

# Bridging Classroom and Real-World Learning: The Impact of Field Trips on Geography Students' Engagement and Critical Thinking in South Africa

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**Abstract:** This study investigates the enhancement of learning in Geography Education through field trips at a South African university, guided by Dewey's philosophy of experiential learning and Kolb's Experiential Learning Cycle. The aim was to explore how practical, real-world experiences strengthen students' comprehension of theoretical concepts and foster professional development. The research was framed within an interpretivist paradigm, emphasising the subjective meanings and experiences of participants. A qualitative approach was adopted, employing a case study design to provide in-depth insights into a specific field trip experience. The population comprised all third-year Geography Education students at the university, with a purposive sample of 17 participants who attended the field trip and completed the survey. Data was collected through an open-ended questionnaire (administered via Google Forms) immediately following the field trip, as part of a routine evaluation process. Responses were analysed using thematic analysis, allowing for the emergence of patterns and themes from participants' narratives. Four themes emerged: experiential

learning and concrete understanding, theory-to-practice integration, affective engagement and critical reflection, and skill development through collaborative learning. The findings reveal that well-structured field trips can substantially deepen learning, foster critical thinking, and build professional competencies. This well-structured and insightful study clearly demonstrates the value of experiential learning in Geography Education, although the noted challenges highlight areas needing further attention. This study contributes to the literature by applying the Dewey-Kolb framework in a South African higher education context, offering evidence of how experiential learning promotes academic and professional development.

**Keywords:** Geography education, field trips, experiential learning, concrete understanding, theory-to-practice integration.

## 1. Introduction

Geography education focuses on helping students understand the Earth's physical and human environments and how they interact, fostering critical spatial thinking and decision-making skills. Field trips are structured outdoor excursions designed to connect classroom theories with tangible, real-world environments, making abstract geographical concepts more concrete and experiential (Holgersen, 2020). These trips serve as structured, curriculum-linked experiences that enable students to connect classroom theory with real-world geographical phenomena through experiential learning (Kolb, 1984). In South African universities, such field trips are regarded as a practical pedagogical approach that enriches students' engagement and comprehension by moving learning from theory to practice, thus enhancing geography education (Addo et al., 2023). In this regard, field trips are a cornerstone of geography education, serving as a pedagogical tool to bridge the gap between theoretical classroom learning and practical, real-world application (Hurrell et al., 2025).

The literature consistently highlights the benefits of field trips, including increased student motivation, enhanced problem-solving skills, and a deeper understanding of complex concepts

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(Jones & Washko, 2022). Despite the recognised potential of field trips to enhance learning, there are gaps and inconsistencies in the literature regarding their actual impact in South African higher education (Alqudah & Khasawneh, 2023). While international research highlights benefits such as increased motivation and enhanced spatial cognition, limited qualitative research has explored the experiences and perceptions of South African students regarding field trips (Mutesasira & Marongwe, 2025). There is a need to move beyond simply stating that field trips are “good” and, instead, to unpack how and why they are effective in facilitating learning. This study seeks to contribute to the literature by providing a rich, qualitative account of how field trips enhance learning in geography education, thereby shedding light on the pedagogical mechanisms at play and offering insights that can inform curriculum design and teaching practices both locally and internationally.

The core research question of this study asks: How do field trips enhance learning in geography education among students at a South African university? This qualitative inquiry explores students’ experiences and perceptions, focusing on how field trips help them understand and apply lecture-taught geographical theories and concepts. Objectives include identifying specific learning outcomes, challenges faced, and the process by which students bridge theory and practice through these experiential activities. The core research problem is the limited qualitative understanding of how field trips, as a pedagogical tool, specifically enhance geographical learning among university students in a South African context.

