

Academic Field Trip as a Tool for Developing Cultural Competence in Musical and Performing Arts Education

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Abstract

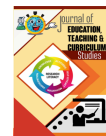
Studies have highlighted the importance of cultural competence in higher education musical and performing arts education. While there are various strategies for incorporating culturally relevant experiences in musical and performing arts education, academic field trips stand out as one such strategy. They allow students to engage with aspects of cultures relevant to their studies and post-study life that are often not covered in the classroom. Although previous studies have examined various aspects of culturally relevant education, little has been done on the significance of academic field trips to students' academic experience in African tertiary education contexts. This study, therefore, examined students' perception of the significance of academic field trips to cultural relevance in performing arts education, using an academic field trip at Kabarak University as a case study. Drawing on the pragmatic research paradigm, the study employed a mix of quantitative and qualitative designs anchored on Kolb's Experiential Learning Theory. Findings revealed that academic trips enriched students' appreciation of indigenous performances and enhanced reflective learning. An overwhelming majority of participants (92%) agreed that the academic field trip provided them a unique learning opportunity that could not be replicated within the classroom. In addition, 88% affirmed that it helped them to bridge the gap between theory and real-world artistic practice. There is a need for academic trips and other immersive, real-world learning experiences to be formally embedded in music and performing arts education curricula to enhance the cultural competence of students in these fields.

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Introduction

Studies have highlighted the importance of cultural competence in performing arts education, especially in higher education settings (McKoy & Lind, 2022; Good-Perkins, 2021; Hess, 2021). While there are various strategies for inculcating culturally relevant experiences in musical, theatre, and film

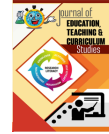


arts education contexts, academic field trips stand as one such strategy, given that they allow students to engage with aspects of cultures relevant to their studies and post-study life. In addition, academic trips to cultural sites such as cultural centres, theatres and festivals enable students to experience real-life performances, instruments and arts professionals with whom they are able to interact and ask questions which they may not be able to ask in the classroom (Curras & Escriva, 2025; Jones & Washco, 2022; González-Herrera & Giralt-Escobar, 2021). Although studies have examined various aspects of culturally relevant education, even in African contexts, little has been done on the significance of academic field trips to students' academic experience. This study, therefore, intends to fill this knowledge gap by examining students' perceptions of the significance of academic field trips to culturally relevant education in musical and performing arts, focusing on an academic field trip at Kabarak University as a case study. It is guided by the question: How do academic field trips contribute to the development of cultural competence in musical and performing arts students at Kabarak University?

This study is important for several reasons. Firstly, the findings of the study will justify academic trips not simply as an enhancement but as a significant tool for producing well-rounded graduates who can situate the performing arts within local and global cultural contexts. Secondly, the findings will contribute immensely to curricular reform, especially in the study of Music, Theatre, Film and related arts at tertiary levels. Additionally, the findings of the study will contribute a significant perspective to ongoing academic discourse on culturally relevant education. The findings will also inform curriculum and policy in performing arts education.

Methodology

Drawing on the pragmatic research paradigm, the study employs a mixed-methods design (Kivunja & Kuyini, 2017). This design is employed to capture the opinions of tens of participants, as well as a few comments on their reflections on the academic trip they were engaged in. The random sampling technique was employed in selecting 25 participants out of 45 students, who were certificate, diploma, and bachelor's Music and Performing Arts and Film students of Kabarak University, Kenya. The sample size was constrained by the need to comply with ethical practices, under which participants voluntarily participated in the study. Data were collected using a structured questionnaire with mainly closed-ended Likert-scale questions for the quantitative design, and a few open-ended questions to capture as much personal reflections as possible from the participants. To augment the qualitative data, the participant observation technique was also employed, consistent with studies such as Owajje (2015; 2016). The questionnaire was disseminated electronically using Google Forms. Data analysis employed a combination of content and thematic analysis techniques for qualitative data, while quantitative data were analysed using descriptive statistics based on percentages. The analysis was carried out within the scope of the selected theoretical framework employing the mixed-methods analytical strategy as employed by Lawal (2025), Sofola (2025), Kinyua (2025), and Fitzpatrick (2011). Ethical considerations involved duly notifying participants of the study's objective, the need for their responses to be the primary data, and their freedom to opt out of the study at any point during the data collection process. The Google form containing the questionnaire required participants to consent to participating in the study before proceeding to answer the questions. In addition, no personal information was collected from the participants to allow the analysis to proceed anonymously.



