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ORIGINAL RESEARCH ARTICLE

Integrating Rural Landscapes and Local Histories into Inclusive Early Childhood Pedagogy: An Ubuntu-Based Conceptual Framework

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ABSTRACT

Rural early childhood education in South Africa faces persistent spatial inequalities, historical marginalisation, and limited recognition of local knowledge within inclusive pedagogical practices. This study aims to develop an Ubuntu-based conceptual framework integrating rural landscapes, local histories, and geospatial–temporal perspectives to inform culturally responsive and inclusive early childhood education. A systematic literature review guided by PRISMA 2020 was employed, drawing on scholarly publications addressing rural learning ecologies, inclusive pedagogy, geospatial education, and historical consciousness. The literature was examined through inductive–deductive thematic synthesis informed by sociocultural learning theory, place-based education, historical consciousness, and Ubuntu philosophy. The synthesis identified four interconnected themes concerning rural learning ecologies as relational learning environments, geospatial perspectives as resources for place-based learning, historical consciousness as a foundation for cultural identity, and Ubuntu-informed participation in inclusive pedagogy. These findings informed an integrated conceptual framework positioning rural landscapes, community histories, and indigenous knowledge as pedagogical assets rather than geographical disadvantages. The framework offers potential contributions to Sustainable Development Goal 4 through inclusive education, Goal 10 through educational equity, Goal 11 through cultural heritage recognition, and Goal 15 through environmental awareness and stewardship. The study concludes that integrating spatial, historical, and relational perspectives provides a theoretical foundation for culturally responsive early childhood pedagogy in rural South Africa, although empirical investigation remains necessary to establish the framework's educational effectiveness.

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ABSTRAK

Pendidikan anak usia dini di wilayah perdesaan Afrika Selatan menghadapi tantangan berupa ketimpangan spasial yang terus berlanjut, marginalisasi historis, serta kurangnya pengakuan terhadap pengetahuan lokal dalam praktik pedagogi inklusif. Studi ini bertujuan untuk mengembangkan kerangka konseptual berbasis filosofi *Ubuntu* yang mengintegrasikan lanskap perdesaan, sejarah lokal, serta perspektif geospasial-temporal, guna mendukung pendidikan anak usia dini yang inklusif dan responsif secara budaya. Penelitian ini menggunakan metode tinjauan pustaka sistematis berdasarkan pedoman PRISMA 2020, dengan merujuk pada berbagai publikasi ilmiah yang membahas ekologi pembelajaran perdesaan, pedagogi inklusif, pendidikan geospasial, dan kesadaran historis. Literatur yang terkumpul dianalisis melalui sintesis tematik induktif-deduktif yang berlandaskan pada teori pembelajaran sosiokultural, pendidikan berbasis tempat (*place-based education*), kesadaran historis, dan filosofi *Ubuntu*. Sintesis ini menghasilkan empat tema yang saling berkaitan: ekologi perdesaan sebagai lingkungan pembelajaran relasional; perspektif geospasial sebagai sumber daya untuk pembelajaran berbasis tempat; kesadaran historis sebagai landasan identitas budaya; serta partisipasi berbasis *Ubuntu* dalam pedagogi inklusif. Temuan ini menjadi dasar bagi pengembangan kerangka konseptual terintegrasi yang memandang lanskap perdesaan, sejarah komunitas, dan pengetahuan masyarakat adat sebagai aset pedagogis, bukan sebagai hambatan geografis. Kerangka ini berpotensi memberikan kontribusi terhadap Tujuan Pembangunan Berkelanjutan (*Sustainable Development Goals*), yakni Tujuan 4 (pendidikan inklusif), Tujuan 10 (kesetaraan pendidikan), Tujuan 11 (pengakuan warisan budaya), serta Tujuan 15 (kesadaran dan pengelolaan lingkungan). Studi ini menyimpulkan bahwa integrasi perspektif spasial, historis, dan relasional menyediakan landasan teoretis bagi pedagogi anak usia dini yang responsif secara budaya di wilayah perdesaan Afrika Selatan, meskipun penelitian empiris lebih lanjut tetap diperlukan untuk menguji efektivitas pendidikan dari kerangka kerja tersebut.

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Keywords: Early Childhood Education; Inclusive Pedagogy; Rural Learning Ecologies; Ubuntu Philosophy; Place-Based Education; Historical Consciousness.

1. INTRODUCTION

Early childhood education occupies a critical position in global efforts to promote educational equity, cultural inclusion, environmental awareness, and sustainable development, particularly in communities experiencing persistent geographical and socioeconomic inequalities. The achievement of Sustainable Development Goal 4, especially Target 4.2 concerning equitable access to quality early childhood development and education, requires pedagogical approaches that recognise children's diverse cultural identities, lived environments, and opportunities for meaningful participation. Contemporary scholarship has increasingly emphasised the importance of contextualising early learning within children's social relationships, geographical surroundings, and historically situated experiences (Ärlemalm-Hagsér & Elliott, 2020; Iruka et al., 2020; Duhn, 2025; Ang et al., 2025). From this perspective, early childhood education is connected to Sustainable Development Goal 10 through the reduction of educational inequalities, Sustainable Development Goal 11 through the recognition of community heritage and inclusive local environments, and Sustainable Development Goal 15 through learning opportunities associated with terrestrial ecosystems and environmental stewardship. These connections represent potential educational contributions rather than demonstrated impacts on the goals themselves (Ajaps & Forh Mbah, 2022; Damoah et al., 2024; Mpofu & Sefotho, 2024). In South Africa, these concerns are particularly significant because rural learning environments continue to reflect historically produced spatial inequalities alongside

valuable cultural knowledge, ecological resources, and community relationships. Consequently, inclusive early childhood pedagogy requires approaches that acknowledge both the geographical and historical dimensions of children's learning experiences while recognising rural communities as active contributors to educational knowledge.

Despite increasing recognition of inclusive and context-responsive education, rural early childhood learning environments continue to encounter structural, pedagogical, and epistemological challenges. These include unequal educational infrastructure, geographical isolation, uneven access to learning resources, limited opportunities for teacher professional development, and insufficient recognition of community-based knowledge within formal curricula. Research on rural ecological contexts indicates that children's learning opportunities are shaped by interconnected family, community, institutional, and environmental conditions rather than by classroom resources alone (Iruka et al., 2020; Chidakwa & Hlalele, 2022; Ang et al., 2025). In South Africa, these challenges are further complicated by the historical consequences of colonialism and apartheid, which continue to influence spatial organisation, educational participation, and the distribution of social opportunities (Makhubu, 2020; Damoah et al., 2024). Educational approaches that privilege standardised curricular experiences may consequently overlook children's familiarity with local landscapes, indigenous knowledge, oral traditions, and intergenerational histories. However, rural contexts should not be characterised exclusively through disadvantage because communities also maintain cultural resources and relationships that can support educational participation (Padayachee et al., 2022; Mpofu & Sefotho, 2024). A further challenge concerns the translation of geospatial knowledge and historical understanding into developmentally appropriate activities for young children without imposing abstract concepts or technologies designed primarily for older learners. Addressing these interconnected problems requires pedagogical frameworks that link inclusion with children's immediate environments, cultural heritage, community participation, and historical experiences (McCluskey et al., 2023; Hannaway, 2024; Ang et al., 2025).

Previous research concerning inclusive early childhood education, rural learning ecologies, place-based education, Ubuntu philosophy, and historical consciousness has produced several complementary but differently focused contributions. Research on rural children's educational opportunities by Iruka et al. (2020) demonstrates the importance of ecological conditions but does not develop an integrated framework connecting geographical learning, historical consciousness, and Ubuntu-informed inclusion. Chidakwa and Hlalele (2022) examine multiple vulnerabilities within rural learning ecologies, although their broader educational orientation does not specifically establish developmental applications for South African early childhood pedagogy. Ang et al. (2025) investigate the contribution of early childhood development and education to learning and well-being in rural South African schools, providing relevant contextual evidence without directly integrating historical consciousness and geospatial learning into a unified conceptual structure. Research on place-based education by Ajaps and Forh Mbah (2022) advances critical understandings of locality and environmental conservation, but its principal contribution differs from the present study's early childhood focus. Yemini et al. (2025) synthesise place-based education scholarship, offering a broader research perspective rather than a framework specifically grounded in Ubuntu and South African rural childhoods. Studies of Ubuntu by Padayachee et al. (2022) and Mpofu and Sefotho (2024) establish its relevance to indigenous knowledge and inclusive education, respectively, yet do not independently integrate the complete geospatial–historical relationship proposed here. Similarly, Popa (2022) advances the conceptual understanding of historical consciousness, while Grimshaw and Mates (2022) investigate children's relationships with community heritage and place. Together, these studies establish a substantive research foundation while identifying distinct conceptual emphases that can be brought into closer dialogue.

Building upon these contributions, the originality of the present study lies in the conceptual integration of rural landscapes, local histories, geospatial perspectives, and Ubuntu-informed relational learning within inclusive early childhood pedagogy. Rather than introducing these concepts as entirely new educational phenomena, the study connects existing theoretical traditions to explain how the spatial and temporal dimensions of children's lived experiences may become complementary pedagogical resources. Scholarship on place-based education provides insights into learning through local environments, while research on historical consciousness explains how interpretations of the past contribute to identity, meaning-making, and relationships between past and present experiences (Popa, 2022; Grimshaw & Mates, 2022; Yemini et al., 2025). Ubuntu-oriented scholarship contributes a relational understanding of personhood, community responsibility, belonging, and indigenous knowledge that can inform culturally responsive educational practices (Padayachee et al., 2022; Brás, 2024; Mpofu & Sefotho, 2024). The proposed framework advances these perspectives by positioning rural learning ecologies not merely as locations in which education occurs but as interconnected environments containing spatial experiences, cultural relationships, ecological knowledge, and collective memories. Its distinctive contribution is therefore the conceptual organisation of these resources into an approach to inclusive early childhood pedagogy that foregrounds children's participation, cultural identity, and community relationships. This integration provides a theoretical contribution without implying that the resulting framework has already been experimentally implemented or shown to improve learning outcomes.

