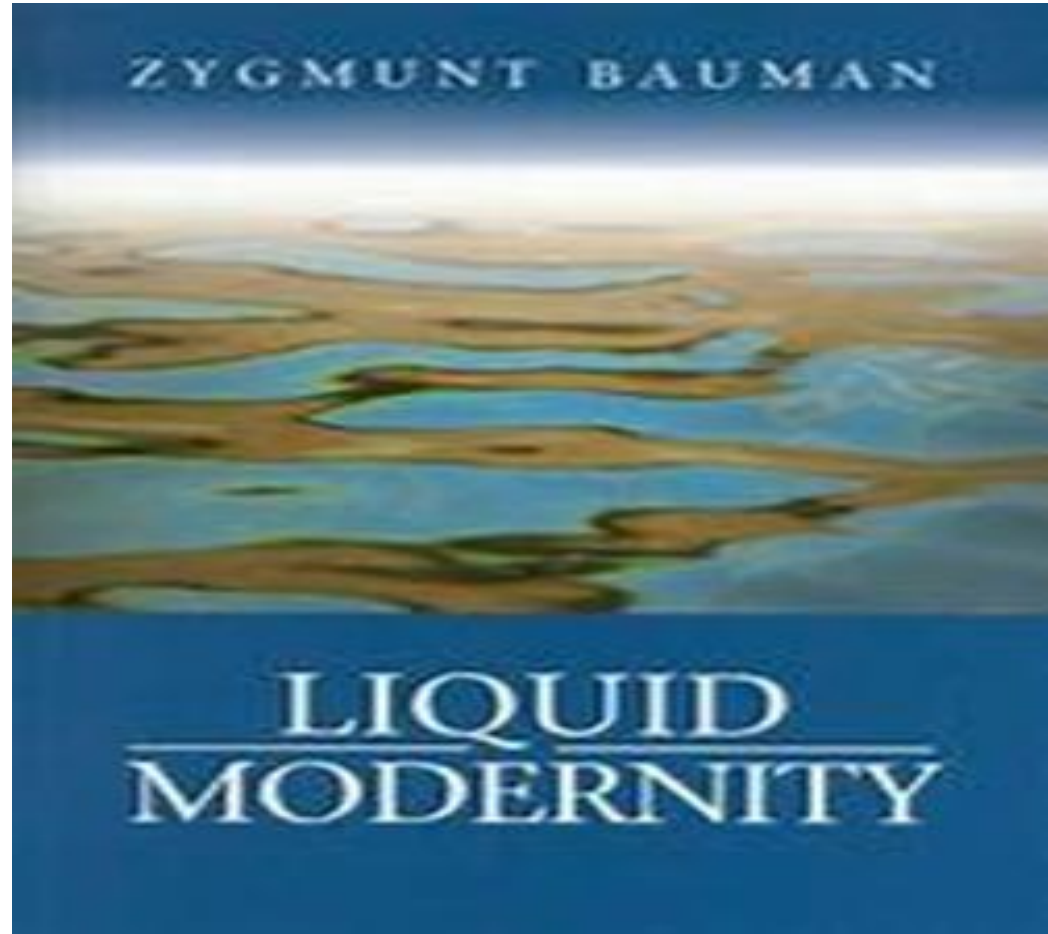


ADDRESSING THE LITERACY CRISIS WITHIN OUR SCHOOLING SYSTEM THROUGH JOHN DEWEY'S EDUCATION PHILOSOPHY

DATE: 20th AUGUST 2026

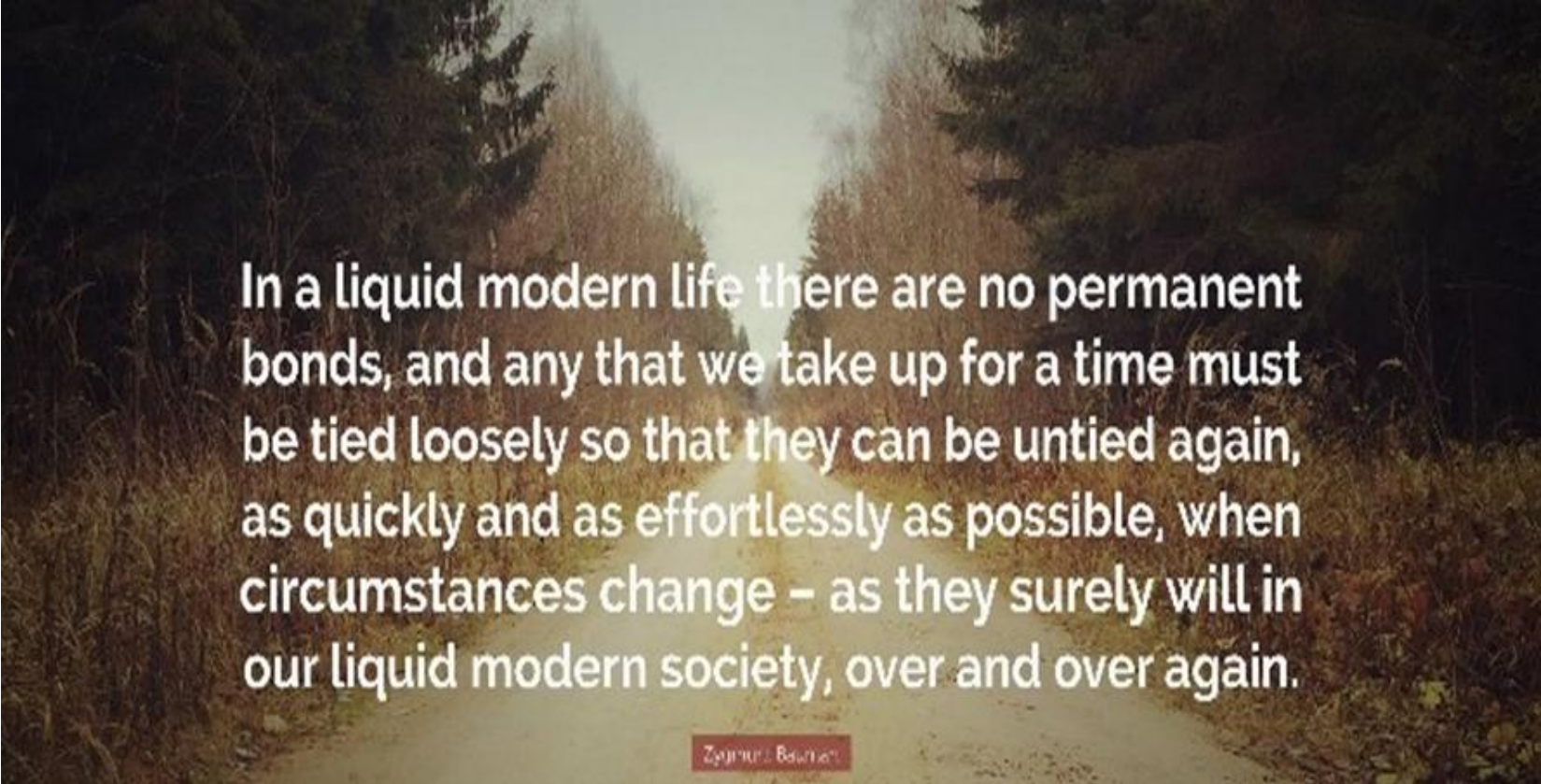
**VENUE: MARITZBURG COLLEGE
MCEASA CONFERENCE**

ZYGMUNT BAUMAN



LIQUID
MODERNITY

Liquid Modernity

A photograph of a dirt road winding through a forest. The trees are covered in autumn foliage, with shades of yellow, orange, and brown. The road is light-colored and leads into the distance, flanked by dense trees and bushes. The overall atmosphere is serene and slightly misty.

In a liquid modern life there are no permanent bonds, and any that we take up for a time must be tied loosely so that they can be untied again, as quickly and as effortlessly as possible, when circumstances change – as they surely will in our liquid modern society, over and over again.