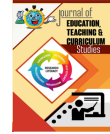
Literature review

Musical and performing arts education are aspects of cultural studies, given their affiliation with critical cultural elements such as singing, drumming, poetry, and drama (Owoaje & Adegbola, 2022). It is for this reason that education in music and performing arts should be centred around cultural competence. Cultural competence in musical and performing arts education is the ability of students to engage with, understand, and value diverse musical traditions and practices relevant to their worldviews. This is achieved through culturally responsive teaching and the exposure of learners to multiple musical traditions both in and outside the classroom (McKoy & Lind, 2022; Hess, 2021). Emphasising the importance of culturally relevant education in musical arts, Good-Perkins (2021) noted that upholding culturally sustaining musical arts education can help to empower minority students, thereby dismantling coloniality and sustaining their cultural competence. This, according to Good-Perkins (2021), promotes epistemic expansion. As noted by McKoy and Lind (2022), incorporating students' cultural references into every aspect of learning will benefit students, schools, and the communities to which they will be of service after completing their training.

This aligns with the position of Koval et al. (2025), who argued that musical arts education contributes immensely to the advancement of cultural identity, especially by providing cultural knowledge to the modern world through research into folk music and traditional instruments of ethnic cultures. This observation is also relevant to the other genres of the performing arts. Zhou and Komarovska (2023) identified pedagogical principles and conditions that could help develop cultural competence in musical and performing arts education. Such principles include training music teachers using cultural approaches to learning, the use of artistic integration, active orientation, the actualisation of creative resources and dialogues, and connections to history and culture. Although their postulation was based entirely on training future music teachers, these notions also apply to achieving cultural competence in musical and performing arts education, given that the broader community is the recipient of these competencies.

In achieving cultural competence in musical and performing arts education, contextual learning comes to bear in situating musical knowledge within real-world, social, and cultural frameworks. This makes learning more impactful and accessible for students from diverse backgrounds. According to Barton and Riddle (2021), sociocultural contexts are instrumental in shaping different modes of communication used across diverse music learning contexts. When experienced by students, especially in real-life situations, these contexts can improve musical and performing arts education for all. Additionally, Paul et al. (2001) noted the impact of authentic-context learning activities in musical arts education. Their study focuses on undergraduate instrumental music teacher education, in which authentic-context learning activities significantly improved initial teaching performance compared to those with medium or low levels of experience. Furthermore, Luo et al. (2024) emphasised the role of immersive teaching methods such as multimedia and interactive discussions in enhancing students' understanding of the cultural and emotional contexts of music. Lastly, an all-encompassing musical and performing arts education requires trained individuals to navigate diverse cultural contexts, starting with acquiring cultural competence from the cultures surrounding them. This aids professional growth within a cultural framework (Слободинська, 2023; Zhang & Leung, 2023).

In the African context, the drive towards cultural competence in musical and performing arts education has tilted towards decolonising the curriculum and emphasising indigenous knowledge. For instance,



several studies have addressed the need to shift the curriculum away from Western-centred curricula, and embed learning in African indigenous perspectives, in order to facilitate culturally relevant education that fits into the worldview of learners, and also help them to understand the global world, starting from local context (Yende, 2024; Yende & Xulu, 2024; De Villiers, 2021). As noted by Yende (2024) and De Villiers (2021), grounding musical and performing arts education in African indigenous perspectives is important because this approach values music-making as a communal, process-oriented activity, rather than an individualised approach that enables mastery of musical skills in isolation. Additionally, Isabirye (2021) emphasised the potential of indigenous pedagogies to foster learner leadership, ownership, agency, and identity, leading to joyful, passionate, collaborative learning experiences. Owoaje and Sofola (2021) also examined the use of indigenous idioms in art music composition in a tertiary music education context. Several other studies, such as Dordzro (2023) and Lebaka (2019), maintain similar positions.

