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THE IMPACT OF INTEGRATING HANDS-ON EXPERIMENTS IN PHYSICS INSTRUCTION ON STUDENTS' UNDERSTANDING AND RETENTION OF PHYSICS CONCEPTS IN ZAMBIAN SECONDARY SCHOOLS: A COMPARATIVE STUDY WITH TRADITIONAL LECTURE-BASED INSTRUCTION

[*1]Silimbwidwa Muleya Sams Junior, [2]Dr. Sumathi K. Sripathi

[1]Master of Education in Physics, [2]Associate Professor

DMI–St. Eugene University, School of Education – Natural Sciences, Zambia.

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***Corresponding Author: Silimbwidwa Muleya Sams Junior**

Master of Education in Physics, DMI–St. Eugene University, School of Education – Natural Sciences, Zambia.

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ABSTRACT

This study investigates the pedagogical efficacy of integrating hands-on experiments into physics instruction to enhance conceptual understanding and knowledge retention among secondary school students in Zambia. While physics is foundational to technological progress, students frequently perceive it as an abstract and formidable subject. This perception is largely attributed to a systemic reliance on teacher-centered lecture methodologies, which often fail to facilitate active cognitive engagement. Consequently, learners frequently resort to rote memorization of formulas without comprehending underlying principles or practical applications. Employing a quasi-experimental mixed-methods design, this research compared traditional lecture-based instruction with hands-on experimental learning among 25 students across five secondary schools in Lusaka District. The experimental group engaged in structured laboratory activities involving mechanics, electricity, magnetism, and wave phenomena. Data collected via achievement tests, observations, and questionnaires revealed that students in the experimental group demonstrated superior conceptual mastery, enhanced retention, and more favourable attitudes toward physics. The findings underscore the importance of experiential learning and suggest that integrating practical experiments using both standard laboratory equipment and locally available materials can significantly bolster academic performance and scientific literacy in Zambia.

KEYWORDS: Hands-on learning, Physics education, Retention, Active Learning, Secondary School, Physics Concepts, Constructivism, Understanding, Lecture-based Instruction, Hands-on Instruction and Experiential Learning.

1. INTRODUCTION

Physics serves as a critical pillar of the scientific domain, providing the theoretical underpinnings for natural phenomena and modern technological infrastructure. Advancements in engineering, medicine, telecommunications, and environmental science are inherently linked to concepts derived from physics. Therefore, a robust framework for physics education is essential for fostering scientific innovation and driving national development.

Despite its importance, secondary students often encounter significant difficulty mastering physics. The discipline is frequently associated with dense mathematical abstractions and theoretical constructs that appear detached from daily reality. This lack of relatability often culminates in diminished motivation and negative attitudes toward the subject. In the Zambian context, instruction is predominantly characterized by lecture-based methods where students occupy passive roles, focusing on note-taking and memorization. While this may facilitate rapid syllabus coverage, it rarely results in the ability to apply knowledge to solve complex problems.

Educational research posits that science is most effectively acquired through active participation. Practical experimentation allows learners to directly observe phenomena, manipulate variables, and derive evidence-based conclusions. This inquiry-based process transforms students from passive recipients into active investigators who develop critical thinking and problem-solving skills. In Zambia, where exposure to scientific experimentation outside the classroom is often limited, bridging the gap between theoretical knowledge and real-world experience is a pedagogical necessity. This study, therefore, evaluates whether experiential learning can objectively improve student understanding, motivation, and long-term retention.

1.1 Background of the Study

The evolution of physics pedagogy has seen a shift from purely didactic instruction to interactive, inquiry-based models. While Zambian curriculum reforms emphasize practical skills such as observation, measurement and data analysis implementation is frequently hindered by large class sizes, insufficient teacher training and a lack of laboratory infrastructure. Consequently, practical work is often reduced to occasional demonstrations intended solely for examination preparation. To address this, teachers can utilize low-cost, locally available materials to design meaningful experiments that connect scientific principles with everyday life.

1.2 Problem Statement

Despite the theoretical benefits of practical work, many Zambian classrooms lack consistent integration of experiments due to resource constraints or pedagogical habits. This results in students viewing Physics as a difficult, unrelatable subject, leading to lower performance in national examinations.

1.3 Research Objectives

The study was guided by the following objectives:

1. To investigate the impact of integrating hands-on experiments on students' conceptual understanding, academic performance, and retention of physics concepts in Zambian secondary schools.
2. To examine students' attitudes, motivation, and engagement levels toward physics when taught through hands-on experimental methods compared to traditional lecture-based instruction.
3. To explore teachers' perceptions, challenges, and enabling factors influencing the effective implementation of hands-on physics instruction in Zambian secondary schools.

1.4 Research Questions

1. How does the use of hands-on experiments affect students' conceptual understanding, academic performance, and retention of physics concepts compared to traditional lecture-based methods?
2. In what ways do hands-on experiments influence students' motivation, attitudes, and engagement toward learning physics?
3. What are the perceptions of teachers regarding the implementation of hands-on instruction, and what challenges and factors affect its successful integration in physics teaching?