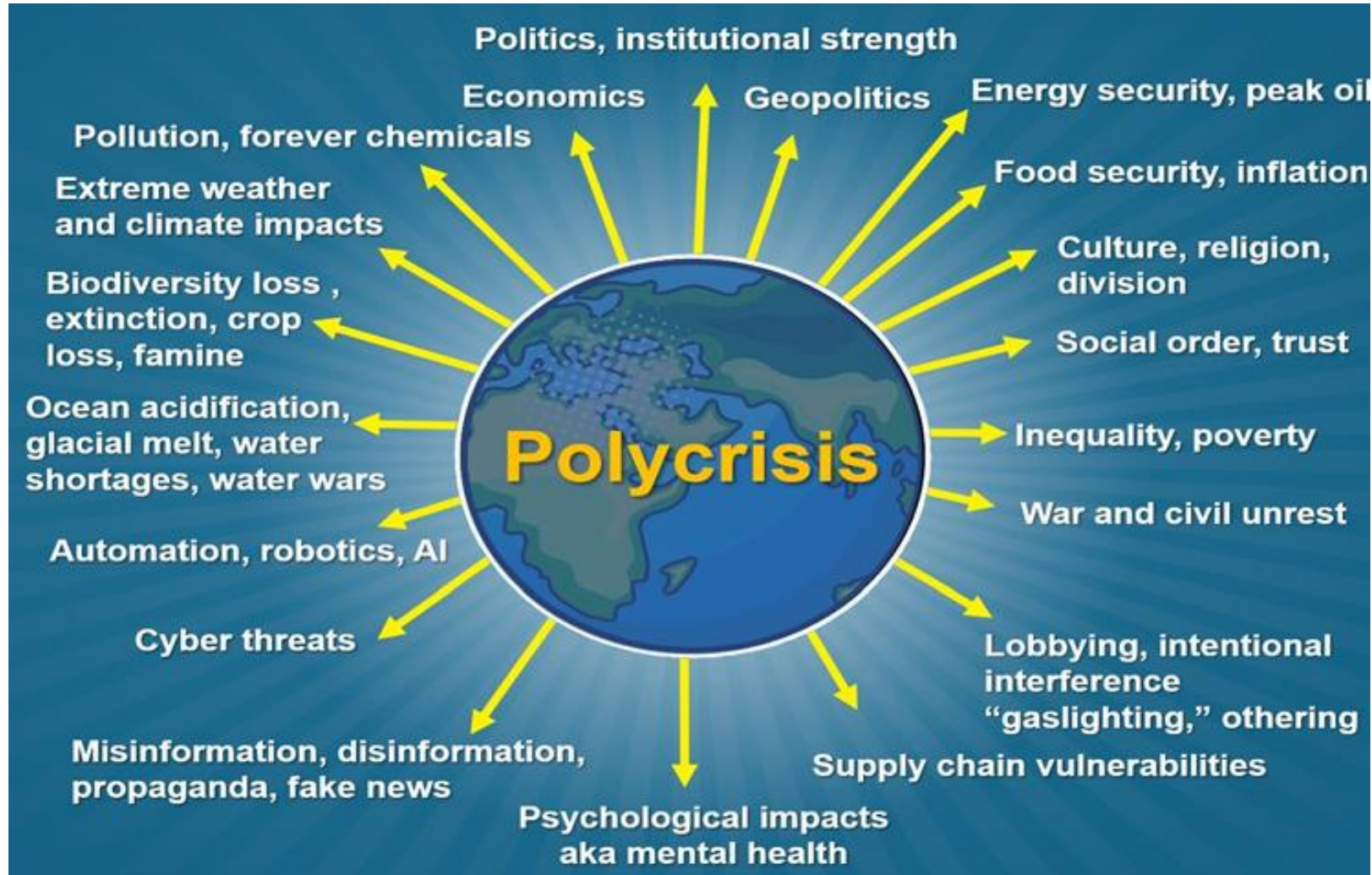
Zygmunt Bauman

poly·crisis

[poly-krai-sis]

noun

a constant and increasing
state of multiple crises.



What is Critical Pedagogy

- An educational philosophy guiding learners to question and challenge domination, beliefs, and practices.
- Popularised in the work of Paulo Freire, emphasizing education as a practice of freedom.
- Central tenet: Developing critical consciousness ('conscientization') to recognize and change oppressive social structures.
- Radical departure from the traditional and conservative, 'banking' models of education where students simply absorb facts.

Critical Literacy Pedagogy is:

Relevant

- Designing the class and curriculum to be relevant and inclusive of students' identities, lives, experiences, cultures, and current events.

Reflexive

- Acknowledging, exploring, and/or learning about one's biases, as well as how to bracket those biases.

Deconstructive

- Deconstructing or dissecting texts, videos, or other media to look at the language features; authorial bias, intent, and purpose; as well as the way the text, video, or media might perpetuate grand cultural narratives. Also involves working to deconstruct these grand cultural narratives.

Dialogic

- Exploring literacy as a social practice by exploring multiple perspectives and meanings of a text or media. In particular, this exploration may occur through dialogue and questioning.

Empowering

- Examining issues of power in text, media, classroom, school, and/or society in order to counter deficit mindsets and empower students.

Transformative

- Considering how texts, media, and/or society can be transformed to be more equitable and creating opportunities for social action.