From the foregoing, scholars have engaged with various aspects of culturally relevant musical and performing arts education and the need to employ strategies to ground learners in cultural knowledge that crosses the bounds of their own culture, thereby building an understanding of the global world from their local environment. While academic field trips are among the important tools to achieving musical arts education grounded in culture, much of the available studies on the contributions of field trips to learning in higher education context are based on Western contexts (Curras & Escriva 2025; Jones & Washco, 2022; González-Herrera & Giralt-Escobar, 2021; Parello & Vallentine, 2022; Larsen et al., 2017), leaving a wide gap on African perspectives, especially in musical and performing arts education. It is this gap that this study intends to fill.

Theoretical Framework: Experiential Learning Theory

Experiential learning theory was proposed by David A. Kolb in 1984. It builds on the earlier ideas of Dewey, Lewin, and Piaget. The theory holds that learning is best achieved through lived experience. In this experience, knowledge is formed in a cycle that includes concrete involvement, reflective observation, abstract conceptualisation, and active experimentation (Kolb, 1984). The main tenets of the theory are as follows: First, learning is a continuous process and not a final product. Second, knowledge is created from experience and the learner's reflection on those experiences. Third, learning is holistic, and it draws on feelings, perceptions, thinking, and behaviour. Fourth, learning involves adapting to changing contexts. Finally, learners move through a cycle of transformation where experience leads to knowledge. Recently, experiential learning theory has been employed in educational research, for example by Jiang (2024), who examined how experiential approaches transformed music appreciation pedagogy in secondary education. The study showed that immersive and participative methods enhance emotional and intellectual engagement with music. Sofola (2025) also employed the theory in a Nigerian context. The study aimed to examine music students' perceptions of the role of the industrial attachment programme in their career readiness. The study found that most participants were engaged in activities that helped to prepare them for the world of industry.

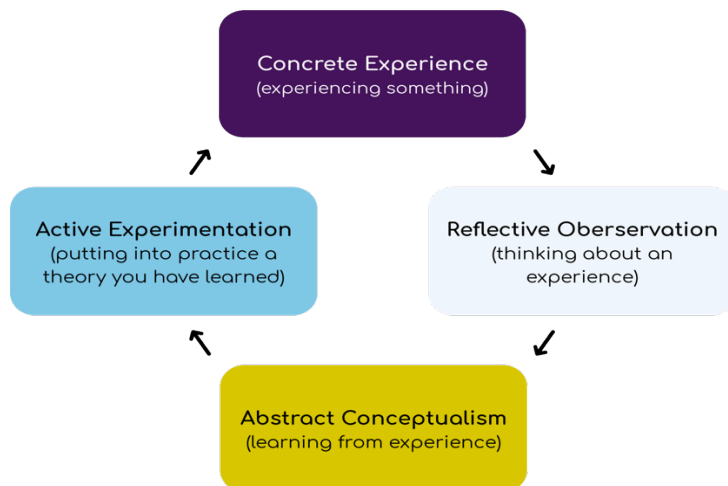
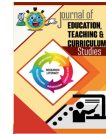


Figure 1: Four stages of Kolb's experiential learning

(Source: <https://www.cambiana.com/kolbs-cycle-of-reflective-practice/>)

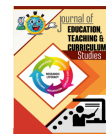
The theory, as visualised in Fig. 1, connects deeply with the present study on academic trips and musical and performing arts education at Kabarak University. The study is built on the idea that students learn performing arts and film more meaningfully when they experience them in real cultural contexts. The academic trip to cultural centres and festivals, therefore, enabled students to gain concrete experiences of indigenous instruments, performances, and indigenous music professionals who possess the authentic arts. Their reflections on these encounters represent reflective observation that grounds their musical knowledge in meaningful cultural contexts. While their connection of classroom concepts to the realities witnessed during the trip demonstrates abstract conceptualisation, their later substantiation of these concepts reflects active experimentation, which is instrumental in realising a culturally relevant education.

