

Reimagining Early Childhood Education in Southern Africa: Transforming Fragmented Curriculum through Cultural Pedagogy

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ABSTRACT

Background of the study: This paper centres on cultural pedagogy and its influence on transforming fragmented approaches into holistic, inclusive frameworks that nurture identity, community values, and lifelong learning.

Aims and scope of paper: This study aims to transform fragmented Early Childhood Education (ECE) curricula in Southern Africa by embedding cultural pedagogy that nurtures holistic child development and strengthens cultural identity. It focuses on examining existing frameworks to identify gaps in cultural relevance while exploring indigenous knowledge systems, storytelling, play, and community-based practices as tools for curriculum transformation. Finally, the study sought to propose an integrated model that fosters identity formation, social cohesion, and lays strong foundations for lifelong learning.

Methods: A systematic review approach guided by the PRISMA framework was employed to cross-examine 79 sources purposively selected from targeted databases (Scopus, Web of Science, DOAJ, AJOL, and Scielo, SA). Thematic analysis was employed to identify trends and gaps linked to cultural pedagogy and curriculum transformation in ECE across Southern Africa.

Results: Based on the results, it was drawn that Ubuntugogy and chat theory formed the theoretical underpinning of cultural pedagogy in the ECE space. It was also revealed that curriculum fragmentation and pedagogical marginalisation were influenced by the historical, structural, and institutional factors. The results acknowledged the significance of language, storytelling, music, and play in nurturing culturally grounded ECE. In addition, the reviewed sources argued for inclusive curriculum frameworks, integration of cultural pedagogy into ECE policies, and a paradigm shift towards child-centred and community-based learning. Lastly, the selected sources emphasised the challenges and opportunities in redefining fragmented ECE curriculum across Southern Africa.

Contribution: This study contributes by providing a culturally responsive framework that addresses fragmented early childhood curricula in Southern Africa. It offers practical insights for educators, policymakers, and communities to design inclusive programmes that strengthen identity, social cohesion, and lifelong learning foundations.

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INTRODUCTION

Early Childhood Education (ECE) in Southern Africa occupies a critical position within ongoing debates on systemic reform, social equity, and cultural relevance (Padayachee et al., 2022). While a robust body of global evidence affirms the foundational role of ECE in promoting cognitive, psychosocial, and long-term educational outcomes, participation across the region remains uneven and structurally constrained. In Zimbabwe, for example, only 57% of government primary schools had established ECE centres by 2024, enrolling 651,791 children—figures that remain substantially below universal access targets (Mahuni et al., 2025). Regionally, enrolment rates frequently fall below 30%, in sharp contrast to near-universal participation in OECD countries (*Inequalities in Sub-Saharan Africa*, 2025). These disparities underscore persistent structural inequities in access, quality, and curricular coherence.

The distribution of opportunities further reveals pronounced rural–urban divides. Urban centres typically benefit from comparatively stronger institutional capacity, better-qualified educators, and exposure to contemporary pedagogical innovations. By contrast, many rural communities face chronic shortages of trained personnel, limited infrastructure, and curricula that are inconsistently aligned with national frameworks or global quality benchmarks (Song, 2023). Policy fragmentation compounds these challenges. Responsibility for early childhood provision is often distributed across education, health, and social welfare ministries with limited coordination, while non-governmental organisations frequently implement externally designed programmes that may not fully align with local cultural contexts or national reform priorities. Such institutional discontinuities contribute to curriculum fragmentation and weaken the coherence of early learning systems.

These structural patterns are inseparable from longer colonial histories that reshaped educational systems across Southern Africa. Colonial administrations and missionary enterprises institutionalised Western epistemological frameworks that marginalised Indigenous languages, community-based pedagogies, and Indigenous Knowledge Systems (IKS) (Onyango Ouma, 2025). Formal schooling models privileged standardised curricula, individual achievement, and transmissive pedagogies, often at the expense of communal, relational, and experiential modes of learning embedded within local cultures (Jaiswal, 2025). Although post-independence governments have pursued reforms aimed at redressing these inequities, educational systems frequently continue to reproduce operational and epistemological assumptions inherited from colonial structures (Mlambo et al., 2023). Consequently, ECE provision in many Southern African contexts remains situated within frameworks that privilege Western pedagogical norms, while the cultural capital and epistemic resources of Indigenous communities remain insufficiently institutionalised.

