Evaluating Learner Feedback as a Leadership Tool for School Improvement in Ghana

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ABSTRACT

Despite growing interest in feedback strategies for school improvement in Ghana, learner perspectives—especially at the senior high school level—remain underexplored. This gap limits understanding of the effectiveness of learner feedback in driving meaningful change. Guided by contingency theory, which underscores the need for context-responsive leadership, this qualitative case study examined how principals in Ghana's most cosmopolitan city perceived learner feedback as a school improvement strategy. Twelve principals—the entire cohort within the study area—were purposively selected and interviewed, and the data were analyzed thematically. Findings revealed that participants acknowledged the value of learner feedback in enhancing student engagement, fostering continuous improvement, and promoting responsible citizenship. However, they also raised significant concerns. Key challenges included perceived unreliability of student input, time and financial constraints, and resistance from both staff and students. These findings highlight the complex leadership decisions involved in implementing learner feedback systems in resource-constrained environments. The study offers context-specific insights for school leaders and policymakers seeking to integrate learner voice in school governance. It underscores the need for leadership development, policy support, and resource allocation to strengthen the role of learner feedback in enhancing school practices and improving student outcomes.

Keywords: Ghana; leadership; learner feedback; principals; school improvement strategy

In today's constantly evolving world, schools need to play a pivotal role in nurturing learners to reach their full potential and meet society's complex demands. Achieving this goal necessitates continuous improvement efforts by school leaders, covering enhancements in human resources, infrastructure, and teaching methodologies (Farrell, 2015; Koh et al., 2023; Marsh & Farrell, 2015; Zumpe, 2024). Among the diverse improvement strategies, the feedback approach stands out for its capacity to refine school visions, evaluate progress, and foster meaningful change (Adolfsson, 2024; Hopkins, 2022). Feedback encompasses insights from various stakeholders, such as principals, teachers, parents, learners, and support staff, on different facets of school life, including the outputs of principals, teachers, and students (Ahea et al., 2016; Ampofo, 2020; Brown & McGill, 2024).

While scholarly interest in feedback approaches has increased lately, the existing body of research has mainly focused on feedback from principals, teachers (Cole et al., 2017; Peterson & Portier, 2014), and parents (Eady & Moreau, 2018; Miller, 1995), overlooking learner feedback. Despite extensive exploration of feedback strategies for school improvement in Ghana, prior studies (e.g., Ampofo, 2020; Awinyam et al., 2022; Eshun, 2019; Liu & Gumah, 2020) have notably omitted the vital perspective of learners themselves, particularly within the secondary education sector, where student concerns have been evident (Ampofo, 2020). Consequently, the effectiveness of learner feedback in improving secondary schools is unclear. This study aims to bridge this gap by exploring how principals, as managers of senior high schools (SHS) in the country, perceive the effectiveness of learner feedback as a school improvement strategy, and the reasons they like or dislike its implementation. To achieve this objective, we posed the question: How do SHS principals in Ghana perceive the

effectiveness of learner feedback as a school improvement strategy, and how do their perceptions of its implementation align with the contingent factors influencing their leadership decisions? The word effectiveness, in this context, refers to the extent to which learner feedback assists principals' ongoing planning, monitoring, and evaluation processes to advance the school toward its vision and mission, as noted by Han (2017) and Sigurðardóttir and Sigþórsson (2016).

The study holds significant implications for educational practice and policy. By examining the role of learner feedback in enhancing school performance, this study aims to shed light on an often-overlooked aspect of school improvement strategies. Incorporating learner feedback into school improvement plans in Ghana can lead to more effective outcomes, aligning with global efforts towards achieving Sustainable Development Goal 4 on quality education.

Overview of the Ghanaian Education System

The Ghanaian education system consists of three levels: Basic education, secondary education, and tertiary education. Basic education follows a nine-year cycle, comprising one year of kindergarten, six years of primary school, and three years of junior high school. At the end of junior high, students take the Basic Education Certificate Examinations (BECE) administered by the West African Examinations Council (WAEC). However, this examination is procedural, as students proceed to secondary education regardless of their performance (Acheampong, 2010; Anamuah-Mensah, 2002; Armah, 2017; Asiedu-Akrofi, 1982).