## **2. Literature Review**

Field trips are widely regarded as a compelling pedagogical strategy in geography education, bridging abstract classroom theory and tangible real-world experience (Rosita et al., 2025). Their role is particularly crucial in South African higher education, where experiential learning faces contextual challenges such as resource limitations and curriculum rigidity (Abdullah & Qolamani, 2024). Current literature offers limited insights into how students personally experience these trips and how they interpret the relationship between theoretical knowledge and practical application through fieldwork (Fedesco et al., 2020). This literature review examines existing research on how field trips enhance geographical learning, focusing on student perspectives, benefits and challenges, as well as the theoretical framework that experiential learning theory provides to frame these dynamics.

### **2.1 Pedagogical role of field trips in bridging theory to practice**

A significant body of literature underscores the unique capacity of field trips to connect theoretical geographical concepts with real-world applications (García de la Vega, 2022). A meta-analysis by Foo and Foo (2022) found that students consistently report a deeper and more intuitive understanding of concepts following a field trip. This phenomenon occurs because the “out-of-classroom” environment provides a rich, multi-sensory context that is impossible to replicate in a lecture hall. For example, a student studying geomorphology can observe wave action, sediment transport, and coastal erosion processes firsthand, rendering abstract theories of longshore drift and isostatic rebound tangible and more comprehensible (Addo et al., 2023). However, the literature often affirms these benefits without providing a detailed qualitative account of how students cognitively and emotionally make these connections.

Field trips serve as a powerful tool for developing geographical imagination, enabling students to visualise and understand spatial relationships and processes that are not immediately apparent (Julien & Chalmeau, 2022). For instance, a trip to a South African urban centre allows students to physically navigate spaces shaped by historical policies such as apartheid, directly observing the spatial segregation and its enduring socioeconomic impacts. This experiential learning transcends mere observation; it encourages students to critically analyse how political, social, and economic forces have shaped the landscape (Bakar, 2021). By engaging with the environment in this manner,

students transition from the passive absorption of facts to the active interpretation and synthesis of complex geographical phenomena, thereby transforming theoretical knowledge into practical, contextualised understanding (Campbell & Gedat, 2021).

## **2.2 Student experiences and perceptions of field trips**

Research consistently demonstrates that students perceive field trips as highly beneficial to their learning journeys, particularly in the discipline of geography, where contextual understanding enhances comprehension. In a study focusing on wetland ecosystems, Rosita et al. (2025) observed that students reported heightened engagement, a more precise understanding of complex ecological processes, and increased enjoyment compared to traditional classroom lessons. These sensory-rich experiences enable students to connect abstract terms and diagrams with real sensory inputs such as sights, sounds, and textures, thereby deepening cognitive and emotional learning. Moreover, such experiential encounters often stimulate curiosity and critical questioning, encouraging learners to reflect on their preconceived notions and prior textbook knowledge (Barseghyan & Hovakimyan, 2024).

Qualitative studies echo these findings while highlighting the crucial role that field trips play in making geography education more accessible and relatable. Nkuna & Mawela (2025) found that South African students appreciated how field trips helped elucidate geographical content by situating learning within their own landscapes and communities, thereby bridging academic content with lived realities. These narratives underscore students' active role in constructing knowledge during field trips and recognise these excursions as transformative educational moments (Jones & Washko, 2022). Students also identify areas for improvement, such as better preparation prior to trips and clearer connections between field observations and academic assessment, indicating a need for more intentional integration (Lee et al., 2020).

## **2.3 Benefits of field trips in geography education**

Field trips provide a range of cognitive, affective, and social learning benefits that support deeper geography education outcomes. Students develop improved spatial thinking abilities, enhanced retention of geographical phenomena, and refined problem-solving skills as they engage with real landscapes and datasets (Hickman, 2023). Field trips foster environmental awareness and stewardship by providing students with direct experience of environmental issues and cultural landscapes (Bhushal et al., 2025). These settings encourage collaborative learning and interpersonal skill development, as students interact, share perspectives, and work on group tasks, cultivating teamwork and communication skills essential for holistic education (Foo & Foo, 2022).