Scholarly engagement with ECE reform in the region has expanded in recent years. Existing studies (Acharibasam & McVittie, 2021) have examined curriculum development, access, and pedagogical quality. However, few systematic syntheses have critically interrogated the intersection between cultural pedagogy and IKS as a coherent strategy for curriculum transformation. Moreover, there is limited integrative scholarship that situates contemporary ECE reform simultaneously within the enduring legacies of colonial education and the evolving policy architectures of postcolonial states. The absence of such synthesis constrains theoretical advancement and policy innovation, particularly in relation to curriculum coherence and epistemic justice.

Addressing these gaps requires a conceptual reframing of ECE beyond technocratic reform and toward a culturally grounded analytical lens. Cultural pedagogy offers a framework through which Indigenous epistemologies, Western pedagogical traditions, and locally embedded forms of cultural capital can be examined not as binary oppositions, but as interacting knowledge systems within pluralistic educational ecologies. By foregrounding IKS while critically engaging Western educational values, this study advances an integrative framework for curriculum transformation in Southern African ECE.

Accordingly, this review seeks to interrogate curriculum fragmentation through the following research question: How can cultural pedagogy, through the integration of Indigenous Knowledge Systems, Western pedagogical values, and cultural capital, address curriculum fragmentation in Southern African ECE? By situating statistical synthesis within broader socio-historical and epistemological debates, the study contributes both theoretically and empirically to high-level discussions on decolonial curriculum reform and equitable early childhood provision in the region.

METHOD

Research Design

This study employed a systematic review and meta-analysis to critically examine curriculum transformation and decolonial pedagogical reform in Early Childhood Education (ECE) across Southern Africa. The review was conducted in strict accordance with the PRISMA 2020 statement, ensuring comprehensive reporting of identification, screening, eligibility, and inclusion procedures. A detailed review protocol specifying research questions, eligibility criteria, coding framework, risk-of-bias procedures, and statistical analysis plan was developed prior to data extraction to minimize analytic flexibility and selective reporting. All procedural decisions were documented to enhance transparency and reproducibility.

Information Sources and Search Strategy

A multi-database search strategy was implemented to maximize coverage of international and regionally indexed scholarship. Searches were conducted in Scopus, Web of Science, Directory of Open Access Journals, African Journals Online, and SciELO South Africa. The inclusion of regional databases was intentional to reduce Global North publication bias and ensure epistemic representation of African scholarship.

The search covered January 2015 to December 2025. Search strings combined controlled vocabulary and free-text terms using Boolean operators and truncation techniques. Database-specific adaptations were applied to align with indexing conventions. Backward and forward citation tracking was performed to identify additional eligible studies. The final search update was conducted on 14 January 2026.

Eligibility Criteria and Conceptual Boundaries

Studies were eligible if they (a) were empirical investigations conducted within Southern Africa, (b) examined ECE curriculum or pedagogical transformation, (c) engaged substantively with Indigenous Knowledge Systems, decolonial theory, or colonial legacies in education, and (d) reported quantifiable educational outcomes enabling effect size computation. Both experimental and quasi-experimental designs were included, alongside mixed-methods studies containing extractable quantitative data. Only peer-reviewed journal articles published in English between 2015 and 2025 were retained to ensure methodological quality and contemporary relevance.

Conceptual papers, commentaries, grey literature, and studies lacking extractable statistical indicators were excluded. This boundary-setting ensured coherence between theoretical framing and quantitative synthesis.

Study Selection and Inter-Rater Reliability

All retrieved records were imported into reference management software and deduplicated. Two independent reviewers conducted title and abstract screening followed by full-text eligibility assessment. Inter-rater agreement was calculated using Cohen's kappa coefficient, with $\kappa \geq 0.80$ interpreted as strong agreement. Discrepancies were resolved through structured deliberation to minimize subjective bias.

The search identified 150 records; after removing duplicates, 137 studies were screened. Of these, 79 met the criteria for qualitative synthesis. Forty-six studies reported sufficient

statistical data and were included in the quantitative meta-analysis. A PRISMA 2020 flow diagram documents each stage of the selection process.