1.5 Definitions of Key Words

Hands-on Instruction: Hands-on Instruction in Physics involves instructional strategies where teachers guide students through practical experiments, demonstrations, and inquiry-based lessons that translate physical laws into observable experiences.

- **Hands-On Learning**: Hands-on learning in physics involves students actively conducting experiments, using laboratory equipment, and applying theoretical principles to understand phenomena through direct experience.
- **Hands-on Experiments**: Practical science activities conducted by students using physical tools, materials or apparatus to explore and test scientific concepts through observation and experimentation.
- **Lecture-based Instruction**: A traditional form of teaching where the teacher delivers information verbally while students listen and take notes, with minimal interactive or practical engagement.
- **Understanding**: The ability to grasp, interpret, and apply scientific principles or physics concepts meaningfully in a range of contexts.
- **Retention**: The ability of students to recall and accurately apply physics concepts over a sustained period of time after initial instruction.
- **Physics Concepts**: Fundamental scientific principles and laws related to matter, energy, force, motion, electricity, magnetism, and thermodynamics as outlined in the Zambian science curriculum.
- **Active Learning**: A student-centered teaching method involving engagement through discussion, problem-solving, experiments, or group work, as opposed to passive listening.
- **Experiential Learning**: Learning through direct experience, reflection, and application, often associated with hands-on activities and Kolb's learning cycle.
- **Constructivism**: A learning theory which posits that learners construct knowledge actively through experience and interaction, rather than passively receiving it.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Theoretical Framework

Academic literature consistently advocates for active learning to promote conceptual depth. Constructivist theory suggests that knowledge is built by synthesizing new information with prior experience. Piaget's theory of cognitive development underscores the necessity of environmental interaction, while Vygotsky's "Zone of Proximal Development" highlights the role of social interaction and collaborative inquiry in the learning process.

Empirical evidence, such as that provided by Abrahams I. and Millar R., (2008) and Freeman. S., et al. (2014), confirms that well-designed laboratory work facilitates the connection between theory and observable phenomena, significantly improving performance compared to traditional lecturing. Furthermore, experimentation is a powerful tool for cognitive conflict, allowing students to test and correct intuitive misconceptions. In developing contexts, the use of simple, locally constructed apparatus is a viable strategy for maintaining high-quality science education despite resource constraints.

2.2 Global and Regional Perspectives

Studies conducted in South African and Kenyan Secondary Schools show that students who regularly participate in practical experiments perform better on standardized tests and exhibit higher interest in science careers. Even in resource-limited contexts, local adaptation of materials can make hands-on learning highly effective.

2.3 Addressing Misconceptions

Physics is rife with intuitive misconceptions. Practical activities allow students to confront these through "conceptual change," a process where empirical evidence forces the revision of faulty internal models.

3. Research Methodology

This study utilized a **quasi-experimental mixed-methods research design**. This approach enabled a dual analysis of measurable learning outcomes and qualitative participant perceptions.

- **Design:** A non-equivalent control and experimental group design was implemented.
- **Sample:** 25 students were purposively sampled from five secondary schools in Lusaka District.
- **Intervention:** The experimental group utilized apparatus such as trolleys, ripple tanks, and ray boxes to investigate Newton’s laws, electricity and wave phenomena.
- **Instrumentation:** Data were triangulated using achievement tests (pre-test and post-test), classroom observation checklists, and Likert-scale questionnaires.

1.1 Description of Hands-On Instructional Approach

The hands-on instructional approach employed in this study involved actively engaging students in practical physics activities designed to enhance their understanding and retention of key concepts. Unlike traditional lecture-based teaching, which relied primarily on verbal explanations, this method emphasized learning by doing, allowing students to interact directly with experimental apparatus, manipulate materials, and observe physical phenomena. This approach is consistent with constructivist learning theories of Vygotsky L.S. and Piaget J., which posit that knowledge is best acquired through active engagement and experiential learning.

4. Presentation and Analysis of Results

Analysis revealed that hands-on instruction yielded significantly positive outcomes across several metrics:

- **Engagement:** The experimental group exhibited higher participation, characterized by active discussion and peer collaboration.
- **Performance:** Quantitative analysis showed that the experimental group achieved higher average post-test scores, indicating a more robust grasp of physics concepts as indicated in the table below.

Instruction Method	Average Pre-test score	Average Post-test score	Change (post-Pre test scores)
Hands-on	62.53	78.13	+15.60
Lecture	68.40	71.80	+3.40

- **Retention:** Re-testing several weeks post-intervention confirmed that students who engaged in experiments retained information longer than the control group.
- **Motivation:** Qualitative feedback indicated more positive attitudes, with students noting that experiments enhanced their curiosity and illustrated the practical relevance of physics.