Secondary education comprises a three-year cycle of senior high school or technical school. In the final year, students sit for the West African Senior School Certificate Examination (WASSCE), also conducted by the WAEC. Unlike the BECE, passing the WASSCE is essential for students aspiring to tertiary education. They must also meet specific entry requirements for their preferred programs in universities, polytechnics, colleges of education, nurses' colleges, and vocational training institutions. Tertiary education typically takes four years to complete (Akyeampong, 2010; Anamuah-Mensah, 2002; Armah, 2017; Asiedu-Akrofi, 1982).

LITERATURE REVIEW

While global trends emphasize inclusive feedback mechanisms that involve students in the process, Ghana's approach remains relatively underdeveloped. Internationally, research often highlights the role of learner feedback in enhancing educational quality and leadership practices, with a focus on systematic, inclusive, and iterative processes (e.g., feedback loops in Western educational systems). In contrast, Ghanaian research primarily focuses on teacher feedback and school performance. Yet, it lacks a comprehensive integration of learner perspectives, thereby limiting the scope for more holistic school improvement strategies. This gap underscores the need for context-specific studies on learner feedback in Ghana, particularly given the unique challenges faced by school leaders.

Theoretical Framework: The Contingency Theory

This study is grounded in contingency theory (CT), which asserts that effective leadership depends on aligning decisions with the specific context, such as resource availability, institutional culture, and accountability demands (McAdam & McSorley, 2019; Mikes & Kaplan, 2014; Otley, 2016). CT provides a framework for understanding how school leaders adapt their strategies in response to these contextual factors. It assumes there is no single best way to lead; instead, leadership must be responsive to specific circumstances. In the context of Ghanaian senior high schools, this study provides insight into how principals adapt their approaches to using structured student feedback—input on teaching and school practices—as a tool for school improvement. The theory emphasizes that leadership practices are not one-size-fits-all but must be responsive to each school's unique circumstances. For example, a principal at a resource-constrained school may limit feedback mechanisms due to insufficient staffing or time. In contrast, a principal in a better-resourced school might actively integrate feedback into decision-making processes.

By applying CT, this study highlights how their school's environment shapes principals' decisions about feedback mechanisms. This adaptability ensures that feedback is utilized effectively, even if its implementation varies across schools. In this way, CT offers a valuable lens for understanding how learner feedback can drive school improvement across diverse contexts.

Learner Feedback as a School Improvement Strategy

Importance of the Strategy

In nurturing learners, schools must prioritize giving students a voice in decisions that impact their academic, emotional, and social well-being (Marsh & Farrell, 2015). This is achieved through soliciting and acting upon their feedback to drive school improvement, a fundamental responsibility of school principals (Koh et al., 2023; Quesel et al., 2021).

Utilizing learner feedback as a tool for school improvement is indispensable, as it yields numerous benefits. Firstly, it empowers students to share their perspectives openly (Ahea et al., 2016) and enriches their learning experiences (Bajaj et al., 2018). Secondly, it enhances the school's credibility (Henderson et al., 2021) and supports the formulation of strategic timelines for school activities, thereby facilitating effective decision-making by school leaders (Huberman & Miles, 2013; Nehez & Håkansson Lindqvist, 2024).

Implementation Challenges

The challenges principals encounter when implementing learner feedback as a school improvement strategy are multifaceted. The literature has identified several of them. First, accessing comprehensive feedback can be difficult, as not all students can provide input due to limited access to the necessary platforms (Adolfsson, 2024; Huberman & Miles, 2013; Koh et al., 2023). Additionally, analyzing and interpreting large volumes of feedback is time-consuming and costly, requiring principals to possess strong analytical skills to identify trends and derive actionable insights (Eady & Moreau, 2018; Goffin et al., 2022; Quesel et al., 2021).

Another significant challenge is the potential bias and subjectivity inherent in learner feedback, which may be influenced by factors such as peer pressure, personal preferences, and cultural backgrounds. Principals must be vigilant in recognizing these biases to ensure that the feedback collected is objective and truly reflective of the students' opinions (Liu & Gumah, 2020).

Moreover, some principals struggle to manage both quantitative and qualitative feedback effectively. To gain a comprehensive understanding of educational programs, they must balance numerical metrics with qualitative insights, a skill that not all principals possess (Acton, 2021; Sigurðardóttir & Sigþórsson, 2016). Communicating learner feedback effectively to stakeholders is also essential for fostering trust and collaboration within the school community, but not all principals are adept at this task (Ampofo, 2020; Harris et al., 2013; Sadler, 2014).

