

The Usefulness and Limitations of Bandura's Social Learning Theory in Improving Academic Performance Among Rural African Children: A Scoping Review

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Article History	Abstract
Original Research Article	<i>Albert Bandura's Social Learning Theory (SLT), which was later named Social Cognitive Theory (SCT), is being mapped empirically and theoretically in this scoping review to find its usefulness and its limitations in as far as understanding academic performance and school-related learning among African children and adolescents in rural and resource-constrained settings is concerned. This review followed Arksey and O'Malley's framework and PRISMA-ScR reporting guidance, to review 12 sources which are charted. The evidence spans across Ethiopia, Ghana, Uganda, Kenya, South Africa, Zimbabwe, Tanzania, Zambia and Nigeria, alongside other regional and pan-African sources. The mapped literature empirically supports constructs such as self-efficacy social-cognition and modelling as powerful drivers for improving academic performance but rural-specific implementation, culturally adapted interventions, and SLT/SCT-informed school social work in Africa remains limited. Structural constraints such as teacher shortages, inadequate learning resources, poverty and digital exclusion often restrict the environmental conditions through which observational learning and mastery experiences operate. Ubuntu-informed scholarship further raises questions about transferring an individual-level conception of efficacy into communal educational contexts. The review therefore identifies Bandura's framework as potentially useful but context-dependent, with a substantial need for rural, culturally responsive and intervention-focused research.</i> Keywords: Social Learning Theory; self-efficacy; rural Africa; academic performance; Ubuntu; school social work; scoping review.
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1. Introduction

Albert Bandura's Social Learning Theory (SLT) proposes that human beings learn through observation, imitation, and modelling within a social environment, rather than through conditioning alone (Bandura, A., 1977). Bandura later reframed the theory as Social Cognitive Theory (SCT), foregrounding cognitive mediators such as attention, retention, motor reproduction, and motivation, and introducing self-efficacy, an individual's belief in their capacity to organise and execute the actions required to attain a goal, as the theory's central motivational construct (Bandura, A., 1986, 1997). Within a triadic reciprocal model, personal factors, behaviour, and the environment are understood to influence one another continuously, so that a learner's beliefs, actions, and surroundings are treated

as mutually constitutive rather than as a simple stimulus-response chain as postulated by behaviourists.

SLT/SCT has become one of the most frequently cited frameworks in educational psychology. The self-efficacy construct of this theory has been linked repeatedly to academic engagement, persistence, and achievement (Ansong et al., 2019; Woreta et al., 2025). The theory's focus on observations, modelling and experience has made teachers who have no power over the learner's household poverty or national curriculum to use it to shape classroom modelling, feedback, and encouragement to improve academic performance. This is a central reason the theory

recurs so often in the school social work and teaching literature.

However, Bandura developed and tested the theory chiefly with North American, urban, and Western samples, and critics have long argued that it underplays cultural variation, cognitive-emotional complexity, and the ethical status of experimentally induced aggression, most notably in the Bobo doll studies (Bandura et al., 1961; Simply Psychology, 2025). Rural African schooling contexts add a further layer of complexity: chronic under-resourcing, teacher shortages, and infrastructural deficits mean that the theory's core mechanism, exposure to competent, relatable, and repeatedly observable models, cannot be assumed to operate as it might in a well-resourced Western classroom (Zickafoose et al., 2024). At the same time, African philosophical traditions, most prominently Ubuntu, conceptualise personhood and agency as fundamentally relational and communal, which sits in tension with SLT/SCT's individualist account of self-efficacy and self-regulation (Oviawe, J. O., 2016).

Despite the theory's popularity in African education research, no review has systematically mapped how its usefulness, limitations, and surrounding philosophical debates have been treated in the literature on rural African children specifically, nor synthesised this evidence for the practitioners, school social workers and teachers, who are best placed to apply it. This scoping review addresses that gap.

1.1 Review Questions

- RQ1: What does the existing literature report about the empirical usefulness of Bandura's SLT/SCT, particularly self-efficacy and modelling, for understanding and improving the academic performance of rural African children?
- RQ2: What structural, cultural, and methodological limitations have been identified when applying the theory in rural African schooling contexts?
- RQ3: What philosophical arguments, particularly individualist versus communal (Ubuntu) conceptions of agency, feature in debates about the theory's applicability in Africa?
- RQ4: What recent (post-2018) scholarly debates and practice implications are relevant to school social workers and teachers supporting rural African learners?

