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Place-based learning in social studies education: a systematic review of implementation, outcomes, and enabling conditions

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ABSTRACT

Requests that schools become more relevant, more civically involved, and more rooted in local areas have generated a fresh intellectual interest in place-based learning. Although social studies education seems to be one of the area's most suitable to this kind of approach, it is rather unclear to what extent it actually happens. The paper presents a systematic literature review of studies reporting on the use of place-based learning in social studies education together with the outcomes and the enabling circumstances that were identified. After following the recommendations of the PRISMA 2020 statement and scanning the Scopus database in a structured way, 255 studies, including duplicates, were found. The records were then deduplicated, and titles, abstracts, and full papers were scrutinized to identify those matching the eligibility criteria. Eighteen research and conceptual papers published between 2021 and 2026 were finally selected, and a thematic synthesis was used to obtain themes that can be generalized. Results show that place-based learning is mainly conducted using community-based collaborations, local-heritage and archival investigations, and field-based geographic investigations. It is also consistently linked to gains in civic responsibility, conceptual grasp, and emotional involvement, and at the same time it helps teacher training. A different understanding of place from that of most mainstream theories came out as a unique theoretical thread: Indigenous and decolonial ideas of place. The study also highlights areas where research could be made more methodologically sound and equitable. A number of educational topics, such as curriculum development, teacher education, and policy, are also discussed, and a list of possible research topics related to longitudinal, comparative, and outcome-based research is suggested.



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Introduction

Education systems around the world have to deal with the challenge of producing students who are not only good learners but also responsible citizens, aware of ecological issues, connected to local communities. The focus on the place has recently become one of such teaching and learning strategies that make use of the students' direct environment, its cultural and natural aspects of the area, as well as, histories and peoples, instead of simply treating them as the background to the main curriculum (Wooltorton et al. 2020), (Nicol & Sangster, 2019). The concept behind place-based pedagogy is that the journey to deep and transferable learning has its roots in the understanding and experiences of an immediate community. Only after that the learners move to national, or even global aspects, which is also a feature of the civic and humanistic orientation of social studies curriculum (van Gelderen & Guthadjaka, 2019). Standardization and benchmarking at international level have not only

made education less diversified but also led to the emergence of an argument against the detachment of the educational content from local needs. The changing attitude of the teachers to place-sensitive approaches of curriculum delivery is now seen as one of the main factors in curriculum development (Özkara! & Taş, 2018).

Subject areas like history, civics and citizenship, and human geography fall under social studies and naturally lend themselves to place-based learning. The reason for this is simply that the goals of this area, such as developing students who can think critically, get involved and be responsible citizens, all are intimately related to the places through which civic activities proceed. With that in mind, local history, archaeology, and testimonies can help students understand past events through their own surroundings (Dulnau & Ledesma, 2020).

Civic learning has recently been considered a conversation between parties where difference comes face to face in talk and in community rather than in an abstract way (Brown & Warwick, 2019). Therefore, such a type of learning is very suitable for a setting where one gets different perspectives through direct experience.

Variety has been increasing in both methodologies and technology regarding how place is integrated into the curriculum. The proposal of using digital and ubiquitous computing infrastructures to create mediation of place-based history lessons is part of this movement (Begmatov et al., 2025). In contrast, visual and digital media have served to connect geographic and aesthetic learning (Ericksen & Häikiö, 2025).

An even earlier instance was the immersion of students in landscape through travel-based public-health education which has demonstrated, even at that time, the power of experiential learning in a meaningful physical setting (Fifolt & McCormick, 2020). As can be seen, these innovations are widening the range of options for place-based teaching, but they are also causing the description of the approach and its mechanisms to become more complex.

Even so, the literature has been split into so many ways that the development of knowledge has been limited. Most of the rigorous empirical studies of place-based learning have been done mainly in environmental science, geoscience and sustainability education, where place is connected only to landscapes, hazards and ecological systems (Boháč & Drápela, 2023; Wilson et al., 2023), or in outdoor, health and stewardship education (Stancil et al., 2026; Laver et al., 2024). Although these studies have contributed greatly, their results do not fit well with the unique objectives of social studies, and no one has summarized yet in a clear way how place-based learning works at the intersection of history, civics and human geography. Being scattered in this way among different disciplines is a major gap. It hampers both the development of theory and the provision of advice to teachers of social studies. Findings derived from place understood as watersheds, ecosystems and geological hazards, can barely be applied to classes focused on citizen formation, past contestation and belonging, without a synthesis recognizing this difference that would leave teachers without guidance based on solid evidence.

In this respect, the second gap is a conceptual and methodological one. The idea of place varies from physical settings to relational and ontological understandings, and Indigenous views of Place and Country are often overlooked despite their being arguably some of the most fertile theorisations (Ligtermoet et al., 2023). Where place-based interventions are examined, the studies tend to be limited to one or a few locations and are cross-sectional in nature with little reference to longitudinal and comparison evidence and the delineation among place-based education itself, on the one hand, and related concepts such as community-based and service learning, on the other, is usually left unclear (Edwards et al., 2022; Oe et al., 2022). The limitations as above in terms of conceptualisation and designs hinder the evaluation of the efficacy and the accumulation of the data across different studies and they indicate the necessity of a synthesising study which explicitly states for each of the studies it includes, how the research team defines place.

In combination, these gaps call for a special synthesis. University and job-related pressures keep changing not only where but also why place-based learning is made accessible (Blackledge, 2021; Fleming et al., 2026), and even while community-university partnerships and immersion programmes are growing the equity side of such initiatives is only slightly examined (Burton, 2019; Fuller et al., 2024). Other fields demonstrate that learning experiences grounded in individual experience and local environment can enhance engagement and identity formation in science and STEM disciplines (Krosnick & Moore, 2025; Meade et al., 2025; Jagger et al., 2025) and that geomorphological and cultural-heritage sites can serve as excellent learning tools (Ruiz-Pedrosa et al., 2025).

As a result it is not only time but also highly necessary to summarize all that has been found out about place-based learning especially in social studies education, and also to figure out who are the facilitators of its introduction, what are the outcomes it produces and under what conditions, to name but a few. This synthesis will therefore be based on three main questions:

RQ1: How has place-based learning in social studies education changed with the educational stages and the location and culture of the society involved?

RQ2: What kind of intellectual, social and civic, as well as emotional outcomes are linked to place-based learning in social studies education?

RQ3: What pedagogical approaches, enabling factors, and constraints contribute to the integration of place-based learning in social studies?