Implementation Action Steps

While the learner feedback approach to school improvement offers numerous benefits, Marsh and Farrell (2015) contend that, for learners' feedback to enhance schools, the challenges that bedevil its implementation must be addressed. One strategy for doing so is carefully designing the feedback process to ensure anonymity. Thus, students must have easy access to digital platforms for surveys, fill out printed questionnaires, provide one-on-one interview responses, or use suggestion boxes to express their anonymous views on various aspects of the school experience, including teaching quality, resources, policies and procedures, extracurricular activities, and overall culture and climate. Students are more likely to provide honest and constructive feedback when they feel free to express their opinions and concerns without fear of retaliation or victimization in the school environment (Eady & Moreau, 2018).

METHODS

Research Design

This study employed a qualitative single-case study design to assess the effectiveness of learner feedback as a school-improvement strategy in Ghana. According to Yin (2003), a case study design is particularly suitable for exploring complex social phenomena within their real-life context. In this case, it enables an in-depth understanding of the unique dynamics within Ghanaian senior high schools, where learner feedback is an emerging school improvement strategy. A case study is well-suited for this research as it facilitates the examination of how various contextual factors—such as school leadership, resources, and local educational policies—interact and influence the implementation and effectiveness of learner feedback.

Aligned with a social constructivist research philosophy, this study views research as a process of exploring multiple realities. It emphasizes interpreting participants' perspectives with an understanding of subjectivity and context (Patton, 2015), while also identifying commonalities (Creswell, 2013). In this regard, the case study design allows for a rich exploration of school principals' perceptions, which are deeply embedded in Ghana's unique educational setting. By focusing on a single case, this approach enables a nuanced understanding of the complexities involved, particularly amid

challenges such as reliability, time constraints, and resistance from staff and students. Thus, the case study design is justified, as it provides the necessary depth and context-specific insights to fully understand senior high school principals' perceptions of learner feedback as a school improvement strategy in Ghana.

Case Profile

The geographical area used as a case study in this research is Ghana's largest and most cosmopolitan city. Located on the coast of the Gulf of Guinea in West Africa, this area includes three of Ghana's 29 districts in the Greater Accra Region, each overseen by a mayor appointed by the President (Ghana Statistical Service, 2021). As the economic and administrative center of the Greater Accra Region, the city is home to the Office of the President, government ministries, and the headquarters of many governmental and non-governmental organizations.

Participant Selection

We employed two purposive sampling techniques—modal and expert (Creswell, 2013)—to select participants. We used the modal technique to select Ghana's most cosmopolitan city as a case study (see case profile) because, by its nature, it was likely to include school principals with diverse cultural experiences relevant to our research. The purposive expert sampling technique guided the selection of participants, including 12 SHS principals in the study area, chosen for their relevance and expertise and because they constituted the entire cohort in that area. We specifically included only SHS principals or their deputies, as they were responsible for their schools' overall management and were key stakeholders in decisions regarding school improvement practices, including learner feedback. This technique ensured participants had direct experience implementing learner feedback, enriching our insights into their perceptions and experiences.

The participants varied in age, gender, type of school (public or private), years of experience as principals, teacher population, supporting staff population, and student population (see Table 1). This diversity added depth to our findings and provided a comprehensive understanding of learner feedback practices across different contexts within Ghanaian SHSs. While we tried to ensure diversity, there may still have been some biases in our selection. However, we were transparent about our sampling methods, which helped to minimize these biases and improve the study's credibility.

Table 1

Details of Participants

Participant	Age	Gender	Nature of School	Duration of Principalship	Number of Teaching Staff	Number of Supporting Staff	Number of Students
P1	51	Male	Private	12 years	12	5	98
P2	51	Male	Public	4 years	152	56	2032
P3	48	Female	Public	7 years	87	42	1500
P4	58	Male	Private	6 years	26	3	149
P5	52	Female	Public	3 years	159	21	3723
P6	59	Female	Public	6 years	40	16	255
P7	55	Male	Public	4 months	77	11	1408
P8	55	Male	Public	5 years	223	105	5800
P9	55	male	Public	8 years	130	93	2145
P10	55	Female	Public	1year	111	59	2418
P11	56	Male	Public	8 years	111	63	2325
P12	42	Female	Private	3 years	34	7	235