Although substantial scholarship supports the relevance of rural environments, cultural knowledge, inclusive education, and place-based learning, the relationship among these dimensions remains insufficiently integrated within the specific context of rural South African early childhood education. The research gap comprises three interconnected concerns. First, research on geospatial technologies and geographical competencies frequently addresses educational stages beyond early childhood or examines spatial learning without fully connecting it to historically situated rural identities (de Miguel-González, 2021; Ma et al., 2023; McCluskey et al., 2023). Second, place-based and rural education scholarship demonstrates the importance of local environments but does not consistently integrate historical memory, Ubuntu relationality, and inclusive early childhood pedagogy within the same conceptual explanation (Chidakwa & Hlalele, 2022; Ajaps & Forh Mbah, 2022; Ang et al., 2025). Third, research on historical consciousness and indigenous knowledge offers valuable perspectives on identity and cultural meaning, although the developmental translation of these perspectives into geographically grounded early childhood learning requires further conceptual specification (Popa, 2022; Padayachee et al., 2022; Mpofu & Sefotho, 2024). These limitations do not indicate an absence of research on the individual concepts. Instead, they reveal a need to clarify how spatial experiences, local histories, community knowledge, and inclusive pedagogical principles can operate together. The present study addresses this integrative gap by developing a theoretically grounded explanation of rural learning ecologies as resources for culturally responsive and inclusive early childhood education, while recognising the need for subsequent empirical examination.

The theoretical framework combines sociocultural learning theory, place-based education, and historical consciousness, with Ubuntu providing a complementary relational and philosophical orientation. Sociocultural learning theory, associated with Vygotsky, explains learning as a socially mediated process in which children develop understanding through interaction with more knowledgeable participants and culturally meaningful resources. Contemporary interpretations emphasise mediation, social participation, and the relationship between cognitive development and cultural experience (Rahmatirad, 2020; Tzuriel, 2021). Place-based education extends this perspective by locating learning within children's immediate geographical, ecological, and social environments, thereby recognising landscapes and community resources as potential foundations for educational experiences (Ajaps & Forh Mbah, 2022; Wallgrün et al., 2024; Yemini et al., 2025). Historical consciousness contributes the temporal dimension by explaining how

individuals interpret relationships among past events, present circumstances, and future possibilities, including the cultural meanings associated with community histories (Popa, 2022; Lévesque, 2023). Ubuntu strengthens the framework through its emphasis on relational personhood, interdependence, reciprocity, and shared responsibility, which are relevant to inclusive participation and community-based knowledge construction (Padayachee et al., 2022; Brás, 2024; Mpofu & Sefotho, 2024). These perspectives are complementary rather than interchangeable: sociocultural theory explains mediation, place-based education foregrounds locality, historical consciousness addresses temporal meaning-making, and Ubuntu informs relational and ethical interpretation. Their integration provides the conceptual foundation for examining how rural landscapes and local histories may support inclusive early childhood pedagogical practices.

Within this theoretical structure, rural learning ecologies constitute the central organising concept, referring to interconnected relationships among children, families, educators, communities, cultural practices, environments, and available educational resources. The concept recognises that learning opportunities emerge across multiple settings and are influenced by both material conditions and social interactions (Iruka et al., 2020; Chidakwa & Hlalele, 2022; Ang et al., 2025). Geospatial perspectives contribute to an understanding of place, location, spatial relationships, and children's encounters with their surroundings, while place-based education translates the educational significance of local environments into opportunities for exploration and participation (McCluskey et al., 2023; Wallgrün et al., 2024; Yemini et al., 2025). Historical consciousness contributes attention to oral histories, community memories, cultural heritage, and the interpretation of relationships between past and present experiences (Popa, 2022; Grimshaw & Mates, 2022; Lévesque, 2023). Ubuntu provides an ethical and relational foundation for connecting these resources to collective participation, respect, belonging, and intergenerational learning (Padayachee et al., 2022; Brás, 2024; Mpofu & Sefotho, 2024). The original conceptual framework also incorporates Participatory Action Learning and Action Research as a perspective emphasising reflection, community engagement, participation, and collaborative knowledge construction. Within the present literature-based study, these principles inform the proposed pedagogical orientation and are not presented as evidence of completed classroom intervention cycles. Together, the concepts establish a framework in which children's environments, histories, relationships, and cultural identities are recognised as potential resources for inclusive learning.

The significance of this study lies in reconsidering the relationship between educational inclusion and the geographical, cultural, and historical experiences of rural children. Conventional approaches may treat local landscapes primarily as physical settings, whereas the present framework positions them as potentially meaningful sources of spatial exploration, ecological awareness, storytelling, and collaborative learning. Research on place-based education indicates that engagement with local environments can offer opportunities for contextualised learning, while scholarship on historical consciousness and community heritage demonstrates the importance of historical meaning-making and cultural identity (Popa, 2022; Grimshaw & Mates, 2022; Yemini et al., 2025). Integrating these perspectives with Ubuntu introduces a relational emphasis through which children, teachers, families, and community members may participate in the interpretation of local knowledge and shared experiences (Padayachee et al., 2022; Brás, 2024; Mpofu & Sefotho, 2024). This approach is relevant to inclusive education because it recognises that children encounter learning through diverse languages, relationships, cultural traditions, and environmental experiences rather than through uniform developmental or curricular pathways (Iruka et al., 2020; Ang et al., 2025). Its educational implications also intersect with Sustainable Development Goals 4, 10, 11, and 15 through proposed contributions to quality education, reduced inequalities, cultural heritage recognition, and environmental awareness. These connections remain conceptual, but they provide a basis for future curriculum development, teacher preparation, and participatory educational research in rural South African settings.

Accordingly, this study aims to develop an Ubuntu-based conceptual framework for integrating rural landscapes, local histories, and geospatial–temporal perspectives into inclusive early childhood pedagogy in South Africa. More specifically, it seeks to synthesise existing scholarship concerning rural learning ecologies, inclusive pedagogy, place-based education, geospatial learning, historical consciousness, and Ubuntu; examine the complementary contributions of sociocultural learning theory, place-based education, and historical consciousness; and identify conceptual relationships through which community environments and cultural heritage may inform context-responsive educational practices. These objectives build upon research addressing rural educational opportunities, community knowledge, spatial learning, historical interpretation, and indigenous approaches to inclusion (Iruka et al., 2020; Popa, 2022; Padayachee et al., 2022; Mpofu & Sefotho, 2024; Ang et al., 2025). Consistent with the original manuscript, the study is framed as a systematic literature review guided by PRISMA 2020 and interpreted through an inductive–deductive thematic synthesis. The methodological account is confined to procedures documented in the manuscript, without treating subsequent exploratory database searches as part of the original review. The intended contribution is an integrated conceptual framework that positions rural learning ecologies as pedagogical assets and offers theoretically grounded propositions for inclusive, culturally responsive, and historically situated early childhood education. Ultimately, the framework is intended to inform future empirical investigation, curriculum development, teacher professional learning, and educational dialogue concerning equitable participation and sustainable learning opportunities in rural communities.

2. RESEARCH METHODS

This study employed a Systematic Literature Review guided by the Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses (PRISMA 2020) to examine how rural landscapes, local histories, and geospatial–temporal perspectives contribute to inclusive early childhood pedagogy in South Africa. The review integrated scholarship on early childhood education, rural learning ecologies, place-based education, historical consciousness, and Ubuntu philosophy. The analytical orientation combined inductive and deductive thematic synthesis to identify relationships among spatial experiences, cultural knowledge, historical understanding, and educational inclusion. Sociocultural learning theory, place-based education, and historical consciousness provided the principal theoretical foundations, while Ubuntu and Participatory Action Learning and Action Research informed the interpretation of relational and participatory learning. This methodological approach supports the development of a conceptual framework grounded in existing scholarship rather than direct classroom experimentation (Iruka et al., 2020; Page et al., 2021; Chidakwa & Hlalele, 2022; Popa, 2022).

2.1 Research Design

The research adopted a systematic literature review design to synthesise interdisciplinary evidence concerning inclusive early childhood education within rural South African learning environments. The review was organised around three interconnected dimensions: early childhood education as the population of educational interest, geospatial and historical perspectives as the principal conceptual domains, and inclusive rural pedagogy as the educational context. This structure reflects the Population–Concept–Context approach described in the study. The review further employed an inductive–deductive analytical orientation, allowing concepts emerging from the literature to be examined alongside the established theoretical framework. The integration of contextual and theoretical perspectives is consistent with

contemporary scholarship addressing rural educational opportunities, spatial learning, and place-based pedagogy (Iruka et al., 2020; Chidakwa & Hlalele, 2022; McCluskey et al., 2023; Yemini et al., 2025). The research design was guided by the relationship between the study's central question and the analytical dimensions required to address it. Table 1 presents this relationship by distinguishing the overall research question from the conceptual areas examined through literature synthesis.