In South Africa, these outcomes hold particular significance against a backdrop of largely theoretical and content-heavy geography curricula, which sometimes struggle to resonate with students' everyday experiences. Jones & Washko (2022) emphasise that field trips offer critical opportunities for applied learning, allowing students to contextualise classroom theories and case studies through firsthand observation and analysis. This experiential dimension roots abstract curriculum content in real socio-environmental scenarios, assisting students in transferring and internalising knowledge (Trott et al., 2023). These findings align closely with Kolb's Experiential Learning Theory, which prioritises concrete experience paired with subsequent reflective and abstract processing as a foundation for sustainable learning (Haritha & Rao, 2024).

## **2.4 Challenges and constraints in implementing field trips**

While the literature highlights the significant benefits of field trips, it also reveals several key limitations that can hinder their effectiveness in South African university contexts. Resource intensity is a major constraint; field trips are inherently demanding, requiring substantial financial investment for transport, accommodation, and specialised equipment (Nkuna & Mawela, 2025). This often limits

their frequency and can create an inequitable learning environment where students from lower socioeconomic backgrounds are unable to participate. The significant time commitment for both students and faculty also places pressure on a curriculum already packed with content, making it difficult to integrate meaningful, multi-day trips. A lack of proper planning and alignment can severely diminish the academic impact of a field trip (Dawson & Leytham, 2020). If the activities are not explicitly linked to the theoretical content taught in class, students may struggle to make the necessary connections, reducing the experience to a simple excursion rather than a powerful learning tool. Logistical and ethical challenges, including safety concerns, accessibility issues for students with disabilities, and ensuring equitable participation across diverse student groups, are critical factors that must be carefully managed to ensure the overall effectiveness and inclusivity of the learning experience.

Moreover, curriculum policies such as the CAPS framework emphasise the coverage of theoretical content, constraining teachers' flexibility to allocate ample time for extended fieldwork (Chuene & Teane, 2024). Many teachers report pressure to prioritise examination preparation over experiential activities, which can marginalise the value of field trips in practice (Jones & Washko, 2022). These systemic constraints often result in field trips being regarded as add-ons rather than integral components of pedagogy, thereby limiting their transformative potential (Mustafa et al., 2024). Understanding these barriers is crucial for designing strategies that enhance field trip efficacy and accessibility in geography education contexts.

