy, and develops a more inclusive and supportive learning environment for everyone.

Students' School-level Voice Practices and Democratic Participation

The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) emphasises the essentiality of allowing young people to participate actively and meaningfully in the decisions that concern their lives. In this organisation, the participation of children in decision-making is touted. In accepting children in decision-making processes, it ought to be mutual between children and adults, where the views of children are respected and valued (Committee on the Rights of the Child, 2009). Researchers working on citizenship education have been promoting the significance of democratic knowledge as a recourse for civic engagement (Anderson, 2023; Lin, 2015; Maulana & Milanti, 2023). Nonetheless, in recent times, among young people, there has been a troubling suggesting that there is a reduction in appreciating democratic values, calling for a more focused democratic values teaching in schools (Storstad et al., 2023). In essence, democratic knowledge is not just the ability to take informed action but also a predictor of active and responsible citizenship (Marzęcki, 2017). Likewise, a study on civic and citizenship showed contextual, educational, and cultural variations in acquiring democratic knowledge by young people (Damiani et al., 2025). Together, there is a need to prioritize civic and democratic education in schools as a way of propagating democratic societies. These claims suggest that involving students decision-making procedures as part of their growth and development.

Extant literature affirms the notion that student voice allows their democratic abilities. For instance, Egan et al. (2025) in a study examined the perceptions and experiences of school leaders about students' voice and participation in decision-making democratically. The study found school leaders had positive perceptions on student voice

while stressing the need for a trust-based, inclusive culture that promoted interaction and provided sufficient institutional support. In addition, the study highlighted some limitations on student engagement and staying true to student voice practices. Likewise, Rinnooy Kan et al. (2023) in their study indicated a strong relationship between students' voice practices (e.g. discussing and influencing) and their democratic peer participation.

Students' voices are considered per se a dimension of democratic participation in schools, nonetheless, the actual role of student voice on school citizen participation is worth examining. For instance, Sousa and Ferreira (2024) looked at student voice and student participation in school management and reported that student voice tends to occur in formal leadership, typically at some representative level for student councils or class representatives, but students often serve an advisory capacity instead of being more participatory or influential. Also, their findings demonstrated that while there are often examples of democratic participation, and schools present points of inclusive practice, sociocultural barriers to student participation often govern and limit the extent of participation, and engagement. Despite the expansive rhetoric of democracy, and participation, in schools and policy discourse, students are often not positioned to participate in meaningful manner. Likewise, in their systematic review of student voice practices in health-promoting schools, Griebler and Nowak (2012) found that although student council participation has personal benefits (e.g., developing confidence and communication skills), they often remained symbolic rather than transformational. Often, students had the opportunity to participate or furnish schools with their voice, without true decision-making power remaining, notwithstanding, the council risked perpetuating existing power relations between students and educators. This does seem to be problematic, especially for some students with special educational needs (Griffin et al., 2022). Griffin et al. (2022) found students with disabilities are frequently left out of participatory and decision-making processes in schools. This exclusion appears to be discriminatory, and shows continued inequalities and offers explanation for inclusive methods to student voice and democratic participation in educational settings. Lastly, Kahne et al. (2022) conducted the first large-scale panel study examining the relationship between school responsiveness to student voice and academic outcomes. Their results revealed that students in schools with perceived voice collected feedback and critique, who are perceived to be listened to and response made to their collective input, did anticipate earning higher grades and achieved significantly higher incidences of improved attendance and were free from chronic absenteeism. Given these studies, we examined the impact of students' school-level voice practices on their democratic participation in higher education institutions in Ghana.

Students' School-Level Voice Practices and their Peer-Led Restorative Practices

Research in university settings consistently reveals that when policies

institutionalize student voice through shared governance, consultative structures, and authentic responsiveness, students are more likely to lead restorative responses and support peer-led processes (Campbell et al., 2025). In one study, Smith (2018) observed that RJ programmes thrived within environments students held meaningful roles in design and decision-making; and even when student leader roles were not directly involved, student leader participation led to increased uses of circles/conferences, and in tandem with student leaders, higher satisfaction with outcomes. Also, case studies have similarly indicated programme longevity and uptake of RJ into university culture depended on student partnership, advisory input, shared expertise, or some other form of input from students supporting the program (LaCroix, 2018); students were partners in the long-term changes. More broadly, recent sector-wide reviews confirm this association with increased student engagement, perceived fairness for respondents, and student learning from RJ processes when RJ programs are designed, deployed, and evaluated with student input or co-created with students (Karp, 2025). Collectively, it is important to recognize the role students' voice practices may play in their peer-led restorative practice. Therefore, we explored the interplay between students' participation in school-level voice practices their higher education institutions in Ghana.

The Ghanaian Context

The higher education systems in Ghana are not only uncharted with respect to voice opportunities for students in both institutional contexts and peer-led restorative practices but also quite limited. While student activism and voice have always played a primary role in Ghana's parliamentary democracy (Van Gyampo, 2013), most higher education institutions only permit student voice in advisory roles and with limited power and oversight (Pepra-Mensah, 2018). This reality is important in relation to peer-led options for restorative practices. Without voice or authentic decision-making, students are not well positioned to contribute to restorative practices to build community, address conflict, and develop democratic voice within their experience. In fact, most of these studies were qualitative and not quantitatively oriented, which was surprising (McMahon & Karp, 2023; Quinn, 2024). The current study utilises quantitative procedures and methods to accomplish this missing perspective. Lastly, the intersection between student voice, democracy, and convergence in a higher education context is rarely studied in Ghana, although being viewed as important in developing inclusive, participatory education, which is obviously at the centre of democratic citizenship education and institutional resilience (Fuseini et al., 2025). Therefore, it is imperative to explore the influence of school-based voice practices and their intersection with institutional structures in relation to student-led inclusive restorative practices in Ghanaian higher education institutions. The potential for these practices to contribute to structures, trust, agency, and participatory campus practices cannot be known without investigations, hence the study.