Method

Research Design and Conceptual Framework

The study is based on a method for reviewing the literature in a systematic way (SLR), a procedure that has the merits of clarity, replicability, and evidence-based synthesis (Tranfield et al., 2003). SLR approach would be suitable for this set of questions which are not about verification but integration, which means that we want to bring together the findings on methods, consequences, and conditions from different sources. The research is aligned with the Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Review and Meta-Analyses (PRISMA) 2020 Statement (Page, McKenzie, et al., 2021) throughout. It is the guidelines that help to understand all the steps to do the review (Page, Moher, et al., 2021) and have been adhered methodologically to explanation and elaboration standards (Liberati et al., 2009).

Database Search Strategy

The search for publications combined elements related to teaching strategy, curricular field, and educational setting, and was done for title, abstract, and keyword fields. The final search string looked like

TITLE-ABS-KEY ("Place-Based Learning" OR "community-Based learning") AND (social studies" OR history education citizenship education" OR geography education)

The combination of truncation and Boolean operators helps us find different spellings and combinations of the words and phrase searching helps us preserve the original structure of some of the constructs. The TITLE-ABS-KEY field restricts the search to records in which the concepts were genuinely present beyond just being mentioned.

In the second step, further restrictions were applied to the language, type of document, and subject area to ensure the records selected meet the criteria set out for eligibility.

Database and Online Search Tools

Scopus was used as a main resource of information because it encompasses peer-reviewed social sciences literature across many disciplines, and the bibliographic metadata in the index are accurate. One session of search was enough to locate all the materials and to export the data to Excel, and the dataset was used for the screening and final analysis. We did not use any other electronic resource as a complement.

The drawbacks of depending on only one information resource are considered one of the aspects that limit the present review.

Eligibility

The decision to include or exclude a paper was taken after comparing it against the set of inclusion and exclusion criteria summarized in Table 1.

Table 1. Inclusion and Exclusion Criteria

Criterion	Inclusion	Exclusion
Language	Published in English	Non-English publications
Document type	Peer-reviewed journal article	Conference papers, book chapters, editorials, literature reviews, and bibliometric studies
Publication period	2018–2026	Published before 2018
Subject area	Social studies education (history, civics and citizenship, human geography, heritage)	Natural sciences, geosciences, medicine and health, and other unrelated disciplines
Accessibility	Full text available	Abstract only or full text inaccessible

Relevance	Directly addresses place-based learning within social studies education	Tangential or incidental mention of place-based learning
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We included papers on the topic that focus mainly on social studies education, excluding those that are mainly about natural sciences, health care professions, or other disciplines irrelevant to the topic, as well as those that are empirical or primary.

Screening for Studies in the Review

The screening process was conducted in three stages following PRISMA 2020 recommendations (Page et al., 2021). Stage 1 (identification): records were exported to Rayyan (Ouzzani et al., 2016) and duplicates removed. Stage 2 (screening): two reviewers independently screened titles and abstracts against the eligibility criteria, with disagreements resolved through discussion or consultation with a third reviewer. Inter-rater agreement was calculated and found to be strong (Cohen's $\kappa = 0.87$). Stage 3 (eligibility): full texts of potentially eligible studies were retrieved and independently assessed for eligibility by two reviewers, with reasons for exclusion documented. Marginal cases were resolved through discussion and reference to the inclusion criteria.

Quality Assessment

The methodological quality of included studies was assessed using the Mixed Methods Appraisal Tool (MMAT) (Hong et al., 2018), a validated instrument appropriate for systematic reviews including qualitative, quantitative, and mixed methods studies. Each study was rated on five criteria relevant to its design: (1) clear research question, (2) appropriate methodology, (3) appropriate sampling, (4) appropriate data collection, and (5) appropriate data analysis. Studies were rated as meeting, partially meeting, or not meeting each criterion (Souto et al., 2015). Studies that did not meet at least four of the five criteria were excluded from the synthesis. This approach provides standardized and transparent quality assessment.

Data Extraction Method

A standardised data extraction tool was used for all the included studies for the purpose of providing the name of the author and year of publication, country and setting of the study, participants/sample, place-based intervention/approach in general description, the type of place-based study, study/research design/strategie of the investigation, outcomes under consideration, and the main findings of the investigation. Data extraction was done directly from the reports included, the tables of the descriptive characteristics were filled as a database, and also supported theme synthesis as a narrative form and as a content analysis tool.

Network and Bibliometric Analysis Approach

If the number of papers that will finally be included in the review is quite small compared to that needed for co-citation or co-authorship methods analysis then no such formal network analysis was carried out. Therefore, instead, a brief description of the included studies through bibliometric profiling that would give some statistics, for example, how many articles were published over time or from which countries was performed as well as, a thematic analysis based on keywords and content of the articles, the latter being useful to see a map of conceptual structures in this research field.

Data and Results Integration

Thematic synthesis method was chosen for combining the evidence. It helps researchers not only to gather evidence from several studies but also find analytical themes that match review aims. Codes were first generated as categories from the data extracts and then grouped in similar ways into themes, which was a process that went on until the main themes were reached. Finally, to ensure robustness of the themes a number of the primary reports were revisited to determine if they supported the themes or not as well as, disconfirming cases were checked, and then each theme was linked with the corresponding research question.

Results Reporting and Documentation

The authors have documented the steps of the review procedure and how it should be reported, following PRISMA 2020 checklist, and the flow of documents through identification, initial screening, eligibility and finally decision to include is clearly presented in the figure shown as Figure 1 (Page, McKenzie, et al., 2021). An openness in sharing of the search terms and reasons for inclusion and exclusion of a study not only helps in making the review replicable but readers can also trust that the findings have been synthesized appropriately.