Data Collection and Analysis

We collected data using semi-structured interviews. The tool consisted of 21 initial questions. While the first six questions gathered demographic information and were closed-ended, the rest were open-ended. Examples included the following:

1. Please, what gender do you prefer for yourself?
2. How old are you?
3. Is your institution a public or private school?
4. How many teachers do you have in the school?
5. How many supporting staff do you have in the school?
6. What is the population of students in your school?
7. May I know how long you have been serving as principal of the school?
8. Can you describe your role and responsibilities as a principal in a senior high school in Ghana?
9. How familiar are you with the concept of learner feedback as a school improvement strategy?
10. In your opinion, how important is learner feedback in the context of senior high schools in Ghana?
11. Can you share any experiences or examples of how learner feedback has been utilized in your school?
12. What do you perceive as the primary benefits of implementing learner feedback as a school improvement strategy?

We conducted the interviews face-to-face, lasting approximately 45 minutes each. With participants' permission, we recorded and transcribed them using Turboscribe.ai. We saved the recordings on the lead author's computer and reconciled the transcriptions with the audio to correct errors caused by unfamiliar accents.

We coded the data inductively using NVivo software, conducting repeated coding exercises until saturation was achieved. We identified several codes reflecting principals' perceptions of learner feedback. Positive perceptions included codes such as *enhancing student engagement*, *fostering a culture of continuous improvement*, and *developing responsible citizens*. Concerns were captured using codes such as *unreliable feedback*, *time and financial constraints*, and *subordinates' resistance*. We subsequently organized the codes into two major themes: the perceived usefulness of learner feedback and concerns about implementing it. This thematic analysis provided detailed insights into the reasons for and concerns about using learner feedback as a school-improvement strategy.

Rigor and Trustworthiness

To ensure the rigor and trustworthiness of the study, we employed several strategies. We achieved reliability by having multiple coders independently analyze segments of the data, then comparing and resolving discrepancies through discussion and consensus. We also maintained an audit trail throughout the process, documenting coding decisions, thematic development, and changes made during data analysis. We further conducted member checking by sharing the findings with a select group of participants to verify the accuracy and relevance of interpretations. Additionally, we used peer debriefing, involving colleagues to review the research process and findings, ensuring that interpretations were consistent and well-supported.

We acknowledge that researchers' backgrounds and biases influence their studies, so we ensured reflexivity and adopted an 'outsider position' to approach the data from the participants' perspectives rather than our presumptions. These practices collectively contributed to the credibility, dependability, and confirmability of the study's results (Johnson et al., 2020).

Ethics

Before the study commenced, we obtained ethical clearance from the Humanities Ethics Committee of the lead author's university and approval from the Regional Directorate of Education of the Greater Accra Region. We briefed participants on the research and obtained their verbal consent rather than written consent because that was their preferred option. We thus audio-recorded their consent as proof and kept a consent form outlining the key issues discussed during the verbal consent process. We informed participants that their involvement was voluntary and that they could withdraw at any stage without consequences. We also maintained confidentiality by anonymizing participants and their schools during coding and reporting the findings. For example, we used codes like P1 for the principal of the first school, P2 for the second school, and so on, up to P12 for the twelfth school.

FINDINGS

This section presents the findings from interviews of 12 Ghanaian senior high school (SHS) principals on their perceptions of the effectiveness of learner feedback as a school improvement strategy. The principals shared their views on the benefits and challenges of implementing learner feedback, explaining why they liked or disliked its use. After analyzing the data, two themes emerged:

1. The perceived usefulness of learner feedback
2. The concerns with implementing learner feedback

These themes guide the presentation of findings. For ethical reasons, we anonymised the narrative quotes within the themes by assigning each participant a unique code. For example, we refer to the principal of the first school as P1, the second as P2, and so on, up to P12 for the twelfth school.

The Perceived Usefulness of Learner Feedback

This theme explores the principals' positive perceptions of learner feedback as a tool for school improvement. The leaders highlighted several benefits of learner feedback, which are organized into the following subthemes:

- Enhancing Student Engagement
- Fostering a Culture of Continuous Improvement
- Churning out Responsible Citizens

Enhancing Student Engagement
Student engagement in this context refers to students' involvement in decision-making processes to promote their level of interest in and commitment to learning and school activities (Ahea et al., 2016; Quesel et al., 2021). The data reveal that participants preferred learner feedback as a school improvement strategy because it promoted student engagement necessary to "drive students' interest in academic work" (P4), "build trust" (P6), "minimize school attrition" (P10), and "boost institutional success" (P4).