Methodology

Research Design

The study was a cross-sectional where diverse students were surveyed within Ghanaian higher education institutions (HEIs) across several public private higher education institutions in Ghana. The choice of the cross-sectional survey design allowed for a broad sample for the study as many students were given the opportunity to participate regardless of educational categorisations (public and private). The inclusion of both public and private HEIs provided a contextually rich environment for exploring how democratic and restorative principles are embedded within student governance and disciplinary processes. Further, it is important to note that each of the HEIs operates within the regulatory framework of Ghana Tertiary Education Commission (GTEC).

Participants

Although 5,829 students started to respond to the inventories, only 480 of them completed the process. The 480 respondents (minimum age of 18 and maximum age of 46) came drawn from diverse educational settings as shown in Table 1. The respondents included males (n=263, 54.8%), females (n=209, 43.5%), and preferred not say (n=8, 1.7%). Respondents were required to have enrolled and registered in their institutions database and have completed at least one academic year to ensure adequate exposure to university decision-making processes and peer support systems.

Sampling Procedures

A convenience sampling strategy was employed. This was the most appropriate procedure because the data were collected through virtual/online platforms (WhatsApp groups, institutional emails, and LMS portals) of the respondents. The recruitment of the respondents was facilitated through faculty announcements and student association platforms. Prior to data to taking part in the study, informed consent was secured and any respondent who got involved in this study did so voluntarily.

Instrumentation and Data Collection

Three quantitative scales were used to collect data on students regarding the study variables. Specifically, voice practices were assessed by adapting Conner et al. (2025) school level students' voice practices scale. This is an 11-items questionnaire with three dimensions: opportunities (3-items, α=.76), participation (3-items, α=.79), and responsiveness (6-items, α=.81). The questionnaire a 4-point Likert-type scale, with

responses ranging from 'Strongly Agree' (4) and 'Agree' (3) to 'Disagree' (2) and 'Strongly Disagree' (1). In all the composite reliability of the scale was established using Cronbach's alpha ($\alpha \geq .79$). To ensure less contextual variations and proper measurement of the construct, a confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) was performed to verify construct validity of the scale by assessing the model fit via CFI (> .90), TLI (> .90), RMSEA (< .08), and SRMR (< .08) (Hu & Bentler, 1999).

In terms of democratic participation, a developed questionnaire (20-items), known as the students' democratic participation scale (SCES), was used to assess their democratic participation in HEIs. The questionnaire utilized a 4-point Likert-type scale, with responses ranging from 1 = Never, 2 = Rarely, 3 = Often, and 4 = Always. The validity and reliability of the scale were considered. Primarily, all the researchers developed the questionnaires based on existing literature. After which, an expert panel review, consisting of three experts examined the wording of the items qualitatively. Through an acceptable reliability analysis using Cronbach's alpha, the scale scored a high level of internal consistency (0.861) for all 20-items. Furthermore, an Exploratory Factor Analysis (EFA) was conducted to assess the psychometric properties of the 20-items. The outcomes of the validity and reliability analysis are provided in detailed at the results segment.

Regarding restorative practices among students, a developed questionnaire named peer-led restorative circle scale (PRCS) was used. The questionnaire utilized a 4-point Likert-type scale, with responses ranging from '1 = Never, 2 = Rarely, 3 = Often, and 4 = Always. The validity and reliability of the scale were considered. Initially, three researchers developed the inventory from existing literature. Further, expert panel reviewed the statements for appropriateness. Using the Cronbach's alpha procedure, the scale produced an internal consistency (0.885) for all 20-items. The researchers conducted Exploratory Factor Analysis (EFA) to assess the psychometric properties of the 20-items. The outcomes of the validity and reliability analysis are provided in detailed at the results section. Data were collected between May 2025 and October 2025. After ethical clearance from the University of Education, Winneba Institutional Review Board (UEW-ECR/25/HE/036) various institutions were notified through some collaborators.

Data Analysis

Before the researchers conducted the main analysis, EFA was performed to evaluate the psychometric properties of the two developed scales while CFA was used to re-evaluate the suitability of the voice participation scale in this study. EFA was performed through the Principal Component Analysis (PCA) extraction method. Regarding the sampling adequacy, the Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin measure of sampling adequacy (KMO) and Bartlett's test of sphericity with a factor-loading cut-off point of 0.40 (Hair et al., 2025; Shrestha, 2021). Moreover, the factor solution was established using eigenvalues greater

than 1 and screen plots while factor solution was established with the Monte Carlo's PCA (Hair et al., 2017; Sürücü et al., 2022). The internal consistence figure of 0.60 and above was established as the basis for evaluating item consistencies.

Ethical Considerations

Ethical approval (Ref: UEW-ECR/25/HE/036) was obtained prior to data collection. Respondents were informed of their rights to voluntary participation, withdrawal without penalty, and data confidentiality. Informed consent was taken from all the respondents, where the process respected all ethical principles required (American Psychological Association, 2022).

Results

Table 1: Demographic Characteristics of Respondents

Variable	Category	Frequency	Percent (%)
Age Range (years)	18–22	175	36.5
	23–27	177	36.9
	28–31	52	10.8
	32–36	48	10.0
	37–41	13	2.7
	42–46	15	3.1
Type of Institution	Public University	469	97.7
	Private University	7	1.5
	Technical University	2	0.4
	College of Education	2	0.4
Residential Status	On-Campus	157	32.7
	Off-Campus	305	63.5
	With Family	18	3.8
Employment Status	Yes	74	15.4
	No	406	84.6
Participation in Discussions	Yes	202	42.1
	No	278	57.9
Level of Engagement	Low	93	19.4
	Moderate	296	61.7
	High	91	19.0
Religion	Christianity	372	77.5
	Islam	87	18.1
	Traditional African Religion	21	4.4

In Table 1, the demographic information of the 480 respondents was shown. The study showed those between the ages of 18 and 27 (73.4%) were the majority. Again, respondents from public universities dominated the sample with 97.7% while those from private universities recorded 2.3%. in terms of residence status, respondents with off-

campus status were the majority (63.5%), while those with on-campus status recorded 32.7%. When it comes to employment status, surprisingly, majority of the respondents were unemployed (84.6%) due to the fact that majority of them were full-time students. Regarding students taking in decision-making processes in school, 57.9% of them do not participate while 42.1% did. In terms of their level of engagement in school activities, 61.7% moderately got engaged, 19.0% got highly engaged while 19.4% got lowly engaged. With respect to their religious affiliation, 77.5% were Christians, 18.1% were Muslims, while 4.4% subscribed to the African Traditional Religion. Taken together, results portray a young population, largely Christian student population enrolled largely in public universities, with moderate engagement levels and limited employment involvement.

