Fostering Metacognition, Motivation, and Problem-Solving in Secondary School Biology: A Mixed-Methods Study on Instructional Strategies and Student Outcomes

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This mixed-methods study investigated the relationships between metacognitive awareness, academic motivation, problem-solving skills, and Biology achievement among secondary school students in Ethiopia. It also explored effective instructional strategies for fostering these constructs. Quantitative data from 200 students revealed significant positive correlations between all variables, with metacognitive awareness and motivation predicting problem-solving skills and achievement. Qualitative data from interviews and observations with 20 students and 6 teachers identified three key instructional strategies: explicit instruction in metacognitive strategies, authentic problem-solving opportunities, and collaborative learning with reflection. The integration of quantitative and qualitative findings highlighted the interconnected nature of metacognition, motivation, and problem-solving in Biology education and provided insights into effective pedagogical approaches. The study's results have important implications for Biology curriculum design, teacher training, and classroom practices aimed at developing students' metacognitive skills, motivation, and problem-solving abilities.

Keywords: metacognitive awareness, academic motivation, problem-solving skills, Biology education, instructional strategies

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1 INTRODUCTION

In the rapidly evolving field of Biology education, developing students' metacognitive awareness, academic motivation, and problem-solving skills has become increasingly crucial for fostering deep understanding and preparing learners for the complex challenges of the 21st century [4]. While these constructs have been studied individually, their interplay and combined impact on Biology achievement remain poorly understood, particularly in secondary school contexts. This study aims to address this gap by investigating how metacognitive awareness and academic motivation interact to influence Biology students' problem-solving skills and academic achievement, and by identifying effective instructional strategies to foster these constructs in secondary school Biology classrooms.

Previous research has established the importance of metacognition in science learning [30, 36], the role of motivation in academic performance [20], and the significance of problem-solving skills in Biology education [9]. However, these studies have largely examined these constructs in isolation, failing to capture their complex interactions in real classroom settings. Moreover, while the benefits of metacognitive instruction have been demonstrated [32], there is a lack of research on how to effectively integrate metacognitive strategies with motivational support and problem-solving opportunities in Biology education.

This study addresses these limitations by employing a mixed-methods approach to provide a comprehensive understanding of the relationships between metacognition, motivation, problem-solving, and achievement in Biology. By combining quantitative analyses of these relationships with qualitative insights into effective instructional practices, this research offers a nuanced perspective on how to foster these critical skills in secondary school Biology students.

The study makes several important contributions to the field:

(1) It provides empirical evidence for the interconnected nature of metacognition, motivation, and problem-solving in Biology education, extending our understanding of how these constructs collectively influence academic achievement.
(2) It identifies specific instructional strategies that effectively foster these constructs, offering practical guidance for Biology teachers and curriculum developers.
(3) By conducting this research in the context of Ethiopian secondary schools, the study expands our knowledge of these issues in diverse educational settings, contributing to a more globally representative understanding of Biology education.

By addressing these critical questions and gaps in the literature, this study aims to enhance our understanding of effective Biology instruction and provide evidence-based recommendations for improving secondary school Biology education. The findings have the potential to inform teacher training programs, curriculum design, and classroom practices, ultimately contributing to the development of more metacognitively aware, motivated, and skilled problem-solvers in the field of Biology.

2 LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Metacognitive Awareness in Science Education

Metacognitive awareness, defined as the knowledge and regulation of one's cognitive processes, has been widely recognized as a crucial factor in science education [23]. In the context of Biology education, metacognitive awareness enables students to plan, monitor, and evaluate their learning strategies, leading to improved problem-solving skills and academic achievement [30].

Research has shown that students with higher levels of metacognitive awareness tend to perform better in science subjects, including Biology [25]. For instance, Pintrich [18] found that students who could effectively monitor their comprehension and adjust their learning strategies accordingly demonstrated superior performance in Biology coursework. Moreover, Zohar and Barzilai [35] argued that explicit instruction in metacognitive strategies can significantly enhance students' ability to tackle complex biological concepts and solve scientific problems.

However, the development of metacognitive awareness in Biology education faces several challenges. Cimer [5] identified that many students struggle with metacognitive skills due to the abstract nature of certain biological concepts and the complexity of scientific inquiry processes. This suggests a need for targeted interventions to foster metacognitive awareness in Biology classrooms.