The school leaders utilized the student engagement approach at three levels: school, program, and classroom. At the school level, they created an enabling environment that provided easy access to academic materials and encouraged student participation in discussions to promote active learning. For example, one participant mentioned efforts to introduce "… digital online learning platforms in my school's library" (P6). Additionally, learner feedback was used to implement significant reforms, such as "revising the boarding students' menu to improve dining hall food quality" (P9) and "undertaking major maintenance on physical facilities, including dormitories and classrooms" (P11).

At the program level, learner feedback was used to guide students who wished to "change their program selections, with counselling units assisting them in making informed choices" (P4). It was also used as a guide to "select supplementary textbooks to meet students' needs" (P12). Further, the learner feedback approach played a major role in the decision to enhance extracurricular and co-curricular activities, such as "organizing games and reintroducing drama and debating clubs" (P10).

At the classroom level, student feedback informed the leaders' decision to encourage their teachers to use student engagement to improve teaching strategies. One principal explained,

> My teachers engage with students to identify their specific learning needs and take urgent steps to address them. For example, honest discussions with students sometimes inform teachers' decisions to change questioning techniques and vary instructional delivery to better meet students' needs (P2).

Fostering a Culture of Continuous Improvement
The data indicate that principals valued the learner feedback approach not only for increasing student engagement but also for fostering a culture of continuous improvement. One principal described it as, "… an ongoing process of examining the school's performance, identifying challenges and opportunities, and making gradual changes based on priorities" (P1).

To support this approach, the principals implemented several strategies. For example, regular meetings were held between students and their assigned teacher-advisors, known as form masters or form mistresses. A principal explained,

> I've assigned every class a teacher-advisor, known as form master or form mistress. The school requires all advisors to organize regular class meetings with their students to listen and address their issues. If the advisors can't handle the grievances, they refer the matter to me or any of my assistants for redress. Where necessary, we implement changes that address students' grievances (P5).

Additionally, the principals allowed student leaders to meet with their peers and report feedback to school management. One of them said,

> The school has a leadership forum called the prefectorial board, comprising senior and house prefects, class prefects, and the dispensary prefect. The board meets fortnightly. During these meetings, every prefect reports on challenges faced based on students' complaints. The issues are documented and discussed in senior management meetings (P9).

Furthermore, the leaders engaged directly with students, showing visible signs of distress. One principal noted,

I often visit common areas in the school unannounced, observing students who appear anxious or sorrowful. I meet such students privately on a one-on-one basis to discuss their issues in a fear-free environment, often revealing problems at home or school. I then contact their parents or address school-related issues directly *(P1)*.

The leaders also instituted measures allowing students to anonymously report their challenges: "We have suggestion boxes installed around the school, allowing students to report issues and suggest solutions without revealing their identities" (P5).

Churning out Responsible Citizens

Responsible citizenship involves taking responsibility for one's actions, understanding one's role in the community, participating actively in community activities, and working collaboratively to promote communal welfare (Cole et al. 2017). In addition to the previously noted benefits of learner feedback, the principals identified its role in developing responsible citizenship among students. They viewed the feedback approach as an opportunity for students to contribute to school management and thereby cultivate the qualities of responsible citizenship before graduation. A principal highlighted the connection between feedback and responsible citizenship:

I encourage students to give feedback based on their opinions on issues. This initiative helps to empower them. Empowering students prepares them to be good citizens who can share their thoughts and views on national issues without prejudice or fear (P3).

This perspective underscores the belief that engaging students in providing feedback not only improves school management but also fosters their development into responsible and proactive members of society.

The Concerns with Implementing Learner Feedback

This theme covers the challenges the principals claimed they encountered when implementing learner feedback. It delves into the barriers that frustrate the leaders' effective use of learner feedback in their schools. The emergent subthemes included:

- Reliability of Feedback
- Time and Financial Constraints

Reliability of Feedback

The data highlight many concerns among the principals regarding the reliability of learner feedback in guiding school reform policies and programs. They expressed skepticism about the accuracy of learner feedback, citing potential biases. One principal noted, "Students sometimes provide inaccurate information" (P7). At the same time, another observed that student feedback could be exaggerated because "students may not be satisfied with our efforts and might highlight issues disproportionately" (P2). Additionally, concerns were raised that learner feedback might "allow room for unnecessary criticism and excessive demands that may not benefit the school overall" (P8).