Table 2: Descriptive Statistics on School-Level Students Voice Participation (N = 480)

Statement	Mean	SD	Skewness	Kurtosis
Students help to identify what needs to be improved in our school	2.96	0.891	-0.677	-0.171
Students give ideas about how to improve our school	2.82	0.913	-0.576	-0.377
Students partner with adults to make decisions about how to improve our school	2.78	0.983	0.829	9.162
My school has opportunities to hear from all students about how to improve our school	2.72	1.719	11.347	200.483
School leaders listen to students' ideas about how to improve our school	2.69	0.911	-0.402	-0.594
I give ideas to school leaders about how to improve the school when I am asked	2.66	1.304	6.689	100.085
My school seeks out the ideas of the students who are	2.60	1.702	11.895	212.484

Statement	Mean	SD	Skewness	Kurtosis
having the hardest time in school about how to improve our school				
School leaders take action based on students' ideas about how to improve our school	2.58	0.930	-0.143	-0.830
I have taken part in at least one of the opportunities available at school to share my ideas about how to improve our school	2.57	0.914	-0.157	-0.775
School leaders tell us how students' ideas were used to improve our school	2.53	0.943	-0.116	-0.882
I give ideas to school leaders about how to improve the school, even when I am not asked	2.29	0.979	0.266	-0.928

Mean of Means: 2.65
Note: Scale: 1 = Strongly Disagree to 5 = Strongly Agree

Table 2 presents the descriptive statistics on students' perceptions of their involvement in school improvement initiatives. The overall mean score (M = 2.65) indicates a generally low to moderate level of student participation in school decision-making and improvement processes. Among the items, the highest mean (M = 2.96, SD=.89) suggests that students somewhat agree that they help identify what needs to be improved in their schools. Conversely, the lowest mean (M = 2.29, SD=.98) reflects that students rarely offer improvement ideas to school leaders unprompted. Taken together, the revelations imply that whereas structures for student involvement are available, active and consistent engagement of students in decision-making and feedback loops remains restricted, stressing a need for a more inclusive and participatory leadership practices in school.

Table 3: Descriptive Distribution of Students' Responses on School Participation and Voice

No.	Statement	Never (%)	Rarely (%)	Often (%)	Always (%)
1	Students help to identify what needs to be improved in our school	37.5	37.7	19.2	5.6
2	Students give ideas about how to improve our school	28.3	26.3	31.3	14.2
3	Students partner with adults to make decisions about how to improve our school	20.6	33.3	28.5	17.5
4	My school has opportunities to hear from all students about how to improve our school	16.0	32.3	33.1	18.5
5	School leaders listen to students' ideas about how to improve our school	17.7	32.7	34.4	15.2
6	I give ideas to school leaders about how to improve the school when I am asked	19.0	25.8	32.7	22.5
7	My school seeks out the ideas of students who are having the hardest time in school about how to improve our school	48.5	16.9	15.8	18.8
8	School leaders take action based on students' ideas about how to improve our school	48.5	20.8	18.3	12.1
9	I have taken part in at least one of the opportunities available at school to share my ideas	15.0	29.4	29.4	26.3
10	School leaders tell us how students' ideas were used to improve our school	11.3	25.6	33.5	29.6
11	I give ideas to school leaders about how to improve the school, even when I am not asked	33.5	28.1	24.0	14.4
12	I express my views freely during class or group discussions	17.3	29.8	31.7	21.3

No.	Statement	Never (%)	Rarely (%)	Often (%)	Always (%)
13	I feel respected when I share my ideas in school	10.2	16.9	32.3	40.6
14	Teachers encourage students to express their opinions about school matters	10.8	25.4	35.8	27.9
15	My ideas are taken seriously by teachers and school leaders	17.9	27.9	32.9	21.3
16	I am involved in making classroom decisions that affect me	24.2	32.3	27.5	16.0
17	Students' suggestions lead to visible changes in school policies or activities	17.7	27.5	34.0	20.8
18	I take part in planning or organizing school events	10.4	20.6	32.1	36.9
19	My school provides platforms (e.g., clubs, forums) for student participation	10.4	22.3	36.3	31.0
20	School activities promote a sense of belonging among students	28.1	25.2	25.2	21.5

Note: Percentages may not total 100 due to rounding.

Table 3 shows descriptive distribution of students on their participation and voice in school-related decision-making processes. Transversely, the results indicate a moderate trend of students' engagement on participation and decision-making. Furthermore, a substantial percentage of students were rarely or occasionally got involved in decision-making processes or received feedback on school-related activities. Precisely, responses on foundational aspects like recognizing areas of enhancement or affiliating with adults (statements 1–3) leaned toward never and rarely (around 60–70%), signifying inadequate established structures for consistent student participation. Nonetheless, participation looks stronger in interpersonal and classroom contexts. For example, over 70% of respondents reported often or always feeling respected (statements 13) and encouraged to express their opinions (statement 14), reflecting a positive relational climate between teachers and students. Likewise, statements 18 and 19 showed higher engagement rates (often/always=68–70%), demonstrating that opportunities for participatory activities occur, however they may not directly influence broader school governance.

Contrarily, a few students (approximately 30–35%) perceived that their thoughts led to reasonable actions or changes (statements 7, 8, and 17), suggesting a gap between

voice and influence.

Taken together, the revelation shows that while many schools provide opportunities for students to express themselves and participate in classroom level events, meaningful decision-making power and feedback mechanisms remain inadequate. Therefore, solidifying shared communication would enhance democratic participation towards students' sense of agency in school life.