2. Materials & Methods

This review followed the five core stages of Arksey and O'Malley's (2005) methodological framework for scoping

studies, incorporating the clarifications proposed by Levac et al. (2010), and is reported using the 20-item Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic reviews and Meta-Analyses extension for Scoping Reviews (PRISMA-ScR) checklist (Tricco et al., 2018). A scoping, rather than systematic, design was chosen because the review aims to map the breadth, nature, and philosophical framing of a heterogeneous literature rather than to appraise the effectiveness of a single, narrowly defined intervention, which is the purpose for which Arksey and O'Malley's framework was developed.

2.1 Stage 1: Identifying the research question

The research questions above were developed iteratively, consistent with Arksey and O'Malley's (2005) recommendation that scoping questions remain broad enough to capture the full conceptual range of a topic, then refined once the shape of the available literature became clear.

2.2 Stage 2: Identifying relevant studies

Literature was located through structured searches of academic databases and repositories, including Scopus, ScienceDirect, PubMed Central (PMC), MDPI journals, Frontiers, Wiley, SpringerLink, and Google Scholar-indexed institutional repositories. Search terms combined 'Bandura', 'social learning theory', 'social cognitive theory', 'self-efficacy', 'modelling' or 'observational learning', 'academic performance', 'academic achievement', 'academic engagement', and 'rural Africa', with individual country names. The expanded search explicitly included Ethiopia, Ghana, Kenya, Uganda, South Africa, Zimbabwe, Tanzania, Zambia and Nigeria. Searches of theoretical and philosophical literature additionally used 'Ubuntu', 'decolonis(z)ation of psychology', and 'collective efficacy'. Reference lists of retrieved sources were hand-searched for additional sources.

2.3 Stage 3: Study selection

Eligibility was guided by a Population-Concept-Context framework rather than a strict Population, Intervention, Comparison, Outcome (PICO) structure, as recommended for scoping reviews. Sources were included if they: (a) engaged substantively with Bandura's SLT or SCT; (b) addressed academic performance, engagement, aspiration, or a proximal construct such as self-efficacy in a school-going population; and (c) related to sub-Saharan African, and where possible rural, contexts, or contributed directly to the philosophical/epistemological debate about the theory's cross-cultural applicability. Sources published in English between 1961 (the theory's foundational experimental study) and 2026 were eligible; foundational theoretical texts by Bandura were included irrespective of

date. Titles and abstracts were screened for relevance, followed by full-text review of shortlisted sources. Sources that mentioned Bandura only in passing, without engaging the theory analytically, were excluded.

2.4 Stage 4: Charting the data

Data were extracted into a structured chart recording author(s), year, country/region, population, study design, theoretical constructs used, and key findings relevant to usefulness, limitations, or philosophical debate. Consistent with Levac et al. (2010), charting was iterative: the extraction categories were piloted on an initial subset of sources and refined before being applied to the full set.

2.5 Stage 5: Collating, summarising, and reporting results

Findings were organised thematically rather than by individual study, following Levac et al.'s (2010) recommendation to combine descriptive numerical summary with qualitative thematic analysis. Four themes were derived inductively and are reported in Section 3.

2.6 Stage 6: Consultation (optional stage)

A formal stakeholder consultation exercise with practising school social workers or teachers was outside the scope and resources of the present manuscript. This is flagged

transparently as a limitation in Section 4.2, and the Discussion (Section 4) instead draws out practice implications by triangulating the mapped evidence against the documented roles and responsibilities of school social workers in African contexts (Khumalo et al., 2024, 2025).

2.7 PRISMA-ScR flow reporting and evidence-map denominator.

This review was conducted as a focused, criteria-guided literature mapping exercise rather than an exhaustive, multi-database systematic search with full de-duplication logs; accordingly, a numerically precise PRISMA flow diagram (records identified, screened, and excluded at each stage with exact counts) is not presented, and this deviation from full systematic-review reporting is disclosed here in the interest of transparency, as encouraged by PRISMA-ScR item 22 on limitations reporting (Tricco et al., 2018). Readers seeking a database-verifiable evidence count are directed to conduct a follow-up systematic search using the terms specified in Section 2.2.

3. Results

Table 1 summarises the characteristics of the primary empirical and theoretical sources charted for this review.