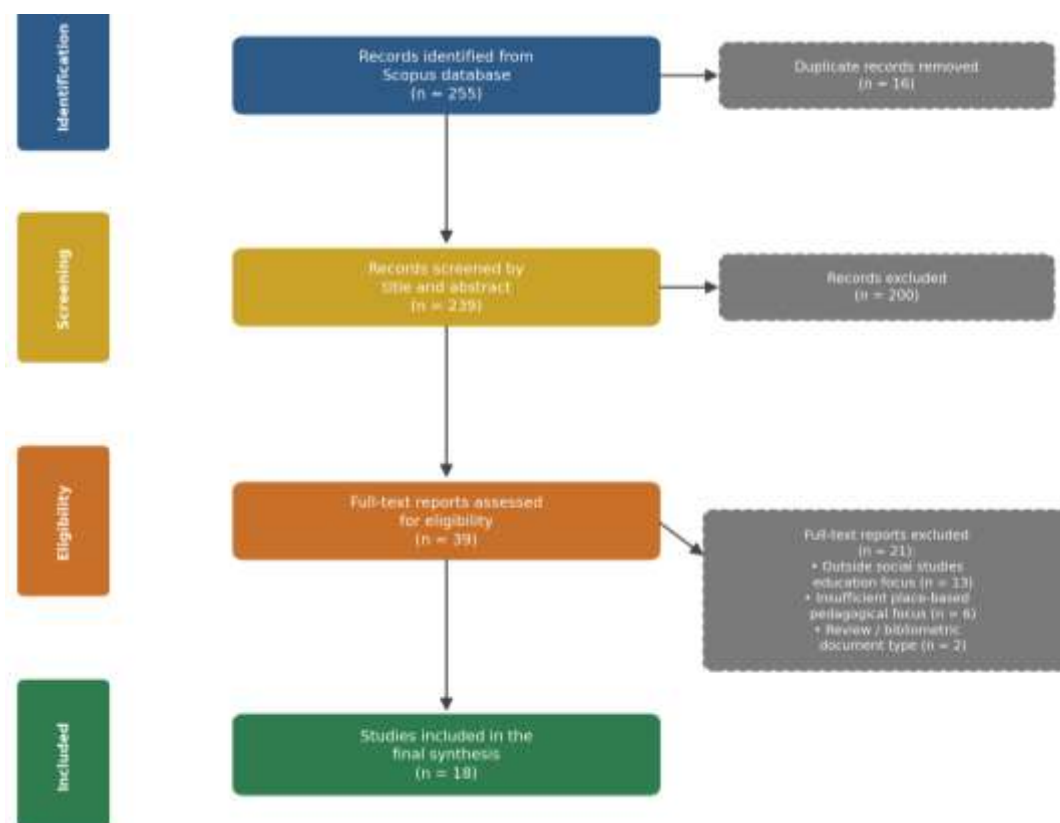


Figure 1. PRISMA 2020 flow diagram representing the steps of study identification, screening, eligibility, and inclusion in the review.

Results and Discussions

Findings from study selection

Through the structured Scopus search, a total of 255 publications have been brought to attention. After eliminating 16 duplicates, the reviewers screened all the remaining 239 titles and abstracts, with 200 of them excluded due to being about social studies education in a very minimal or indirect way. There still remained 39 papers to be evaluated at the full-text stage where 21 were found not eligible because of one of the reasons: mainly (13) they were about topics other than social studies education e.g., natural sciences, geosciences, health, and sustainability; (6) the place-based teaching was only slightly mentioned; (2) they were review articles or bibliometrics. The final list of 18 primary reports, all of which met all the criteria set out, were kept for meta-synthesis as it is the case for the flow chart in Figure 1.

General information about the papers

All the papers selected for the synthesis have been published lately from 2021 to 2026, which shows that this topic of social studies education has been increasingly gaining the attention of scholars for quite some time now. According to the temporal trend depicted in Figure 2, research activity has been pretty stable with a fairly even distribution across years except for a slight spike in the year 2023. So the increase of research papers published in 2023 does not indicate the sudden popularity of this research topic but rather a constant interest from academicians in this field.

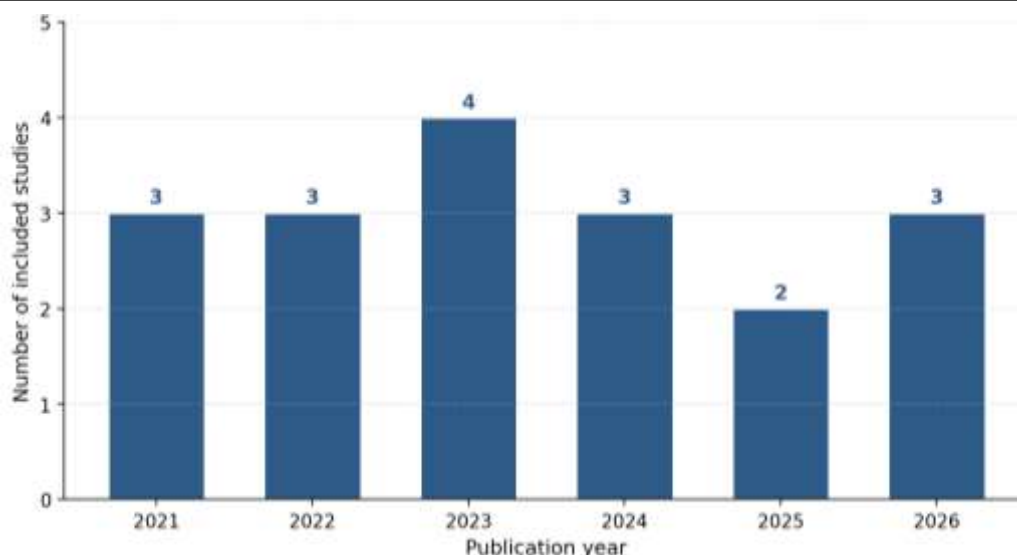


Figure 2. The number of the included studies published in each year.

As is shown in Figure 3, there is a geographic clustering of the corpus with Australia being by far the most prolific in terms of research output. Canada follows and then other four countries: Portugal, Thailand, and the United States have also published studies, whereas some of the other countries have published only one study, those are Ghana, New Zealand, Slovakia, Sweden, and the United Kingdom.

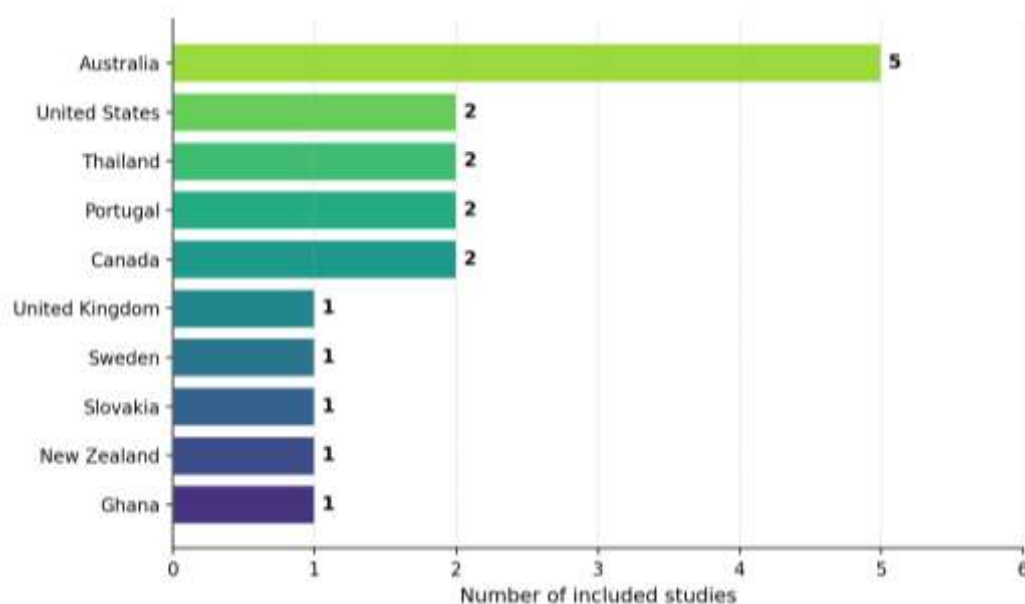


Figure 3. Countries that had studies included.