Table 4: Distribution of Responses on Peer-Led Restorative Circle Practices in Schools

Statement	Never (%)	Rarely (%)	Often (%)	Always (%)
I feel safe to share my thoughts during group sessions in school	13.3	22.7	32.5	31.5
Other students respect my views during discussions in school	8.5	23.8	37.7	30.0
The group sessions I take part in encourage honest and open conversations	10.6	21.0	39.8	28.5
I can speak without fear of being judged in group sessions	11.9	25.4	35.4	27.3
The group sessions I take part in help us understand each other better	8.1	20.6	37.1	34.2
Student leaders treat everyone fairly during sessions	10.4	23.8	37.1	28.7
Peer leaders give everyone time to speak in sessions	12.3	25.6	33.1	29.0
I trust student facilitators to lead the sessions well	11.9	24.4	40.0	23.8
The sessions I take part in are well-organized and clear	11.9	24.0	40.0	24.2
Student facilitators stay neutral during discussions	11.9	26.3	42.3	19.6
Joining group sessions helps us talk about what went wrong in school	12.5	23.5	34.4	29.6
In group sessions, people take responsibility for their actions	13.5	27.3	35.6	23.3
The sessions I take part in focus on fixing problems, not blaming others	9.2	27.1	34.6	29.2

Statement	Never (%)	Rarely (%)	Often (%)	Always (%)
In group sessions, we have a shared understanding of how to move forward	12.1	24.6	34.8	28.5
In group sessions, solutions are felt to be fair to everyone involved	11.5	26.0	37.1	25.4
The group sessions I participated in helped me feel more connected to others	9.8	21.3	37.1	31.9
Group sessions encouraged cooperation and respect among students	11.9	19.2	36.0	32.9
Student-led groups help me to prevent future problems in school	12.3	26.3	35.6	25.8
I felt included and welcomed during group sessions	11.9	20.2	35.6	32.3
Student-led discussion groups make our campus a better place	13.3	18.3	34.8	33.5

Note: Items were rated on a four-point scale (Never = 1, Rarely = 2, Often = 3, Always = 4).

In Table 4, students' perceptions of peer-led restorative circle practices in their schools showed a positive climate of trust, openness, and inclusion. Transversely, responses to all the statements clustered around "Often" and "Always,". For instance, 63.9% of respondents (32.5% often; 31.5% always) agreed feeling safe to share their thoughts, while 67.7% indicated that their views were respected by other students. Likewise, 68.3% of the respondents indicated that group sessions allowed for open and honest dialogue, signifying the effectiveness of restorative approaches in promoting authentic communication.

In terms of fairness, approximately 71.3% of the respondents thought that student leaders are treated fairly, and 62.1% of the respondents trusted people engaged for facilitations do so competently. Furthermore, 66.9% of the respondents accepted the fact that peer-led restorative circles were made clear and organized appropriately, while 61.9% acknowledged that those engaged as facilitators were neutral in discussion sessions. These assertions echo the fact that restorative justice processes are unbiassed.

Concerning collective responsibility and problem-solving, 64% of the respondents indicated that engaging in group discussions allowed for reflections on what went wrong, and as well, taking responsibility for their actions by the respondents. Likewise, 63.8% agreed that sessions focused on solutions rather than blame, and 63.3% acknowledged that

resolutions were perceived as fair to all. This demonstrates a shift toward dialogic accountability rather than punitive resolution.

Affective outcomes were particularly positive, where 69.0% of the respondents felt more connected to their peers, while 68.9% indicated that group meetings nurtured cooperation, respect, and inclusion among them. Finally, 68.3% of the respondents showed that student-led dialogue helped in making their schools safer and cohesive for them.

Taken together, the high percentage of "Often" and "Always" responses seem to suggest that restorative practices lead to the improvement of interpersonal relationships among students and reinforce their feeling of belonging and collective obligation.

Table 5: Normality Test

Variables	Mean	SD	Skewness		Kurtosis	
	Stat	Stat	Stat	SE	Stat	SE
Students Peer Led Restorative Circle	56.57	12.35	-.353	.111	.796	.222
Students Democratic Participation	50.06	10.65	-.052	.111	.246	.222
Student Level Voice Practices	29.19	6.64	.435	.111	2.808	.222

In Table 5, descriptive results of the study variables were presented. For example, peer-led restorative circles recorded the highest statistics (M = 56.57, SD = 12.35), signifying that respondents engaged in peer mediation and restorative dialogue activities in schools. Likewise, democratic participation statistics (M = 50.06, SD = 10.65) showed that respondents' level of engagement in democratic processes were appreciable. However, opportunities for student-level voice practices were inadequate (M = 29.19, SD = 6.64). Concerning the distributional characteristics, skewness values for all variables ranged between –0.35 and 0.44, while kurtosis values ranged from 0.25 to 2.81. These results showed that the data were normally distributed as the statistical values recorded were within the thresholds [±2 and ±3] for skewness and kurtosis (Field, 2018).

EFA on Democratic Participation Scale

EFA through Principal Component Analysis (PCA) was performed. The EFA was performed to ascertain the data suitability for factor extraction. In this process, the sampling adequacy was established using the Kaiser–Meyer–Olkin [KMO=.883] (see Table 6) and this exceeded the recommended threshold of .80. The Bartlett's Test of Sphericity was

statistically significant, χ^2 (190) = 2,560.63, p < .001, indicating that the correlation matrix was not an identity matrix and that relationships among variables were adequate for factor extraction (Field, 2018). The significant. In all, two components were extracted and this was based on eigenvalues greater than 1.0. The component 1 had an eigenvalue of 5.64, explaining 28.20% of the total variance, while the component 2 had an eigenvalue of 2.09, explaining 10.45% of the total variance, while all together explained 38.65% of the total variance (see Table 7, Figure 1). Additionally, component 1 was labelled Participatory Engagement with 16-items (see Table 8), while component 2 was labelled Institutional Trust and Fairness with 4-items (see Table 8). Per the results, the recorded statistics were within the acceptable range between 30%–60% cumulative variance as supported by literature (Hair et al., 2021; Tabachnick & Fidell, 2019).