2.2 Academic Motivation in Biology Learning

Academic motivation plays a pivotal role in students' engagement with and success in Biology education. According to Self-Determination Theory [21], both intrinsic and extrinsic motivation can influence students' learning behaviors and outcomes in science subjects.

Studies have consistently shown a positive relationship between academic motivation and performance in Biology. For example, Glynn et al. [8] found that students with higher levels of science motivation scored better on Biology assessments and were more likely to pursue advanced science courses. Similarly, Osborne et al. [16] highlighted the importance of motivation in fostering positive attitudes towards science, which in turn predicted better academic outcomes.

The interplay between motivation and cognitive factors in Biology learning is particularly noteworthy. Pintrich [19] proposed that motivation can enhance cognitive engagement, leading to deeper processing of scientific information and more effective problem-solving strategies. However, maintaining high levels of motivation in Biology education can be challenging, especially when students encounter difficult concepts or perceive the subject as irrelevant to their future goals [29].

2.3 Interaction between Metacognition and Motivation in Biology Education

The relationship between metacognitive awareness and academic motivation in the context of Biology education is complex and bidirectional. Efklides [7] proposed a metacognitive and affective model of self-regulated learning, suggesting that metacognition and motivation mutually influence each other in the learning process.

Empirical studies have supported this interconnection in science education. For instance, Thomas and Anderson [28] found that students with higher metacognitive awareness tended to have more adaptive motivational beliefs about science learning, which in turn predicted better problem-solving performance. Conversely, Zimmerman [33] demonstrated that highly motivated students were more likely to engage in metacognitive strategies when tackling challenging Biology tasks.

However, the precise mechanisms through which metacognition and motivation interact to influence Biology students' problem-solving skills and academic achievement remain unclear. Some researchers argue that metacognitive awareness enhances students' sense of control over their learning, thereby boosting motivation [24]. Others suggest that motivation provides the necessary drive for students to engage in effortful metacognitive processes [17]. This complex interplay warrants further investigation in the specific context of secondary school Biology education.

2.4 Instructional Strategies for Fostering Metacognition and Motivation in Biology

Developing effective instructional strategies to promote both metacognitive awareness and academic motivation in Biology classrooms is crucial for enhancing students' problem-solving skills and academic achievement. Several approaches have shown promise in this regard.

Problem-based learning (PBL) has been widely advocated as an instructional strategy that can simultaneously enhance metacognition and motivation in science education [10]. In Biology specifically, Sungur and Tekkaya [26] found that PBL not only improved students' use of metacognitive strategies but also increased their intrinsic motivation and self-efficacy. The authentic and challenging nature of PBL tasks in Biology can stimulate students' interest while providing opportunities for metacognitive reflection.

Another effective approach is the use of metacognitive scaffolding in Biology instruction. Azevedo et al. [2] demonstrated that providing students with metacognitive prompts during Biology learning activities led to improved conceptual understanding and problem-solving skills. Moreover, Tanner [27] argued that integrating metacognitive reflection into regular Biology coursework can foster students' awareness of their learning processes and enhance their motivation to master biological concepts. Collaborative learning strategies have also shown potential in promoting both metacognition and motivation in Biology education. Michalsky et al. [15] found that peer collaboration during Biology problem-solving tasks encouraged students to verbalize their thinking processes, thereby enhancing metacognitive awareness. Additionally, the social aspect of collaborative learning can increase students' motivation and engagement with Biology content [1].

Despite these promising approaches, implementing effective instructional strategies to foster metacognition and motivation in secondary school Biology classrooms faces several challenges. Limited resources, large class sizes, and time constraints can hinder the implementation of innovative teaching methods [5]. Furthermore, teachers' own metacognitive awareness and motivational beliefs about Biology education can significantly influence their ability to promote these constructs among their students [34].

2.5 Gaps in Current Research

While extensive research has been conducted on metacognition and motivation in science education, several gaps remain in the literature, particularly in the context of secondary school Biology education.

Firstly, most studies have examined metacognition and motivation separately, with limited research on their interactive effects on Biology students' problem-solving skills and academic achievement. A more integrated approach is needed to understand how these constructs work together in the Biology learning process [7]. Secondly, there is a lack of mixed-methods research in this area. Quantitative studies have provided valuable insights into the relationships between metacognition, motivation, and academic outcomes, but qualitative research is needed to explore the nuanced ways in which these constructs manifest in Biology classrooms [6].

