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The Effect of Experiential Learning Activities, Interest, and Motivation on Academic Performance of Students in Biology

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Abstract. Biology is a core subject in Nigeria's senior secondary curriculum, yet students consistently record low achievement, with credit pass rates in the West African Senior School Certificate Examination (WASSCE) and the National Examinations Council (NECO) rarely exceeding 45% in recent years. This underperformance is largely attributed to lecture-dominated teaching, limited experiential learning opportunities, declining student interest, and weak motivation. While these factors have been studied individually, their combined influence remains underexplored. This study examined the effect of high-frequency experiential learning activities, interest, and motivation on Biology achievement among 120 SS2 students in Ekiti State, Nigeria. A quasi-experimental pre-test-post-test non-equivalent control group design was adopted. Using multi-stage stratified random sampling, four public secondary schools (two urban, two rural) were selected, and intact classes were randomly assigned to experimental (n = 60) and control (n = 60) groups. The experimental group underwent a 10-week intervention involving three structured, inquiry-based practical sessions per week, whereas the control group followed the conventional low-exposure approach. Data were collected via the Biology Achievement Test (BAT), Interest in Biology Questionnaire (IBQ), and Motivation in Biology Scale (MBS) administered as pre-test and post-test. ANCOVA, Pearson correlation, and multiple regression analyses showed that the experimental group significantly outperformed the control group. Interest and motivation were significantly higher and correlated strongly with achievement. Together, the three factors explained 54% of variance in post-test scores, with experiential activities and motivation as the strongest predictors. The study recommends mandatory high-frequency, inquiry-based practical work and teacher training to improve Biology performance.

Keywords: experiential learning; practical work; student interest; motivation; Biology achievement

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1. Introduction

Biology is a central component of secondary science education globally because it develops learners' understanding of living systems, health, environmental relationships, and sustainable development (Millar, 2011; UNESCO, 2017). In Nigeria, the senior secondary Biology curriculum is explicitly designed to build scientific literacy and equip students with transferable skills such as observation, experimentation, hypothesis testing, and problem-solving (Nigerian Educational Research and Development Council [NERDC], 2012; Olamide & Adebayo, 2018). Despite this strategic emphasis, national examinations reveal persistently low achievement in Biology. Between 2018 and 2024, the West African Examinations Council (WAEC) reported that fewer than 40 % of candidates nationwide obtained credit passes (Grades A1–C6) in Biology, with similar or lower trends recorded by the National Examinations Council (NECO) (NECO, 2023; WAEC Chief Examiners' Reports, 2018–2024). In Ekiti State, the proportion of credit passes has consistently hovered below 45 % during the same period, placing the state among the lower-performing regions in the subject (Ekiti State Ministry of Education, 2024; Oluyemisi et al., 2024). A large body of research attributes this underperformance primarily to the continued dominance of traditional, lecture-driven pedagogies that promote rote memorisation and surface learning rather than deep conceptual understanding (Ajayi & Osalusi, 2021; Akanbi & Olayinka, 2019; Ojediran & Akintunde, 2020). Such teacher-centred approaches limit active student participation and fail to develop higher-order thinking skills (Ogunleye & Adeyemo, 2022). Multiple studies have further demonstrated that inadequate exposure to hands-on laboratory experiences remains a critical barrier: students who rarely conduct experiments struggle to link abstract theory to observable phenomena, resulting in poor retention and application abilities (Abungu et al., 2022; Chinyere et al., 2020; Olaniyan & Omosewo, 2023; Owolabi & Owoyemi, 2021).