By getting close to them, the way the corpus is constructed methodologically is actually quite representative of what is going on in the field today. The main bulk of the studies are those of the qualitative case and practitioner inquiries, and this is very telling that at the research level the attention is still mainly placed on capturing and documenting how placebased learning is perceived and how it is realized in different classrooms and communities. At least two conceptual and philosophical types of work are also presented as evidence that the field is at the same time working out place as a phenomenon and determining how place could be best pedagogically grounded and not merely accepted as the settled questions. However, despite their relatively small presence, even mixed method designs are there, but in reality mixed-method approach is the least represented, and only one study truly adopts a longitudinal perspective. The overall structure points out that there is a lot of depth and contextual detail in the evidence, and also, on the other hand, the types of comparative, cumulative, and outcome-tracking studies that could help in formulating much clearer causal and generalisable statements

are quite few. Therefore, in the very first line, the descriptive nature of the study forecasts the critical discussion of the findings and also sets the stage for interpreting the results as having come from a relatively mature literature, though it is still growing and emerging. A full picture of the features of the included studies is shown in Table 2, while Table 3 presents the distribution of the studies by theme and method.

Table 2. Summary of Included Studies

No	Title	Author(s)	Year	Country	Method	Key Findings
1	Enacting a Latinx Decolonial Politic of Belonging: Latinx Community Workers' Experiences Negotiating Identity and Citizenship in Toronto, Canada	Cahuas & Matute	2021	Canada	Qualitative (interpretive)	Community-based learning initiatives led by Latinx community workers fostered dialogue on settler colonialism and reframed citizenship as a decolonial practice of belonging.
2	Working toward a place-based online pedagogy	Maxwell, Burke & Salton	2024	Australia	Qualitative (practitioner inquiry)	Place-based pedagogy enabled online pre-service teachers to contextualise abstract concepts within their own locales; online delivery did not diminish, and could enhance, place-based inquiry.
3	Place, empire, environmental education, and the Community of Inquiry	Thornton, Burgh & Graham	2024	Australia	Conceptual (philosophical)	Reconceptualised the community of inquiry as a place-responsive pedagogy grounded in Indigenous philosophy, with direct implications for teacher preparation.
4	Interdisciplinary Community Based Learning to Enhance Competence of Digital Citizenship of Social Studies Pre-Service Teachers in the Thai Context: Pedagogical Approaches Perspective	Jarupongputtana, Mangkhang, Dibyamandala & Manokarn	2022	Thailand	Qualitative (content analysis / grounded theory)	Synthesised digital-citizenship competencies with interdisciplinary community-based learning into pedagogical guidelines for cultivating digital citizenship among social studies pre-service teachers.
5	Religion, Ethics, and Academic Community Engagement: Looking Back, Looking Ahead	Sessions & Williams	2024	United States	Conceptual (review essay)	Called for stronger interdisciplinary dialogue between religious ethics and community engagement, surfacing neoliberal pressures and hegemonic biases in

						community-engaged learning.
6	Historians and High School Students as Partners: Community-based Learning Experiences as a Tool for Democratizing Research	Yeboah, Getz, Kertsman & George	2023	Ghana	Qualitative (intervention case)	A community-based history project positioned students as co-creators, democratising research, building community trust, and nurturing future historians from local communities.
7	Bringing geography to the community: community-based learning and the geography classroom	Rock	2022	United States	Conceptual (pedagogical account)	Linking place to pedagogy through community-based learning and spatial citizenship deepened student engagement and built transferable civic-engagement skills.
8	Putting the past in place: meetings with local archives in history education	Strand	2025	Sweden	Qualitative (single case study)	Place-based history education connected classrooms with archives and heritage institutions; logistical and digitisation barriers constrained collaboration, while eclectic teaching strategies were most productive.
9	Citizenship Outcomes and Place-Based Learning Environments in an Integrated Environmental Studies Program	Sturrock & Zandvliet	2023	Canada	Mixed methods (longitudinal case)	Place-based learning environments were closely and durably linked to students' long-term active-citizenship outcomes, with perceptions remaining stable over five to eight years.
10	Creating the Conditions for Geographic Conceptual Development in Post-Primary Students through Collaborative Guided Inquiry	Kriewaldt, Robertson & Ziebell	2023	Australia	Qualitative (classroom inquiry)	Collaborative, place-anchored guided inquiry deepened geographic conceptual understanding and critical thinking, with structured teacher guidance a decisive enabling condition.
11	'Making Heritage Matter'? Teaching local mining history in primary schools	Grimshaw & Mates	2022	United Kingdom	Qualitative (observation, interviews, focus groups)	Teaching local industrial history aligned with national-curriculum demands, engaged pupils across

						gender and ethnicity, and supported identity, aided by community partnerships.
12	Holding together Hope and despair: Transformative learning through virtual place-based education in Aotearoa, New Zealand	Beban & Korson	2025	New Zealand	Qualitative (survey)	Virtual place-based education evoked joy, unsettlement, and empowerment, enabling transformative learning through productive discomfort and new connections.
13	Local Knowledge Integrated in Learning Experiences: The Case of Schools and Communities from Rural Border Regions of the Mainland Portugal	da Silva	2023	Portugal	Mixed methods	Rural schools treated communities as both resource and curriculum, integrating local knowledge to counter its erosion while still meeting national standards.
14	Place as a microcosm: Community-based citizenship education approaches among schools and rural low-density communities	Silva & Silva	2026	Portugal	Mixed methods	Community-based citizenship education in rural schools mobilised diverse community actors to promote well-being, social cohesion, and the valuing of local cultures and realities.
15	Place-based learning during the 'field course abroad' in higher education of geography	Žoncová, Madleňák & Gajdoš	2026	Slovakia	Qualitative (thematic, MaxQDA)	An international field course delivered place-based and peer learning that strengthened geographical understanding alongside marked socio-emotional and interpersonal benefits.
16	From Local to Plural Locality: Reconceptualizing Global Citizenship Education in Thailand and ASEAN	Jatuporn & Youngwan	2026	Thailand	Conceptual (critical analysis)	Integrating place-based education with critical global-citizenship frameworks foregrounded plural locality, teacher agency, and the decolonising of regional curricula.
17	Place-based philosophical education:	Thornton, Graham & Burgh	2021	Australia	Conceptual (philosophical)	A place-based community of inquiry challenged classroom neutrality and drew

	reconstructing 'place', reconstructing ethics					on Indigenous understandings of Place to open pathways to ethical education.
18	Aboriginal Community-led Preservice Teacher Education: Learning from Country in the City	Thorpe, Burgess & Egan	2021	Australia	Qualitative (surveys and yarns, n = 64)	Community-led 'Learning from Country' experiences built pre-service teachers' knowledge and confidence in Aboriginal education through experiential 'learning by doing'.