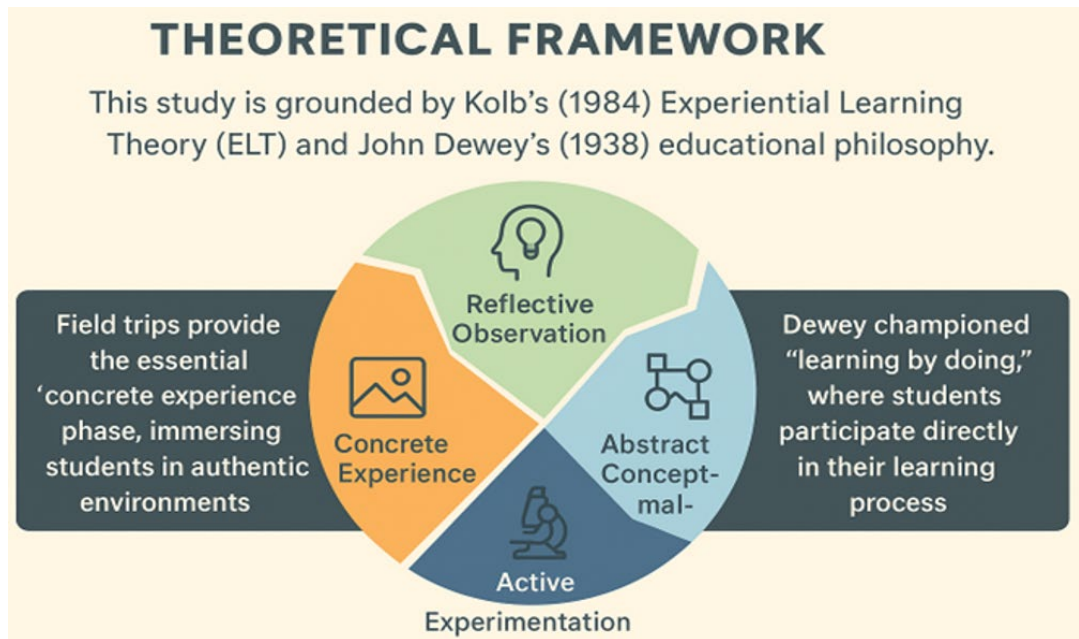
## **2.5 Theoretical framework**

This study is grounded in Kolb's (1984) Experiential Learning Theory (ELT), and John Dewey's (1938) educational philosophy is widely used to understand how field trips facilitate meaningful geography learning. ELT posits that learning is a cyclical process involving four stages: concrete experience, reflective observation, abstract conceptualisation, and active experimentation (Kolb, 1984). Field trips provide the essential "concrete experience" phase, immersing students in authentic environments where they can observe, interact with, and engage in geographical phenomena firsthand. This experiential engagement prompts reflection and allows learners to connect observations with classroom theories, leading to deeper conceptualisation and application. Research in South African geography education confirms that such experiential phases promote cognitive development and practical skills acquisition, thereby supporting Kolb's cyclical model (Nkuna & Mawela, 2025).

Complementing Kolb, John Dewey's educational philosophy offers a foundational underpinning to the concept of experiential learning, emphasising that education must be rooted in active, practical engagement with real-life experiences to be truly effective (Dewey, 1938; Bhushal et al., 2025). Dewey championed "learning by doing," whereby students participate directly in their learning process rather than passively receiving information. Central to Dewey's theory is the idea that meaningful knowledge is socially constructed and emerges from reflective interactions with the environment within a social context. He asserted that educators must thoughtfully organise educational experiences to align with students' readiness and capabilities, thus ensuring effective learning outcomes (Abdullah & Qolamani, 2024). The quality of these experiences is paramount; without active participation and reflection, learning remains superficial.

Dewey also stressed the continuity and interaction of experiences, proposing that learning is a continuous process where new experiences build upon prior knowledge (Thomassen & Jørgensen, 2021). This perspective highlights that field trips are not isolated events but part of an ongoing learning journey, wherein real-world encounters enable students to relate classroom content to their living environment. Dewey underscored the importance of reflection as a critical phase in which students analyse their experiences, develop critical thinking skills, and derive a deeper understanding. This reflective practice transforms experiential encounters into knowledge that can

be adapted and applied in future contexts, a core educational goal that supports lifelong learning (Tobin et al., 2024).



*Figure 1: Integrating Dewey's and Kolb's theories*

Integrating Dewey's and Kolb's theories (Figure 1) establishes a comprehensive framework for analysing geography education field trips in South Africa. Field trips function as immersive contexts for concrete experience (Kolb) and active engagement (Dewey), wherein students observe geographical phenomena and engage socially and reflectively in the process of meaning-making. Dewey's emphasis on the role of shared experiences and interaction enhances the understanding of how knowledge is constructed, thereby complementing Kolb's process-focused cycle. Collectively, these theories underpin this study's qualitative exploration of how field trips facilitate the bridging of theoretical knowledge and practical observation in geography education.

### 3. Methodology

This chapter outlines the research methodology used to investigate how field trips enhance learning in Geography education at a South African university, with a focus on exploring students' lived experiences and meaning-making processes during these trips. The methodology chapter describes the research paradigm, approach, and design that guided the study, followed by detailed explanations of the sampling strategy, data collection methods, and data analysis procedures. It addresses data quality and ethical issues, ensuring rigor and integrity throughout the research process.