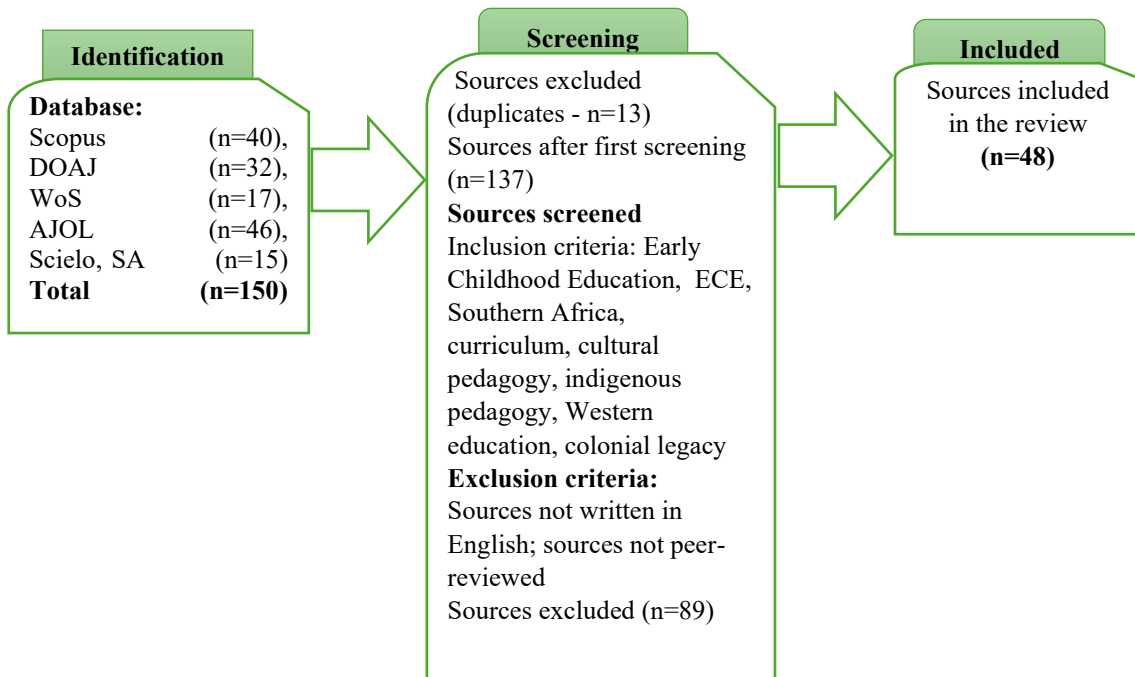


Figure 1. Source selection flow diagram

Data Extraction and Coding Procedures

A structured coding protocol was developed and pilot-tested on a subset of studies to ensure consistency. Extracted variables included study design, country, sample characteristics, intervention type, outcome measures, duration of intervention, and statistical data required for effect size calculation. Moderator variables (e.g., rural/urban context, teacher training level, intervention duration, theoretical framework) were coded to enable subgroup and meta-regression analyses.

Coding reliability was verified through double-coding of 20% of included studies, achieving agreement above 90%. This process enhanced internal validity and minimized extraction bias.

Risk of Bias and Methodological Quality Assessment

Methodological quality was evaluated using the Critical Appraisal Skills Programme (CASP) checklist for qualitative components and complementary quantitative appraisal frameworks. Risk of bias was assessed across domains including selection bias, performance bias, detection bias, attrition bias, and reporting bias.

Studies were categorized as low, moderate, or high risk of bias. Sensitivity analyses were conducted excluding high-risk studies to assess the robustness of pooled estimates. This layered appraisal approach strengthens inferential credibility and aligns with expectations for high-impact review journals.

Statistical Synthesis and Advanced Meta-Analytic Procedures

A random-effects model was employed to account for anticipated contextual and methodological heterogeneity across studies. Standardized mean differences (Hedges' g) were calculated for continuous outcomes, while odds ratios and correlation coefficients were converted into comparable effect size metrics when necessary.

Between-study heterogeneity was evaluated using Cochran's Q statistic and the I^2 index. Given expected contextual variability, meta-regression analyses were conducted to examine

potential moderators, including country context, intervention type, implementation duration, and teacher professional development components. Influence diagnostics and leave-one-out analyses were performed to detect outlier effects and assess stability of pooled results.