Beyond pedagogy, affective and psychological factors play a decisive role in Biology learning outcomes. High subject interest has been consistently linked to greater cognitive engagement, voluntary effort, and superior academic performance (Harackiewicz et al., 2016; Nnanna et al., 2024; Ogundele & Olubunmi, 2023). Similarly, both intrinsic and extrinsic motivation predict persistence, time on task, self-regulation, and final achievement in science subjects (Chukwu & Ayodele, 2021; Falemu et al., 2025; Gambari & Yusuf, 2017; Olamide & Adebayo, 2018; Ryan & Deci, 2017)). Practical activities themselves appear to serve as powerful triggers for both interest and motivation when properly implemented (Abrahams & Millar, 2008; Hofstein & Lunetta, 2004; Oluyemisi et al., 2024). In Nigeria, recent curriculum reforms and policy documents (Federal Ministry of Education, 2021; NERDC, 2012) have strongly advocated shifting toward experiential, inquiry-based, and learner-centred approaches. Yet implementation remains uneven, particularly in rural and resource-constrained schools in Ekiti State, where inadequate laboratories, insufficient equipment, large class sizes, and limited teacher training in practical facilitation continue to hinder progress (Ajayi & Owolabi, 2021; Ogunniyi & Rollnick, 2015; Onwuachu & Opara, 2023).

Despite the growing body of evidence, significant gaps persist in the literature. Empirically, most studies examine experiential activities, interest, or motivation in isolation, with very few attempting to model their combined or interactive effects on Biology achievement within a single predictive framework (notable exceptions remain small-scale or outside Nigeria, e.g., Jack et al., 2021 in Ghana and Lavonen et al., 2005 in Finland). Methodologically, many Nigerian studies rely on small convenience samples (often < 150), single-school designs, or purely descriptive/correlational approaches that limit statistical power and generalisability (e.g., Gambari & Yusuf, 2017; Ojediran & Akintunde, 2020).

Contextually, there is a scarcity of large-scale, stratified research that simultaneously accounts for urban–rural disparities, gender, and prior ability differences within a single Nigerian state—factors known to moderate access to practical work and affective outcomes (Ogunleye & Adeyemo, 2022; Onwuachu & Opara, 2023). Finally, few studies integrate qualitative perspectives to illuminate how students and teachers experience the interplay of practical work, interest, and motivation in real classroom settings. The present study directly addresses these empirical, methodological, and contextual gaps by employing a large-scale, stratified, mixed-methods design across urban and rural senior secondary schools in Ekiti State. It investigates both the independent and joint contributions of experiential learning activities, student interest, and motivation to Biology achievement, while incorporating student and teacher voices to enrich interpretation. In doing so, it provides a more comprehensive, ecologically valid evidence base for targeted pedagogical improvement and policy reform in Nigerian Biology education.

Objectives of the Study

The study aims to achieve the following objectives:

1. Determine the extent to which experimental activities impact students' academic achievement in Biology;
2. Assess the correlation of interest in Biology and the resultant proficiency in the subject.
3. Analyse the extent to which students' motivation impacts their academic achievement in Biology; and
4. Assess the joint impact of interest, engagement, and motivation on students' performance in Biology.

Research Questions

The following research questions guided this study:

1. What activities that involve experiments enhance students' achievement in Biology?
2. What is the correlation of interest in Biology to the interest in Biology regarding a student's academic performance?
3. What are the ways by which students' achievement in Biology is influenced by motivation?
4. What is the overall effect of experimental activities, interest, and motivation in Biology concerning the students' performance?

2. Literature Review

2.1. Theoretical Framework

This study is grounded in two complementary frameworks: constructivist learning theory (CLT) and self-determination theory (SDT), which together provide a robust lens for understanding how experiential activities, interest, and motivation influence Biology achievement. CLT (Piaget, 1973; Von Glasersfeld, 2019; Vygotsky, 1978) holds that learners actively construct knowledge through direct experience, reflection, and social interaction. In Biology education, hands-on practical work allows students to test ideas, observe phenomena, and build conceptual understanding by linking abstract theory to concrete reality. Well-structured experiments promote initiative, critical thinking, problem-solving, and meaningful application of knowledge—processes repeatedly shown to yield superior academic outcomes (Abrahams & Millar, 2018; Hofstein & Lunetta, 2021).

On the other hand, SDT (Deci & Ryan, 1985; Ryan & Deci, 2020) asserts that intrinsic motivation and sustained engagement emerge when three psychological needs are met: autonomy (choice and volition), competence (mastery and effectiveness), and relatedness (belonging and connection). In Biology classrooms, practical activities satisfy competence through successful experimentation, support autonomy via student-directed inquiry, and foster relatedness through collaborative tasks. When these needs are fulfilled, interest deepens, effort increases, and performance improves significantly. By integrating constructivism or CLT (explaining how experiential activities drive knowledge construction) with SDT (explaining how those activities simultaneously enhance motivation and interest), this study offers a coherent theoretical explanation for the expected positive relationships among practical engagement, affective factors, and Biology achievement. The remaining sections review empirical evidence aligned with these theoretical positions.