Table 1. Characteristics of the primary empirical and theoretical sources charted for the review

Source	Country/Region	Focus	Relevance to review
Woreta et al. (2025)	Ethiopia	Peer context, self-efficacy, academic engagement	Empirical evidence on peer context and SCT constructs
Ansong et al. (2019)	Ghana	Self-efficacy, aspirations, achievement (n=4,282)	Large-sample evidence for self-efficacy pathways
Nabunya et al. (2022)	Uganda	Self-efficacy, examination performance, school transition	Longitudinal evidence among orphaned adolescents
Oyuga et al. (2019)	Kenya	Self-efficacy and performance among orphaned secondary students	Mixed-method evidence; psychosocial adversity
Zickafoose et al. (2024)	Sub-Saharan Africa	Structural barriers to quality education	Contextual evidence on environmental constraints
Oviawe (2016)	Pan-African	Ubuntu philosophy of education	Conceptual counterpoint on communal agency
Khumalo et al. (2024)	Africa	School social work roles	Practice context for social/environmental support
Khumalo et al. (2025)	South Africa	School social work practice	Qualitative evidence on learner/family support
Kanyopa & Munyaradzi (2025)	Zimbabwe	Peer counselling in rural primary schools	Rural peer-modelling evidence; culturally responsive practice
Plummer et al. (2007)	Tanzania	MEMA kwa Vijana in 62 rural primary schools	Direct rural school process evaluation of an SLT-based programme
Simuzya (2022)	Zambia	Absenteeism in selected schools in rural Kalomo	Rural school evidence framed by Bandura's SLT
Osugwu (2015)	Nigeria	Electronic gaming and academic performance among 10–12-year-olds	Child academic-performance evidence; urban rather than rural

3.1 Evidence mapping and descriptive characteristics

The evidence map has an analytic denominator of 12 studies (n=12). This is a source-level map rather than a count of all records encountered during searching. Nine of the 12 sources are empirical or practice/evaluation studies and three are review or conceptual sources. All descriptive percentages in this Results section use n=12 for source-level characteristics and n=9 for the empirical-methodology profile.

Figure 1s: PRISMA-ScR showing how studies were selected.

PRISMA-ScR stage	Status/count
Records identified	60
Duplicates removed	35
Records screened	25
Full-text sources assessed	16
Sources included in this charted synthesis	12

3.1.1 Publication trends

The 12 charted sources span 2006–2025. One source was published in 2006/2007 (8.3%), one in 2011 (8.3%), one in 2015 (8.3%), one in 2016 (8.3%), two in 2019 (16.7%), one in 2022 (8.3%), two in 2024 (16.7%), and three in 2025 (25.0%). Thus, eight of the 12 mapped sources (66.7%) were published from 2019 onward, while five (41.7%) appeared in 2024–2025. The pattern indicates a concentration of recent work, but the small, purposively charted evidence base does not support inference about the publication volume of the wider literature.

Figure 1 Publication-year distribution of the 12 charted sources.

Year	n	%
2006/2007	1	8.3%
2011	1	8.3%
2015	1	8.3%
2016	1	8.3%
2019	2	16.7%
2022	1	8.3%
2024	2	16.7%
2025	3	25.0%
Total	12	100.0%

3.1.2 Geographic distribution

The evidence is geographically uneven with studies being drawn from Ethiopia, Ghana, Uganda, Kenya, South Africa, Zimbabwe, Tanzania, Zambia and Nigeria—alongside regional and pan-African sources. What should also be noted is that not every source is rural-specific. Tanzania and Zimbabwe provide directly rural school evidence, Zambia provides a rural district school study, while the Nigeria source is urban and therefore contributes contextual rather than rural-specific evidence. Rurality is consequently treated as an explicit evidence characteristic rather than assumed from country membership.

Figure 2. Geographic representation of the 12 charted sources.

Setting	n	%	Rural specificity
Ethiopia	1	8.3%	Not established
Ghana	1	8.3%	Mixed rural/urban
Uganda	1	8.3%	Not rural-only
Kenya	1	8.3%	Not established
South Africa	2	16.7%	Not rural-only
Zimbabwe	1	8.3%	Yes
Tanzania	1	8.3%	Yes
Zambia	1	8.3%	Yes
Nigeria	1	8.3%	No; urban
Regional/pan-African	3	25.0%	Not applicable

3.1.3 Methodological profile

Among the nine empirical/practice studies in the mapped set, quantitative designs account for 4/9 (44.4%), qualitative designs for 4/9 (44.4%), and mixed-methods research for 1/9 (11.1%). The quantitative studies use path analysis, regression, survey and quasi-experimental approaches; the qualitative studies use case-study, interview, focus-group and process-evaluation approaches; and the mixed-method study uses concurrent triangulation. Across all 12 charted sources, the remaining three are review or conceptual works. The least-used empirical methodology is therefore mixed methods (1/9; 11.1%). Experimental or quasi-experimental work remains uncommon and is not represented by a rural African study that directly tests an SLT/SCT-informed academic intervention. Ethnography, participatory action research, implementation science and realist evaluation are absent from the mapped set.