Table 6: KMO and Bartlett's Test

Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin Measure of Sampling Adequacy.		.883
Bartlett's Test of Sphericity	Approx. Chi-Square	2560.633
	Df	190
	Sig.	.000

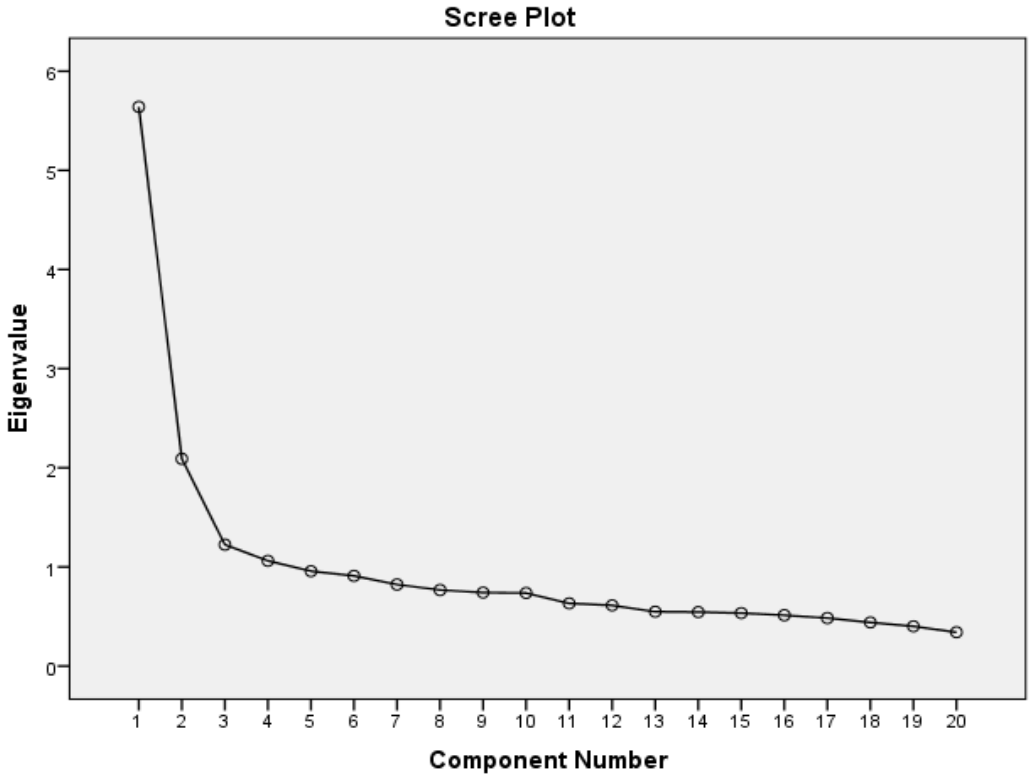

Figure 1: Scree Plot of Eigenvalues

Table 7: Total Variance Explained

	Initial Eigenvalues			Extraction Sums of Squared Loadings		
Component	Total	% Variance	Cumulative %	Total	% Variance	Cumulative %
1	5.640	28.202	28.202	5.640	28.202	28.202
2	2.090	10.451	38.653	2.090	10.451	38.653
3	1.224	6.121	44.774			
4	1.061	5.307	50.081			
5	.957	4.787	54.868			
6	.909	4.546	59.414			
7	.823	4.113	63.527			
8	.767	3.835	67.361			
9	.742	3.708	71.069			
10	.737	3.684	74.753			
11	.632	3.161	77.914			
12	.612	3.060	80.974			
13	.548	2.740	83.714			
14	.544	2.722	86.437			
15	.534	2.672	89.109			
16	.513	2.563	91.672			
17	.484	2.420	94.092			
18	.440	2.200	96.292			
19	.400	2.002	98.294			
20	.341	1.706	100.000			

Extraction Method: Principal Component Analysis

Table 8: Component Matrix

Statements	Component	
	1	2
I have opportunities to express my views in course-related decisions	.667	
I participate in forums or meetings where students' issues are discussed	.638	
I take part in community outreach or volunteering initiatives led by students	.638	
I believe my voice can influence decisions in my department or faculty	.635	
I participate in dialogues that promote mutual understanding and change	.615	
I have engaged in peaceful advocacy or campaigns related to student welfare	.577	
I feel that my opinions are taken seriously by university staff or administrators	.572	
I feel a sense of responsibility to contribute to improving university life	.531	
Students are actively involved in shaping policies that affect us	.530	
My university provides safe spaces for open and respectful dialogue	.522	
I know how to raise concerns through official student representation channels	.515	
I feel comfortable discussing controversial topics in class or campus space	.497	
I stay informed about campus and national issues affecting students	.496	
I have engaged in structured debates or discussions on campus issues	.467	
My university encourages co-creation of learning environments with students	.458	
I feel that students have power to shape university policies	.382	
I have served on a committee, board, or leadership group at the university	.592	-.548
I have collaborated with staff or faculty on institutional initiatives	.590	-.501
I believe it is important to be politically and socially active as a student		
I respect different viewpoints expressed in campus		

EFA on Peer-Led Restorative Practices Scale

An EFA performed using Principal Component Analysis (PCA) to examine the latent structure of the Peer-Led Restorative Practices Scale. The primary aim was to determine whether the 20-items measured a single underlying construct representing restorative engagement and collaborative dialogue among students in peer-facilitated school group sessions. The results of the Kaiser–Meyer–Olkin (KMO) Measure of Sampling Adequacy and Bartlett's Test of Sphericity demonstrated that the dataset was highly suitable for factor analysis. The KMO value was .934, which surpasses the recommended threshold of .90. Additionally, Bartlett's Test of Sphericity produced a statistically significant result, χ^2 (190) = 3,653.98, $p < .001$, confirming that the correlation matrix was not an identity matrix (see Table 9).