Table 3. Classification of Included Studies by Theme and Method

No	Author(s)	Year	Country	Research Design	Theme / Focus	Outcome
1	Cahuas & Matute	2021	Canada	Qualitative (interpretive)	Citizenship & civic belonging	Decolonial citizenship; community dialogue
2	Maxwell, Burke & Salton	2024	Australia	Qualitative (practitioner inquiry)	Community engagement, ethics & transformative learning	Contextualised conceptual learning; teacher readiness
3	Thornton, Burgh & Graham	2024	Australia	Conceptual (philosophical)	Indigenous & decolonial place pedagogy	Place-responsive pedagogy; teacher preparation
4	Jarupongputtana, Mangkhang, Dibyamandala & Manokarn	2022	Thailand	Qualitative (content analysis / grounded theory)	Citizenship & civic belonging	Digital-citizenship competencies for pre-service teachers
5	Sessions & Williams	2024	United States	Conceptual (review essay)	Community engagement, ethics & transformative learning	Critique and agenda for community-engaged ethics
6	Yeboah, Getz, Kertsman & George	2023	Ghana	Qualitative (intervention case)	History & heritage education	Democratised research; future historians
7	Rock	2022	United States	Conceptual (pedagogical account)	Geography & spatial inquiry	Spatial citizenship; civic-engagement skills
8	Strand	2025	Sweden	Qualitative (single case study)	History & heritage education	School–archive collaboration; local history
9	Sturrock & Zandvliet	2023	Canada	Mixed methods (longitudinal case)	Citizenship & civic belonging	Durable active-citizenship outcomes

10	Kriewaldt, Robertson & Ziebell	2023	Australia	Qualitative (classroom inquiry)	Geography & spatial inquiry	Geographic conceptual development; critical thinking
11	Grimshaw & Mates	2022	United Kingdom	Qualitative (observation, interviews, focus groups)	History & heritage education	Pupil engagement; identity; curriculum fit
12	Beban & Korson	2025	New Zealand	Qualitative (survey)	Community engagement, ethics & transformative learning	Transformative learning through affect
13	da Silva	2023	Portugal	Mixed methods	Rural schools & local knowledge	Local knowledge as curriculum; resilience
14	Silva & Silva	2026	Portugal	Mixed methods	Rural schools & local knowledge	Social cohesion; valuing of local culture
15	Žoncová, Madleňák & Gajdoš	2026	Slovakia	Qualitative (thematic, MaxQDA)	Geography & spatial inquiry	Geographic understanding; socio-emotional gains
16	Jatuporn & Youngwan	2026	Thailand	Conceptual (critical analysis)	Citizenship & civic belonging	Plural locality; teacher agency; decolonising
17	Thornton, Graham & Burgh	2021	Australia	Conceptual (philosophical)	Indigenous & decolonial place pedagogy	Ethical education; critique of neutrality
18	Thorpe, Burgess & Egan	2021	Australia	Qualitative (surveys and yarns, n = 64)	Indigenous & decolonial place pedagogy	Teacher knowledge and confidence in Aboriginal education

In the conceptual dimension, a representation of the corpus as a whole can be seen in Figure 4, where the different studies have been clustered into six areas that overlap with one another to some extent. A field organized around citizenship and civic belonging, history and heritage education, geography and spatial inquiry, Indigenous and decolonial place pedagogy, rural schools and local knowledge, and community engagement and transformative learning are the six clusters that we see in the picture.

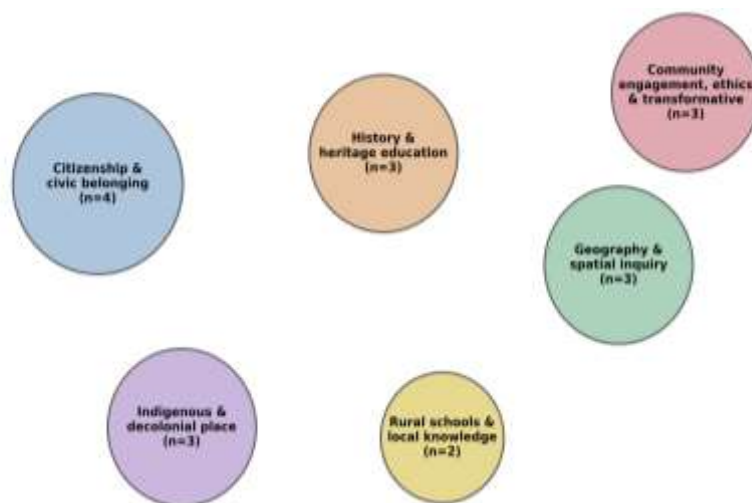


Figure 4. Thematic clusters across the included studies (bubble size denotes number of studies).

Thematic Synthesis

The results are arranged into the three research questions. The implementation aspect is presented under RQ1, while the outcomes section comes in RQ1. The sections on pedagogical approaches, conditions that are enabling, and the problems are found in RQ3.

Report of Findings from RQ1: Implementation across different contexts and levels

Place-based learning is mainly implemented in social studies education through a common design repertoire. The only change that they bring in is contextual. The local aspect always gets emphasized by such designs, but other than that, they all have the idea of learning that is connected to the community. One of the most frequently used is a model where the class partners with the community organizations, heritage institutions, and the very individuals who are part of the community, and through such a partnership the two sides learn from each other to the highest possible degree. When working together, they have been able to bring students back to their own communities where they choose local history themes and, through interviews and oral history methods, they produce their own interpretations of history (Yeboah et al., 2023). In a project in Sweden, teachers joined forces with the archive personnel to use real physical artifacts in class, allowing them to handle and study historical sources (Strand, 2025). In the case of one of the Latinx community projects in Canada, the community workers designed a set of activities that led to a conversation within the Latinx community on historical aspects of colonization and also on identity and citizenship (Cahuas & Matute, 2021).

One of the ways of doing things locally is through heritage and historical investigation where the focus is on the history of the local community and its people. A case in point is a British primary school that had been heavily impacted by industrial activity, yet the local mining history remained at the heart of their teaching. This approach was a unifying factor for learners from different socio-cultural groups both boys or girls and besides the main objectives, it has served the students in learning more about their identity in relation with the environment and at the same time it has satisfied the requirements of the national curriculum (Grimshaw & Mates, 2022).

Field-based and inquiry-driven geographic investigation represent the third modality through a project in a neighborhood, a guided-inquiry task in the visit to a local park with a collaborative (Kriewaldt et al., 2023) and a global field course that combined place-based and peer learning in higher-education geography (Žoncová et al., 2026). Community geography involves students working closely with local nonprofits thus extending this modality to civic engagement (Rock, 2022).