Table 1. Research Questions and Types of Analysis

Research Question	Research Question	Types of Analysis
RQ1	How do geospatial and temporal dimensions, interpreted through Ubuntu and Participatory Action Learning and Action Research, contribute to repositioning rural learning ecologies as foundations for inclusive pedagogy in South African early childhood education?	Integrative thematic synthesis and conceptual framework development
RQ1.1	How are rural learning ecologies represented as socially mediated and relational environments for early childhood learning?	Sociocultural and relational thematic analysis
RQ1.2	How can rural landscapes and geospatial perspectives inform place-based learning and inclusive participation?	Geospatial and place-based conceptual analysis
RQ1.3	How do local histories and historical consciousness contribute to children's cultural identity, belonging, and educational experiences?	Historical and cultural thematic analysis
RQ1.4	How can Ubuntu and participatory educational principles inform the integration of spatial and historical knowledge into inclusive early childhood pedagogy?	Critical theoretical integration and interpretive synthesis

Source: Adapted from the study's central research question and theoretical framework, drawing on Iruka et al. (2020), Chidakwa and Hlalele (2022), Popa (2022), Mpofu and Sefotho (2024), and Yemini et al. (2025).

The analytical questions in Table 1 distinguish the interconnected dimensions of the study while retaining a common focus on inclusive early childhood pedagogy. The first dimension concerns the social and relational characteristics of rural learning environments. The second examines geographical experience and the pedagogical significance of place, while the third addresses historical knowledge and cultural identity. The final dimension integrates these perspectives through Ubuntu and participatory educational principles. Together, these analytical dimensions provide a structure for interpreting the literature and developing a conceptual explanation of how rural environments and community histories may support culturally responsive learning (Popa, 2022; Padayachee et al., 2022; Mpofu & Sefotho, 2024).

2.2 Data Collection

The review drew upon scholarly publications addressing early childhood education, rurality, inclusive pedagogy, geospatial technologies, place-based learning, and historical consciousness. Scopus, Web of Science, Education Resources Information Center, and JSTOR were identified as the principal bibliographic databases. The search strategy incorporated terms associated with early childhood development, spatial literacy, geographical education, historical thinking, cultural heritage, inclusion, rural learning, and South African educational contexts. Citation searching and hand-searching were also included in the reported identification process. The selection of these interdisciplinary domains reflects the relationship between educational opportunities, spatial experiences, and culturally situated learning identified in contemporary scholarship (Iruka et al., 2020; Popa, 2022; McCluskey et al., 2023; Ang et al., 2025).

2.3 Data Analysis Through Inductive–Deductive Thematic Synthesis

The reviewed literature was examined through an inductive–deductive thematic synthesis informed by sociocultural learning theory, place-based education, and historical consciousness. The deductive dimension provided theoretical categories for examining social mediation, spatial learning, cultural identity, and historical meaning-making. The inductive dimension allowed relationships among rural learning environments, community participation, geographical experiences, and educational inclusion to be interpreted across the reviewed scholarship. Ubuntu provided a relational perspective through which these

themes could be considered in relation to collective identity, reciprocity, and belonging. This analytical integration connects established educational perspectives with the study's concern for rural South African childhoods (Tzuriel, 2021; Popa, 2022; Padayachee et al., 2022; Mpofu & Sefotho, 2024).

2.4 Research Instruments

The methodological instruments consisted of documentary search strategies and scholarly appraisal criteria appropriate to the different forms of literature examined. Database-specific Boolean search expressions were organised around early childhood education, geospatial and historical perspectives, inclusive pedagogy, and rural South African contexts. The Critical Appraisal Skills Programme Qualitative Checklist was identified for assessing qualitative studies, while an adapted National Institutes of Health Quality Assessment Tool addressed quantitative research. Theoretical and conceptual publications were considered in relation to argument clarity, theoretical coherence, engagement with relevant scholarship, and scholarly contribution. This differentiated approach accommodates the methodological diversity characteristic of interdisciplinary educational research (Long et al., 2020; Page et al., 2021; Popa, 2022).

2.5 Validity and Reliability

Methodological rigour was approached through the appraisal of included studies and the transparent reporting of literature identification, screening, and synthesis. Qualitative publications were evaluated with reference to methodological appropriateness, analytical rigour, and reflexivity, whereas quantitative studies were considered in relation to measurement validity, confounding, and statistical appropriateness. Conceptual publications were assessed according to theoretical coherence and the strength of their scholarly arguments. These procedures address the credibility of the evidence informing the synthesis rather than the reliability of a newly developed psychometric instrument. The conceptual framework consequently remains theoretically derived and requires empirical investigation before its educational effectiveness can be established (Long et al., 2020; Page et al., 2021; Mpofu & Sefotho, 2024).

2.6 Research Subjects and Location

The study focused on published research concerning early childhood education, particularly the geographical, historical, and cultural conditions shaping learning in rural South Africa. Its units of analysis were scholarly publications rather than children, teachers, or community members recruited for primary fieldwork. The geographical emphasis reflected the historical consequences of colonialism and apartheid alongside the cultural and ecological resources available within rural learning environments. Scholarship from South Africa and comparable educational contexts contributed to understanding relationships among community knowledge, place-based learning, and inclusion. These contextual considerations are consistent with research concerning rural educational opportunities, indigenous knowledge, and inclusive educational practices (Iruka et al., 2020; Chidakwa & Hlalele, 2022; Padayachee et al., 2022; Ang et al., 2025).

2.7 Data Analysis Techniques

The analytical synthesis examined relationships among the principal theoretical perspectives and the educational themes identified in the reviewed publications. Sociocultural theory provided an explanation of mediated learning through interactions with teachers, families, elders, and other community members. Place-based education informed interpretations of local landscapes as resources for geographical exploration and contextualised learning, while historical consciousness contributed an understanding of cultural memory and relationships between past and present experiences. These perspectives were integrated through Ubuntu's emphasis on relationality and community participation. The analysis supported

the identification of four interconnected themes concerning rural learning ecologies, geospatial experiences, historical understanding, and inclusive pedagogical possibilities (Tzuriel, 2021; Popa, 2022; Mpofu & Sefotho, 2024; Yemini et al., 2025).

2.8 Data Collection Techniques and Literature Selection

The literature identification and selection process followed the principal stages of PRISMA 2020: identification, screening, eligibility assessment, and inclusion. The manuscript reports 1,184 records identified through database searching and 47 additional records obtained through citation searching and hand-searching, producing 1,231 records before deduplication. Following the removal of 287 duplicate records, 944 records were screened by title and abstract. The reported screening process subsequently involved full-text retrieval and eligibility assessment, with 86 studies identified as the final review corpus. This process was intended to identify literature relevant to early childhood education, geospatial and historical perspectives, rural learning, and inclusive pedagogy (Long et al., 2020; Page et al., 2021). The selection process is represented in Figure 1 through the identification, screening, eligibility, and inclusion stages. The diagram provides the methodological context for interpreting the review corpus and the thematic synthesis.

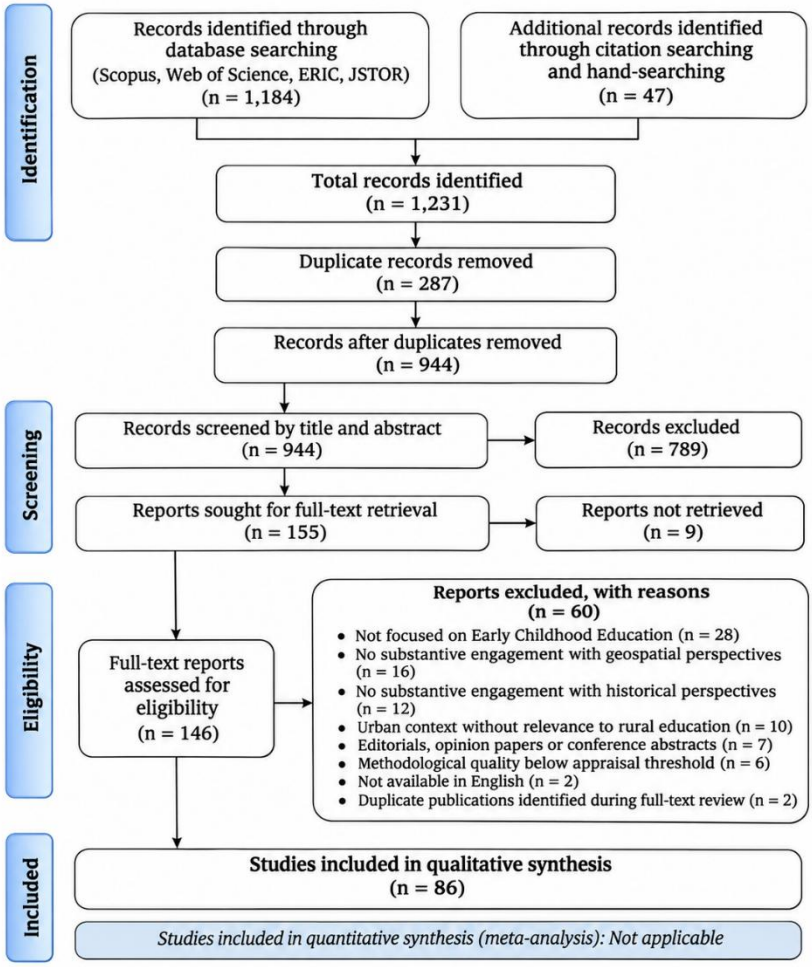


Figure 1. The Systematic Literature Review Methodology Adopted for the Study Using PRISMA Protocols

The PRISMA flow diagram illustrates how bibliographic records were considered across successive stages of the review. Database identification and supplementary searching established the initial collection of

records, followed by duplicate removal and title-and-abstract screening. Full-text assessment then considered the relevance of the remaining publications to the study's educational, geographical, historical, and conceptual focus. The final stage identifies the publications retained for thematic synthesis. The flow diagram should be interpreted together with the numerical screening summary to establish the relationship between records identified, reports excluded, and studies included (Long et al., 2020; Page et al., 2021).