Time and Financial Constraints

According to the data, time and financial constraints were significant obstacles to effectively implementing learner feedback to improve schools, aside from feedback reliability. The principals were worried about splitting time between their administrative duties and handling student feedback. For example, a principal elaborated,

While I acknowledge that learner feedback is beneficial, dealing with a large volume of feedback during my limited administrative hours is a significant challenge. It's hard for me to find the time to thoroughly review and act on each piece of feedback (P7).

When we asked why he did not delegate his staff to perform the task on his behalf, he added,

My staff is already overwhelmed with their heavily packed daily duties, and finding time to handle student feedback implies relegating to the background equally necessary issues. We're, however, trying to find time for the feedback we receive from students (P7).

These quotes underscore how time constraints may hinder schools from fully utilizing feedback to make meaningful improvements. A related issue was financial constraint, which the principals believed significantly limited their ability to act on students' valuable input: "School heads in Ghana have limited budgetary allocation. This situation thwarts our good intention to process and act on all the suggestions from students to fully address their concerns due to the lack of available

resources" (P 4). This quote highlights the challenge of aligning financial capabilities with the need to make meaningful improvements based on learner feedback.

Subordinate Resistance

Many participants highlighted significant resistance from both staff and students as a major concern. This resistance manifested in different ways. Principal 2 explained teachers' resistance to change related to power and control: "Some teachers and ancillary staff are hesitant to accept change based on students' perspectives because they believe so much in their competence to know everything expected of them. This situation is worrying! (P2)." Principal 6 shared similar ideas: "The teachers who oppose the implementation of recommendations borne out of students' grievances do so because they are supercilious, believing that changing their detrimental attitudes to suit students' needs is an affront to their authority (P6).

Principal 8 described teacher resistance coming from a lack of knowledge and skill:

As for me, I'm not so much surprised because I think some teachers' failure to implement new ideas emanating from students' feedback in their teaching is due to their lack of knowledge on how to effectively incorporate feedback into their teaching practices, which creates resistance and delays in implementing improvements (P8).

Meanwhile, Principal 10 shared students' resistance based on a lack of trust: "Many students are reluctant to participate in feedback exercises because they don't trust the school to implement their suggestions. But we're doing our best to encourage them" (P10). All of these quotes emphasize the need for professional development tailored to each school's unique circumstances.

DISCUSSION

Informed by contingency theory (CT), this study aimed to explore how principals of senior high schools (SHSs) in Ghana's most cosmopolitan city perceived the effectiveness of learner feedback as a school-improvement strategy. The findings underscore the dual nature of learner feedback as both a powerful tool for school improvement and a complex challenge requiring careful management. The principals in this study recognized the potential benefits of learner feedback, such as enhanced student engagement, continuous improvement, and responsible citizenship. From a CT perspective, these benefits materialize only when the input is aligned with the specific context of each school, including its culture, resources, and external pressures (McAdam & McSorley, 2019). These insights are consistent with findings in studies from other African contexts, such as those by Cohen and Singh (2020) and Olatunji et al. (2023), which have identified the importance of contextual factors, such as school culture and available resources, in the successful implementation of feedback systems in educational settings across Ghana and Sub-Saharan Africa. However, the challenges identified in the present study, such as staff resistance and unreliable student input, further highlight a divergence from some of the more optimistic findings in other Ghanaian studies, where contextual adaptation was seen as slightly more successful in overcoming such barriers.

The findings further corroborate existing literature, particularly studies by Bajaj et al. (2018), Henderson et al. (2021), Koh et al. (2023), and Zumpe (2024), which have shown that engaging students in contributing to school improvement initiatives can enhance their sense of ownership and commitment to changes. However, school leadership needs to foster a culture where students feel empowered to share their perspectives openly, in an atmosphere of trust, with anonymity in feedback processes, and with value placed on student input. Analyzing and acting upon student input is crucial, and school leadership must establish structured processes for reviewing feedback, identifying common themes, and developing action plans to address them (Cole et al., 2017; Eady & Moreau, 2018). In this study, the creation of a student-led committee—a prefectorial board that met fortnightly to discuss school issues—reflects Sigurðardóttir and Sigþórsson's (2016) view that regular engagement of student leaders is essential for monitoring and evaluating improvements, ensuring their effectiveness and sustainability. This approach aligns with similar strategies in other Ghanaian schools, where student committees have been key to engaging learners in decision-making. However, the challenges principals face in maintaining consistent student input underscore that such models are not always universally applicable, especially in contexts with greater resistance or resource constraints.