This study is situated within the interpretivist paradigm, which holds that knowledge is socially constructed through interactions between individuals and their environment (Omodan, 2022). The interpretivist paradigm is appropriate here because it emphasises understanding participants' lived experiences and meaning-making processes, specifically how Geography students interpret and internalise learning during field trips. A qualitative research approach was employed to explore the depth and complexity of students' learning experiences during these trips. Qualitative methods are well-suited to understanding phenomena from participants' perspectives, enabling detailed exploration of how theoretical knowledge is transformed into applied understanding in real-world settings (Tracy, 2024). This approach allows for flexibility in data collection and analysis, facilitating

the emergence of nuanced themes grounded in participant narratives. This study utilised a case study research design focusing on Geography students at one South African university. Case studies are valuable for in-depth, contextualised investigations of bounded systems, providing detailed insights into processes, experiences, and interactions within real-life contexts (Tracy, 2024). The case study design enables examination of how field trips function as learning spaces within the university's unique socio-cultural and institutional environment.

The population for this study comprised all third-year students in the Geography Education Bachelor of Education programme enrolled at a South African university. These students were selected because they participate in both theoretical classroom sessions and field-based learning activities as part of their education. The target population included students who had experienced at least one official academic field trip during their studies. A purposive sampling strategy was employed to select participants who had directly engaged in Geography field trips as part of their curriculum. Purposive sampling ensures that participants possess relevant experiences necessary to address the research questions (Campbell et al., 2020). The sample included approximately 17 undergraduate third-year Geography students to capture diverse perspectives. This size is consistent with qualitative research norms, allowing for depth without sacrificing manageability (Lim, 2025).

Data was collected using an open-ended questionnaire administered via Google Forms. This method allowed participants to reflect on their experiences and provide detailed responses at their own pace. Open-ended questions encourage participants to share their unique perspectives without being restricted by predefined responses (Tracy, 2024). The questionnaire was designed to elicit responses on how field trips have contributed to their understanding of Geography concepts, their engagement with learning materials, and the application of classroom knowledge to real-world contexts.

The researcher's positionality as both an academic in the Geography Education programme and the organiser of the field trips inevitably influenced the research process. The existing relationship with the students and familiarity with the curriculum may have built a level of trust that encouraged more candid responses. However, this same proximity could also have introduced a potential for bias. The researcher made a conscious effort to adopt a neutral stance during the survey, ensuring questions were open-ended and non-leading. Awareness of how their presence might affect students' willingness to provide critical feedback was notable.

Data were analysed using thematic analysis, a flexible method for identifying, analysing, and reporting patterns within qualitative data (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The analysis followed six phases: familiarisation with the data, generating initial codes, searching for themes, reviewing themes, defining and naming themes, and producing the final report. This approach allowed for the inductive exploration of themes emerging from participants' narratives related to experiential learning, knowledge application, and context. During data analysis, critical reflection on interpretations was conducted, and consistent cross-referencing with the raw data was performed. This practice helped ensure that preconceived notions about the value of field trips did not overshadow the genuine voices of the participants. This reflexive process was essential for grounding the study's findings in the students' lived experiences rather than in personal beliefs.

### **3.1 Ethical considerations**

The data for this study was initially collected as part of a routine field trip evaluation survey within the Geography Education programme at a South African university. This type of quality assurance activity, being an integral part of standard teaching and learning processes, did not require a separate, formal ethical clearance certificate from the university's ethics committee. However, upon deciding to use this data for research purposes, we adhered to all key ethical principles to ensure the integrity of the study and the protection of our participants. The researcher ensured that participation in the survey was entirely voluntary, and all student participants were clearly informed that their

anonymised responses might be used for research purposes in a future publication. This transparency was crucial for obtaining informed consent. To protect participant privacy and maintain confidentiality, all collected data was treated as strictly confidential and stored securely. All identifying information was meticulously anonymised, and student teachers were assigned pseudonyms, referred to as S1 through S17, to ensure that no individual could be linked to their responses. This approach, while not following a formal clearance procedure, aligns with the core principles of research ethics by prioritising participant consent, confidentiality, and data security.