Data Presentation and Analysis

This analysis presents a detailed examination of data gathered from participants who were Music and Performing Arts students, following their participation in a four-day academic field trip. During the academic field trip, students visited Bombolulu Workshops and Cultural Centre, and the Little Theatre Club, both in Mombasa, Kenya. The core objective was to investigate the influence of the trip on students' development of cultural competence, a crucial attribute for their prospective careers in the contemporary arts. It is important to note that these students are not just involved in musical training; they are also involved in theatrical arts and film education. While certificate and diploma students take units in theatre and film, a number of bachelor's students who participated in this academic field trip have either been involved in acting, the Kenyan Drama Festival, the Kenyan Music Festival of 2025, or all of these. Data are presented across three themes that align with Kolb's (1984) experiential learning cycle. These themes also encapsulate the essence of the students' transformative experience.

Demography

A total of 25 students participated in the study. This represents a cross-section of students of the various programmes of the Department of Music and Performing Arts, Kabarak University, Kenya. The



participants were enrolled in Certificate, Diploma, and Bachelor of Music and Performing Arts degree courses. A notable feature of the participant group is its gender distribution. A significant majority of participants (18 = 72%) were male, while female students constituted 28% of the population. Apart from the number of male students who participated in the academic trip being higher than that of female students, adherence to ethical procedure allowed students to participate at will, preventing the possibility of ensuring gender balance. The participants were also at various stages of their academic journey, with representation from Year 1 through to Year 3. At the time of this study, Year 4 students were on their industrial attachment programme, hence their exclusion. A considerable portion of the participants were first-year students (64%), followed by second-year students (28%), and third-year students (8%). For these students, the field trip represented an early opportunity to connect the theoretical knowledge being acquired in lectures and seminars with the vibrant, complex realities of professional artistic practice.

This demographic detail is particularly relevant, as it suggests that students in the foundational stages of their higher education were more committed to the trip, given that they were allowed to participate of their own volition, even though the trip was a crucial part of their programme. In addition, students who were left out of the trip have the opportunity to join another cohort. The blend of students from different programme levels and years of study also implies a varied base of prior knowledge and experience, which likely influenced their individual interpretations and takeaways from the field trip.

Thematic Analysis of the Experiential Learning Trip

The analysis of students' responses, both quantitative and qualitative, revealed three main themes that capture their learning experience. These themes mirror a structured progression: the initial impact of direct engagement, the subsequent shift in cultural perspectives through reflection, and the final stage of applying this new cultural understanding in practice. These themes are discussed as follows:

The Role of Direct Engagement in Cultural Understanding

The foundation of participants' learning experience during the trip was the direct, unmediated encounter with cultural practices and professional environments at the two sites. The data shows that the academic field trip provided students with concrete experience that was pivotal for their learning. This theme is substantiated by quantitative data, which indicate overwhelming agreement among the students regarding the value of this direct engagement. The vast majority of participants (68% Strongly agree and 24% Agree = 92%) concurred that the trip provided unique learning opportunities that could not be replicated within the confines of a traditional classroom. A similarly high proportion (60% Strongly agree and 28% Agree = 88%), as shown in the Fig. 2 below, felt that the trip was instrumental in helping them bridge the often-perceived gap between classroom theory and real-world musical, theatrical, and film experiences.



The academic field trip helped me connect classroom learning to real-life musical, theatrical and film experiences.