2.9 Eligibility Criteria and Quality Assessment

The eligibility assessment considered the relevance of publications to early childhood education, geospatial or historical perspectives, inclusive pedagogy, and rural educational contexts. The screening criteria also addressed methodological quality and the accessibility of English-language publications. Studies were excluded where they lacked a sufficient early childhood focus, did not substantively address the relevant spatial or historical concepts, or failed to meet the specified eligibility considerations. Qualitative, quantitative, and conceptual publications were assessed using criteria appropriate to their methodological characteristics. This differentiated assessment was intended to accommodate interdisciplinary scholarship while maintaining attention to the relevance and credibility of evidence informing the conceptual framework (Long et al., 2020; Page et al., 2021; Popa, 2022). The relationship between screening decisions and the final review corpus is presented in Table 2, which summarises the identification, screening, eligibility, and inclusion stages.

Table 2. Summary of the PRISMA 2020 Screening and Selection Process for Included Studies

Stage	Description	Number of Records
Identification	Records identified through database searching (Scopus, Web of Science, ERIC, JSTOR)	1,184
	Additional records identified through citation searching and hand-searching	47
	Total records identified	**1,231**
	Duplicate records removed	287
	Records after duplicates removed	**944**
Screening	Records screened by title and abstract	944
	Records excluded	789
	Reports sought for full-text retrieval	155
	Reports not retrieved	9
	Full-text reports assessed for eligibility	**146**
Eligibility	Not focused on Early Childhood Education	28
	No substantive engagement with geospatial perspectives	16
	No substantive engagement with historical perspectives	12
	Urban context without relevance to rural education	10
	Editorials, opinion papers, or conference abstracts	7
	Methodological quality below appraisal threshold	6
	Not available in English	2
	Duplicate publications identified during full-text review	2
	Total reports excluded (as reported in the manuscript)	**83**
Included	**Studies included in qualitative synthesis**	**86**
	Studies included in quantitative synthesis (meta-analysis)	Not applicable

Source: Study selection data reported in the manuscript, presented according to the PRISMA 2020 reporting framework (Page et al., 2021).

The literature selection process identified 1,231 records through database searching and supplementary identification methods. Following the removal of 287 duplicates, 944 records underwent title and abstract screening, resulting in 155 reports sought for full-text retrieval. Nine reports were unavailable, leaving 146 reports for eligibility assessment. The manuscript reports 86 studies included in the final qualitative synthesis. These publications provided the foundation for identifying interconnected themes concerning

rural learning ecologies, geospatial perspectives, historical consciousness, and Ubuntu-informed inclusive early childhood pedagogy.

The screening summary reports the initial identification of 1,231 records, including database and supplementary search results, followed by the removal of duplicates and the screening of 944 records. The manuscript further reports 155 records sought for full-text retrieval, nine reports not retrieved, and 146 reports assessed for eligibility. Exclusion criteria included insufficient relevance to early childhood education, geospatial perspectives, historical perspectives, and rural educational contexts, together with publication-type, quality, and accessibility considerations. The final synthesis is reported as comprising 86 studies. These figures describe the reported review process and provide the documentary basis for examining the transparency and reproducibility of study selection (Long et al., 2020; Page et al., 2021).

2.10 Conceptual Framework Development

The conceptual framework was developed by integrating the thematic findings with sociocultural learning theory, place-based education, historical consciousness, and Ubuntu philosophy. Rural learning ecologies were interpreted as relational educational environments shaped by children, families, communities, cultural practices, geographical experiences, and historical knowledge. Geospatial and temporal perspectives provided complementary dimensions for understanding how local environments and community histories may become pedagogically meaningful. Ubuntu informed the relational interpretation of participation and belonging, while Participatory Action Learning and Action Research contributed principles of reflection, community engagement, and collaborative knowledge construction. The resulting framework offers a conceptual basis for inclusive and context-responsive early childhood pedagogy (Popa, 2022; Padayachee et al., 2022; Mpofu & Sefotho, 2024; Yemini et al., 2025).

2.11 Methodological Scope and Limitations

The study synthesised existing scholarly evidence to develop a conceptual framework rather than evaluating a classroom intervention or measuring children's learning outcomes. Its conclusions therefore concern theoretical relationships and pedagogical possibilities identified through the literature. The interdisciplinary character of the reviewed scholarship provides opportunities for conceptual integration but also introduces differences in geographical contexts, age groups, methodological approaches, and educational settings. Findings from studies involving older learners or other geographical contexts consequently require careful interpretation when applied to rural South African early childhood education. The proposed framework provides a foundation for future empirical research concerning implementation, educational participation, cultural responsiveness, and inclusive learning outcomes (McCluskey et al., 2023; Mpofu & Sefotho, 2024; Ang et al., 2025; Yemini et al., 2025).

3. RESULTS

The literature synthesis identified four interconnected themes that illuminate the educational significance of rural landscapes, community relationships, geographical experiences, and local histories for inclusive early childhood pedagogy in South Africa. The findings indicate that rural learning environments extend beyond formal classrooms and that children's existing cultural, spatial, and historical knowledge can provide meaningful foundations for educational participation. Across the four themes, Ubuntu offers a

relational interpretation of learning, while Participatory Action Learning and Action Research provide principles for collaborative inquiry and community engagement. The resulting synthesis positions rural learning ecologies as potential pedagogical assets and establishes conceptual relationships relevant to inclusive education, cultural identity, environmental awareness, and community participation. The four themes are presented according to their progression from the social organisation of learning to spatial experiences, place-based educational practices, and historical meaning-making.

3.1 Rural Learning Ecologies as Socially Mediated and Relational Learning Spaces

The first theme identifies rural learning ecologies as socially mediated environments in which children's knowledge develops through relationships with families, teachers, peers, community elders, and other knowledge holders. The reviewed scholarship describes learning as extending beyond formal classroom instruction into everyday community experiences involving storytelling, indigenous games, observation, local languages, cultural practices, and participation in communal activities. These experiences provide children with opportunities to encounter knowledge through social interaction and culturally meaningful forms of participation (Iruka et al., 2020; Chidakwa & Hlalele, 2022; Tchombe, 2023). Community members therefore emerge as contributors to children's learning rather than individuals whose educational roles are confined to activities outside school. The literature also identifies cultural artefacts, oral traditions, and intergenerational relationships as resources through which children encounter shared values, social responsibilities, and community knowledge (Padayachee et al., 2022; Mpofu & Sefotho, 2024). These findings correspond with the sociocultural understanding of learning as a process mediated by participation and interaction. Within the South African rural context, Ubuntu extends this interpretation by emphasising relationships, reciprocity, communal identity, and collective responsibility. The synthesis consequently identifies a connection between children's participation in community life and the recognition of local knowledge within inclusive educational practices. This relationship forms the foundation for understanding how rural learning environments may contribute to socially and culturally responsive early childhood education.

A second finding concerns the relationship between community participation and the organisation of inclusive educational experiences. The reviewed literature associates collaborative educational practices with opportunities for teachers, parents, elders, and community members to contribute different forms of knowledge to children's learning environments (Iruka et al., 2020; Padayachee et al., 2022; Mahadew, 2023). Community storytelling, shared cultural activities, and collaborative educational discussions illustrate how learning resources may be distributed among participants rather than concentrated exclusively within formal curricular materials. This relational organisation is particularly relevant to rural South African communities, where local knowledge and intergenerational experience constitute important dimensions of children's social environments. The synthesis also connects these practices with the participatory principles of reflection, dialogue, and collaborative knowledge construction associated with Participatory Action Learning and Action Research. However, the reviewed evidence does not establish that a specific participatory intervention was implemented or evaluated within the present study. Instead, the findings identify community participation as a recurring conceptual and educational relationship across the literature. This distinction is significant because the educational contribution concerns the recognition of existing social relationships as resources for learning. The first theme therefore establishes the relational foundation of the conceptual framework, linking sociocultural mediation, Ubuntu, and community participation to the possibility of more inclusive early childhood educational environments. The relationships identified in this theme are represented in Figure 2, which illustrates how community participants and cultural resources contribute to socially mediated learning.