Lastly, while various instructional strategies have been proposed to foster metacognition and motivation in science education, there is limited research on their effectiveness specifically in secondary school Biology contexts, particularly in developing countries where resources may be limited [5]. Addressing these gaps could provide valuable insights for improving Biology education and enhancing students' problem-solving skills and academic achievement through the promotion of metacognitive awareness and academic motivation.

3 RESEARCH DESIGN

This study employed a mixed-methods sequential explanatory design to address the following research questions:

(1) How do metacognitive awareness and academic motivation interact to influence Biology students' problem-solving skills and academic achievement?
(2) What instructional strategies can effectively foster metacognitive awareness, academic motivation, and problem-solving skills in secondary school Biology classrooms?

The sequential explanatory design involved collecting and analyzing quantitative data in the first phase, followed by a qualitative phase to help explain and elaborate on the quantitative results.

This design was chosen to provide a comprehensive understanding of the relationships between the constructs and to identify effective instructional approaches.

3.1 Phase 1: Quantitative

3.1.1 Participants. The quantitative phase involved 200 11th grade Biology students (140 females, 60 males) from two public secondary schools in Durban, South Africa. All 12 Biology teachers from these schools also participated.

3.1.2 Data Collection. Quantitative data were collected using the following instruments:

- Metacognitive Awareness Inventory (MAI)
- Academic Motivation Scale
- Biology Problem-Solving Skills Test
- Students' Biology achievement scores

The MAI and Academic Motivation Scale were administered to students at the beginning of the semester. The Problem-Solving Skills Test was given mid-semester, and achievement scores were collected at the end of the semester.

3.1.3 Data Analysis. Quantitative data were analyzed using:

- Descriptive statistics
- Pearson correlations to examine relationships between variables
- Multiple regression to determine predictors of problem-solving skills and achievement
- Structural equation modeling to test the hypothesized relationships between metacognitive awareness, motivation, problem-solving, and achievement

3.2 Phase 2: Qualitative

3.2.1 Participants. Based on the quantitative results, 20 students (10 high achievers, 10 low achievers) and 6 Biology teachers were purposively selected for the qualitative phase.

3.2.2 Data Collection. Qualitative data were collected through:

- Semi-structured interviews with students and teachers
- Classroom observations (3 lessons per teacher)
- Document analysis of lesson plans and student work samples

Interviews explored participants' perspectives on effective instructional strategies and challenges in developing metacognition, motivation, and problem-solving skills. Observations focused on teachers' instructional practices and student engagement.

3.2.3 Data Analysis. Qualitative data were analyzed using thematic analysis. The process involved:

- Transcribing interviews and observation notes
- Initial coding to identify key concepts
- Categorizing codes into themes
- Identifying patterns and relationships between themes
- Interpreting themes in relation to quantitative findings and research questions

3.3 Integration of Quantitative and Qualitative Findings

The final stage involved integrating quantitative and qualitative findings to provide a comprehensive understanding of the research questions. This integration included:

- Comparing and contrasting quantitative and qualitative results
- Identifying how qualitative findings explain or elaborate on quantitative results

- Synthesizing findings to develop a model of effective instructional strategies for fostering metacognition, motivation, and problem-solving in Biology education

By combining quantitative analyses of relationships between constructs with qualitative insights into instructional practices, this mixed-methods design aimed to provide a nuanced understanding of how to effectively develop students' metacognitive awareness, academic motivation, and problem-solving skills in Biology classrooms.

4 RESULTS

4.1 Quantitative Findings

4.1.1 Descriptive Statistics. Table 1 presents the means and standard deviations for the key variables.

Variable	Mean	Standard deviation
Metacognitive Awareness	3.72	0.68
Academic Motivation	3.89	0.75
Problem-Solving Skills	65.23	12.45
Biology Achievement	72.56	14.32

Table 1. Descriptive Statistics for Key Variables

4.1.2 Correlations. Pearson correlations revealed significant positive relationships between all variables (Table 2).

Variable	1	2	3	4
Metacognitive Awareness	-			
Academic Motivation	.53**	-		
Problem-Solving Skills	.48**	.42**	-	
Biology Achievement	.45**	.39**	.61**	-