Publication Bias and Small-Study Effects

Publication bias was assessed using funnel plot asymmetry, Egger's regression test, and trim-and-fill adjustments. These procedures allowed estimation of potential missing studies and recalculation of adjusted pooled effect sizes. The convergence between adjusted and unadjusted models was examined to determine robustness of findings.

Integrative Synthesis and Theoretical Interpretation

Beyond statistical aggregation, findings were interpreted through a theory-informed synthesis framework integrating decolonial and ecological perspectives. Quantitative outcomes were contextualized within broader epistemological debates concerning curriculum transformation and Indigenous Knowledge Systems in Southern African ECE. This integrative approach ensures that statistical findings are analytically embedded within socio-cultural and postcolonial theoretical discourses, rather than treated as isolated numerical estimates.

RESULTS

This section centres on themes that interrogate the uneven ECE landscape across Southern Africa, shaped by historical, socio-economic, and policy-driven impacts.

Theoretical foundation underpinning the use of cultural pedagogy in Early Childhood Education

The literature reviewed (Padayachee et al., 2022) established that cultural pedagogy in ECE should be contextually appropriate, communally responsive, and rooted in children's lived experiences. In support, Dixit et al. indicate that it tends to challenge the Western education models' dominance through drawing on socially embedded learning styles and collective knowledge systems (Dixit et al., 2025). This upholds that cultural pedagogy nurtures interactive learning and is shaped by language, community, and culture. All this occurs in an environment that emphasises collective responsibility, mutual respect, and interconnectedness. Thus, learners were shown to co-construct knowledge through responsive dialogue and shared experiences, in contrast to competitive and individualistic models (Cupido et al., 2022). This contests the supremacy of Western education models by drawing on socially deep-rooted learning styles and collective knowledge systems.

Numerous studies (Jaxa, 2024; Pandit, 2025) stressed the role of IKS, with practices such as storytelling, music, oral traditions, and play in nurturing cognitive development and cultural knowledge. It is in this context that ECE's theoretical pillars are mostly anchored in Vygotsky's sociocultural theory and Freire's critical pedagogy. This emphasises the role of cultural tools and social interaction in learning, as well as the transformative potential of cultural pedagogy in decolonising curricula (Harrison & Clarke, 2022). So, the consulted literature positions cultural pedagogy as a participatory and inclusive foundation for ECE. This reinforces the significance of grounding early learning in local cultural settings to emulate indigenous social orders and morals.

This is made possible through the chat theory that provides a framework for understanding learning as a socially mediated activity shaped by cultural tools and community practices (Bernard, 2024). In Southern African ECE classrooms, this means pedagogy should move beyond fragmented curricula to embrace collaborative, child-centred activities that integrate IKS, alongside Western educational values. For example, teachers can utilise storytelling, song, and play as cultural tools to mediate learning, while community elders contribute local knowledge to enrich learning activities (Takona, 2024). This operationalisation of this theory highlights how teaching practices can foster resilience, identity affirmation, and equity by situating learning within children's lived cultural contexts.

In this sense, cultural pedagogy is seen as a vehicle for counterattacking epistemic prejudices, repossessing identity, and fostering agency among ECE learners and teachers. Hence, the necessity for the cultural pedagogy to tap into the all-inclusive IKS contexts, which infuse the traditional beliefs, ecological understanding, and communal conscience (Nanthambwe, 2025). In other words, this contests the compartmentalisation of knowledge typical in Western curricula, and in so doing endorses interdisciplinary experiential learning in ECE. Therefore, this theoretical foundation promotes the existence of an inclusive, transformative, and affirming ECE, placing learners within their cultural context, values knowledge from elders, and is reflective of the region's rich diversity (Cappiali, 2023).