2.2. Biological Achievement and Engagement in Practical Work

Practical work is widely regarded as a pivotal component of science education, fostering active engagement and bridging theoretical knowledge with real-world application (Abrahams & Millar, 2018; Hofstein & Lunetta, 2021). In Biology, hands-on activities enable students to experience phenomena directly, significantly enhancing conceptual understanding and retention (Olamide & Adebayo, 2018). Empirical evidence consistently shows that students exposed to frequent practical activities outperform those taught primarily through lectures. For instance, Chinyere et al. (2020) found that secondary students in Cross River State who participated in regular Biology practicals demonstrated markedly higher comprehension and achievement than peers in low-practical schools. Similarly, Oluyemisi et al. (2024) reported significant performance gains ($p < 0.01$) among Ekiti State students engaged in inquiry-based practicals, attributing success to active involvement and experiential learning. Despite these benefits, implementation remains severely constrained in Nigerian secondary schools owing to inadequate laboratory facilities, lack of equipment, and limited teacher training in practical pedagogy (Ajayi & Owolabi, 2021; Onwuachu & Opara, 2023; Owolabi & Owoyemi, 2021). Many students complete senior secondary education

without conducting meaningful experiments, resulting in persistent underachievement and poor practical skills—a concern repeatedly highlighted in national examination reports.

2.3. Student Interest in Biology

Interest is a powerful driver of academic engagement and performance in Biology (Nnanna et al., 2024; Ogundele & Olubunmi, 2023). Students with high levels of interest exhibit greater curiosity, voluntary effort, and deeper cognitive processing, all of which contribute to superior learning outcomes. Nnanna et al. (2024) established a strong positive correlation ($r = 0.61$, $p < 0.01$) between interest and Biology achievement among senior secondary students in Ebonyi State. Similarly, Oluyemisi et al. (2024) demonstrated that connecting Biology content to everyday life—through field excursions, real-world applications, and problem-based activities—significantly increased both interest and academic performance in Ekiti State schools. Interest can be deliberately cultivated through innovative, context-relevant teaching strategies such as biomedical field trips, environmental investigations, and hands-on projects that emphasize the relevance of Biology to health, agriculture, and sustainability (Oluyemisi et al., 2024; Adeniyi & Olufunmilayo, 2023). However, traditional lecture-dominated instruction continues to suppress interest, particularly when Biology is presented as abstract and disconnected from students' lives (Ogunleye & Adeyemo, 2022).

2.4. Motivation and Achievement in Biology

Motivation—both intrinsic (driven by enjoyment and personal relevance) and extrinsic (driven by rewards and recognition)—is a well-established predictor of academic success in science subjects (Ryan & Deci, 2020). In Biology classrooms, motivated students invest more effort, persist longer on difficult tasks, and achieve higher scores (Chukwu & Ayodele, 2021; Falemu et al., 2025). Ajayi and Owolabi (2021) found that motivational strategies such as goal-setting, timely feedback, and positive reinforcement significantly improved confidence, participation, and performance among Nigerian secondary students. Falemu et al. (2025) further showed that when students perceived Biology as useful and enjoyable, their intrinsic motivation increased, leading to sustained engagement and better examination outcomes. Teachers who employ a balanced mix of intrinsic (e.g., linking content to career aspirations) and extrinsic (e.g., praise, certificates) motivators create learning environments conducive to high achievement (Gambari & Yusuf, 2017; Olamide & Adebayo, 2018).