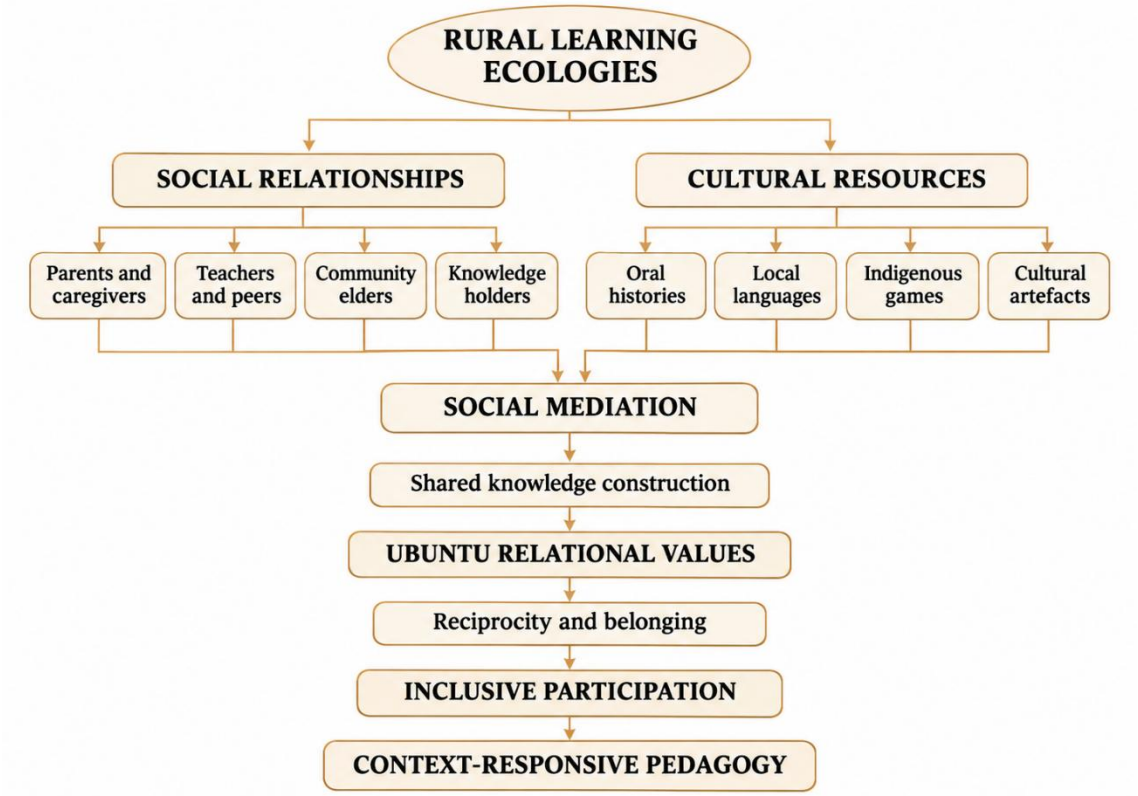


Figure 2. Relational Structure of Rural Learning Ecologies in Inclusive Early Childhood Education.

The diagram illustrates the relationship between social participation and culturally situated learning identified in the literature. Social relationships and cultural resources provide complementary conditions for knowledge construction. Ubuntu connects these dimensions through reciprocity and belonging, while participatory educational principles provide a basis for considering how community knowledge may be incorporated into learning experiences. The figure represents relationships identified through the synthesis rather than an independently tested educational process.

3.2 Geospatial Perspectives Validate Children's Spatial Knowledge and Promote Inclusive Learning

The second theme identifies children's everyday geographical experiences as sources of spatial knowledge that can contribute to early childhood learning. The reviewed literature describes children's relationships with their environments through familiar routes, community landmarks, agricultural spaces, water sources, seasonal changes, and other features of local landscapes. These experiences provide opportunities for developing spatial understanding through movement, observation, environmental familiarity, and participation in everyday activities (Iruka et al., 2020; Witherspoon et al., 2023; McCluskey et al., 2023). The findings also reveal a tension between experiential geographical knowledge and formal educational approaches that may privilege abstract representations of space. In rural South Africa, this distinction is particularly relevant because children's spatial experiences are shaped by community organisation, available infrastructure, and historically produced geographical inequalities. Research addressing spatial relationships and educational opportunities indicates that geographical contexts influence access to resources and experiences of participation (Makhubu, 2020; Witherspoon et al., 2023; Amoateng & Biney, 2024). The synthesis therefore identifies children's familiarity with local environments as a potential educational resource rather than merely background information. This interpretation does not assume that

rural children possess uniform spatial competencies. Instead, it recognises that different geographical experiences contribute to the diversity of knowledge children may bring into early learning settings.

The literature further identifies geospatial representations and participatory approaches as potential means of connecting children's lived experiences with formal educational concepts. Activities described across relevant scholarship include mapping familiar environments, interpreting geographical representations, exploring environmental features, and collaboratively examining relationships among locations and community resources. Research on spatial experiences and geospatial technologies provides evidence of their relevance to spatial understanding and learning, although the populations and educational settings examined differ across studies (de Miguel-González, 2021; Ma et al., 2023; McCluskey et al., 2023). Consequently, findings involving older learners or technologically supported learning environments cannot be interpreted automatically as demonstrated outcomes for rural South African children in early childhood education. Within the conceptual framework, the educational importance of geospatial knowledge lies in the connection between children's existing experiences and opportunities for participation in geographical learning. Ubuntu adds a relational interpretation by connecting spatial knowledge with community identity, cultural relationships, and shared environmental experiences. Participatory mapping and collaborative environmental inquiry are therefore identified as potential educational applications rather than interventions evaluated directly in this review. The theme establishes a relationship between children's spatial experiences, geographical representation, and inclusive participation, while retaining the need for age-appropriate empirical examination of specific educational approaches. Figure 3 illustrates the conceptual relationship between children's spatial experiences and the educational uses of geographical knowledge.

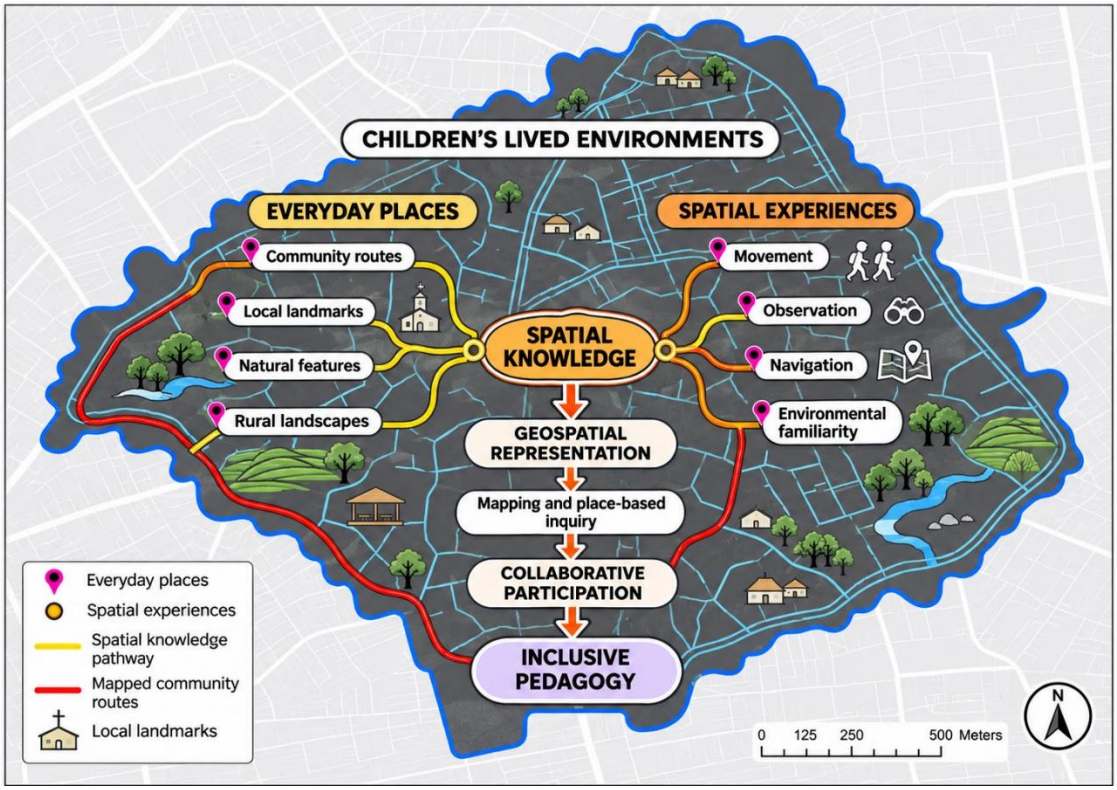


Figure 3. Geospatial Experiences and Inclusive Learning Pathways.

The diagram presents spatial knowledge as emerging from relationships between familiar environments and everyday geographical experiences. Mapping and place-based inquiry connect these experiences with possible educational activities, while collaborative participation introduces an inclusive dimension. The

sequence is conceptual and does not indicate that the present study measured improvements in spatial reasoning or learning achievement.

3.3 Place-Based Pedagogy Strengthens Contextual Learning, Critical Consciousness, and Community Participation

The third theme concerns the educational significance of local environments as resources for contextualised learning. The reviewed scholarship identifies place-based education as an approach through which geographical features, cultural practices, community narratives, and ecological experiences can be connected with curriculum content. The synthesis highlights relationships between familiar places and learning opportunities across literacy, mathematics, environmental education, and social understanding (Iruka et al., 2020; Björklund et al., 2020; Ajaps & Forh Mbah, 2022; Yemini et al., 2025). Community storytelling and local narratives provide possible contexts for language development, while counting, measurement, route exploration, and the observation of environmental patterns offer examples of mathematical and spatial learning. Local ecosystems, agricultural practices, and seasonal changes similarly provide contexts for environmental observation and inquiry. These findings demonstrate the breadth of educational possibilities associated with place-based learning, although the reviewed studies differ in their populations, objectives, and reported outcomes. The synthesis does not establish that all such activities produced measurable improvements among children in rural South African early childhood settings. Instead, it identifies a recurring connection between meaningful local experiences and opportunities for contextualised learning. This relationship is particularly relevant where educational materials insufficiently reflect children's geographical environments and community knowledge. Place-based pedagogy therefore emerges as a conceptual bridge between children's lived experiences and formal educational participation.