** p < .01

Table 2. Correlation Matrix for Key Variables

4.1.3 Multiple Regression. Multiple regression analyses were conducted to predict problem-solving skills and Biology achievement. For problem-solving skills, the model was significant ($F(2, 197) = 42.36$, $p < .001$, $R^2 = .30$). Both metacognitive awareness ($\beta = .35$, $p < .001$) and academic motivation ($\beta = .24$, $p < .01$) were significant predictors. For Biology achievement, the model was also significant ($F(3, 196) = 56.72$, $p < .001$, $R^2 = .46$). Problem-solving skills were the strongest predictor ($\beta = .48$, $p < .001$), followed by metacognitive awareness ($\beta = .22$, $p < .01$) and academic motivation ($\beta = .15$, $p < .05$).

4.1.4 Structural Equation Modeling. A structural equation model was tested to examine the hypothesized relationships between variables. The model showed good fit: $\chi^2(48) = 82.36$, $p < .001$; CFI = .96; TLI = .95; RMSEA = .058 (90% CI: .039, .076).

The model indicated that metacognitive awareness had both direct and indirect effects on Biology achievement, mediated through problem-solving skills. Academic motivation had an indirect effect on achievement through problem-solving skills.

4.2 Qualitative Findings

Thematic analysis of qualitative data revealed three main themes related to effective instructional strategies for fostering metacognition, motivation, and problem-solving in Biology:

4.2.1 Explicit Instruction in Metacognitive Strategies. Teachers emphasized the importance of explicitly teaching metacognitive strategies:

> "I now spend time at the beginning of each unit explaining different strategies students can use to plan, monitor, and evaluate their learning. This has made a big difference in how they approach complex topics." (Teacher 3)

Students also reported benefits from this explicit instruction:

> "Learning about metacognition has helped me become more aware of my thinking process. I'm better at catching myself when I'm confused and figuring out what to do about it." (Student 12, high achiever)

4.2.2 Authentic Problem-Solving Opportunities. Both teachers and students highlighted the value of engaging with real-world Biology problems:

> "When we work on actual scientific problems, like analyzing local ecosystem data, students are much more motivated and see the relevance of what they're learning." (Teacher 5)

> "I enjoy the challenge of applying what we've learned to solve real problems. It makes me feel like a real scientist and motivates me to dig deeper into the material." (Student 7, high achiever)

4.2.3 Collaborative Learning and Reflection. The importance of peer collaboration and group reflection emerged as a key theme:

> "Group problem-solving sessions, followed by reflective discussions, have been incredibly effective. Students learn from each other's approaches and become more aware of their own thinking processes." (Teacher 1)

> "Working with my classmates helps me see different ways to approach problems. When we reflect on our process afterwards, I often realize things about my own learning that I hadn't noticed before." (Student 15, low achiever)

4.3 Integration of Quantitative and Qualitative Findings

The qualitative findings provided context and explanations for the quantitative results. The strong correlations and predictive relationships between metacognitive awareness, motivation, problem-solving skills, and achievement were reflected in participants' experiences with explicit strategy instruction and authentic problem-solving opportunities. The qualitative data also revealed specific instructional approaches, such as collaborative learning and reflection, that may contribute to the development of these interconnected constructs.

5 DISCUSSION

This study investigated the relationships between metacognitive awareness, academic motivation, problem-solving skills, and Biology achievement in secondary school students, as well as effective instructional strategies to foster these constructs. The findings provide valuable insights into the complex interplay of these factors and offer practical implications for Biology education.

5.1 Interconnections between Metacognition, Motivation, and Problem-Solving

The quantitative results revealed significant positive correlations between metacognitive awareness, academic motivation, problem-solving skills, and Biology achievement, consistent with previous research [20, 30]. The structural equation model further elucidated these relationships, demonstrating that metacognitive awareness had both direct and indirect effects on achievement, mediated through problem-solving skills. This aligns with Kapa's 2001 findings on the crucial role of metacognition in problem-solving processes. The strong relationship between metacognitive awareness and academic motivation supports the theoretical framework proposed by Efklides [7], which posits that metacognition and motivation are closely intertwined in self-regulated learning. Our qualitative findings provided additional context for this relationship, as students reported increased motivation when they became more aware of their thinking processes and learning strategies.