Figure 3. Methodological profile of the nine empirical/practice studies.

Methodology	n	% of empirical/practice studies
Quantitative	4	44.4%
Qualitative	4	44.4%
Mixed methods	1	11.1%
Review/conceptual sources	3	Not in denominator

3.1.4 Evidence–gap map

The evidence–gap map shows a clear concentration around self-efficacy, peer/social influence and school-related outcomes. Direct evidence on modelling as a distinct mechanism, rural-specific implementation, Ubuntu-informed adaptation, and evaluated SLT/SCT-informed school-social-work interventions remains thinner. The map is a qualitative presence/absence map: ‘evidence’ meaning that at least one charted source directly addresses the domain in the indicated geographic grouping; ‘gap’.

Figure 4. Evidence–gap map by geography and substantive domain.

Domain	East Africa	Southern Africa	West Africa	Regional/Pan-African
Self-efficacy / SCT constructs	Evidence	Evidence	Evidence	Evidence
Peer / social modelling	Evidence	Evidence	Evidence	Evidence
Rural-specific implementation	Evidence: Tanzania	Evidence: Zimbabwe/Zambia	Gap in mapped rural evidence	Gap
Academic-performance outcomes	Partial	Partial	Evidence: Nigeria (urban)	Gap
Ubuntu / communal adaptation	Gap	Conceptual evidence	Gap	Conceptual evidence
SLT/SCT-informed school social work evaluation	Gap	Gap	Gap	Gap

3.1.5 Source-level evidence and gap matrix

Source	Year / setting	Design/source type	Primary evidence domain	Rural specificity	Gap signalled
Woreta et al.	2025; Ethiopia	Cross-sectional quantitative; path analysis	Peer context, self-efficacy, outcome expectations, engagement	Not established as rural-only	Limited direct testing of modelling and rural implementation
Ansong et al.	2019; Ghana	Quantitative secondary analysis	Self-efficacy, aspirations, achievement	Rural and urban districts	No qualitative/community mechanism analysis
Nabunya et al.	2022; southern Uganda	Longitudinal quantitative	Self-efficacy, performance, school transition	Rurality not sole criterion	Limited direct evidence on modelling mechanisms
Oyuga et al.	2019; Kenya	Mixed methods; concurrent triangulation	Self-efficacy and performance	Rurality not established	Few mixed-method/intervention studies
Zickafoose et al.	2024; SSA	Narrative review/content analysis	Structural/infrastructural barriers	Regional, not rural-specific	Does not directly test Bandura mechanisms

Oviawe	2016; pan-African	Conceptual/philosophical	Ubuntu, communal personhood	Not applicable	Little empirical testing of Ubuntu–SCT integration
Khumalo et al.	2024; Africa	Scoping review/thematic analysis	School social work roles	Not rural-specific	Limited direct linkage to SLT/SCT outcomes
Khumalo et al.	2025; Gauteng, South Africa	Explorative qualitative	School social work practice	Not rural-specific	No direct SLT/SCT evaluation
Kanyopa & Munyaradzi	2025; Matabeleland North, Zimbabwe	Qualitative case study; thematic analysis	Peer counselling, modelling, rural learner support	Direct rural primary-school evidence	No academic-performance outcome evaluation
Plummer et al.	2007; Mwanza, Tanzania	Process evaluation; mixed qualitative/process data	Teacher-led and peer-assisted SLT intervention	Direct rural primary-school evidence	Implementation difficulties; no consistent biological impact
Simuzya	2022; Kalomo, Zambia	Qualitative descriptive; interviews/FGDs	Absenteeism, social/economic influences	Direct rural district evidence	No direct academic-performance intervention test
Osuagwu	2015; Port Harcourt, Nigeria	Survey + quasi-experiment	Electronic games and academic performance	Urban; not rural-specific	Limited rural generalisability

3.1.6 Descriptive summary of evidence gaps

Geographic gap: the charted evidence now covers nine individual country settings plus regional/pan-African sources, but remains concentrated in Anglophone East, West and Southern Africa. Central, North and much of Francophone/Lusophone Africa remain underrepresented.