A further finding concerns the relationship between place-based education, critical awareness, and community participation. The reviewed literature indicates that local environments can provide opportunities for examining environmental conditions, community resources, cultural heritage, and questions of belonging and fairness (Ajaps & Forh Mbah, 2022; Grimshaw & Mates, 2022; Damoah et al., 2024). In rural South African contexts, such questions are connected to the historical distribution of land, infrastructure, and educational opportunities. The synthesis identifies community mapping, environmental inquiry, heritage activities, and collaborative exploration as possible ways of bringing these relationships into educational practice. Ubuntu strengthens the conceptual interpretation of place by connecting local environments with community identity, intergenerational relationships, and collective responsibility (Padayachee et al., 2022; Brás, 2024; Mpofu & Sefotho, 2024). Participatory educational principles further support the involvement of families, educators, and community knowledge holders in contextualising learning. However, these relationships should not be interpreted as evidence that a particular curriculum or intervention has already achieved improvements in critical consciousness, environmental behaviour, or educational equity. The findings instead reveal a convergence among place-based learning, relational participation, and culturally situated educational knowledge. This convergence establishes a conceptual contribution to inclusive pedagogy by positioning local places as resources through which geographical experience, cultural meaning, and community participation may be connected. The relationship between local environments, curriculum opportunities, and participatory learning is represented in Figure 4.



Figure 4. Place-Based Pedagogy and Contextual Learning Opportunities.

Figure 4 illustrates how local geographical, social, and cultural resources may inform learning opportunities across curriculum domains. The conceptual pathway links place-based experiences with community participation and inclusive pedagogy. It reflects the educational relationships identified in the literature rather than measured effects from a classroom intervention conducted as part of the present study.

3.4 Historical Consciousness Strengthens Identity, Belonging, and Inclusive Pedagogy

The fourth theme identifies historical consciousness as a dimension of children's cultural identity, belonging, and relationships with community knowledge. The reviewed literature describes historical learning as extending beyond formal instruction about past events to include family narratives, oral traditions, cultural artefacts, collective memories, and interpretations of relationships between past and present experiences (Johansen & Varvin, 2020; Popa, 2022; Grimshaw & Mates, 2022). Within these forms of learning, community elders and other knowledge holders contribute historical perspectives that may not be represented adequately in conventional educational materials. The synthesis identifies oral storytelling, family-history activities, community timelines, heritage projects, and engagement with cultural traditions as possible approaches through which historical knowledge can become accessible to younger learners. Such activities also provide opportunities for connecting personal experiences with wider community narratives. In South Africa, historical interpretation is closely associated with the legacies of colonialism, apartheid, land dispossession, and community resilience. These relationships demonstrate why geographical experiences and historical understanding cannot be considered entirely separate educational dimensions. The findings consequently identify historical consciousness as a means of interpreting the cultural and temporal significance of place, although the developmental suitability of specific historical activities requires careful consideration according to children's ages, experiences, and educational contexts.

The literature also reveals a connection between historical learning and the recognition of culturally diverse knowledge within inclusive pedagogy. Community histories and oral traditions can provide perspectives through which children's identities and relationships with their environments are acknowledged within educational settings (Popa, 2022; Grimshaw & Mates, 2022; Lévesque, 2023). Ubuntu contributes an interpretation of these relationships through intergenerational responsibility, collective memory, reciprocity, and community belonging. In this context, historical knowledge is not confined to chronological information but includes the meanings communities associate with places, relationships, and inherited experiences (Padayachee et al., 2022; Brás, 2024; Mpofu & Sefotho, 2024). Participatory educational principles further provide opportunities for families, educators, and community members to contribute to the representation of local histories. The synthesis identifies these connections as relevant to culturally responsive education because they acknowledge knowledge that may otherwise remain marginal within standardised curricula. Nevertheless, the reviewed evidence does not establish that the conceptual framework has been implemented or that particular historical activities have produced measurable changes in children's identity or social inclusion. The findings instead establish a theoretical relationship among historical consciousness, cultural belonging, and inclusive participation. This relationship completes the integration of spatial and temporal perspectives within the proposed framework. Figure 5 presents the relationship between community histories, historical understanding, and inclusive educational participation.

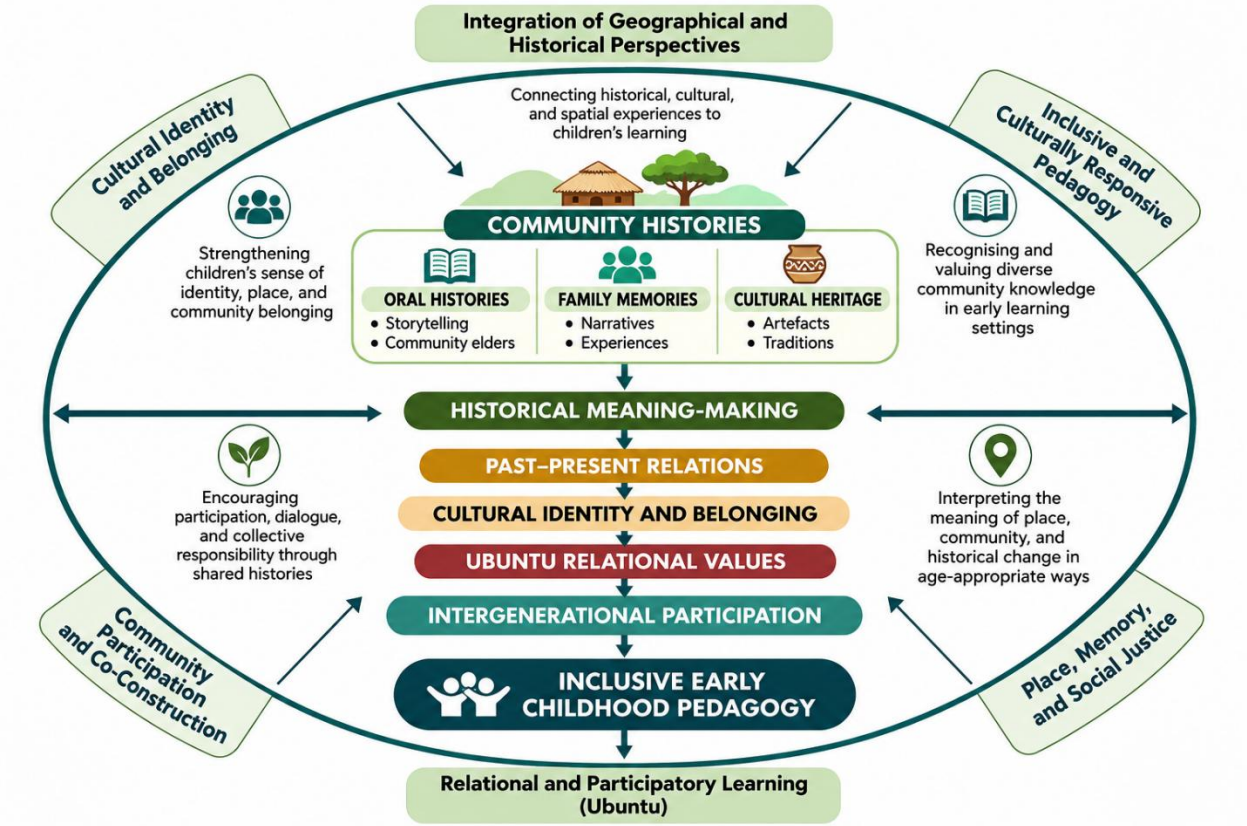


Figure 5. Historical Consciousness and Culturally Responsive Early Childhood Pedagogy.

The diagram illustrates historical consciousness as a relationship between community knowledge, temporal meaning-making, and cultural belonging. Oral histories, family memories, and cultural heritage provide different forms of historical knowledge, while Ubuntu connects their interpretation with intergenerational

participation and communal identity. The framework identifies these relationships as potential foundations for inclusive educational practice rather than outcomes independently measured in this study.

The four themes collectively establish an integrated conceptual understanding of rural learning ecologies. Social relationships provide the conditions for cultural mediation; geographical experiences connect children with local environments; place-based pedagogy identifies opportunities for contextualised learning; and historical consciousness contributes the temporal and cultural meanings associated with those places. Ubuntu connects these dimensions through relationality, reciprocity, and belonging, while participatory educational principles inform their possible application through community engagement. The synthesis therefore supports a conceptual contribution to Sustainable Development Goal 4 through inclusive educational opportunities, Sustainable Development Goal 10 through the recognition of educational inequalities, Sustainable Development Goal 11 through attention to community heritage, and Sustainable Development Goal 15 through environmental learning and stewardship. These relationships indicate potential contributions rather than verified impacts on sustainable development indicators. The findings provide a basis for further interpretation of how spatial, historical, cultural, and relational perspectives may inform inclusive early childhood pedagogy in rural South Africa.

4. DISCUSSION

4.1 Reconceptualising Rural Learning Ecologies Through Sociocultural Mediation and Ubuntu Relationality

The interpretation of rural learning ecologies as socially mediated environments raises a fundamental question about the location and ownership of educational knowledge in early childhood education. Conventional institutional approaches tend to distinguish formal educational provision from the informal learning that occurs within families and communities. Such a distinction becomes problematic in rural South Africa, where children's experiences of knowledge, identity, and participation are shaped by social relationships extending beyond the classroom. Iruka et al. (2020) demonstrate the importance of rural ecological contexts in understanding children's early learning opportunities, while Chidakwa and Hlalele (2022) examine the multiple vulnerabilities affecting rural learning ecologies. These studies establish the significance of context, but their contributions differ from the present synthesis in an important respect: contextual conditions are not considered solely as influences on educational access or developmental opportunities but as constitutive elements of pedagogical knowledge. The distinction matters because an educational framework that recognises community circumstances without acknowledging community knowledge may reproduce the marginalisation it seeks to address. Ang et al. (2025) further demonstrate the relevance of early childhood development and education to learning and well-being in rural South African settings. Their contribution strengthens the educational relevance of rural contexts, although the relationship between community knowledge and the philosophical foundations of inclusion requires further conceptual elaboration. The present framework addresses this issue by interpreting rural learning ecologies through sociocultural mediation and Ubuntu relationality, positioning learning as an interaction among children, cultural resources, social participants, and historically situated environments.