Again, the analysis of the total variance explained revealed that the first principal component had an eigenvalue of 7.73, accounting for 38.66% of the total variance, whereas the second component had an eigenvalue of 1.31, explaining only an additional 6.53% of the variance. Although two components met Kaiser's (1960) criterion of eigenvalues greater than one, the scree plot exhibited a clear and steep inflection point after the first component, indicating that a single-factor solution was optimal (see Figure 2). The proportion of variance explained (38.66%; see Table 10) also exceeds the minimum acceptable threshold of 30% typically considered satisfactory for unidimensional constructs in the social sciences (Hair et al., 2021). Overall, 19-items loaded positively and meaningfully on the first factor, with loadings ranging from .39 to .70, exceeding the recommended cutoff of .40 for exploratory analyses (see Table 11; Stevens, 2002).

Table 9: KMO and Bartlett's Test

Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin Measure of Sampling Adequacy.		.934
Bartlett's Test of Sphericity	Approx. Chi-Square	3653.981
	df	190
	Sig.	.000

Table 10: Total Variance Explained

Component	Initial Eigenvalues			Extraction Sums of Squared Loadings		
	Total	% of Variance	Cumulative %	Total	% of Variance	Cumulative %
1	7.732	38.661	38.661	7.732	38.661	38.661
2	1.306	6.529	45.190	1.306	6.529	45.190
3	1.039	5.194	50.384			
4	.947	4.736	55.119			
5	.928	4.639	59.758			
6	.839	4.196	63.954			
7	.762	3.809	67.763			
8	.726	3.630	71.393			
9	.676	3.379	74.772			
10	.611	3.055	77.826			
11	.600	3.001	80.828			
12	.545	2.724	83.552			
13	.528	2.641	86.193			
14	.467	2.336	88.529			
15	.441	2.204	90.733			
16	.418	2.088	92.821			
17	.396	1.978	94.799			
18	.370	1.851	96.650			
19	.344	1.719	98.370			
20	.326	1.630	100.000			

Extraction Method: Principal Component Analysis.

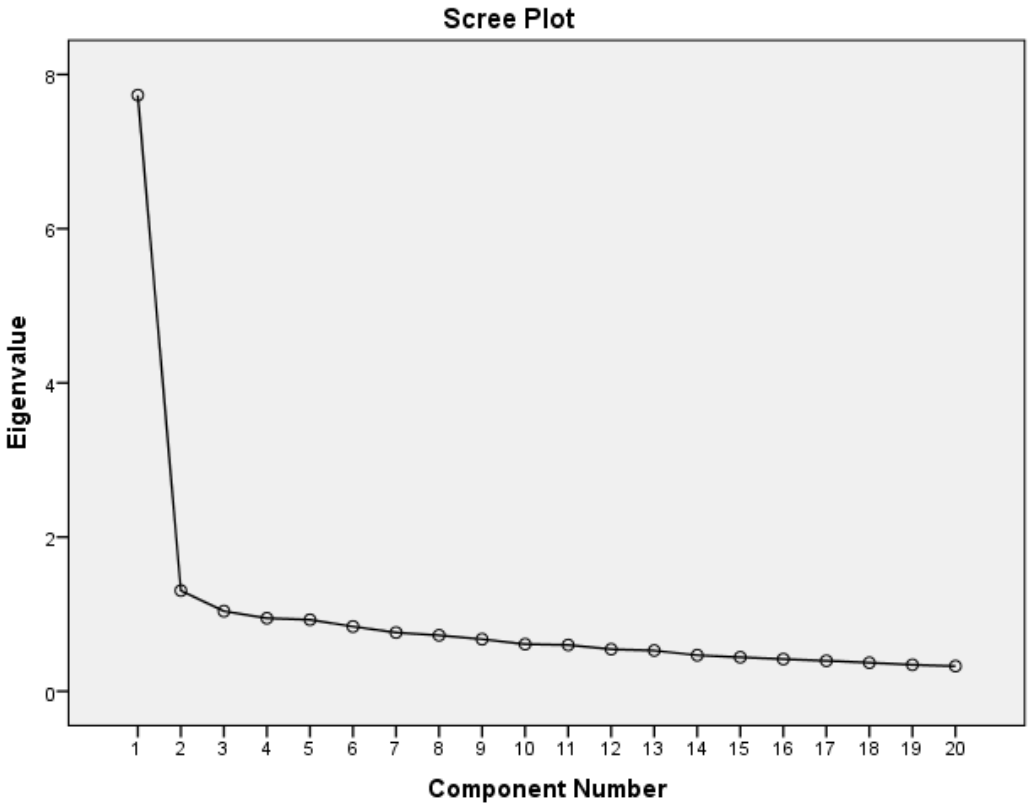

Figure 2: Scree Plot of Eigenvalues

Table 11: Component Matrix

Statements	Component	
	1	2
The group sessions I take part encourage honest and open conversations in school	.702	.235
The group sessions I take part help us understand each other better	.698	.283
The group sessions I participated in helped me feel more connected to others in school	.677	176
I felt included and welcomed during the group sessions in school	.662	344
In group sessions, we have a shared understanding of how to move forward in school	.655	264
In group sessions, solutions are felt as fair to everyone involved in school	.653	202
Group sessions encouraged cooperation and respect among students in school	.651	212
Peer leaders give everyone time to speak in sessions	.641	.340
I can speak without fear of being judged in group sessions	.635	.270
The sessions I take focuses on fixing problems, not blaming others in school	.633	245
I trust students' facilitators to lead the session well	.632	.184
In my case, student-led group help me to prevent future problems in school	.620	329
I feel safe to share my thoughts during the group sessions in school	.620	.159
Other students respect my view during discussions in school	.605	.286
The sessions I take part are well-organized and clear	.604	075
Students leading sessions treats everyone fairly	.591	.439
Joining group sessions help us talk about what went wrong in school	.586	.058
In sessions I take part, students facilitators stay neutral during discussions	.571	.052
Student-Led discussions groups make our campus a better place in school	.541	305

Components of Students-Level Voice Participation against Composites of Democratic Participation and Peer-Led Restorative Practices

In Table 12, a multiple regression analysis was conducted using structural equation modelling (SEM) to examine how the components of student-level voice participation namely opportunities, responsiveness, and participation predict two key outcome variables: students' democratic participation and students' peer-led restorative practices. It showed that opportunities significantly and positively influenced both the outcome variables. Specifically, opportunities significantly predicted students' democratic participation (β = .544, SE = .231, CR = 2.35, $p < .019$) and Students' Peer-Led Restorative Practices (β = .646, SE = .283, CR = 2.28, $p < .022$). These results indicate that once students perceive sufficient and impartial opportunities to express their views and participate in school-level decision-making, they are more likely to engage democratically and exhibit restorative behaviours in their interactions.