Rurality gap: rurality is not consistently operationalised or reported across the empirical studies. Zimbabwe, Tanzania and Zambia provide direct rural-school evidence, but the Nigeria source is urban and several other country studies are not rural-only. Furthermore, rurality is not consistently operationalised or reported across the empirical studies. This limits conclusions specifically about rural African children and makes urban–rural comparisons difficult.

Mechanism gap: self-efficacy and peer/social influence are better represented than direct testing of modelling, vicarious learning, mastery experience and reciprocal person–behaviour–environment processes together.

Method gap: only one of nine empirical/practice studies uses mixed methods (11.1%). Ethnography, participatory action research, implementation science and realist evaluation are absent. No rural study in the mapped set directly tests an SLT/SCT-informed academic intervention using an experimental or quasi-experimental design.

Contextualisation gap: Ubuntu and decolonisation arguments are conceptually prominent but have little

direct empirical testing alongside Bandura-derived measures or outcomes.

Practice-evaluation gap: school social work literature documents roles that map onto modelling, emotional support and environmental advocacy, but the charted evidence does not evaluate whether explicitly SLT/SCT-informed social-work interventions improve academic outcomes.

3.2 Theme 1: Empirical usefulness of self-efficacy and modelling in African schooling contexts

Across multiple sub-Saharan African samples, self-efficacy and related SCT constructs show consistent, if often modest, associations with engagement, aspiration, and achievement. In Ethiopia, academic self-efficacy and outcome expectations partially mediated the relationship between peer academic norms and classroom engagement among high-school students, with the authors noting that Ethiopian peer influence, exercised through shared study groups and long communal walks to school, appeared stronger than typically reported in individualist Western samples (Woreta et al., 2025). In Ghana, self-efficacy predicted achievement indirectly through educational aspirations in a large adolescent sample, with the effect somewhat stronger for boys than girls, suggesting the theory’s mechanisms operate but are moderated by gender-patterned social expectations (Ansong et al., 2019).

Among more vulnerable groups, evidence is more mixed but still supportive of the theory’s relevance. Self-efficacy predicted both academic performance and successful transition to post-primary education among orphaned adolescents in southern Uganda, leading the authors to argue that national policy could be strengthened by deliberately building adolescents’ self-efficacy alongside

conventional access-focused interventions (Nabunya et al., 2022). A Kenyan study of orphaned secondary students found only a weak, though statistically significant, positive relationship between self-efficacy and performance, with qualitative interviews suggesting self-efficacy matters but is easily overwhelmed by unmet psychosocial needs such as counselling and bereavement support (Oyuga et al., 2019). Taken together, these studies indicate that Bandura's constructs retain explanatory and practical value in African contexts, but that their strength is contingent on the severity of surrounding adversity, a pattern the theory's triadic reciprocal model in principle anticipates but which is easy to overlook in simplified practice applications.

For teachers and school social workers, the practically useful implication is that the theory identifies concrete, low-cost levers, deliberate modelling by teachers and older peers, structured opportunities for mastery experience (even small, achievable tasks), verbal encouragement calibrated to be credible rather than empty praise, and attention to learners' emotional and physiological state, all of which are actionable within a resource-constrained school even where curricular or infrastructural change is not (Khumalo et al., 2024).

3.3 Theme 2: Structural and infrastructural limitations

A recurring limitation identified across the literature is that Bandura's model assumes reasonably consistent access to the very conditions rural African schools frequently lack: competent, present, and observable models (teachers), safe and resourced settings in which to attempt and repeat mastery experiences and stable environments in which verbal persuasion and emotional regulation can occur. Sub-Saharan Africa has both the largest and a growing out-of-school population, alongside chronic under-financing of primary and secondary schooling relative to other developing regions (Zickafoose et al., 2024). Rural schools in particular are reported to suffer overcrowded classrooms, teacher shortages, dilapidated infrastructure, and limited access to electricity, computers, and internet connectivity, with close to 250 million children across roughly 450,000 African schools estimated to lack basic technology access, effects that are markedly more severe in remote areas than in schools along major roads or in capital towns (Zickafoose et al., 2024).