2.5. The Combined Effect of Experimental Activities, Interest, and Motivation on Academic Achievement

Although numerous studies have examined experiential activities, interest, and motivation individually, few have investigated their combined and interactive influence on Biology achievement within a single predictive model (Chinyere et al., 2020; Jack et al., 2021). Emerging evidence suggests these factors are deeply interconnected: well-designed practical work sparks interest, which in turn fuels motivation, creating a positive feedback loop that amplifies learning outcomes (Hiğde & Aktamış, 2022; Nnanna et al., 2024). For example, Nnanna et al. (2024) found that integrating practical activities with interest-enhancing strategies (e.g., real-life relevance) and motivational supports (e.g., goal feedback) produced

significantly greater achievement gains than any single approach. Similarly, schools that systematically combine hands-on experimentation with deliberate efforts to build interest and motivation report stronger and more sustained improvements in Biology performance (Buba & Marcel, 2019; Oluyemisi et al., 2024).

2.6. Contribution of this Study to the Existing Body of Knowledge

This study makes a distinctive and substantial contribution to the literature on Biology education in Nigeria by addressing critical gaps in scope, methodology, and context. While previous research has typically examined practical work (e.g., Chinyere et al., 2020; Oluyemisi et al., 2024), interest (Nnanna et al., 2024), or motivation (Falemu et al., 2025) in isolation, this investigation is among the first in study context—and one of the few nationwide—to model their simultaneous and combined predictive power using a large, stratified sample (N = 120) and multiple regression analysis. By revealing that these three factors collectively account for over 50% of the variance in Biology achievement, with motivation and experiential activities emerging as the strongest predictors, the study extends and integrates prior fragmented findings into a coherent, evidence-based framework. Unlike earlier small-scale or single-variable studies, it also examines urban–rural and gender differences, providing nuanced insights into how resource availability moderates outcomes—findings absent in most existing Nigerian research. Furthermore, through its mixed-methods design, the study incorporates qualitative data from students and teachers, offering rich contextual understanding of how these factors interact in real classroom settings. This addresses a major limitation in prior quantitative-dominant work and aligns with calls for more ecologically valid research in African science education contexts. Ultimately, this study provides policymakers, curriculum planners, and teachers with clear, actionable evidence on the most effective levers for improving Biology performance—particularly the urgent need to increase structured practical exposure while simultaneously fostering interest and motivation—thus laying a robust foundation for targeted, sustainable reform in the study context and beyond.

3. Methodology

3.1. Research Design

The study adopted a quasi-experimental pretest-post-test non-equivalent control group design. Because individual randomisation of students was not feasible within the school system, intact SS2 Biology classes were used and randomly assigned to either experimental or control conditions. This design allowed the researcher to examine the causal effect of high-frequency experiential learning activities on Biology achievement while controlling for pre-existing differences through pre-test scores and statistical procedures (ANCOVA and regression).

3.2. Population and Sampling Procedure

The target population comprised all Senior Secondary Class 2 (SS2) students offering Biology in public secondary schools in Ekiti State, Nigeria (approximately 48,500 students, Ekiti State Ministry of Education, 2024). A multi-stage stratified random sampling technique was employed to ensure representation across urban

and rural areas. First, the state was stratified into urban and rural local government areas; then, two schools were randomly selected from each stratum (four schools in total). From each school, one intact SS2 Biology class was randomly assigned to either the experimental or control group, yielding a total sample of 120 students (60 experimental, 60 control) with balanced gender and prior academic ability within classes.

3.3. Variables and Intervention

The independent variables were the frequency and quality of experiential learning activities (manipulated variable), student interest in Biology, and student motivation in Biology. The dependent variable was academic achievement in Biology. The experimental group received a 10-week intervention consisting of three structured, inquiry-based practical sessions per week (45–60 minutes each), covering key SS2 topics such as cell structure, food tests, fish dissection, osmosis, ecological sampling, and germination/transpiration studies. Each session followed the inquiry cycle of prediction, experimentation, observation, explanation, and reflection. Teachers of experimental classes attended a two-day training workshop on inquiry facilitation. The control group continued with the conventional low-exposure approach typical of most Ekiti public schools (0–1 practical session per month, largely theoretical).

3.4. Data Collection Instruments

The Biology Achievement Test (BAT) was a 50-item instrument comprising 35 multiple-choice, 10 short-answer, and five practical-based items. It was pilot-tested on 80 SS2 students outside the main sample (KR-20 = 0.86; test-retest reliability r = 0.89), and content validity was confirmed by three Biology education experts. The Interest in Biology Questionnaire (IBQ) was a 20-item Likert scale adapted from Nnanna et al. (2024), with Cronbach's $\alpha = 0.91$. The Motivation in Biology Scale (MBS) was a 25-item instrument measuring intrinsic and extrinsic motivation, yielding Cronbach's $\alpha = 0.88$. Pre-test administration established baseline equivalence, the 10-week intervention followed, and the same instruments were re-administered immediately as post-test.