Early Childhood Education curriculum fragmentation in Southern Africa

In this paper, the reviewed studies (Koopman, 2025; Oukouomi Noutchie, 2025) acknowledged that ECE in Southern Africa is marked by historic curriculum fragmentation rooted in colonial legacies. This is supported by Ezeanya-Esiobu, who postulated that the imposed Western education models displaced knowledge systems, languages, and indigenous pedagogies, resulting in the curricula failing to reflect their local realities and cultural relevance (Ezeanya-Esiobu, 2019). This deviation laid the foundation for persistent disparities in the quality, content, and accessibility of ECE provision across the region (Shen, 2023). In addition, the fragmented operative and governance structures that were imposed through colonial education policies undermined the post-colonial efforts to reform ECE in most Southern African countries (Ashokkumar et al., 2025). For instance, ministries responsible for health, social welfare, and education were found to operate independently, with limited coordination in shaping ECE policy formulation and implementation, thereby perpetuating incoherence and inefficiency in service delivery (Enhancing International Partnership and Co-Operation in Veneto, Italy, 2024). Thus, findings from this literature review underscore that curriculum fragmentation is not merely a historical residue but a continuing structural and operational challenge.

From another angle, the consulted literature (Gupta, 2022; Mligo, 2025) highlighted that though international donors have expanded access to ECE, they at times introduce external curricula and pedagogical approaches. This, at times tend to contradict national priorities and ethos. This has the potential to destabilise efforts to establish integrated ECE frameworks set to achieve inclusive and high-quality early learning for all children. The systematic review highlighted that donor-led curricula at times fail to reproduce indigenous realities, thereby reinforcing cultural disconnection and limiting the relevance of ECE (Loganathan et al., 2023). Thus, these donor-led curricula reform initiatives place more emphasis on Western instructional models, which limit the incorporation of IKS and culturally responsive pedagogy.

It was also acknowledged that teacher professional development programmes were also contributing to fragmentation, as they largely relied on Western teacher training models with restricted emphasis on culturally responsive pedagogy or IKS (Magoqa & Seleke, 2025). In support, Mpuangnan and Ntombela highlighted that teacher professional development curricula overlooked traditional knowledge, local languages, and community-based learning practices (Mpuangnan & Ntombela, 2024). This fortifies the disconnection between teachers and the realities of the children they serve. This pedagogical gap is perpetuated by over-reliance on imported instructional methods, which are often misaligned with the social and cultural environments of Southern African classrooms (Allen et al., 2017; Nganga & Kambutu, 2024). Hence, this divide leaves ECE teachers struggling to adapt to the cultural and linguistic contexts of learners, which in turn reduces engagement and learning outcomes.

Pedagogical marginalisation in Early Childhood Education

Conceptually, early childhood growth and development is widely recognised as a critical foundation for lifelong learning. However, the evidence from the reviewed literature highlighted that many children continue to experience inadequate treatment within ECE in Southern Africa (Feza & Chiphambo, 2022; Venter, 2022). In instances when racism manifests itself in the early years of life, it can have detrimental effects on the child's cognitive, language, motor, and

emotional development (Curenton et al., 2024). This marginalisation through race and ethnicity is not incidental but emerges from intersecting structural, cultural, and socio-economic factors. In Southern Africa, gender differences can be further compounded by the persistent gender bias in classroom practice and curricula (Shoko, 2025). This disconnect suggests that ECE is not merely a neutral site of learning but a contested space where social hierarchies are reproduced. This reveals a gap between policy rhetoric and lived reality, this exclusion.

This is in contrast with Bastian and Novitasari's call for gender-responsive education in the quest for equality and justice (Bastian & Novitasari, 2022). In support, Nurjannah and Hermanto emphasise the need to interrogate inequalities through the lens of inclusive education with the target of providing holistic services for children with special needs (Nurjannah & Hermanto, 2023). Marginalisation is multifaceted, yet policy responses remain siloed, addressing race, gender, or disability separately rather than within a coherent framework.

Cultural pedagogy as a transformative tool in Early Childhood Education

Findings from the systematic review highlighted cultural pedagogy as a transformative approach within ECE in Southern Africa (Shaik & Moodley, 2024). Thus, it fosters identity, inclusivity, affirmation, and participatory learning as it embeds children's language, norms, and lived experiences into the curricula. Some studies (Hannaway & Preez, 2021) highlighted that the integration of indigenous, communal practices in Southern African ECE counters Western models and fosters holistic development in learners. This acts as the vehicle for transmitting cultural knowledge and pedagogical tools.