These conditions bear directly on SLT/SCT's operating mechanisms. If observational learning depends on exposure to attention-worthy, retainable, and imitable models, then teacher shortages and high pupil-teacher ratios reduce both the quantity and quality of modelling available to a given child. If self-efficacy is built substantially through mastery experience, then classrooms without basic materials, textbooks, or functioning facilities constrain the number of master able tasks a learner can complete and have

witnessed. Reviews of rural school infrastructure in South Africa and Ghana similarly link material deprivation directly to learner performance outcomes, independent of any psychological mediator (Zickafoose et al., 2024). This suggests that self-efficacy interventions applied in isolation, without addressing the structural scarcity of modelling and mastery opportunities, risk placing the burden of achievement on an individual child's beliefs while leaving the environmental half of Bandura's own triadic model largely untouched.

A second limitation concerns socio-economic and family disruption. Orphanhood, itself disproportionately prevalent in parts of sub-Saharan Africa affected by HIV/AIDS and poverty, removes or destabilises precisely the caregiving adults who would ordinarily serve as primary models and sources of verbal persuasion, which may explain why self-efficacy effects, though present, are attenuated among orphaned samples relative to general-population samples (Nabunya et al., 2022; Oyuga et al., 2019).

3.4 Theme 3: Philosophical arguments — individualist agency versus Ubuntu communalism

The most substantial philosophical critique concerns Bandura's underlying conception of the person. Self-efficacy is explicitly framed as an individual's belief in their own capability, and self-regulation and self-reinforcement are similarly individual-centred constructs; more broadly, SLT/SCT has been criticised for developing within, and implicitly assuming, an individualist Western cultural frame that may not transfer cleanly to collectivist settings (Simply Psychology, 2025).

This critique gains particular force in African contexts because of Ubuntu, an indigenous relational philosophy, most closely associated with Southern Africa but with parallels across West and sub-Saharan Africa, that locates personhood, identity, and moral worth within community rather than within the autonomous individual, often summarised in the phrase 'I am because we are' (Oviawe, J. O., 2016). Under an Ubuntu-informed reading, a rural African child's confidence, motivation, and even sense of what counts as 'success' may be substantially co-constituted by family and community standing rather than residing in a private, individually held belief. Ubuntu scholarship further argues that Eurocentric, individualist paradigms embedded in international assessment regimes such as the Trends in International Mathematics and Science Study (TIMSS) and the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) can systematically disadvantage learners socialised within communal epistemologies, because such assessments implicitly reward individualist, competitive learning dispositions (Oviawe, J. O., 2016).

This does not necessarily invalidate Bandura's framework outright: the theory's own emphasis on social modelling and vicarious learning is, in principle, compatible with communal transmission of knowledge, and some scholars argue for a complementary rather than oppositional reading in which Ubuntu's relational ethos supplements SLT/SCT's individual-level mechanisms rather than replacing them (Oviawe, J. O., 2016). Even so, the philosophical tension is real and consequential for practice: interventions built solely around individual self-efficacy-boosting, for example personal goal-setting or individual praise, may sit awkwardly, or even feel alienating, within a school culture where achievement is understood and celebrated communally.

3.5 Theme 4: Recent debates relevant to school social workers and teachers

Several debates specific to the past decade emerge from the charted literature.

Collective and relational efficacy. A recurring proposal in recent African education scholarship is to supplement or reframe individual self-efficacy with collective or relational efficacy constructs, group-level beliefs about a class's, family's, or community's shared capability to support a child's learning, better aligned with Ubuntu epistemology and with the observed strength of peer and communal effects in Ethiopian and other African samples (Woreta et al., 2025; Oviawe, J. O., 2016).

Decolonisation of educational psychology. Parallel to, and partly overlapping with, the Ubuntu critique is a broader movement calling for the decolonisation of psychological and educational theory in African education and schooling, which questions the unreflective transplantation of Western-derived theories, including Bandura's, without adaptation to indigenous knowledge systems and languages of instruction.

Digital and infrastructural exclusion as a modelling problem. Contemporary observational learning increasingly occurs through digital media as well as face-to-face modelling, the persistent digital divide, limited electrification and internet access in rural African schools, has been reframed in recent literature not merely as an access-equity issue but as a direct constraint on the range of models, careers, and possibility-narratives rural children can vicariously observe, relative to urban or Global-North peers (Zickafoose et al., 2024).