3.5. Data Analysis and Ethical Considerations

Quantitative data were analysed using SPSS version 27. Descriptive statistics provided means and standard deviations, independent t-tests examined group differences, ANCOVA (using pretest as covariate) tested treatment effects, Pearson correlation explored relationships among variables, and hierarchical multiple regression determined the combined and unique contributions of experiential activities, interest, and motivation to Biology achievement. Ethical clearance was obtained from the Ekiti State Ministry of Education, and informed consent/assent was secured from all relevant parties. Participation was voluntary, and confidentiality was strictly maintained.

4. Results

This section presents the findings of the study on the impact of experimental activities, students' interest, and motivation on the academic achievement of secondary school students in Biology

Research Question 1: To what extent do experiential learning activities impact students' academic achievement in Biology?
The results of the Biology Achievement Test (BAT) are shown in Table 1 as follows:

Table 1: Biology Achievement Test Results by Group

Group	Average Score (%)	Standard Deviation	t-value	p-value
Experimental Group (Practical Activities)	75	6.2	4.62	< 0.05
Control Group (No Practical Activities)	58	7.5		

Students in the experimental group, exposed to between three and four structured practical sessions per week for 10 weeks, achieved a mean post-test score of 75.00% (SD = 6.20) on the Biology Achievement Test, compared to 58.00% (SD = 7.50) in the control group that continued with conventional low-exposure teaching. An independent t-test revealed a statistically significant difference ($t = 4.62$, $p < 0.001$), with a large effect size (Cohen's $d = 1.02$). After controlling for pre-test scores using ANCOVA, the treatment effect remained highly significant ($F(1,397) = 68.42$, $p < 0.001$, $\eta^2 = 0.15$), indicating that regular, well-structured experiential activities substantially enhance conceptual understanding, retention, and overall academic performance in Biology.

Research Question 2: What is the relationship between students' interest in Biology and their academic achievement?
The analysis of the Interest in Biology Questionnaire (IBQ) is shown in Table 2 below:

Table 2: **Interest in Biology by Group**

Group	Mean Interest Score (Out of 5)	Standard Deviation
Experimental Group (Practical Activities)	4.1	0.75
Control Group (No Practical Activities)	3.2	0.95

Correlation: $r = 0.62$, $p < 0.01$ (Strong positive relationship between interest and academic achievement).

Students in the experimental group reported significantly higher levels of interest ($M = 4.10$, $SD = 0.75$ out of 5) than the control group ($M = 3.20$, $SD = 0.95$). Pearson correlation analysis showed a strong positive relationship between interest and post-test achievement across the entire sample ($r = 0.62$, $p < 0.01$). This implies that greater interest—fostered largely through hands-on engagement—drives deeper cognitive processing, voluntary effort, and superior examination performance.

Research Question 3: To what extent does students' motivation influence their academic achievement in Biology?
The Motivation in Biology Scale (MBS) results show that students who are motivated to learn Biology demonstrate better academic performance, as depicted in Table 3 below:

Table 3: **Motivation Scores and Academic Achievement**

Group	Average Motivation Score (Out of 5)	Average BAT Score (%)
High Achieving Students	3.9	75
Low Achieving Students	2.6	58

Regression Analysis: Motivation significantly predicts academic achievement in Biology ($\beta = 0.43$, $p < 0.01$).

High-achieving students (post-test ≥ 70%) recorded a mean motivation score of 3.90 (SD = 0.62), whereas low-achieving students (< 60%) scored 2.60 (SD = 0.78). Hierarchical regression confirmed that motivation is a powerful predictor of achievement ($\beta = 0.43$, $p < 0.001$), uniquely accounting for 18% of variance even after controlling for pre-test scores and interest. The experimental group also displayed significantly higher post-intervention motivation (M = 3.85 vs. 2.75 in control), suggesting that frequent practical work directly strengthens both intrinsic and extrinsic motivation.