25 responses

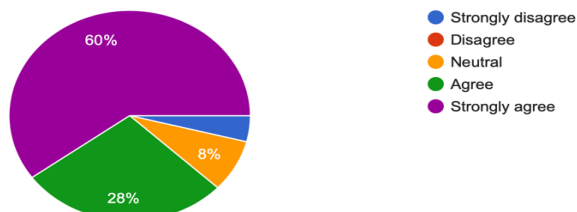


Figure 2: Chart showing the connection between classroom learning and real-life musical, theatrical and film experience

The qualitative responses provide supporting perspectives on these statistics, as they offer a picture of the specific moments that resonated most with the students. When prompted to identify the aspects of the trip that most enhanced their understanding, participants frequently recalled specific performances, workshops, and interactions. The immersive nature of these experiences was a recurring point of emphasis. One student, for instance, pinpointed the "Mijikenda cultural dance performances" as a key learning moment. Another participant elaborated on this, stating, "The visitation to Bombolulu cultural centre opened up my mind on many traditions and costume preparations and choreography as well."

The comment by this student, especially the phrase "opened up my mind," convincingly conveys the transformative potential of cultural experiences outside familiar academic environments and into spaces of active cultural production, in enhancing cultural competence. This is further emphasised in the quantitative data shown in Fig. 3 below. A vast majority (60% Strongly agree and 36% Agree = 96%) agreed that their experience of indigenous performances enhanced their understanding of cultural diversity in music, theatre, and film.

Experiencing indigenous performances enhanced my understanding of cultural diversity in music, film and theatre.

25 responses

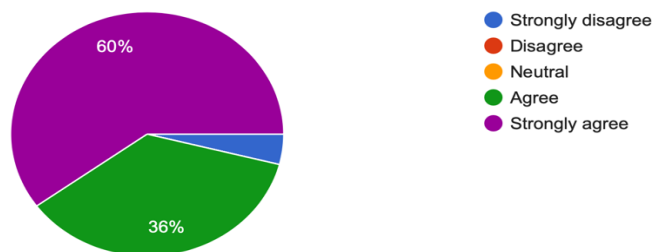


Figure 3: Students' experience of indigenous performances and their role in enhancing understanding of cultural diversity



In addition, students highlighted the value of direct interaction with artists and cultural practitioners during the trip. This direct human connection appears to have been crucial in demystifying the professional arts world and deepening their appreciation for local traditions. A participant noted that their visit to the Little Theatre Club provided a valuable "hands-on experience of what goes on in the industry." This notion of a "hands-on" experience is central to this theme, suggesting that the students' learning was not passive but active, tactile, and deeply personal. This direct, sensory engagement with the arts, in which students saw the dances, heard the music, and spoke with creators, especially in the studio at the Little Theatre Club, activated the initial and most crucial phase of their learning. Although they had always used the studio facilities in the academic environment, interaction with content creators and other personnel at the Little Theatre Club provided them with real-life utilisation of the studio environment, thereby relating to the position of Barton and Riddle (2021) and Paul et al. (2001) regarding authentic sociocultural contexts in influencing different modes of communication that facilitate learning. In addition, joining the dancers and instrumentalists during a performance at Bombolulu Workshops and Cultural Centre provided them with valuable real-life experience of several dances and playing techniques on indigenous drums, most of which they had only encountered through a third party. Participants' experiences, as reflected in their responses, align with Kolb's (1984) position that knowledge is created through experience and the learner's reflection on that experience.

Cultivating New Perspectives through Reflection

Following the direct experiences of the field trip, the data indicate that students entered a crucial phase of reflective observation and abstract conceptualisation, in line with Kolb's (1984) experiential learning. This involved mentally processing their experiences, making connections, and forming new, more sophisticated ideas about the role and relevance of culture in their chosen field. This internal, cognitive work was a vital bridge between the experience itself and the development of genuine cultural competence. The quantitative findings strongly support the prevalence of this reflective practice. An exceptionally high number of participants agreed that taking the time to reflect on the trip was beneficial, specifically helping them to grasp the profound relevance of culture in music, theatre, and film education. This is shown in Fig. 4 below (60% Strongly agree and 32% Agree = 92%).

Reflecting on the trip helped me understand the relevance of culture in music, theatre, and film education.