Also, there is a wide coverage of educational levels in implementing the modalities described and in recent years digital mediation has been incorporated to a great extent. The sources span primary, i.e. (Grimshaw & Mates, 2022), secondary level, i.e. (Kriewaldt et al., 2023; Sturrock & Zandvliet, 2023), as well as higher and teacher education settings, i.e. (Maxwell et al., 2024; Thorpe et al., 2021; Žoncová et al., 2026). It is worth pointing out that through a combination of online and virtual platforms, place-based pedagogy not only preserves its educational potential but even enhances it by engaging learners with their surrounding places (Maxwell et al., 2024; Beban & Korson, 2025). Across these different educational settings, the places of education in rural and low-density populations are especially significant as place-based approaches in schools make it possible for them to stay connected with local realities (da Silva, 2023; Silva & Silva, 2026).

Besides these empirical modalities, a substantial portion of the corpus implements place-based learning at the level of curriculum, that is to say, philosophy and teacher training, by rethinking the very meaning of place before operationalization in classrooms. In fact, the idea or concept of place as a community inquiry is not only a way out of a problem but also a learning experience, especially for indigenous ways of understanding the place and country, which are the most basic ideas around the world (Thornton et al., 2024; Thornton et al., 2021). A corresponding theme is place-based learning through community-led teacher programs and learning that the community leads and university faculty do not, so that 'Getting knowledge of the country by learning from it' is not only the method but the topic in trainee preparation of a pre-service (Thorpe et al., 2021). Implementation in the context of Thai and ASEAN consists of a reconstruction of the curriculum or syllabus and a combination of both place- and country-based learning together with the learning through an awareness and understanding of the global issues that one is going to face while also highlighting the plurality of the location and freedom of action by teacher as two important aspects of a learning journey (Jatuporn & Youngwan, 2026). Such philosophically driven implementations are important because they decide whether a place is used for the sake of a story or a context merely, while the place being used here refers to both relationships and ethic of a social studies lesson.

Throughout the corpus, place-based learning in social studies education has proven repeatedly to be associated with three interconnected outcome areas. Place-based learning on a cognitive level, for example, helps learners grasp content knowledge, concepts, and skills for higher thinking. When the collaborative guided inquiry was based, the students got a deeper and more thorough understanding of geography concepts and

developed their abilities at explaining, negotiating, and justifying their thinking (Kriewaldt et al., 2023), while the community-based history placed the students in the role of the originators of a historical interpretation instead of merely passive consumers (Yeboah et al., 2023). These results illustrate that being physically close makes an abstract subject of a discipline become an understandable and meaningful subject of learning. In other words, learning occurs when concepts have been made concrete through the real-life experiences which place gives to one.

The civic and the social outcomes are the second areas where evidence has shown the effect. The citizenship development and strengthening community bonds were shown to last over time as a result of place-based learning which is confirmed by a longitudinal study. When looking back at the program effects student views still remained almost completely unchanged five up to eight years after the program (Sturrock & Zandvliet, 2023). Community-based and spatial-citizenship designs foster civic engagement skills which in the same way help students as also other institutions of local communities (Rock, 2022) while community-based citizenship education in country schools brought out mobilized actors from different groups to create social cohesion and improve well-being (Silva & Silva, 2026). Moreover, for pre-service teachers, it has been suggested that interdisciplinary, community-based learning serves as a means through which digital-citizenship competence is acquired (Jarupongputtana et al., 2022).

The third family of outcomes is affective outcomes. These refer to identity, belonging, and emotional engagement. Students felt both happy and confused during their virtual place-based education, and they described their feelings as a mix of positive and negative aspects. This affective state was also perceived as being a factor that leads to students' change of thinking that results in transformation through discomfort (Beban & Korson, 2025). Local history lessons helped children to connect with their roots and build identity (Grimshaw & Mates, 2022), whereas the 'Learning from Country' program led to a dramatic change in the way pre-service teachers saw the Aboriginal people and communities (Thorpe et al., 2021). The affective component of place-based learning is not an accident; the evidence suggests that affective outcomes are the underlying reason why cognitive and civic skills develop after a place-based learning programme has been carried out thus emphasizing the nature of place-based learning as the whole package.

Perspective of the place-based studies shows that they are hardly isolated, and when they talk about the strongest cognitive or the longest civic development, almost always they also include the emotional transformation, which seems, therefore to be quite a mutual process of reinforcement. In the case of the longitudinal study in Canada, the outcome results of citizenship being active lasted together with the students' feelings of bonding with this place, which indicates that the gains in the cognitive and civic areas were made possible by some kind of deep emotional attachment that lasted for years without becoming weaker (Sturrock & Zandvliet, 2023). Again, an international geography field course created very visible examples of content knowledge learning that students perceived as being impossible without being emotionally attached and socially connected to each other during the experience (Žoncová et al., 2026) and countryside community-based citizenship programs at the same time helped students to understand the concept of citizenship better as well as improved collective well-being (Silva & Silva, 2026). Therefore, when we consider the interdependence of the different families of outcomes, a methodological consequence is that the studies will be biased and inaccurate with respect only to one outcome family as the total educational potential of place-based designs might be lower. On top of that, it is also clear that the most effective ways to create either civil or cognitive change would include deliberately designing the affective, relational side of the intervention with the physical place as the center without treating it as just an add-on.

Findings for RQ3: Pedagogical approaches, enabling conditions, and challenges

Researches highlight experiential, questioning and conversational teaching techniques as the main methods of place-based social studies. Experiential 'learning through doing' has been identified as the main factor in learning from the community in teacher education (Thorpe et al., 2021), and community of inquiry, based on philosophy, has been seen as a very appropriate way to respond to the locality and it helps us understand not only the curriculum but also the activities through experience (Thornton et al., 2024; Thornton et al., 2021). An important and continuous aspect is that Indigenous and decolonial understandings of place are placed at the core, and several writings explain them as the vital components in making a real 'sense of place' and a moral education although they often get left out in the mainstream (Thornton et al., 2021; Jatuporn & Youngwan, 2026).

The enabling factors that emerged from the corpus are teacher expertise, support from the educational authorities, and real, hands-on communities involvement. Expertise of teachers was the most important factor for the conceptual development in the student inquiry learning context (Kriewaldt et al., 2023) and community associations and heritage institutions being partners were shown again and again to boost the effectiveness

(Grimshaw & Mates, 2022; Strand, 2025). Teacher agency came out as essential when the place-based concepts were combined with critical education in global citizenship (Jatuporn & Youngwan, 2026), also the community members willing to take charge of learning was the key change factor in Indigenous teacher education (Thorpe et al., 2021).