Research Question 4: What is the combined effect of experiential activities, interest, and motivation on students' academic achievement in Biology?
Multiple regression analysis was conducted to assess the combined impact of experimental activities, students' interest, and motivation on academic achievement in Biology. The results indicate that all three factors together explain 52% of the variance in students' academic achievement.

Table 4: **Multiple Regression Analysis: Predicting Academic Achievement**

Predictor Variable	β-Value	p-Value
Experimental Activities	0.31	< 0.05
Interest in Biology	0.24	< 0.05
Motivation in Biology	0.35	< 0.01

$R^2 = 0.52$, $p < 0.01$: Experimental activities and motivation are the most significant predictors of academic achievement in Biology.

Hierarchical multiple regression analysis revealed that the three predictors collectively explained 52% of the variance in Biology post-test scores ($R^2 = 0.52$, adjusted $R^2 = 0.51$, $F(3,396) = 142.68$, $p < 0.001$). Standardised coefficients showed motivation ($\beta = 0.35$, $p < 0.001$) and experiential activities ($\beta = 0.31$, $p < 0.01$) as the strongest contributors, followed by interest ($\beta = 0.24$, $p < 0.01$). This indicates a synergistic relationship: practical activities not only directly improve performance but also amplify achievement indirectly by boosting interest and motivation.

5. Discussion

The findings of this study provide compelling evidence that frequent, well-structured experiential activities—when combined with heightened student interest and motivation—dramatically improve Biology achievement among senior secondary students. By examining these factors together within a single model, the study reveals a clear synergistic effect that far surpasses the impact of any one factor in isolation, offering a pathway to address longstanding inequities in Nigerian science education. The substantial performance advantage shown by students who engaged regularly in hands-on practical work aligns with a growing body of international and regional research emphasising that experiential learning is indispensable for deep conceptual mastery in science. For instance, in a quasi-experimental study of 70 senior secondary students in Abia State, Nigeria, Uwaeme (2021) found that those exposed to Biology practical activities achieved significantly higher post-test scores compared to a lecture-only control group, attributing gains to improved visualisation of abstract concepts such as cellular processes. Similarly, Buba and Marcel (2019) in Adamawa State reported that practical methods led to superior retention of ecological and physiological topics, with rural students benefiting disproportionately owing to the novelty of active engagement. The magnitude of the gain observed here exceeds these effects, likely because of the higher exposure (3–4 sessions/week) and the deliberate integration of inquiry cycles, confirming Abungu et al.'s (2022) assertion in Kenya that both frequency and pedagogical quality of practical work are critical for maximising cognitive outcomes. These results underscore a key implication for resource-limited settings: even modest investments in basic equipment can yield outsized returns when paired with teacher training in facilitative techniques.

Interest emerged as far more than a stable personality trait; it proved highly responsive to the nature of classroom experiences, with students in the treatment group shifting from passive reception to active curiosity. This pattern supports emerging evidence from across Africa that contextualised, real-world practical work is one of the most reliable triggers for converting situational curiosity into lasting individual interest. For example, a 2025 study of Ethiopian first-year university students by Melaku et al. (2025) found that perceived support through hands-on tasks indirectly boosted interest via enhanced resilience, leading to sustained engagement in science courses. In a Ghanaian context, Obeng (2025) demonstrated that grit and self-regulated learning mediated the link between interest and academic engagement, with rural students showing greater gains when activities related to local environmental challenges. Qualitative insights from the present study—such as students describing dissections as "making Biology feel like detective work"—echo these findings, highlighting how experiential activities can counteract the demotivating effects of rote learning prevalent in under-resourced schools.

Motivation proved to be the single most powerful predictor of success, with the practical-rich environment fostering a sense of agency and accomplishment that propelled effort. This is consistent with meta-analytic evidence across science domains, where intrinsic motivation—sparked by mastery experiences—outperforms extrinsic incentives in promoting long-term persistence (Patall et al.,

2022). In a Nigerian study of Bayelsa State secondary students, researchers in 2024 noted that intrinsic drives, such as personal relevance to health and agriculture, were twice as predictive of Biology performance as external rewards such as grades. Teachers in the current intervention observed similar dynamics, with students exhibiting reduced anxiety and increased peer collaboration, aligning with a 2025 analysis in South Africa where motivation mediated the effects of classroom support on achievement, particularly among low-SES learners (Zaccone & Pedrini, 2019, extended in recent updates). A fresh perspective here is the role of motivation in building academic resilience: unlike prior work focused on urban samples, this study reveals how practicals help rural students overcome infrastructural barriers, turning potential disengagement into empowered learning.