Intersectional

- Considering how systems of oppression, such as race, class, and gender, interact in texts, media, the classroom, and/or society.

The Current Context

- Enduring legacy of Apartheid left behind an intentionally fragmented, unequal, and racialized education system. How do address schooling from the perspective of a developmental state?
- Current juncture characterised by persistent structural divides, resource disparities, and spatial inequality along historical racial lines. Explore the ways in which race has morphed into class-based inequality.
- How does a democratic government foster unity, equity, social justice and human rights.
- What is the role of education within society, transformation cannot occur through policy alone; it requires reinventing the classroom dynamic and school ethos.

Eradicating Apartheid Legacies

- Challenging Eurocentric Epistemologies: Critiquing Western-centric orthodoxies that dismiss local and indigenous histories.
- Centering Local Realities: Validating and integrating culturally situated knowledge that reflects the lived experiences of South African students.
- Exposing Systemic Power: Guiding learners to unmask structural inequities and implicit biases within institutional cultures.
- Deconstructing Colonial Texts: Re-interpreting historical or literary narratives that justified past marginalization.

Fostering Social Cohesion & Agency

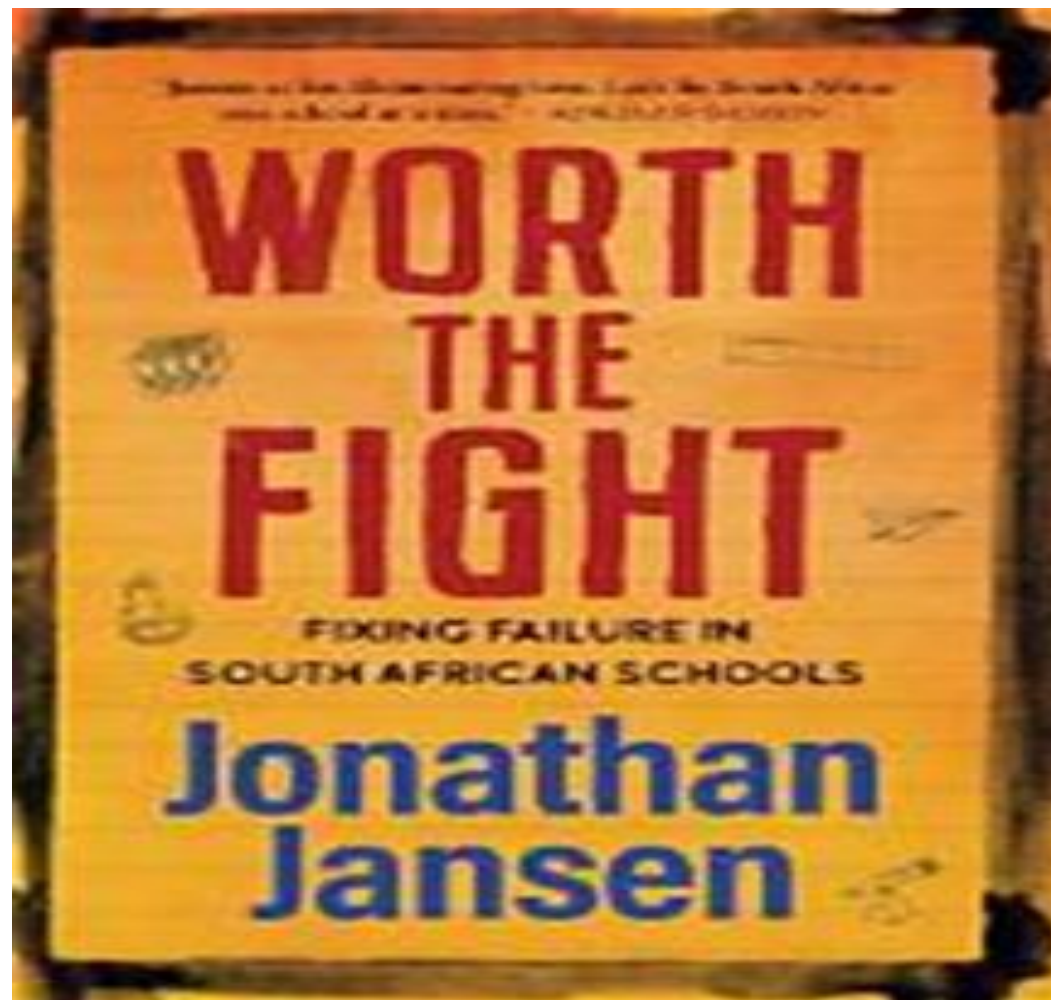
- Promoting Democratic Citizenship: Cultivating critical literary pedagogy and shared responsibility for nationhood.
- Rooted in African Philosophies: Aligning educational transformation with 'Ubuntu' (interconnectedness and shared humanity).
- Empowering Transformative Intellectuals: Positioning teachers as active agents of social justice rather than neutral technicians.
- Holistic Student Care: Addressing the broader socio-economic reality, including student welfare, pastoral care, hunger and gender-based violence.