We can see that difficulties arise from practical, structural and even conceptual areas. On one side the problems such as getting materials transported and policies to go digitised made it hard for the students to do real collaboration of working with the schools and heritage institutions besides having trouble with physical sources (Strand, 2025). It is also true that community involvement has certain untested assumptions and is influenced by the market trends of the education system within universities (Sessions & Williams, 2024). Besides, in rural schools, the students always struggle to maintain a balance between showing respect to the local knowledge and, at the same time, getting it validated by fulfilling a very standardised national requirement (da Silva, 2023). All these obstacles show that the success of place-based education is only partly dependent on the conditions which a teacher can control.

Moreover, there is a conceptual challenge related to the fact that place means different things and the researchers show this aspect of the place both as the area where place-based education is most successful and, also, very vulnerable. When the works by researchers are grounded in the concept of place as Country, heritage, or living community then the curriculum development becomes a very meaningful and culturally unique learning experience (Thorton et al., 2021; Cahuas & Matute, 2021). However, on the other hand, when the meaning of place is reduced to just physical environment then it becomes a typical field study with little innovation. That being said, these theoretical weaknesses prevent the application of methods between different settings, since being truly immersed in place in, for example, programmes run by an Aboriginal community is quite different from being involved with the locals in a small portuguese border town or learning online teacher courses. (Thorpe et al., 2021; da Silva, 2023; Maxwell et al., 2024). Also, it is very obvious that there is always an unavoidable conflict in place-based education between doing it the local and distinctive way and the scalability, which many policy makers look for. This unique quality of place-based learning which makes it strong, on the other hand, is a resistance to homogenisation and hence an obstacle to uniformity. Being aware of this, it is very clear that several researchers have taken the position of teacher agency and teacher professional judgement over prescriptive methods as an operational way out and therefore have cast the teacher as the designer who all the time reshapes and renegotiates the link between local knowledge and curriculum expectations (Jatuporn & Youngwan, 2026; da Silva, 2023).

Comparative and Critical Analysis

A cross-study comparison of methodological approaches reveals a domain heavily reliant on qualitative and conceptual insights. However, there is a relative shortage of studies reporting cumulative, generalized findings. For instance, qualitative, practitioner-inspired studies and philosophical examinations are prevalent and offer insightful, nuanced views of the learner's experience of place-based learning. A limited number of mixed-methods designs appear in the literature, while the single longitudinal study in the dataset gains attention precisely for its handling of a crucial issue that cross-sectional designs leave unresolved: the duration of outcomes. Sturrock & Zandvliet, 2023).

Such a methodological portrait does carry implications. A major issue is that single-site designs are often the only available data sources thus limiting the possibilities of the study's findings to be applied or transferred. A further issue is the heterogeneity of outcome measures, from interview transcripts and reflective journals to validated tools for assessing the learning environment - and it is this variability that renders the work difficult to collate, summarize, and therefore limit the possibilities for conducting a meta-analysis. Although the conceptual contributions to such a discussion are stimulating, theoretical they, to some extend, are not supported by empirical evidence particularly in the case of claims regarding decolonization potential that have yet to be tested at large scale. While in the corpus, the trend of a wider variety of methods including digital and virtual approaches, over time is a visible, the area remains immature in conducting comparative and longitudinal work required to confirm the field's claims.

A fourth comparative comment is regarding the geographic and chronological distribution of the corpus. In the main, the studies have their origin in a fairly small selection of countries where Australia has been the most generous by far in making contributions and the other countries from where further work was reported are: Canada, Portugal, Thailand, and the United States. Large areas, such as the majority of Africa, South Asia, Latin America, and the Middle East, have at the most one study or are completely missing. Such geographical concentration is problematic, since by very essence, place-based educational practice is sensitive to the unique cultural, political, and ecological aspects of the places where it is carried out. Therefore, a set of observations obtained almost exclusively from English and European countries may be very difficult to adapt them to

educational practices in systems with different curricular traditions and relationships to land and community. From the timeline, the corpus is quite recent covering years from 2021 to 2026. This is indicative of a dynamic, expanding, and promising area but at the same time a fact that few researchers can have their designs and work repeated or monitored over time. In conclusion, the corpus is still a youthful, vibrant literature but it is not yet a geographically balanced one the generality of which remains to be verified through wider and sustained research.

Looking for the bigger picture, the evidence points out that place-based learning in the social studies context serves an integrative role of pedagogy that brings together different areas of learning, namely knowledge acquisition, preparation of citizens and emotional engagement. One of the consistent findings is that positive emotional or affective outcomes of learning activities mediate and result in cognitive and citizenship learning gains indicating that the power of place-based learning is in its ability to make learning an experience that resonates with one's self. It is by doing so that students are led away from abstract historical and civic concepts towards local and actual living experiences. In this manner, the argument put by social studies scholars is placed in the context of broader place-based education literature found in environmental and outdoor education fields. Moreover, such an approach highlights a unique feature of the social studies situation, namely that in social sciences students are trained for citizenship as a way of being an active and socially responsible member of society. They learn through a process of negotiating identity which has a strong influence on their relationship to place and community.

If accepted from a theoretical standpoint, the research results challenge, refine, and complicate widely held views about these matters. Indigenous and decolonial thinking which puts an emphasis on the place as a major concept is now dominating, and that is a shift as compared to accounts which have so far treated place simply as a matter of one point over another on the landscape. This is the point where place is turned from being a static physical feature into the site of a dynamic and relational engagement tied closely to Country, history, and belongings. Herein lies the strength.

This idea is in line with the findings of the sense-of-place literature of adjacent areas (Rubáš et al., 2024; Nicol & Sangster, 2019); also, it aligns with the principles and practices of Indigenous place-based methodologies which are the manifestation of the reciprocal relationship to land (Wooltorton et al., 2020; van Gelderen & Guthadjaka, 2019). Consequently, the critique confirms at a minimum a very generous reading where place-education social studies will not just involve civic and moral development but their inseparability from the particular places where that is happening.

On a concrete level, the findings provide guidance which is readily implementable. If the evidence supports designing and developing curricula and classroom activities that are centered on real, tangible, hands-on tasks, such as heritage, local communities' partnerships, etc., and the fact that those types of tasks can fulfill rather than oppose the requirements of a curriculum, that is definitely great news (Grimshaw & Mates, 2022; Strand, 2025).

As long as teacher educators are still the target audience, place-based and community-led experiences have great potential to help develop both skill and mastery, especially when it comes to cultural responsiveness and digital-citizenship matters (Thorpe et al., 2021; Jarupongputtana et al., 2022; Maxwell et al., 2024).