Therefore, results obtained from both quantitative and qualitative analyses were interpreted in light of the research questions that guided this study. The primary research question sought to determine how integrating hands-on experiments in physics instruction affects students' understanding and retention of physics concepts compared to traditional lecture-based methods. Findings clearly indicated that students taught using hands-on experimental methods showed greater conceptual understanding and higher levels of retention.

5. DISCUSSION

The research investigated the impact of integrating hands-on experiments into physics instruction and compared the outcomes with traditional lecture-based teaching methods in selected secondary schools in Lusaka District, Zambia. The findings revealed significant improvements in students' understanding, retention, and engagement when exposed to experimental learning approaches. These outcomes not only validate global and regional studies on experiential learning but also provide unique insights into how low-resource educational environments can adapt such methodologies to enhance science education. Through this discussion, the study also highlights the limitations encountered, proposes areas for further research, and makes recommendations for pedagogical practice, curriculum development, and educational policy.

5.1 Limitations and Future Directions

More work needs to be done in examining the cost-effectiveness and sustainability of experimental learning models. While this study demonstrated the feasibility of using locally available materials, long-term implementation requires institutional commitment, budgeting, and policy alignment. Studies focusing on the economic implications of scaling up hands-on learning, especially in underfunded rural schools, would provide practical recommendations for education ministries. Developing cost models, resource kits, and maintenance strategies could help institutionalize practical physics instruction without overburdening Schools financially.

Another promising area for future research is the influence of sociocultural factors on the effectiveness of hands-on learning. In some communities, students may face external pressures that influence their attitudes toward science, such as cultural beliefs or gender biases. Investigating how these factors interact with experimental learning can offer insights into tailoring interventions that are not only pedagogically sound but also culturally responsive. This would ensure that hands-on physics instruction is inclusive and resonates with student's lived experiences.

In addition to the noted constraints, the logistical challenges of conducting experiments in overcrowded classrooms must be considered. Zambian Secondary Schools often face the challenge of high student-teacher ratios, making it difficult to ensure that every student actively participates in an experiment. This limitation may dilute the potential benefits of hands-on learning, as passive observation replaces active engagement. Future studies should explore scalable models, such as station-based labs or rotation systems, that allow more personalized engagement even in large classrooms.

Despite the strong findings of this research, it is important to acknowledge its limitations. The study was conducted in a relatively small sample of schools, which may limit the generalizability of the findings. Future research should aim to include a more diverse range of schools across different provinces, including rural, peri-urban, and urban settings. This would help validate the results across a broader spectrum of learning environments.

Additionally, the study was limited to a single academic term, which may not capture the long-term impacts of hands-on learning. While immediate improvements in understanding and retention were observed, it is necessary to conduct longitudinal studies to examine whether these benefits persist over time. Such research could also explore how students transition from secondary to tertiary education and whether their hands-on learning experiences influence their academic and career choices.

Another limitation is the variability in teacher implementation. Although teachers were trained in experimental methods, their individual execution varied based on their comfort levels and prior experience. Some teachers embraced the approach enthusiastically, while others struggled with managing class time and resources. Future studies should investigate the role of teacher attitudes, professional background, and institutional support in the successful implementation of hands-on learning strategies.

Moreover, while the study focused on cognitive and affective outcomes, it did not extensively explore the psychomotor domain. Hands-on experiments inherently involve skills such as measurement, manipulation of instruments, and recording data. Future research should consider assessing students' development in these practical skills, as they are essential for scientific inquiry and technical proficiency.

There is also scope for exploring technological integration in hands-on learning. With the increasing availability of low-cost digital tools, schools can supplement physical experiments with virtual labs and simulations. These tools can provide additional opportunities for exploration, especially in schools with limited resources. Research into blended experimental models combining digital and physical experiments could offer valuable insights for educational planning.

Therefore, this study highlights the need for policy reforms and systemic support to scale up experimental learning. This includes developing national guidelines for practical science instruction, allocating budgets for laboratory materials, and integrating hands-on learning into teacher training colleges. Researchers and policymakers must work together to translate these findings into actionable strategies that can be implemented at scale.

6. CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The study concludes that integrating hands-on experiments is a transformative pedagogical strategy that improves understanding, retention, and student morale. To strengthen physics education in Zambia, it is recommended that:

- Teachers integrate practical experiments into regular instruction rather than limiting them to examination prep.
- Schools and educators leverage low-cost, locally sourced materials to mitigate resource shortages.
- Teacher training and professional development emphasize inquiry-based strategies and laboratory management.
- Curriculum Reforms should be upheld so as to Institutionalize the role of practical learning in science instruction by requiring a minimum number of experiments per topic.
- Future research to explore the role of digital technologies, such as simulations, virtual labs, and interactive learning platforms, as supplementary tools in experimental learning.
- Future research should expand to larger sample sizes and diverse geographical regions to further generalize these findings.SS

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