## **4. Presentation and Discussion of Findings**

This section synthesises key findings from our study of South African geography students, examines how these results confirm or challenge existing literature, and proposes actionable recommendations grounded in experiential learning theories. By analysing participant experiences through the lenses of Kolb's (1984) Experiential Learning Theory and Dewey's (1938) principles of active learning, we highlight both the transformative potential and practical challenges of field-based education in resource-constrained environments.

### **4.1 Theme 1: Experiential learning and concrete understanding**

Students consistently described field trips as transformative for making abstract concepts tangible, aligning with Kolb's "concrete experience" stage.

*S1: "It helped me to experience and see what is taught in class."*

*S16: "Practically seeing what was taught in class made things easy."*

These findings echo Foo and Foo's (2022) meta-analysis, which indicated that students reported a deeper conceptual understanding through sensory engagement. Kolb's Experiential Learning Theory (ELT) explains this as the foundational stage for reflective observation, where direct encounters with landforms or ecosystems—such as deforestation sites noted by (S17)—cement theoretical knowledge. Dewey's emphasis on "interaction with the environment" (1938) further validates how field trips anchor learning in lived reality, addressing a gap identified in South African studies by Nkuna and Mawela (2025).

This study's findings align with Kolb's concrete experience stage, where direct sensory engagement facilitates deeper learning (Kolb, 1984). For example, S16's observation that "Practically seeing what was taught in class made things easy" echoes Foo & Foo's (2022) findings that multi-sensory experiences improve retention. However, our data extends this by revealing a crucial contextual nuance for South African students. In settings with limited classroom resources, such as the absence of 3D models or advanced technology, field trips are not merely supplementary; they are essential for providing a tangible connection to the material. This finding fills a gap noted by Nkuna & Mawela (2025), highlighting how fieldwork becomes a primary tool for bridging the theory-practice divide under resource constraints.

Dewey's principle of interaction with the environment (1938) further explains why students like S1, who stated, "It helped me to experience and see what is taught in class," found field trips so transformative. While García de la Vega (2022) emphasises the universal benefits of experiential learning, our study contextualises these benefits, showing that for South African students, field trips are not just an academic luxury but a foundational element of their learning. This deepens the theoretical engagement by illustrating how context shapes the role and impact of experiential learning, making it a critical component of equitable geography education.

### **4.2 Theme 2: Theory-to-practice integration**

Field trips enabled students to contextualise classroom content, particularly in South Africa's socio-historical landscape.

S9: *"The road to democracy, as it relates to our history module, became clearer after visiting historical sites."*

S10: *"all the places that we went to made us realise what we did in class with practical examples"*

S17: *"Seeing deforestation and afforestation along the Durban route is linked directly to our lessons on environmental management."*

This aligns with Rosita et al. (2025), who found that field trips "demystify" geography by grounding it in local contexts. However, S9 experience contrasts with Jones & Washko's (2022) assertion that field trips universally boost motivation.

Kolb's abstract conceptualisation stage is evident in how students connect their field observations to theoretical frameworks. S17's comment, "Seeing deforestation linked directly to our lessons," exemplifies this process, supporting Rosita et al.'s (2025) finding that contextualised learning boosts relevance. However, a deeper look at the data reveals a critical gap in the application of Kolb's model: the underutilization of the reflective observation stage. Many student comments, such as one noting "all the places that we went to made us realise what we did in class with practical examples," are descriptive rather than truly reflective. This suggests that while students made connections, they may not have fully completed the reflective part of the learning cycle.