In this regard, cultural pedagogy operates as an important transformative instrument in ECE, centering cultural identity as the foundation of learning. In this case, cultural pedagogy is not only an instructional method but also a transformative tool for decolonising the curricula (De Beer & Kriek, 2021). Hence, the adoption of culturally responsive methods facilitates higher engagement, improved developmental outcomes, and a stronger sense of belonging (Mbire-Chigumba et al., 2024). So, it disrupts epistemic hierarchies and re-centres indigenous knowledge in learning activities. This underscores the need for the ECE teacher to possess strong pedagogical content knowledge tailored to multicultural and multilingual classrooms (Veliz et al., 2025). However, some reviewed literature (Naeem, 2022; Pratiwi et al., 2023) highlighted the existence of a systemic gap, with some ECE teachers relying more on experiential learning than formal training to manage diversity. This systematic review provided clear evidence that cultural pedagogy has the potential to transform ECE by valuing children's cultural identities.

Child-centred and community-based learning in Early Childhood Education

The findings from the systematic review (Kunda Marron, 2020; Wood, 2023) identified child-centred and community-based learning as critical approaches for strengthening ECE. In other words, the reviewed literature revealed that child-centred pedagogy enhances developmental outcomes by prioritising learners' interests, agency, and active participation in the learning process (Veraksa et al., 2023). ECE curricula grounded in children's lived experiences foster creativity, problem-solving, socio-emotional growth, and affirm identity. In this case, community-based learning plays a transformative role in embedding social cohesion and cultural relevance into ECE. This highlights that storytelling, play, oral traditions, and communal activities serve as pedagogical tools that transmit cultural knowledge while promoting inclusion. So, the community-based and child-centred approaches counteract the supremacy of the Western one-size-fits-all by situating ECE within the indigenous contexts (Xu, 2022). In support, Murray noted that these approaches empower teachers to act as facilitators who create participatory ECE environments, where children's voices are valued (Murray, 2024).

Comparison of the proposed framework with established culture-Based Early Childhood Education models

The proposed cultural pedagogy framework builds upon established culture-based approaches (multicultural education, culturally responsive pedagogy) that emphasise the importance of

integrating cultural narratives in ECE. This primarily focuses on representation and inclusivity, ensuring that children's identities are reflected in learning materials and instructional methods. However, this proposed framework advances beyond representation by conceptualising culture as a dynamic and co-constructed process rather than a static set of traditions or artefacts. This tends to contrast with the earlier frameworks that, at times, treated culture as content to be added to existing curricula. Thus, it situates cultural knowledge within ongoing dialogues among the stakeholders in ECE. This transformation brings about the following differences: a)relational engagement: Whereas multicultural curricula often emphasise exposure to diverse perspectives, the proposed cultural pedagogy framework centres on sustained partnerships with families and communities to co-create learning experiences; b)contextual adaptability: Traditional models sometimes risk applying standardised multicultural templates across diverse contexts. The proposed framework accentuates adaptability, allowing practices to evolve in response to local cultural ecologies and community priorities; c)transformative orientation: Beyond affirming cultural identities, the anticipated framework seeks to challenge systemic inequities and foster social justice, aligning with critical pedagogical traditions (Amankwa et al., 2026). In this way, while earlier culture-based ECE models laid the basis for inclusivity and representation, the proposed framework extends their scope by positioning culture as a living, participatory construct integral to pedagogy, curriculum design, and institutional practice.

Challenges and opportunities in transforming ECE through cultural pedagogy

The results of the systematic review explicitly demonstrate that cultural pedagogy presents both challenges and opportunities in the transformation of ECE. On the one hand, several studies revealed persistent challenges, including the dominance of Western education models that continue to overshadow indigenous pedagogies and limit cultural relevance (Mgaiwa & Amani, 2024). Teacher preparation gaps were also consistently identified, with evidence showing that many educators are trained in Western frameworks and lack exposure to IKS, leaving them ill-equipped to implement culturally responsive practices (Nganga & Kambutu, 2024). In addition, fragmented governance structures and donor-driven agendas were found to hinder the integration of cultural pedagogy into national curricula (Nxumalo, 2019), while resource constraints in underfunded ECE systems, particularly in rural communities, further restricted the embedding of the cultural practices. On the other hand, the systematic review highlighted significant opportunities. Evidence demonstrated that cultural pedagogy fosters identity affirmation, resilience, and inclusion by embedding children's languages, traditions, and lived experiences into learning (Abidogun & Falola, 2020).