Sociocultural learning theory provides a useful explanation for this relationship because it recognises that knowledge develops through culturally mediated interaction. Tzuriel (2021) discusses the importance of

mediated learning within the sociocultural tradition, providing a theoretical basis for understanding how learning experiences are shaped through interactions with more knowledgeable participants. Applied to rural South African early childhood education, this perspective makes it possible to recognise parents, grandparents, community elders, and indigenous knowledge holders as participants in educational mediation. Yet the framework requires critical interpretation when transferred to contexts characterised by unequal relations between institutional and community knowledge. The designation of educational expertise cannot be restricted to formally trained teachers without disregarding the cultural knowledge embedded in intergenerational practices. Padayachee et al. (2022) examine the educational significance of Ubuntu-related indigenous knowledge, while Mpofu and Sefotho (2024) consider the relationship between Ubuntu philosophy and inclusive education. These contributions extend the discussion beyond the cognitive processes traditionally foregrounded in sociocultural learning theory. Ubuntu introduces an ethical dimension in which reciprocity, belonging, and shared responsibility become relevant to the organisation of learning. This does not mean that community participation automatically produces inclusion. Communities may contain differences in authority, language, cultural expectations, and access to educational resources. A relational framework must therefore consider whose knowledge receives recognition and whose participation remains marginal. The theoretical contribution lies in connecting sociocultural mediation with an explicit concern for relational equity, enabling rural learning ecologies to be understood not simply as settings containing educational resources but as networks of relationships through which educational opportunities are negotiated.

4.2 Geospatial Knowledge, Spatial Inequality, and the Limits of Conventional Early Childhood Pedagogy

The educational significance of children's geographical experiences becomes clearer when spatial learning is considered alongside the historical and structural conditions governing access to places and resources. Geographical knowledge is frequently approached through formal representations, spatial concepts, and technological applications. De Miguel-González (2021) examines geographical and geospatial competencies across educational contexts, while Ma et al. (2023) synthesise research concerning the influence of geospatial technologies on learning outcomes. These contributions establish the educational relevance of geospatial learning, but they cannot be transferred uncritically to rural South African early childhood education. Their broader educational orientation leaves questions concerning developmental appropriateness, technological accessibility, cultural relevance, and children's existing spatial experiences. McCluskey et al. (2023) offer a more developmentally relevant perspective by examining the role of movement in young children's spatial experiences. Their contribution suggests that spatial understanding can be approached through embodied and experiential learning rather than through abstract geographical representations alone. The present synthesis extends this perspective by considering children's everyday geographical knowledge within environments shaped by social relationships, historical inequalities, and cultural practices. In rural South Africa, familiar routes, community landmarks, agricultural spaces, and local environmental features are not educationally neutral. They form part of landscapes influenced by uneven infrastructure, geographical isolation, and the historical organisation of settlement and opportunity. Witherspoon et al. (2023) emphasise the importance of place-based developmental research for understanding young people's experiences within their environmental contexts. Their perspective supports a contextual interpretation of spatial development, while the present framework connects that interpretation specifically to inclusive early childhood pedagogy.

A central tension emerges between the promise of geospatial technologies and the conditions required for equitable educational participation. Technological approaches may expand opportunities for geographical representation, but their educational significance depends on whether they connect with children's

developmental capacities and local experiences. The evidence synthesised by Ma et al. (2023) concerns particular technologies, populations, and learning outcomes; it does not demonstrate that digitally mediated geospatial activities are necessarily more effective than experiential approaches for young children in rural South African communities. Wallgrün et al. (2024) examine immersive place-based educational experiences, providing insights into technologically supported learning while also highlighting a context different from the rural early childhood settings considered here. A technologically centred interpretation of spatial education may consequently overlook the educational value of direct environmental observation, movement, storytelling, and collaborative mapping. The present framework does not reject technological applications but places them within a broader pedagogical understanding of spatial knowledge. Ubuntu contributes a relational interpretation by connecting geographical experiences with community identity, shared environments, and collective participation. This perspective also complicates an individualised understanding of spatial competence: children's knowledge of place may be acquired through relationships with family members, peers, and community knowledge holders rather than through isolated cognitive activity. The practical implication is that inclusive geographical learning should begin with children's accessible environments and experiences, while digital representations should be evaluated according to their educational suitability, accessibility, and contextual relevance. Such an approach expands the conceptual boundaries of geospatial education without claiming that the proposed integration has already produced measurable improvements in spatial reasoning or educational inclusion.

4.3 Place-Based Pedagogy as a Response to Curricular Decontextualisation and Epistemic Inequality

Place-based education offers a means of reconsidering the relationship between formal curriculum content and children's lived environments, but its contribution to inclusion depends on how place is interpreted. A narrow interpretation treats the environment as a convenient setting for delivering predetermined curricular activities. A more critical interpretation recognises that places contain cultural relationships, environmental knowledge, historical experiences, and unequal distributions of power. Ajaps and Forh Mbah (2022) advance a critical pedagogy of place within environmental conservation, demonstrating the relevance of examining the social and political dimensions of local environments. Yemini et al. (2025) provide a broader synthesis of place-based education scholarship, establishing the conceptual diversity of approaches connecting learning with locality. These contributions provide an important foundation for the present study but differ in the extent to which they address the interaction among early childhood development, Ubuntu relationality, historical consciousness, and rural South African educational inequalities. The significance of this distinction is that place-based pedagogy cannot be considered inclusive merely because it uses local environments. Learning activities may reproduce dominant cultural interpretations when educators select resources without considering whose experiences and knowledge are represented. The present framework places greater emphasis on the relationship between pedagogical relevance and epistemic recognition. Rural landscapes and community practices become educationally meaningful not simply because they are familiar but because they offer opportunities to acknowledge forms of knowledge that may receive limited attention within standardised educational materials. Research by Iruka et al. (2020) and Ang et al. (2025) reinforces the importance of contextual conditions in rural learning, while Padayachee et al. (2022) provides a basis for considering indigenous knowledge within early childhood education. Their contributions are brought into dialogue through the proposition that contextual responsiveness requires both educational accessibility and recognition of community knowledge.

The relationship between place-based pedagogy and critical consciousness requires further qualification. Local environments can support inquiry into ecological conditions, cultural heritage, geographical relationships, and community experiences, yet the development of critical awareness depends on the pedagogical processes through which these topics are introduced. Damoah et al. (2024) examine the

trajectory of environmental education within the South African curriculum, providing a relevant perspective on the relationship between educational priorities and environmental learning. McCluskey et al. (2023) establish the relevance of movement and spatial experiences in early childhood, while Björklund et al. (2020) address research concerning early mathematics learning. Considered together, these studies suggest possible relationships among local environmental exploration, spatial understanding, and curriculum-related learning, but they do not constitute direct evidence that a single integrated approach improves literacy, mathematics, environmental understanding, and social participation simultaneously. The conceptual contribution of the present synthesis lies in identifying how familiar places may provide connected contexts for these educational domains. Ubuntu adds an ethical dimension by emphasising the relationships linking individuals, communities, and shared responsibilities. This orientation also challenges approaches that regard local environments primarily as resources for individual academic achievement. Community participation introduces questions of reciprocity and shared knowledge construction, while historical consciousness prevents place from being interpreted without reference to its temporal and political dimensions. The long-term pedagogical implication is the possibility of curriculum design that acknowledges local knowledge while maintaining educational coherence and developmental suitability. Such an approach requires educators to distinguish contextual enrichment from evidence of educational effectiveness and to evaluate specific learning activities before wider implementation.

4.4 Historical Consciousness, Cultural Identity, and the Decolonial Interpretation of Rural Childhood

Historical consciousness introduces a temporal dimension that complicates conventional distinctions between children's geographical surroundings and their cultural identities. Places are not simply physical environments encountered in the present; they carry memories, relationships, and meanings shaped by historical experiences. Popa (2022) synthesises scholarship on historical consciousness and meaning-making, establishing the importance of how individuals interpret relationships among past, present, and future. Grimshaw and Mates (2022) examine children's sense of place in relation to community heritage, providing a particularly relevant connection between historical meaning and children's everyday environments. Lévesque (2023) further considers the educational significance of historical learning in contexts involving contested public memory. These studies contribute different perspectives on historical interpretation, but their educational implications cannot be transferred without qualification to young children in rural South Africa. Historical concepts developed through formal history education may require adaptation to children's language, experiences, cognitive development, and emotional understanding. The present framework addresses this issue by examining historical consciousness through forms of knowledge that may be accessible within early childhood experiences, including family narratives, oral traditions, community memories, and cultural artefacts. This perspective extends conventional historical education by connecting temporal meaning-making with children's immediate relationships and environments. The distinction is particularly significant in South Africa, where geographical landscapes and community identities are historically connected to colonialism, apartheid, displacement, and collective resilience. Historical knowledge in this context cannot be understood solely as information about events; it also concerns the meanings through which communities interpret belonging, cultural continuity, and relationships with place. The conceptual integration of historical consciousness and geographical experience consequently provides a more comprehensive understanding of the social conditions shaping rural childhood.