This dissonance is clarified by Dewey's continuity of experience (1938). When field trips are poorly aligned with the curriculum, they can disrupt the learning cycle, turning what should be a meaningful experience into a disjointed one. Our findings, therefore, refine Addo et al.'s (2023) optimistic claims by stressing the need for deliberate design and structured reflection. This point is often absent in global literature but is critical for ensuring that field trips within South Africa's uneven educational infrastructure are academically impactful and not just isolated events.

### **Theme 3: Affective Engagement & Critical Reflection**

Field trips fostered emotional connections and critical questioning, advancing Dewey's "reflective inquiry."

S8: *"It gave a clear picture, and everything matched what we learned"*

S16: *"Visiting museums made history meaningful; I could link textbook events to real people"*

S16's reflection supports Bhushal et al. (2025), who linked field trips to increased environmental stewardship. Conversely, S8's critique echoes Lee et al.'s (2020) call for improved pre-trip preparation to bridge theory-practice gaps. Kolb's "reflective observation" stage clarifies how dissonance (e.g., mismatches between expectations and reality) can enhance critical thinking, a finding not present in Addo et al.'s (2023) otherwise positive accounts.

The findings on affective engagement align with Kolb's reflective observation stage, where emotional and personal connections deepen understanding. S16's reflection that "visiting museums made history meaningful" demonstrates this emotional engagement. This supports Bhushal et al.'s (2025) work linking field trips to environmental stewardship. Our data adds a crucial nuance: affective outcomes are deeply tied to the relevance of the experience to students' identities (e.g., S9's focus on South Africa's democracy). This shows that emotional engagement is not a universal outcome but is context-dependent, enriching the theoretical discussion. Dewey's concept of reflective inquiry (1938) provides a framework for understanding the pedagogical value of comments like S8's ("It gave a clear picture, and everything matched what we learned"). Such insights indicate that the field trip created a powerful sense of cognitive clarity and synthesis. This finding challenges the assumption by Saleem et al. (2021) that all student feedback, even positive, can be overlooked. We argue that such critiques are vital for a continuous process of maintaining and monitoring the design of



experiential learning, reinforcing that even seemingly simple feedback can offer deep theoretical insights into how learning occurs.

#### **Theme 4: Skill Development & Collaborative Learning**

Students developed applied skills (e.g., spatial analysis) and teamwork, resonating with Kolb's "active experimentation."

*S12: "I gained field experience to share with my learners during teaching practice."*

*S15: "Doing pollution practicals helped me understand mitigation strategies."*

These outcomes corroborate Foo & Foo's (2022) findings on collaborative skill-building but extend them by highlighting teacher training applications as a novel contribution to South African literature. Dewey's social constructivism frames this as "knowledge co-construction," where peer interactions during trips (e.g., group observations) enrich learning—a dimension underexplored in Saleem et al. (2021).

These findings confirm that field trips enhance geography education by bridging theory and practice through experiential learning (Kolb, 1984); however, their effectiveness depends on intentional design and contextual relevance, as Dewey (1938) emphasises. While the findings align with global literature on sensory engagement (Foo & Foo, 2022) and critical reflection (Lee et al., 2020), they also reveal gaps in South African implementation, such as mismatches between trip content and the syllabus. To optimise impact, curricula must integrate field trips with clear learning outcomes, incorporate reflective debriefs to solidify Kolb's cycle, and advocate for policy reforms to address funding and logistical barriers (Chune & Teane, 2024). Ultimately, field trips hold transformative potential in South African geography education when grounded in experiential theory and responsive to student and contextual needs, advancing both pedagogical research and practical application.

Kolb's active experimentation stage frames how students develop and transfer practical skills during field trips, a key contribution of this study. For instance, S12's comment, "I gained experience to share with my learners," illustrates that the field trip served as a form of cyclical learning, where abstract concepts are applied and then refined through practice (Kolb, 1984). This finding extends the work of Foo & Foo (2022) by highlighting fieldwork's crucial role in teacher preparation, a novel contribution to the South African literature on this topic. Furthermore, the collaborative nature of these excursions, where students work together on tasks like data collection, aligns with Dewey's principle of social constructivism (1938), which emphasises that learning is a social process. This mirrors real-world geographic practice, a dimension that Nkuna & Mawela (2025) noted was underexplored.