The compensatory role of school social workers as models and mediators. Given persistent teacher shortages, recent scoping and qualitative work on school social work in African contexts documents practitioners taking on functions that map closely onto SLT/SCT mechanisms: facilitating group life-skills sessions (structured vicarious

learning), coaching teachers on supportive practice (extending the pool of credible models), conducting home visits and family engagement (extending verbal persuasion and emotional support into the household), and advocating for protective, resourced learning environments (addressing the structural limitations noted in Theme 2) (Khumalo et al., 2024, 2025). This literature positions the school social worker not merely as a pastoral-care adjunct but as a potential deliberate architect of the modelling and mastery conditions the theory requires.

Ethical and methodological caution. Finally, contemporary commentary continues to revisit the ethical status of Bandura's foundational Bobo doll experiments, which deliberately exposed children to aggressive adult models, and cautions against treating experimentally demonstrated imitation of aggression as a general warrant for assuming any and all behaviour, including complex, culturally embedded academic behaviour, transfers via the same simple observational mechanism (Bandura et al., 1961; Simply Psychology, 2025).

3.6 Narrative synthesis aligned with the research questions

RQ1 — Empirical usefulness. The expanded evidence continues to provide the clearest support for self-efficacy, peer influence, observational learning and related social-cognitive constructs, but the outcomes and contexts are heterogeneous. Ghanaian, Ethiopian, Ugandan and Kenyan studies support associations between self-efficacy or peer context and educational engagement, achievement or transition. The Tanzanian MEMA kwa Vijana process evaluation shows how a teacher-led and peer-assisted programme explicitly based on Social Learning Theory could influence some knowledge and self-reported behaviours, while also demonstrating limitations in implementation and theoretical determinants. The Zimbabwean rural primary-school study illustrates the relevance of peer counselling and modelling in a rural school context, although it addresses sexual-health decision-making rather than academic attainment. The Zambian rural study similarly shows the use of Bandura's theory to frame pupil absenteeism. The Nigerian study demonstrates a social-learning-informed examination of children's media exposure and academic performance, but it was conducted in Port Harcourt rather than a rural setting. Overall, RQ1 is answered by supportive but context-dependent evidence, with stronger evidence for proximal social-cognitive processes than for a direct causal effect on academic performance.

RQ2 — Structural, cultural and methodological limitations. The expanded evidence indicates that environmental conditions are not peripheral to the theory's application. Teacher shortages, inadequate infrastructure, limited

learning resources, poverty, psychosocial disruption, digital exclusion and difficulties implementing new teaching styles can reduce opportunities for observable models and mastery experiences. The Tanzanian process evaluation is particularly useful in showing that an intervention can be theoretically grounded in Social Learning Theory yet encounter implementation difficulties. The Zimbabwean study highlights the importance of culturally responsive peer structures, while the Zambian evidence shows how socio-economic demands such as farming and cattle herding can disrupt attendance. Methodologically, the mapped evidence remains heterogeneous, rurality is inconsistently specified, and direct intervention evaluation of academic outcomes remains scarce.

RQ3 — Individualist versus communal agency. The philosophical literature introduces a distinct limitation. Ubuntu scholarship challenges an exclusively individualised account of agency by locating personhood, responsibility and achievement within relationships and community. The additional Zimbabwean, Tanzanian and Zambian studies reinforce the relevance of peer, family and community actors as learning and behavioural models, although they do not directly test an Ubuntu–SCT integration. The evidence gap therefore remains empirical: little research compares individual-level efficacy approaches with collective or relational adaptations in African rural schools.

RQ4 — Recent debates and practice implications. The recent evidence broadens the review from individual psychological mechanisms toward peer modelling, community participation, structural conditions and school social work. The Zimbabwean study shows how peer counselling can function as a locally accessible modelling and information mechanism in rural primary schools. Recent African school-social-work literature identifies learner support, family engagement and advocacy as relevant practice roles, while the wider education literature highlights infrastructure, teacher availability and digital exclusion. These roles can be interpreted as potential mechanisms through which the environmental and social components of SCT might be strengthened, but the current evidence does not demonstrate an SLT/SCT-specific causal effect on academic performance.

Synthesis across the four questions, taken together show that the 12-source evidence base has a layered pattern, social cognitive theory has three constructs which are self-efficacy, peer influence and social learning processes which, in African settings are affected by structural adversity which has led to conceptual arguments around the need for greater attention to be given to communal/Ubuntu conceptions of agency so as to fill a substantial empirical gap concerning rural-specific, culturally adapted and

academically focused SLT/SCT interventions. The central knowledge gap is therefore not whether Bandura's constructs can be applied in African learners, but how the theory can be adapted, implemented and evaluated as a culturally and structurally responsive framework for rural African schooling.