25 responses

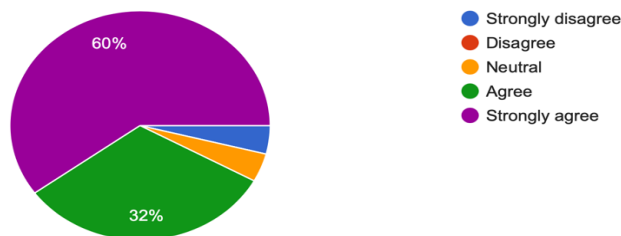
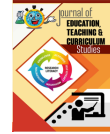


Figure 4: Students understanding the relevance of culture in relation to music, theatre, and film, through reflection on their experience during the trip



Engaging in reflection appears to have been the catalyst for a significant shift in perspective among many participants. The qualitative data provide compelling evidence of this internal transformation. Students' responses moved from describing what they *saw* to articulating what they now *understood*. This transition is evident as eloquently captured by some of the participants as follows:

"Seeing performances and cultural expressions up close helped me understand that art is a powerful way to preserve culture, share stories, and celebrate identity."

"Watching a Mijikenda cultural dance at Bombolulu cultural centre, and watching a play at the Little Theatre, enhanced my understanding of how music, theatre and film are valued across different diverse cultures not only as a form of entertainment, but also as a form of cultural preservation."

"Honestly, every aspect of the trip enhanced my understanding of musical, theatrical arts, and films. From observing live performances to seeing behind-the-scenes work and interacting with creatives, everything contributed to a deeper appreciation of how these art forms come together. Each moment added a new layer to my understanding."

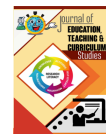
"The visit to Little Theatre greatly enhanced my understanding of the musical, theatrical arts, and films by allowing me to see how theory is applied in real performances. I learned about stage design, lighting, and how actors use expression, movement, and voice to bring characters to life. Observing the teamwork behind a production helped me appreciate the coordination between directors, actors, and the technical crew. It also gave me insight into how music and sound effects are used to create mood and emotion in both theatre and film."

"The trip gave me a chance to explore how music, theatre and film are used by different communities to create cultural awareness and pass their culture down to their generation."

These statements serve as a perfect illustration of the learning cycle in action. They demonstrate a move from a concrete experience to a compelling abstract conceptualisation. This shows that these students are no longer just spectators; they have become analysts who make meaning and construct new frameworks for understanding their discipline. These reflective positions show a newfound appreciation for the social and anthropological functions of the arts, moving beyond a purely aesthetic appreciation and into functionality. The experience prompted students to think critically about their own future roles as artists, not just as entertainers, but as potential custodians and communicators of culture. One student's reflection connected the experience directly to their own practice, stating, *"I got to understand that culture and collaboration create a seamless creation of art when all the learned skills and theory are applied with a practical experience."* This synthesis of the practical and the theoretical, born from reflection, lies at the very heart of developing a mature and culturally competent artistic practice. These findings align with the positions of Слободинська (2023) and Zhang and Leung (2023), who emphasised the role of cultural contexts in supporting professional growth within a cultural framework.

The Application of Cultural Learning in Artistic Practice

The final, perhaps most crucial, theme to emerge from the data concerns the active experimentation phase, in which new knowledge is translated into action. A learning experience can only be considered truly effective if it influences future behaviour, or, in another context, culminates in the production of an expected tangible outcome. The data strongly suggests that the field trip succeeded in empowering



students to potentially apply their deepened cultural understanding in their own academic and creative endeavours.

Through the quantitative data, a significant majority of students reported a newfound confidence in their ability to relate theoretical concepts to practical artistic expressions. Crucially, a large number of participants confirmed that they had already begun applying specific lessons learned from the trip to their own practice, or had figured out how to apply such lessons in their practice. This indicates that the trip's impact was not merely theoretical or temporary, but already had a tangible effect on their future work and prospects. For instance, a compelling majority of participants (56% Strongly agree and 32% Agree = 88%), as shown in Fig. 5 below, maintained that the trip increased their cultural sensitivity and appreciation of indigenous music, theatre, and film.