Despite these challenges, in Southern Africa, the growing recognition of the importance of culturally grounded ECE has sparked interest among different stakeholders (teachers, researchers, and community leaders) in crafting context-sensitive curricula (Nelson-Barber et al., 2024). It can be indicated that the viability of cultural pedagogy in enhancing learner engagement and identity formation. This can be advanced through grassroots initiatives like community-based ECE centres and storytelling programmes. At the regional level, the Southern African Development Community (SADC) offers a platform for knowledge exchange, policy harmonisation, and cross-border collaboration (Chikuvadze et al., 2025). Thus, by leveraging collective cultural heritage and educational priorities, the region can co-create policies that endorse inclusive and culturally pertinent ECE curricula (Kangana et al., 2024). Lastly, the transformation of ECE in Southern Africa requires a bold reimagining of education as a culturally affirming and socially responsive endeavour (Makeremese & Mahlomaholo, 2023).

DISCUSSION

This systematic review demonstrates that Early Childhood Education (ECE) in Southern Africa remains structurally uneven, shaped by the enduring interaction of colonial epistemic legacies, socio-economic stratification, and fragmented governance architectures. The persistence of curriculum fragmentation and pedagogical marginalisation is not merely a residual historical

condition; rather, it reflects the continued institutionalisation of externally derived educational models within policy, teacher preparation, and classroom practice. The convergence of donor-driven curricular diffusion, siloed ministerial governance, and Western-oriented teacher training collectively sustains inequities in access, quality, and cultural relevance.

The findings suggest that curriculum fragmentation operates as both an administrative and epistemological phenomenon. At the administrative level, policy incoherence and weak inter-ministerial coordination impede systemic integration (Itiade James Akinbi & Lawrence Oluwole, 2025). At the epistemological level, dominant pedagogical paradigms privilege standardised, individualistic models that insufficiently reflect local cultural ecologies. This dual-layered fragmentation contributes to misalignment between national reform rhetoric and classroom enactment.

Within this context, cultural pedagogy emerges as a theoretically grounded and practically viable reorientation framework. Anchored in Vygotsky's sociocultural theory, Freire's critical pedagogy, and Cultural-Historical Activity Theory (CHAT), it conceptualises learning as socially mediated, dialogic, and culturally embedded. By integrating Indigenous Knowledge Systems (IKS), Western pedagogical values, and cultural capital, cultural pedagogy reframes ECE as a site of epistemic negotiation rather than epistemic hierarchy (Mdletshe, 2025). Storytelling, play, oral traditions, and community participation function as mediational tools that embed learning within children's lived realities while contesting the uncritical dominance of Western curricular templates.

Importantly, the review indicates that cultural pedagogy does not reject Western educational theory outright; instead, it repositions it within pluralistic epistemic configurations. This integrative orientation enables the co-existence of globally recognised developmental frameworks and locally embedded knowledge systems. Such positioning is particularly significant in contexts marked by racialised, gendered, and socio-economic inequalities, where pedagogical marginalisation intersects with structural exclusion. Evidence reviewed here confirms that race, gender, disability, and socio-economic status continue to shape classroom experiences, reinforcing the argument that ECE is not a neutral space but a socially contested domain.

Cultural pedagogy offers a countervailing trajectory by embedding inclusivity, identity affirmation, and community-based engagement within curriculum and practice (Chowdhury & Alzarrad, 2025). Child-centred and community-based approaches, in particular, emerge as operational mechanisms through which cultural integration becomes pedagogically tangible. These approaches enhance learner agency, socio-emotional development, and belonging while repositioning teachers as facilitators of participatory knowledge construction. In doing so, they disrupt homogenised "one-size-fits-all" models and situate early learning within indigenous contexts (Jaiswal, 2025).

Nevertheless, the transformative potential of cultural pedagogy remains contingent upon structural reform. Persistent reliance on Western teacher education frameworks, governance fragmentation, and resource constraints—particularly in rural settings—limit scalability and institutionalisation. The findings therefore underscore that cultural pedagogy cannot function solely as a classroom-level innovation; it requires systemic embedding across policy, governance, and professional preparation structures.