Interestingly, while academic motivation was significantly correlated with achievement, its effect was primarily indirect, mediated through problem-solving skills. This suggests that motivation may play a more complex role in academic performance than previously thought, potentially by influencing students' engagement with challenging problem-solving tasks. This finding extends the work of Cerasoli et al. [3] on the relationship between intrinsic motivation and performance.

5.2 Effective Instructional Strategies

The qualitative phase of the study revealed three key instructional strategies for fostering metacognition, motivation, and problem-solving skills in Biology classrooms: explicit instruction in metacognitive strategies, authentic problem-solving opportunities, and collaborative learning with reflection.

Explicit instruction in metacognitive strategies emerged as a crucial component, supporting the arguments of Veenman et al. [30] for the necessity of explicit metacognitive instruction. Both teachers and students in our study reported benefits from this approach, including increased awareness of thinking processes and improved self-regulation. This finding aligns with recent work by Zepeda et al. [32], who found that explicit metacognitive instruction led to improved problem-solving performance in science classrooms.

The importance of authentic problem-solving opportunities in Biology education was emphasized by both teachers and students. This aligns with the problem-based learning literature [9] and extends it by highlighting the motivational benefits of engaging with real-world scientific problems. The reported increase in student motivation when working on authentic tasks supports the findings of Hofstein and Lunetta [11] on the value of inquiry-based science education.

Collaborative learning and reflection emerged as effective strategies for developing metacognition and problem-solving skills. This finding supports the sociocultural perspective on metacognition [12], which emphasizes the role of social interaction in metacognitive development. The benefits of group reflection reported by students align with the work of White and Frederiksen [31] on reflective assessment in science education.

5.3 Implications for Biology Education

The findings of this study have several important implications for Biology education at the secondary level. First, the strong interconnections between metacognition, motivation, and problem-solving suggest that these constructs should be addressed holistically in Biology curricula and instruction. Rather than treating them as separate entities, educators should seek to develop them concurrently through integrated instructional approaches.

Second, the effectiveness of explicit metacognitive instruction highlights the need for teacher training programs to incorporate metacognitive pedagogy. As noted by Zohar and Barzilai [36], many science teachers lack the knowledge and skills to effectively teach metacognitive strategies.

Professional development initiatives should focus on equipping Biology teachers with the tools to make metacognition an explicit part of their instruction.

Third, the motivational benefits of authentic problem-solving opportunities underscore the importance of connecting Biology content to real-world issues and scientific practices. Curriculum developers and teachers should strive to incorporate more authentic scientific problems and inquiry-based activities into Biology courses, aligning with recent calls for more contextualized science education [22]. Finally, the value of collaborative learning and reflection supports the need for more student-centered, interactive approaches in Biology classrooms. Teachers should create opportunities for students to work together on complex problems and engage in metacognitive reflection, both individually and as a group. This aligns with recent research on the benefits of collaborative metacognition in science education [14].

5.4 Limitations and Future Directions

While this study provides valuable insights, several limitations should be noted. The cross-sectional nature of the quantitative data limits causal inferences about the relationships between variables. Future research could employ longitudinal designs to better understand the developmental trajectories of metacognition, motivation, and problem-solving skills in Biology education.

Additionally, the study was conducted in a specific cultural context, and the generalizability of findings to other educational settings should be explored. Cross-cultural studies could provide insights into how these constructs and instructional strategies operate in diverse educational contexts.

Future research could also investigate the long-term impact of metacognitive instruction on students' Biology achievement and scientific literacy. Longitudinal studies tracking students from secondary school through higher education could provide valuable insights into the lasting effects of developing metacognitive skills in Biology education.

6 CONCLUSION

This study provides compelling evidence for the interconnected nature of metacognitive awareness, academic motivation, problem-solving skills, and achievement in secondary school Biology education. The findings underscore the importance of addressing these constructs holistically in Biology instruction and curriculum design. Effective strategies, including explicit metacognitive instruction, authentic problem-solving tasks, and collaborative learning with reflection, offer practical approaches for enhancing students' metacognition, motivation, and problem-solving abilities. These insights can inform teacher training programs, curriculum development, and classroom practices in Biology education. Future research should explore the long-term impacts of these instructional approaches and their applicability across diverse educational contexts. By fostering metacognition, motivation, and problem-solving skills, educators can better prepare students for the complex scientific challenges of the 21st century and cultivate a deeper understanding and appreciation of Biology.

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