Moreover, the principals engaged students at various levels—school, program, and classroom—depending on contextual factors such as school culture and external demands. This multi-level engagement strategy illustrates the contingency approach, demonstrating that different levels of student involvement are necessary depending on the challenges and opportunities of each school. The success of the principals in creating a holistic educational environment that supports students academically, emotionally, and behaviorally further highlights the importance of adapting strategies to fit specific situational needs. While the multi-level engagement has been shown to work well in other African settings, such as those

discussed by Han (2017), this study's findings suggest that cultural and resource constraints in Ghana sometimes prevent the successful implementation of such strategies. For example, some schools reported challenges in achieving high levels of engagement across all three levels due to time and staffing limitations.

At the school level, the engagement strategy allowed research participants to involve students actively in decision-making processes, which is essential for developing critical thinking skills and motivating participation in both academic and extracurricular activities (Ahea et al., 2016; Hopkins, 2022). For example, "Revising the boarding students' menu to improve dining hall food quality" (P9) and "undertaking major maintenance on physical facilities, including dormitories and classrooms" (P11) are necessary initiatives for student emotional and behavioral development. Again, "Change their program selections, with counselling units assisting them in making informed choices" (P4) was also imperative for student academic development. In many educational settings, student voices are underrepresented in decision-making processes (Acton, 2021; Marsh & Farrell, 2015). However, engaging students in providing feedback can lead to more effective, student-centered improvements (Quesel et al., 2021). These examples show similarities to initiatives in other Ghanaian schools, but the varying success across schools suggests that the impact of such initiatives may be contingent on specific leadership practices and available resources, consistent with Liu and Gumah's (2020) findings.

Turning to the concerns raised by participants about implementation challenges —such as unreliable student input, time and financial constraints, and resistance from staff and students—these align with the tenets of CT. The theory posits that no single management strategy is universally effective, and measures must be adapted to address specific challenges within a given context (Mikes & Kaplan, 2014; Otley, 2016). For example, the difficulty in obtaining reliable feedback due to peer pressure, personal preferences, and cultural backgrounds underscores the importance of school leaders' ability to implement validation measures to ensure the effectiveness of learner feedback. Resistance from staff and students underscores the need for professional development tailored to each school's unique circumstances, a core principle of CT. This resonates with findings from other Ghanaian studies (e.g., Ampofo, 2020; Awinyam), which similarly attributed resistance to feedback implementation to cultural factors and insufficient training. However, the study suggests that these challenges may be exacerbated in urban schools where diverse student populations and external pressures complicate consensus-building efforts.

The findings also echo those of Liu and Gumah (2020), who noted that obtaining comprehensive student feedback is difficult because not all students can provide honest input due to peer pressure, personal preferences, and cultural influences. As such, principals must implement strategies to ensure the feedback reflects students' true opinions. Furthermore, Marsh and Farrell (2015) found that educational leaders often hesitate to collect feedback due to time constraints and financial limitations. While this aligns with the current study, the additional challenge of managing high expectations from both parents and external stakeholders in urban settings adds another layer of complexity that may not be as pronounced in rural Ghanaian schools.