However, the study also reveals a significant gap between this ideal and reality. Our findings show that logistical constraints, such as limited group sizes and inadequate transportation, can directly impede collaboration. This challenge to the idealised model of collaborative learning, as presented by Lee et al. (2020), is a critical insight. It necessitates a deeper theoretical engagement with how a lack of resources in South Africa can disrupt the full learning cycle, preventing students from effectively moving from the concrete experience of fieldwork to the abstract conceptualisation of how to work together and solve problems.

#### **5. Limitations of the Study**

While this study provides valuable insights, it is important to acknowledge several limitations that could influence the interpretation and generalisability of the findings. The primary method of data collection relied on an open-ended questionnaire, which, while appropriate for gathering a wide range of perspectives, may have limited the richness and depth of interaction that could have been achieved through methods such as interviews or focus groups. This design choice meant we could

not pursue follow-up questions or explore nuanced points in real time. The reliance on qualitative self-reported data could introduce response bias, as participants' reflections might have been influenced by their personal perceptions or recent experiences, rather than a balanced, long-term view. The study focused on a relatively small sample of students from a single South African university, which inherently restricts the generalisability of the findings to other institutions or regions with different educational and socioeconomic contexts.

The sample primarily consisted of third-year Bachelor of Education students, potentially overlooking perspectives from students at other academic levels or disciplines. The study captured only immediate student perceptions after field trips and did not assess the long-term retention of knowledge or skills. Lastly, while logistical challenges such as funding and transportation were noted, the study did not systematically evaluate their direct impact on field trip outcomes.

## **6. Conclusions and recommendations**

This study aimed to investigate how field trips enhance geography education among students at a South African university, using Kolb's Experiential Learning Theory and Dewey's principles of active learning as theoretical frameworks. Through qualitative analysis of open-ended questionnaires from 17 B.Ed. third-year students, the study revealed key insights about the value and challenges of field-based learning. The research makes a significant contribution to the existing literature by connecting the theories of Kolb and Dewey to the practical application of field trips, especially in contexts with limited resources. It highlights how field trips allow students to internalise abstract concepts through direct observation (Kolb's concrete experience), link classroom theory to real-world situations, and develop critical thinking and emotional connections (Dewey's interactive learning). The study also provides valuable insights into the experiences of South African students, revealing both the transformative benefits and the practical challenges of such trips, and concludes with specific recommendations for improving their design and implementation.

To enhance the transformative potential of field trips in geography education, teachers are encouraged to design field trips with explicit alignment to curriculum goals, integrating structured pre- and post-trip reflective activities to complete Kolb's learning cycle. To address common logistical barriers, we recommend that educators actively explore partnerships with external organisations, such as local businesses, NGOs, or environmental groups, which can provide funding, resources, or specialised expertise. The strategic use of blended learning models is crucial, where physical trips are complemented by virtual field trips or augmented reality tools to provide context and reduce costs. Policymakers should support these efforts by allocating targeted funding for experiential learning, especially for under-resourced institutions, and by integrating these innovative learning models into national education policies. Future research should build on this by conducting longitudinal studies to assess long-term learning retention and by systematically evaluating the effectiveness of these hybrid learning approaches in diverse South African contexts.

## **7. Declarations**

**Funding:** This research did not receive any external funding

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**Conflicts of Interest:** The authors declare no conflict of interest.

**Data Availability:** The data are not publicly available due to confidentiality agreements with participants and ethical restrictions imposed by the Institutional Review Board. However, de-identified data can be made available from the corresponding author upon reasonable request, subject to approval by the ethics committee.

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