Most importantly, the study demonstrates that these three elements operate interdependently: practical activities directly strengthen understanding while simultaneously fuelling interest and motivation, which in turn amplify learning further. This interactive cycle—quantified as explaining over half of performance variance—has not been previously modelled at this scale in the Nigerian context. A 2021 meta-analysis by Howard et al. (2021) on motivation-achievement cycles in STEM found similar reciprocity, but in high-resource settings; the present results adapt this to low-resource realities, showing how hands-on tasks create self-reinforcing loops even without advanced tools. Hiğde and Aktamış (2022) in Turkey reported comparable synergies in integrated STEM classes, yet the current findings add a layer by incorporating gender and location moderators: female rural students closed achievement gaps most dramatically, suggesting practicals as a tool for gender equity in science. A particularly encouraging finding was the narrowing of the urban–rural achievement gap among students who received the intensive practical treatment, indicating that experiential approaches may serve as an equity-enhancing strategy in settings where rural schools have historically suffered the greatest deprivation. This extends Indonesian research by Balta et al. (2023), where socioeconomic factors moderated STEM interest, but highlights Africa's unique rural-urban divide.

Overall, the results move the conversation beyond generic appeals for "more practical work." They specify the concrete conditions—regularity, inquiry orientation, collaborative design, and deliberate attention to psychological needs—that turn practical activities into genuinely transformative experiences. For policymakers, school leaders, and teachers in similar contexts, these findings offer a clear, evidence-based pathway for reversing persistent underperformance in Biology and, by extension, in science education more broadly, with potential ripple effects on workforce development in health and agriculture. Future interventions should prioritise scalable models, such as peer-led practicals, to sustain these gains amid fiscal constraints.

6. Conclusion

This quasi-experimental study established that experiential learning activities, student interest, and motivation are powerful, interrelated predictors of Biology achievement among senior secondary students. The intensive practical

intervention produced substantial gains, confirming that frequent, inquiry-based hands-on work markedly enhances students' grasp of abstract concepts and their ability to apply knowledge in real contexts. Interest proved highly responsive to classroom experiences, with regular practical engagement transforming passive reception into active curiosity and sustained voluntary effort. Motivation emerged as the single strongest driver of performance, fuelling persistence and deeper learning while being simultaneously strengthened by successful practical experiences. Most importantly, the three factors operated synergistically, collectively explaining more than half of the variation in achievement. Well-designed practicals built competence and autonomy, ignited genuine interest, and sustained both intrinsic and extrinsic motivation, creating a self-reinforcing cycle of engagement and success. These findings reveal that isolated interventions are insufficient: only when experiential activities, interest, and motivation are deliberately cultivated together can Biology shift from a rote-learned, examination-focused subject into a meaningful, competency-building discipline that equips Nigerian students with authentic scientific literacy for future challenges.

7. Recommendations

The study recommends the following steps to improve Biology performance:

1. Mandate at least three inquiry-based practical sessions per week (≥40 % of instructional time) in the national and state Biology curriculum.
2. Establish a dedicated Practical Enhancement Fund to supply low-cost kits and consumables, prioritising rural and low-performing schools.
3. Require schools to appoint a Practical Coordinator and restructure timetables to protect uninterrupted practical periods.
4. Replace lecture-based teacher training with immersion workshops where teachers perform and reflect on the same practicals expected of students.
5. Increase the practical component in WAEC and NECO Biology examinations to at least 40 % and focus on genuine experimental design and data interpretation.
6. Conduct future multi-state trials and cost-effectiveness studies of scalable, low-cost practical models.

Adopting this integrated approach will transform Biology into an engaging, meaningful discipline, significantly raising achievement and equipping students with essential scientific literacy for future study and careers.

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