At the regional level, opportunities emerge through grassroots initiatives and collaborative platforms such as SADC, which offer potential for policy harmonisation and cross-border knowledge exchange (Gibbens & Cilliers, 2023). The strategic mobilisation of collective cultural heritage and coordinated reform agendas could reposition ECE as a foundational site for resilience, equity, and social justice. Transformation, however, demands not incremental curricular modification but an epistemic reconfiguration of how early learning is conceptualised and governed.

Implications

Embedding cultural pedagogy into teacher education, professional development, and national curriculum frameworks is essential for systemic coherence. In teacher preparation, this entails cultivating critical reflexivity, cultural competence, and sustained engagement with community-based learning practices. Professional development initiatives should move beyond episodic training toward structured, long-term support for culturally responsive pedagogy.

At the curriculum level, reform must transcend symbolic representation and integrate children's linguistic, ecological, and communal realities into core learning design. Governance reforms should prioritise inter-ministerial coordination and alignment between donor initiatives and national priorities to reduce policy fragmentation. Collectively, these measures position culture not as an adjunct to pedagogy but as a constitutive dimension of educational practice.

Research Contribution

Existing culture-based ECE models, both regionally and globally, have emphasised multicultural representation, parental engagement, and community participation. While these approaches have expanded inclusivity, they often address discrete dimensions of reform without integrating governance, teacher preparation, and epistemic alignment. The synthesis advanced in this study extends beyond additive multicultural models by conceptualising IKS, Western pedagogical values, and cultural capital as interwoven components of a unified curricular framework.

Unlike earlier models that treat these elements as parallel strands, the proposed framework situates them within a coherent systemic architecture that encompasses curriculum design, teacher education, and policy governance. This integrative positioning contributes to international debates on decolonisation and culturally responsive education by demonstrating how epistemic justice can be operationalised within formal education systems rather than remaining aspirational rhetoric. The framework thus advances both theoretical refinement and applied policy relevance in comparative ECE scholarship.

Limitations

This review focused on selected contexts within Southern Africa, which may not fully represent the heterogeneity of ECE practices across the region. Variability in national policy environments, resource allocation, and socio-cultural dynamics may influence the transferability of findings. Additionally, while cultural pedagogy is conceptualised as a transformative framework, challenges related to standardisation, policy scalability, and cross-national implementation remain. These limitations suggest the need for cautious contextual interpretation.

Suggestions

Future research should undertake comparative cross-national analyses to capture the diversity of cultural ecologies and policy architectures across Southern Africa. Longitudinal studies are needed to examine the sustained impact of culturally grounded curricula on identity formation, social cohesion, and academic trajectories. Further inquiry should explore how cultural pedagogy intersects with digital technologies in early learning environments, particularly in resource-constrained contexts.

Research on teacher education remains especially critical. Empirical investigation into how educators can systematically integrate IKS into classroom practice would provide actionable insights for reform. Finally, policy-oriented research should examine mechanisms for harmonising governance frameworks and aligning donor initiatives with nationally embedded cultural priorities.

CONCLUSION

This systematic review demonstrates that ECE in Southern Africa is constrained by curriculum fragmentation, pedagogical marginalisation, and governance incoherence rooted in enduring epistemic hierarchies. Cultural pedagogy offers a transformative pathway by integrating

Indigenous Knowledge Systems, Western pedagogical values, and cultural capital into a coherent curricular architecture. However, its effectiveness depends on systemic embedding across teacher preparation, policy coordination, and institutional practice.

Strengthening ECE in the region requires harmonised governance frameworks, culturally responsive teacher education, sustained community participation, and regional collaboration to mitigate fragmentation. By situating early learning within culturally grounded and socially responsive paradigms, ECE can function as a foundational site for equity, resilience, and epistemic justice—while contributing meaningfully to global debates on decolonisation and culturally relevant education.

AUTHOR CONTRIBUTION STATEMENT

Pinias Chikuvadze: Conceptualization and Writing original draft. **Christopher Mutseekwa:** Methodology, Formal Analysis, and Supervision. **Claretah Makuvire:** Validation and Resources. **Joseph Zuva:** Writing - Review & Editing and Software.

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