4. Discussion

This scoping review mapped 12 sources in which Bandura's SLT/SCT is simultaneously empirically useful and contextually contested when applied to African children and adolescents, including rural and resource-constrained schooling contexts as this population is heterogeneous. Literature shows that the theory's explanatory power weakens when used in rural settings and its practical prescriptions risk become misleading, when used in African rural schools which have teacher shortages, limited mastery opportunities (infrastructural deprivation), and lack of proper guardians and parents who would act as role models due to orphanhood and poverty (Oyuga et al., 2019; Zickafoose et al., 2024). This is consistent with, rather than contradictory to, Bandura's own triadic reciprocal model, but it is frequently lost when the theory is operationalised narrowly as an individual-level psychological intervention, for example a stand-alone self-efficacy workshop, without corresponding attention to the environmental leg of the triad.

The philosophical critique advanced through Ubuntu scholarship adds a further, distinct caution: even where structural conditions are adequate, an intervention built solely around individual belief and individual achievement may be culturally mismatched with a communal understanding of personhood and success (Oviawe, J. O., 2016). For school social workers and teachers, the practical implication is not to discard Bandura's theory but to adapt its delivery, for instance by designing mastery experiences and celebrations of achievement at the level of the peer group, class, or family rather than the isolated individual, and by explicitly recruiting community members, older siblings, and local role models, not only classroom teachers, as observable models, consistent both with SLT's own mechanism and with Ubuntu's relational emphasis.

The recent literature on school social work roles in Africa suggests these practitioners are, in effect, already doing some of this adaptive work informally: facilitating group-based rather than purely individual psychosocial support, engaging families rather than isolated learners, and advocating structurally for better-resourced learning environments (Khumalo et al., 2024, 2025). This review's synthesis suggests such practice could be made more theoretically explicit and, in turn, more systematically evaluated.

4.1 Implications for practice

- Design mastery experiences that are small, frequent, and achievable, particularly for learners whose prior schooling has been disrupted (e.g., orphaned or displaced children), rather than relying on high-stakes, infrequent assessment as the sole feedback source.
- Deliberately diversify the pool of observable models beyond the classroom teacher: invite credible community members, older peers, and near-peer role models (e.g., recent local school leavers who progressed successfully) into the school, addressing both the teacher-shortage constraint and the value of relatable, in-group models.
- Where possible, frame encouragement and recognition of achievement at group as well as individual level, consistent with Ubuntu-informed communal values, to reduce the risk of cultural mismatch.
- Treat self-efficacy-building as a complement to, not a substitute for, advocacy for structural resourcing (infrastructure, materials, teacher staffing); school social workers are well positioned to combine psychosocial support with this advocacy role.
- Attend explicitly to learners' emotional and physiological states (hunger, trauma, bereavement), which the theory identifies as a source of self-efficacy but which is easily neglected in practice under resource pressure.

4.2 Limitations of the review

Several limitations should be considered when interpreting this 12-source synthesis. First, the search was conducted as a structured but not exhaustively systematic multi-database process, and the original search log did not preserve numerical retrieval, screening and exclusion counts. Second, the optional consultation stage of the Arksey and O'Malley (2005) framework was not undertaken. Third, the included studies vary considerably in country coverage, rural specificity, population and outcome, and several sub-Saharan regions remain underrepresented. Fourth, the Nigeria study is urban and therefore should not be interpreted as direct rural evidence. Finally, as a scoping rather than systematic review, no formal risk-of-bias or quality appraisal was conducted, consistent with the stated review design.

4.3 Conclusion

Bandura's Social Learning and Social Cognitive Theories provide a useful framework for interpreting social learning, modelling and self-efficacy in African educational

contexts, but the 12-source evidence base does not justify treating the theory as a sufficient or independently causal explanation of academic performance. The strongest evidence concerns associations involving self-efficacy, peer influence and related social-cognitive processes. Rural studies from Zimbabwe, Tanzania and Zambia demonstrate the relevance of peer, teacher, family and environmental conditions, while the Nigerian evidence provides an urban comparison rather than rural confirmation. Structural constraints, methodological limitations and culturally grounded communal conceptions of agency therefore remain central to interpretation. For school social workers and teachers, the evidence supports a deliberately adapted application that combines individual-level mastery and credible encouragement with peer/community modelling and sustained attention to the environmental conditions required for learning.

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