Also, the responsiveness construct significantly predicted democratic participation (β = .388, SE = .129, CR = 3.00, $p < .003$), showing that once school authorities meaningfully accept students input, democratic engagement is reinforced. Nevertheless, the influence of responsiveness on peer-led restorative practices insignificant (β = .279, SE = .158, CR = 1.77, $p > .078$). This result shows that although responsiveness improves formal participation, its effect on restorative practices may depend on other factors that are not readily known.

Moreover, participation significantly and positively predicted of democratic participation (β = 1.083, SE = .217, CR = 4.99, $p < .001$). This strong and high prediction underscores the fact that honest student participation leads to higher levels of democratic involvement. Additionally, participation significantly and positively predicted peer-led restorative practices (β = .498, SE = .266, CR = 1.87, $p > .061$), suggesting that active participation may contribute to restorative culture indirectly, possibly through its mediating role in building interpersonal respect and shared responsibility. The results can be found in Table 12 and Figure 3.

Table 12: Regression Weights

Outcome Variables		Predictor Variables	Estimate	S.E.	C.R.	*P*
Students Democratic Participation	<---	Opportunities	.544	.231	2.352	.019
Students Peer-Led Restorative Circle	<---	Opportunities	.646	.283	2.282	.022
Students Peer-Led Restorative Circle	<---	Responsiveness	.279	.158	1.765	.078
Students Democratic Participation	<---	Responsiveness	.388	.129	3.001	.003
Students Democratic Participation	<---	Participation	1.083	.217	4.985	***
Students Peer Led Restorative Circle	<---	Participation	.498	.266	1.873	.061

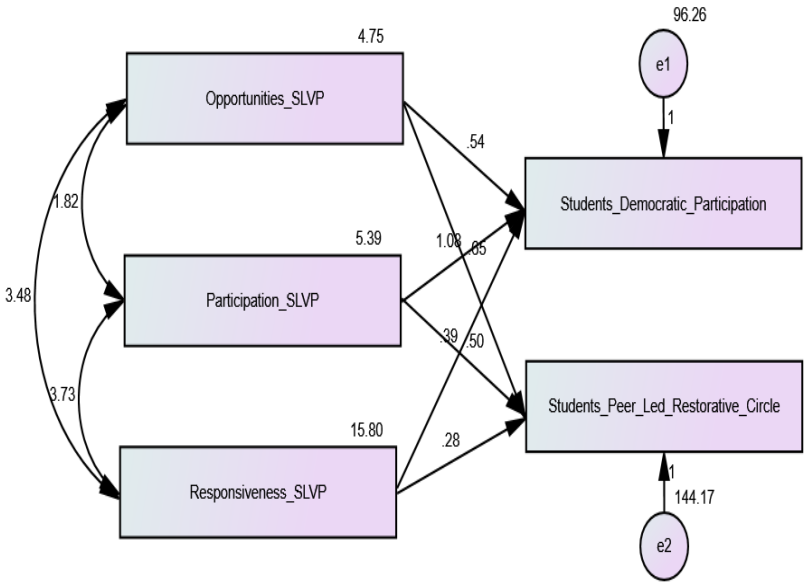

Figure 3: Conceptual Model of the study variables

Composite of Students-Level Voice Participation against Composites of Democratic Participation and Peer-Led Restorative Practices

Table 13: Regression Weights

Outcome Variable		Predictor Variable	Estimate	S.E.	C.R.	*P*
Students Democratic Participation	<---	Student Level Voice Practices	.596	.068	8.765	.000
Students Peer-Led Restorative Circle	<---	Student Level Voice Practices	.417	.083	5.037	.000

Table 13 shows results of the SEM analysis for students' level voice participation on democratic participation and peer-led restorative practices. The results showed significant and positive model paths, signifying that when students are engaged actively in voice-related activities, they are likely to engage in democratic activities and restorative peer interactions. Explicitly, student-level voice participation predicted democratic participation ($\beta = .596$, SE = .068, CR = 8.77, $p < .001$), while student-Level Voice Participation predicted Peer-Led Restorative Practices ($\beta = .417$, SE = .083, CR = 5.04, $p < .001$). In sum, the results show that student voice has the ability to influence both democratic engagement and restorative school culture among students in school.

Therefore, HEIs should put in place measures that allow students to expression themselves and provide feedback that tend to resonate with their thoughts. The results can further be found in Figure 4.

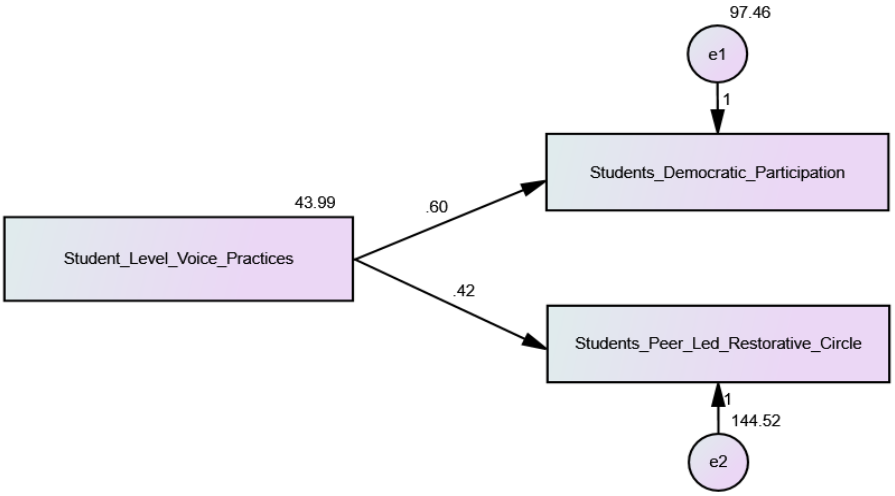

Figure 4: Conceptual model of student-level voice participation, democratic participation, and peer-led restorative practices