The incorporation of Ubuntu introduces a further theoretical challenge concerning the relationship between historical knowledge and cultural authority. Historical narratives may preserve community knowledge, but they may also reflect selective memories, unequal participation, or competing interpretations of the past. A culturally responsive pedagogy must therefore avoid assuming that community traditions represent a single,

uncontested historical perspective. Padayachee et al. (2022) examine Ubuntu-related indigenous knowledge in early childhood education, while Brás (2024) considers the contribution of Ubuntu philosophy to epistemic decolonisation. Mpofu and Sefotho (2024) extend this discussion by examining Ubuntu in relation to inclusive education. These perspectives provide a philosophical basis for recognising relational knowledge and collective responsibility, yet their application requires attention to the plurality of community experiences. An inclusive interpretation of Ubuntu should make space for different family histories, languages, cultural practices, and perspectives rather than imposing a uniform account of identity or belonging. The present framework positions historical consciousness as a means of connecting children's personal experiences with wider community narratives while maintaining sensitivity to developmental and cultural differences. This interpretation also distinguishes the proposed contribution from approaches that treat historical knowledge primarily as a sequence of events to be remembered. Historical understanding becomes relevant to early childhood pedagogy through relationships among memory, identity, place, and participation. The practical implication concerns the careful selection of age-appropriate activities through which children may encounter community histories without being exposed to unnecessarily distressing material or simplified representations of complex historical experiences. The framework therefore offers a theoretical foundation for historically responsive pedagogy, while the educational effects of particular activities remain questions for subsequent empirical investigation.

4.5 Integrating Spatial, Historical, and Relational Perspectives: Theoretical Contribution and Sustainable Development Implications

The integration of rural learning ecologies, geospatial knowledge, place-based pedagogy, and historical consciousness provides the principal theoretical contribution of this study. Each perspective addresses a different dimension of children's educational experiences, but their separation risks producing incomplete explanations of learning in historically marginalised environments. Sociocultural learning theory explains the importance of mediation and participation, place-based education emphasises the educational significance of locality, and historical consciousness addresses relationships among memory, identity, and temporal meaning-making. Ubuntu connects these perspectives through a relational understanding of personhood, reciprocity, and collective belonging. The resulting framework differs from scholarship addressing these components individually because it explicitly considers their interaction within inclusive rural South African early childhood pedagogy. Iruka et al. (2020) and Chidakwa and Hlalele (2022) contribute ecological perspectives on rural learning, while Popa (2022) provides a theoretical account of historical consciousness. Padayachee et al. (2022) and Mpofu and Sefotho (2024) establish the relevance of Ubuntu-related knowledge and inclusion, whereas Yemini et al. (2025) offers a broader synthesis of place-based education. These contributions are not contradicted by the present framework; rather, their different analytical emphases reveal the value of an integrative explanation. The framework proposes that the educational meaning of rural landscapes cannot be separated from community relationships or historical experiences, just as the pedagogical significance of local histories depends partly on their connections with familiar places. This proposition advances the discussion from identifying educational resources to considering how different forms of knowledge may become mutually relevant within inclusive educational practice. Its novelty therefore concerns theoretical integration rather than the discovery of an entirely new educational phenomenon.

The contribution to sustainable development follows from this integrative interpretation but requires careful distinction between conceptual relevance and demonstrated impact. Sustainable Development Goal 4 provides the strongest connection because the framework directly addresses the possibilities for inclusive, equitable, and context-responsive early childhood education. Sustainable Development Goal 10 becomes relevant through the recognition of geographical and epistemic inequalities affecting educational

participation, particularly where rural children's experiences and knowledge receive limited curricular recognition. Sustainable Development Goal 11 is connected to the educational significance of community heritage, cultural memory, and relationships with historically situated places. Sustainable Development Goal 15 is relevant through the emphasis on local landscapes, ecological knowledge, and environmental learning. These relationships can be interpreted through scholarship addressing rural educational opportunities, environmental education, cultural knowledge, and place-based learning (Iruka et al., 2020; Ajaps & Forh Mbah, 2022; Damoah et al., 2024; Ang et al., 2025; Yemini et al., 2025). Nevertheless, the conceptual framework does not provide evidence of measurable progress towards sustainable development indicators. Its contribution lies in establishing theoretically informed possibilities for educational planning and future investigation. Translating these possibilities into practice would require attention to teacher preparation, curriculum design, accessible learning resources, community participation, and the evaluation of developmentally appropriate activities. The distinction between conceptual potential and demonstrated outcomes is particularly important because pedagogical approaches that appear culturally responsive may not produce equitable participation unless implementation conditions are examined. Future research should consequently investigate how the proposed relationships operate in particular rural early childhood settings, whether different children experience comparable opportunities for participation, and how educational activities informed by local landscapes and histories contribute to defined learning outcomes. The framework offers a basis for these investigations while retaining the cultural, geographical, and historical complexity of rural South African childhoods.

5. CONCLUSION

5.1 Conclusion

This study concludes that integrating rural landscapes, local histories, and Ubuntu relational values provides a conceptual foundation for developing inclusive and context-responsive early childhood pedagogy in rural South Africa. The findings address the research objectives through four interconnected conclusions. First, rural learning ecologies function as socially mediated environments in which families, educators, community elders, and cultural knowledge holders contribute to children's learning experiences. Second, children's geographical experiences provide meaningful foundations for spatial understanding and place-based learning. Third, local landscapes and community practices offer opportunities to connect literacy, mathematics, environmental education, and social participation with familiar contexts. Fourth, historical consciousness connects community memories, cultural heritage, and intergenerational knowledge with children's developing sense of identity and belonging. Together, these findings establish the conceptual relevance of spatial, historical, and relational perspectives to inclusive early childhood education.

The principal theoretical contribution lies in integrating sociocultural learning theory, place-based education, and historical consciousness through Ubuntu philosophy. This integration extends conventional understandings of early childhood learning by positioning geographical environments, community histories, and relational knowledge as interconnected dimensions of educational participation. The proposed framework also incorporates participatory educational

principles to explain how community knowledge may inform culturally responsive pedagogical practices. Its contribution is conceptual rather than experimental: it provides an interpretive model for understanding relationships among place, history, culture, and inclusion without claiming that these relationships have been causally established or that the framework has demonstrated educational effectiveness.

The practical and policy implications concern the development of early childhood curricula that recognise rural environments and community knowledge as educational resources. Curriculum developers, education authorities, teacher educators, and early childhood practitioners can consider integrating local landscapes, oral histories, community mapping, environmental exploration, and intergenerational learning into developmentally appropriate educational activities. These possibilities are particularly relevant to Sustainable Development Goal 4 (Quality Education) through inclusive learning opportunities and Sustainable Development Goal 10 (Reduced Inequalities) through greater recognition of rural children's educational experiences. The framework also offers potential contributions to Sustainable Development Goal 11 (Sustainable Cities and Communities) through cultural heritage awareness and Sustainable Development Goal 15 (Life on Land) through environmental learning and stewardship. These contributions represent pedagogical possibilities rather than measured achievements against sustainable development indicators.

The study's limitations arise from its reliance on secondary literature and conceptual synthesis rather than direct classroom observations or intervention-based evidence. Differences in the geographical contexts, participant ages, and methodological approaches of the reviewed studies limit the direct application of their findings to rural South African early childhood settings. The proposed framework has not been independently validated through classroom implementation, and its potential educational effects remain untested. Nevertheless, the synthesis provides a foundation for investigating how spatial experiences, historical knowledge, Ubuntu relationality, and community participation interact within specific educational environments. Future studies should examine the feasibility, cultural responsiveness, accessibility, and educational outcomes of approaches informed by the framework.

5.2 Limitations and Future Research Directions

Future research should prioritise participatory, longitudinal, and intervention-based investigations involving rural South African early childhood settings to examine the practical application and educational effectiveness of the proposed Ubuntu-based conceptual framework. Particular attention should be given to evaluating developmentally appropriate community mapping, local-history storytelling, environmental exploration, and intergenerational learning activities. Collaborative research involving educators, families, community elders, and curriculum specialists could clarify how geographical experiences and cultural knowledge contribute to children's spatial understanding, historical awareness, belonging, and inclusive participation. Comparative studies across rural communities should examine differences in language, infrastructure, cultural practices, educational resources, and accessibility. Further empirical validation should assess implementation feasibility, teacher preparation requirements, and measurable learning outcomes

while ensuring that educational interventions remain culturally responsive and appropriate to children's developmental needs. Such investigations would provide stronger evidence for translating the framework into sustainable curriculum practices and for evaluating its potential contribution to Sustainable Development Goals 4, 10, 11, and 15.

Ethical & Author Statements

CRediT Statement: Tolulope Ayodeji Olatoye: Conceptualization, Methodology, Investigation, Formal Analysis, Visualization, Writing – Original Draft, and Project Administration. Glynnis Elizabeth Daries: Conceptualization, Methodology, Validation, and Writing – Review & Editing. Raymond Nkwenti Fru: Conceptualization, Formal Analysis, Validation, and Writing – Review & Editing. All authors reviewed and approved the final version of the manuscript.

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Data Availability Statement (Data Policy): This study is based on a systematic literature review of published research concerning rural learning ecologies, geospatial and temporal perspectives, historical consciousness, Ubuntu philosophy, and inclusive early childhood education. The review reports 86 studies included in the qualitative synthesis. Supporting research materials may be obtained from the corresponding author upon reasonable request, subject to their availability. No new participant-level data were collected..

Artificial Intelligence Policy: The authors retain full responsibility for the accuracy, originality, scholarly interpretation, and integrity of the manuscript, including any content developed or refined with artificial intelligence-assisted tools. The use of such tools, where applicable, must be disclosed in accordance with the journal's publication policies.

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