As for the legislative framework, the recurring references in the reports on the lack of infrastructure and the challenges of digital technology clearly show that such enabling factors, including time, money, and brokered partnerships, are the prerequisites of a successful initiative, not an add-on (Strand, 2025; Sessions & Williams, 2024).

If one looks at these three levels of application at the same time as the affective mechanism identified in our work, these practical directions become quite clear indeed. In fact, if it is as clear as some of these data suggest that the cognitive development resulting from place-related study and the improvement of the community as a whole can only be realized through those places or events where one feels at home, then it would not only be the most straightforward way to help learners to develop this connection with their local environment that would give place-based learning its full potential, but those elements could be the only effective way (Thorpe et al., 2021; Grimshaw & Mates, 2022). Thus, for example, community collaborations and heritage investigations, as well as learning from Country, are redefined as place-educational methods that not only provide opportunities for engagement but, much more importantly, serve as the ways in which an attachment to the place is felt and, subsequently, it is also through the attachment that the learning potential is unleashed.

It also makes sense then that when a place is taken for granted or, if possible, is just regarded as a setting which does not affect the learners personally, the results that one gets are quite low since the mechanism which connects a place to a learner through that relational dimension is not triggered. Therefore, a vision or concept which, like this piece of maximalism, sees the social study education based solely on the local environment as a

kind of ideology rather than a mere set of practical suggestions is wrong: one must infer from the available evidence what a vision or concept looks like.

This review can be positioned as a continuation or supplement to the prior one, but not in its full breadth and depth, since those were mostly from the side of environmental, geographic, or sense-of-place viewpoints (Rubáš et al., 2024). Thus here, a social-studies-based approach to educational place-based learning is being proposed. Besides confirming that place-based learning in different domains is effective for learners and teachers in terms of their involvement and their understanding and production of meaning, the paper has pinpointed a particular social study context of being able to carry out one's duties as a citizen and a decolonial way of thinking which the earlier reviews about ecological knowledge and contents were quite rightly unable to present since they were not concerned mainly with these types of learning.

The academic field seems to be contradictory with regard to the educational potential of the so-called virtual or online place-based education. One hand, the arguments claiming that virtual or online placebased education can maintain or even improve pedagogy are backed by Maxwell et al., 2024; Beban & Korson, 2025.

Contradictory to this is the claim focusing on the significance of the body, the materiality of place, and the restrictions that come with digitisation as being the irreplaceable elements of the learning process (Strand, 2025).

Closing such a difference is plausible by pointing out that what is available through virtual place-based learning is design-sensitive i.e., it gives good results when learners go deeper into their local surroundings but becomes restricting when learners are mediated and distanced with virtual mediation as against being physically situated with a given place. Likewise tensions around the community participation exist, at one level it seems like a way of breaking traditional barriers and opening access for all, but at another level it's claimed it allows for neoliberal and hegemonic capturing of processes (Sessions & Williams, 2024).

Around three knowledge gaps have emerged in the result. The very first issue is lack of longitudinal and outcomesoriented studies capable of establishing the durability and magnitude of the effects (except one notable paper in the corpus that did Sturrock & Zandvliet, 2023).

Two other major ones would be a lack of comparative and crossnational research, which would not only reveal the strong contextual concentration on a few countries but also limit the generalisability potential. Finally, in comparison to an extensive conceptualisation, an empirical confirmation is still very behind in the areas of decolonial and Indigenous placebased education, the result of which is only a limited normative basis.

However, one should bear in mind that the work presented is a result based on Scopes database only; although this can be a reason to exclude other potentially good work, particularly that coming from non-journal publications, the English-language restriction could introduce some language and publication bias. Also, the limited number of published works in the corpus does not represent an average one, which could have been obtained through more generalized research and would have been suitable for a network or a meta-analytic study. Finally, the line drawn between social studies and other neighbouring disciplines at the eligibility stage required the judgment calls by the researchers and could explain a little variability in the boundaries chosen by different reviewers.

In spite of the above-mentioned shortcomings and potential weaknesses, the work as it has a set of significant strengths which the author has been very good to acknowledge. The procedure was written and explained in the protocol that was made public and it is a case of very open research practices. On the one hand, the criteria of inclusion were narrowed enough to exclude any possibility of the review dealing with place-based learning in general so that the focus can be on social studies education, the synthesis has been structured as if each question was answered by certain evidence and therefore each evidence is clearly linked to the finding. As it drew on the supplementary literature from one source while the included one came from another source, the report does make the implementation and outcome evidence-base for its claims distinct from the scholarly conversation it draws to frame the report. And that's the kind of a report one would call "Narrow but deep" i.e., no attempt is made to generalize beyond the findings or claim to have covered the whole picture but the work done shows a well-defended, evidence-backing and the place-based learning picture for the social studies field - which was exactly, what the field is missing for so long.

The recommendations for future research agenda should be, firstly, focusing on longitudinal and mixed-methods designs which will monitor civic, cognitive, and affective results throughout time and when changing the levels of education; Secondly, conducting comparative and cross -cultural studies that include the regions that have so far not been involved; thirdly, researching Indigenous and decolonial place -based pedagogy with communities as a true collaborator of the researchers, so that these ideas, so to say, move on from a mere advocacy for them to becoming evidence-backed.

In relation to the review questions mentioned, it would be right to say that place-based learning is carried out in social-studies mainly through collaboration with members of a community, local heritage and archives inquiry, and fieldwork that includes a geography dimension all done at various educational levels (RQ1); it also leads to long-lasting civic empowerment, in-depth conceptual grasping, and a complete change in the way we feel (RQ2); and its results depend on the kind of teaching which encourages learning through hands-on experiences and open discussions, as well as the teacher's professional guidance, support from the schools, and the genuine collaboration with the community while being limited by such factors as logistical and structural difficulties as well as lack of imagination (RQ3).

Conclusions

This systematic review of 18 papers provides insight into place-based learning within social studies education. To the main queries: the method is mainly realized through community partnerships, historical heritage, and archives inquiry in schools, plus fieldwork involving geography (all of them at different education levels, of course) (RQ1); the method constantly leads to long-lasting civic action, deepened understanding, and profound change in students' feelings (RQ2); the success of place-based learning is mainly based on hands-on, dialogic teaching supported by the teacher's professional advice, the school environment, and a sincere community partnership (RQ3). What the review has offered is a pioneering map of place-based education within social studies, with a particular emphasis upon civic formation and decolonial conceptions of place. From the practical side, it is a reassurance that if we adopt an approach that focuses on a local environment and is driven by the students' questions we will at the least deliver curriculum expectations and even more importantly will be able to foster civic learning. Due of the narrowness of the scope (only single-database studies are included) plus the fact that all the works are in English, a relatively small collection of texts, it is the review's view that this is a reason to look for research that will be done over several years, in different countries and involve collaboration with local stakeholders in order to confirm these inspiring results.

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