Discussion

The study's findings show that student-level voice practices are significant in nurturing or developing participatory democratic and peer-led restorative practices behaviours among students Ghanaian HEIs. These revelations are in line with extant literature, where the involvement of students in participatory democratic and peer-led restorative practices could ginger them towards positive action, belongingness, and responsible in their civic duties (Holquist et al., 2023; Salisbury et al., 2019). Importantly, SVPs capture the bigger picture of participatory engagement, where students experience a shift from passive behaviours to active behaviours in the learning environment. In congruent with Holquist et al. (2023) and Biddle and Huffnagel (2019) such active behaviours lead students to show ownership of their experiences in the educational settings. Undoubtedly, this view is, the study's revelation indicates that the provision of opportunities for students to participate in decision-making activities will lead to their civic democratic involvement. Once students remark that their contributions are valued genuinely, their democratic norms become internalize (Beckman, 2021; Heid et al., 2023; Rammbuda & Mafukata, 2025). This reflects previous literature, as student voice was

perceived to have improved critical thinking, leadership, and metacognitive growth among students in HEIs (Geurts et al., 2023; Lyons & Brasof, 2020; Hipolito-Delgado et al., 2022). With such opportunities, students do not only develop self-reflective awareness but cultivate their civic capabilities.

Furthermore, the encouraging relationship between student voice and democratic participation strengthens the debate that educational environments represent good platforms for imparting citizenship behaviour knowledge in students (Veugelers & de Groot, 2019; Tuhuteru, 2023). This argument aligns with the UNCRC (2009) assertion that participation is a vital component of studentship, where students contribute meaningfully to educational decisions that improve their academic and social settings. It is worthy of note that these opportunities bring about inclusivity and shared responsibility in the administrative structures of educational institutions (Rinnooy Kan et al., 2023; Egan et al., 2025). Nevertheless, as corroborates findings of Sousa and Ferreira's (2024) and Griebler and Nowak's (2012), this study's findings implies that whereas students are regularly given the opportunity to express themselves, this does not lead to any major influence on institutional decision-making processes. In these situations, students are limited in their voice, hence, a structural barrier. In view of this, Ribeiro and Menezes (2022) argued that structural barriers in school leadership stifle genuine democratic engagement among students.

In the realm of restorative education, the prediction of student-level voice practices on peer-led restorative circles shows that although voice practices provide the platform for participatory culture, restorative practices depend on relational trust, compassion, and relational accountability (Clifford, 2015; Lodi et al., 2021; Huguley et al., 2022). The finding aligns with the view that there is a common ground in moral and pedagogical aspects of democratic and restorative practices (Christopher, 2015; Lustick, 2021). Once students are allowed to safely voice out their concerns, they are better prepared to participate in restorative problem-solving.

Furthermore, the interrelationship among student voice, democratic participation, and restorative practices provides a broader theoretical framework on participatory education and relational accountability.

Taken together, these discussions confirm that student voice is a diverse construct, interwoven with democracy and social justice. Therefore, providing opportunities for students in decision making processes hold promise for changing leadership narratives towards democratic, dialogic, and restorative spaces in in universities.

Conclusion

Based on the findings of the study, it concluded that when students are given the chance to express their views, take part in institutional decision-making, and accorded recognition from leadership, they would surely show democratic and restorative

behaviours towards enhanced school community cohesion. Consequently, student voice provides a link between civic agency and relational accountability among students in their learning settings. The study affirms democratic behaviours among students do not come out of the blue, but nurtured through concerted efforts made by institutions so that their views are cherished and acted upon. Correspondingly, restorative practices flourish in contexts where inclusivity, compassion, and impartiality are promoted. As in the Ghanaian context, the finding emphasizes that HEIs are exceptionally positioned to model participatory democracy through policy outlines, administrative structures, and routine instructional practices. Providing these opportunities for students in way reinforces their civic abilities and as well nurtures a culture of care in the HEIs settings.

Recommendations

From the conclusion, the following recommendations were made:

1. There should be institutionalisation of student voice mechanisms within institutional governance systems by HEIs. This is possible through creating leadership management committees, institutional advisory boards, and making some students representatives on institutional boards to have their views projected.
2. There should be skills training and mentorship opportunities made available to students by HEIs. These activities should prioritise civic engagement, conflict resolution, dialogue facilitation, and ethical leadership.
3. There should be restorative justice principles adopted by HEIs in managing disciplinary issues. This should target resolution at the expense of punitive procedures in managing conflicts between and among school leaders and students.
4. There should be a culture that promotes care and inclusivity in HEIs. Doing this will provide an empowering voice and dialogue among students.
5. There should an alignment in HEIs policies and participatory and restorative frameworks, where democratic behaviours of students can be exhibited by students. Such an alignment would strengthen Ghana's quest to uphold SDG 4, by promoting inclusivity and equitable quality education towards lifelong learning.

Limitations

Regardless of the study findings, there were some shortfalls that need acknowledgment. The study employed self-reported procedures in collecting data, and this might introduce some level of biases in responses. As a cross-sectional study, there were no chances for causal inference to be made. The study was limited in terms of locale and context, hence, there is a need for cautious generalizability of findings. Basically, the study collected data from students only, hence, the possibility of misrepresenting facts and information cannot be ruled out.

Ethics Statement

The study followed ethical guidelines that relate to the University of Education, Winneba Research Ethics Committee (Ref: UEW-ECR/25/HE/036) and the Declaration of Helsinki (World Medical Association, 2013). Throughout the process, everyone recruited to provide information did so on voluntary basis upon informed consent. Issues of withdrawal, anonymity, and confidentiality of respondents and their information were spelt out.

Data Availability

The date used for this are readily available upon reasonable request from the corresponding author (imahama@uew.edu.gh).

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Declaration of Interest

The authors of this study had no interests to declare.

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