The trip increased my cultural sensitivity and appreciation of indigenous music, theatre, and film.

25 responses

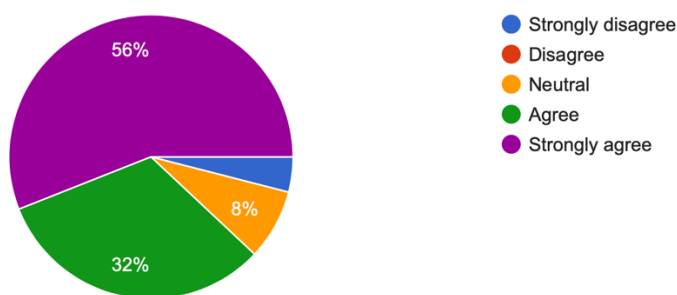


Figure 5: Cultural sensitivity and appreciation of indigenous music, theatre, and film

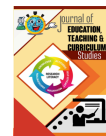
Furthermore, the qualitative data highlights the nature of this application. Students expressed a clear intention to be more culturally conscious and inclusive in their creative choices. As a participant stated, the trip inspired them to:

“appreciate and include more African and Kenyan cultural elements in my own musical and creative work.”

Another participant expressed *“the use of African ornaments and clothing in performances, and even the need for staging an African picture”* in their subsequent creative endeavours.

This desire among participants to actively incorporate local cultural elements into their future creative endeavours signifies a move beyond passive appreciation to active artistic engagement. It reflects a newfound sense of ownership and pride in their cultural heritage as emphasised by Isabirye (2021), Dordzro (2023) and Lebaka (2019), as well as a commitment to reflecting these attributes in their creative works as they move on in their career lives. Another student captured the essence of this commitment by highlighting the trip's role in making their studies more practical and relevant. They noted:

“I got to experience cultural aspects in music and theatre in real-life and made the theoretical aspects of my study a bit practical.”



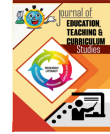
This statement underscores the success of the trip in breaking down the walls between the academy and the real-world. The active experimentation phase is not just about producing a new piece of art. It extends to adopting a new way of thinking and working as creatives and artists. Asked if similar trips should be organised regularly, an overwhelming majority of participants responded positively. While 64% strongly agreed, 32% agreed, with only 4% strongly disagreeing. This overwhelming positive response further reinforces students' own assessment of the trip's value for their cultural competency. It can be deduced that they view this model of learning as essential to their development as competent, confident, and culturally sensitive artists (musicians, choreographers, costume artists, sound engineers, stage managers, and actors). It is evident that the trip equipped them with new knowledge and a new lens through which to view their own creative potential and their role within their cultural landscape. As demonstrated by Owoaje and Sofola (2025), this kind of cultural interaction culminates in musical innovation and cultural reinvention that drives modernity, while ensuring cultural continuity.

Conclusion

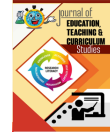
In conclusion, the findings of the study present a convincing picture of academic field trips as successful pedagogical tools in musical and performing arts education. The findings, which are discussed within the scope of Kolb's (1984) experiential learning, being the theoretical framework that guided the study, demonstrate that the trip in which students were involved was far more than a simple excursion from campus, especially as it served as a catalyst for a profound learning journey grounded in cultural competence. Drawn from both the qualitative and quantitative responses of participants, the evidence points to a significant positive impact on their development of cultural competence. Apart from learning about the various cultures they encountered during the trip, students also learned through the elements of those cultures. Through this, they have taken a significant step forward in their development as thoughtful, aware, and capable practitioners in the musical and performing arts. The findings strongly advocate for the continued use of immersive, real-world learning experiences, such as academic trips, as central pillars of arts education. Apart from that, there is a need to formally include these learning experiences in arts education at the tertiary level. Given the limitations of the study in terms of sample size, scope, and generalisability, there is a need for longitudinal studies to track students' post-trip development. Such endeavours could also focus on comparative studies across multiple universities.

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