The application of CT to the study underscores the need for a flexible, adaptive approach to using learner feedback in school improvement strategies. The theory emphasizes that learner feedback effectiveness is not inherent but depends on how well it aligns with each school's specific context, culture, and external environment. Therefore, school leaders must continuously evaluate and adjust their strategies to ensure that learner feedback effectively contributes to school improvement, considering the dynamic and contingent nature of educational environments. This aligns with the broader literature on African education systems, which calls for strategies that are both locally responsive and adaptable to the diverse needs of students and teachers, especially in urban contexts with rapidly changing demographics and external pressures. Figure 1 displays a model for interpreting the process flow for learner feedback collection and use in SHSs, as explained above.
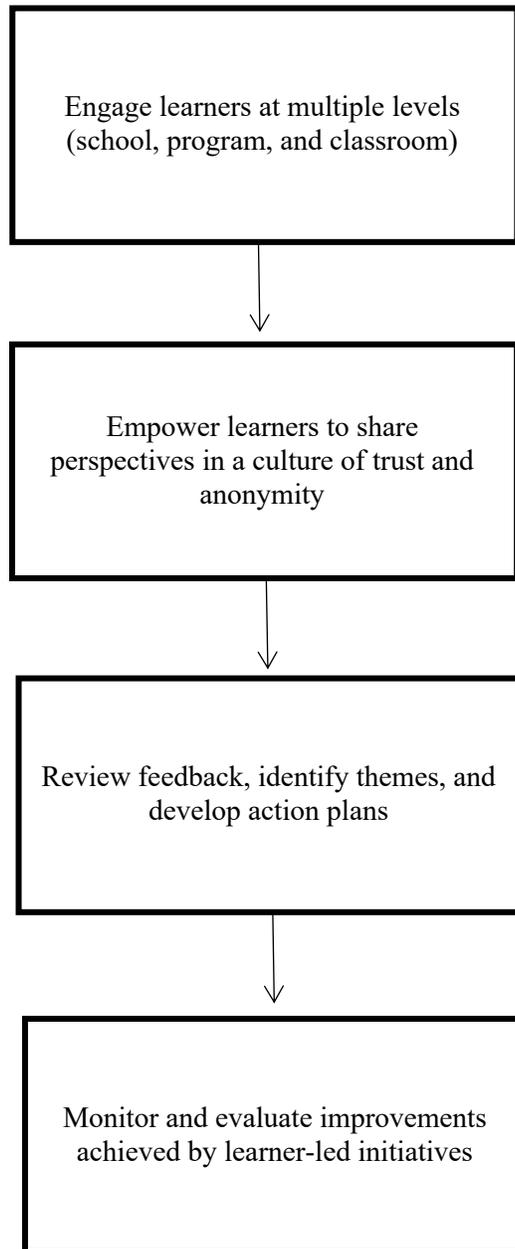
CONCLUSION AND IMPLICATIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

Grounded in contingency theory, this study sheds light on SHS principals' perceptions in Ghana's most cosmopolitan city regarding the use of learner feedback as a school improvement strategy. The findings reveal that while participants acknowledged the potential benefits of learner feedback—such as enhancing student engagement and fostering a culture of continuous improvement—they also expressed concerns about its implementation. These included doubts about the reliability of student input, time and financial constraints, and resistance from both staff and students.

The study underscores the importance of contextual factors in determining the effectiveness of learner feedback systems. Contingency theory posits that the success of a practice depends on how well it fits within its specific environment. In this regard, the cosmopolitan high schools studied presented both unique opportunities and implementation challenges. To maximize the potential of learner feedback, policymakers and school leaders must proactively address these challenges.

This may involve strategies such as triangulating student feedback with other data sources (e.g., direct observations, interviews), allocating sufficient resources, and nurturing a school culture that values openness, responsiveness, and continuous improvement.

Figure 1

Process Flow of Learner Feedback Collection and Use in Senior High Schools

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┌─────────────────────────────────┐
│  Engage learners at multiple    │
│  levels (school, program, and   │
│  classroom)                     │
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              ▼
┌─────────────────────────────────┐
│  Empower learners to share      │
│  perspectives in a culture of   │
│  trust and anonymity            │
└─────────────────────────────────┘
              │
              ▼
┌─────────────────────────────────┐
│  Review feedback, identify      │
│  themes, and develop action     │
│  plans                          │
└─────────────────────────────────┘
              │
              ▼
┌─────────────────────────────────┐
│  Monitor and evaluate           │
│  improvements achieved by       │
│  learner-led initiatives        │
└─────────────────────────────────┘
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Looking ahead, further research is needed to deepen the understanding of how learner feedback can be effectively used across diverse educational settings. Longitudinal studies that track the impact of feedback on school outcomes—such as academic performance, student satisfaction, and school culture—over time would be especially valuable. Such studies can offer insights into the sustainability and long-term effects of feedback-driven improvement efforts. Additionally, comparative research across different regions of Ghana or other African countries could illuminate how varied contexts

shape the implementation and outcomes of learner feedback. These efforts would help identify the conditions under which learner feedback catalyzes meaningful and enduring school improvement.

DECLARATION OF CONFLICT OF INTEREST

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