Implementation challenges

- Systemic Backlogs: Severe under-resourcing and large classrooms in rural and township schools limits creative or experimental pedagogy.
- Assessment Pressures: High-stakes testing and standardized curricula often force a return to rote learning models. (The NSC Syndrome)
- Teacher Preparedness: Many educators lack practical training in facilitating difficult conversations regarding race, class, and privilege.
- Institutional Resistance: Entrenched conservative cultures in older academic institutions slow down epistemic shifts.
- Lack of critical capacity within education departments.

Pathways of Possibility

- A Shared Project: Education remains a primary battleground for true post-apartheid liberation and equity.
- Systemic Alignment: Critical pedagogy must be backed by structural investments, infrastructure improvements, and teacher support.
- Beyond the Classroom: Empowering learners to be active agents who extend democratic transformation into wider South African society.
- Ultimate Aim: Overcoming the past by building an inclusive, critically conscious, and humanizing education system.
- Crucial role of organs of civil society.



How to Fix South Africa's Schools

Lessons from 'Worth the Fight' by Jonathan Jansen

The Central Premise

School turnaround does not depend on complex policies or massive budget injections. It relies on relentless execution of foundational basics and fighting the cultural decay within failing systems.

- **Culture over Theory**

Fixing routines, attitudes, and behaviors first.

- **Relentless Accountability**

Holding both leadership and teaching staff to high operational standards.

- **Context-Driven Fixes**

Addressing the specific localized socio-economic struggles of the community.

Relentless & Courageous Leadership

The Principal as the Pivot

A school's success or failure rises and falls completely with the principal. Turnaround requires a leader willing to confront underperformance directly.

The 'Worth the Fight' Mindset

Leaders must be willing to engage in difficult conflicts—with unions, unmotivated staff, or community politics—to protect the students' right to learn.

Establishing Visible Authority

Effective principals manage by walking around, setting the energetic tone, and being present at the school gates daily.

Class Time Mastery & Staff Discipline

Zero Tolerance for Absenteeism

Chronically absent or late teachers paralyze learning. Schools must track, measure, and strictly enforce instructional time limits.

Protecting the 'Opportunity to Learn'

Fixing schools requires ensuring that when the bell rings, an adult is in front of the classroom teaching text-heavy content every single day.

Countering Professional Inertia

Overcoming a culture of low expectations by demanding prepared lesson plans, regular grading, and active student engagement.

Rebuilding Rituals & High Expectations

Restoring Basic Routines

Reintroducing morning assemblies, strictly enforcing dress codes, keeping grounds clean, and establishing clear start/end times to create a sense of order.

The Psychology of Pride

A chaotic environment breeds chaotic behavior. Restoring physical infrastructure and basic dignity shifts how students view their own potential.

Shielding Schools from External Chaos

Building firm boundaries to prevent localized community disputes, political factions, and unions from interrupting academic hours.

The Turnaround Blueprint

Summary Checklist for Educational Change:

- ✓ Appoint courageous leaders who value pupil learning over political appeasement.
- ✓ Enforce operational basics: Teachers in class, on time, teaching.
- ✓ Build a culture of strict discipline, predictable rituals, and personal pride.
- ✓ Engage communities constructively while firmly insulating the classroom from external politics.

The Stark Reality We Face:

- **South Africa ranked last out of 57 Countries** in the Progress in Reading Literacy Study (PIRLS) 2023.
- **84% of Grade 4 Learners** are unable to read effectively for meaning in any language.
- This research has understandable **created urgency** in Government, research institutions and Civil Society around the systemic challenges within our schooling system.
- We face a systemic pedagogical crisis.

The Current Gap

- There are many initiatives and new policy shifts geared to address this challenge. However, there seems to be a strong and undue emphasis on the technical aspects.

Too much focus on :

- Decoding & Comprehension

Not enough focus on :

- Reading for pleasure
- Integration across subjects
- Critical thinking
- A holistic, learner-centered approach informed by educational philosophy.

John Dewey's Philosophy

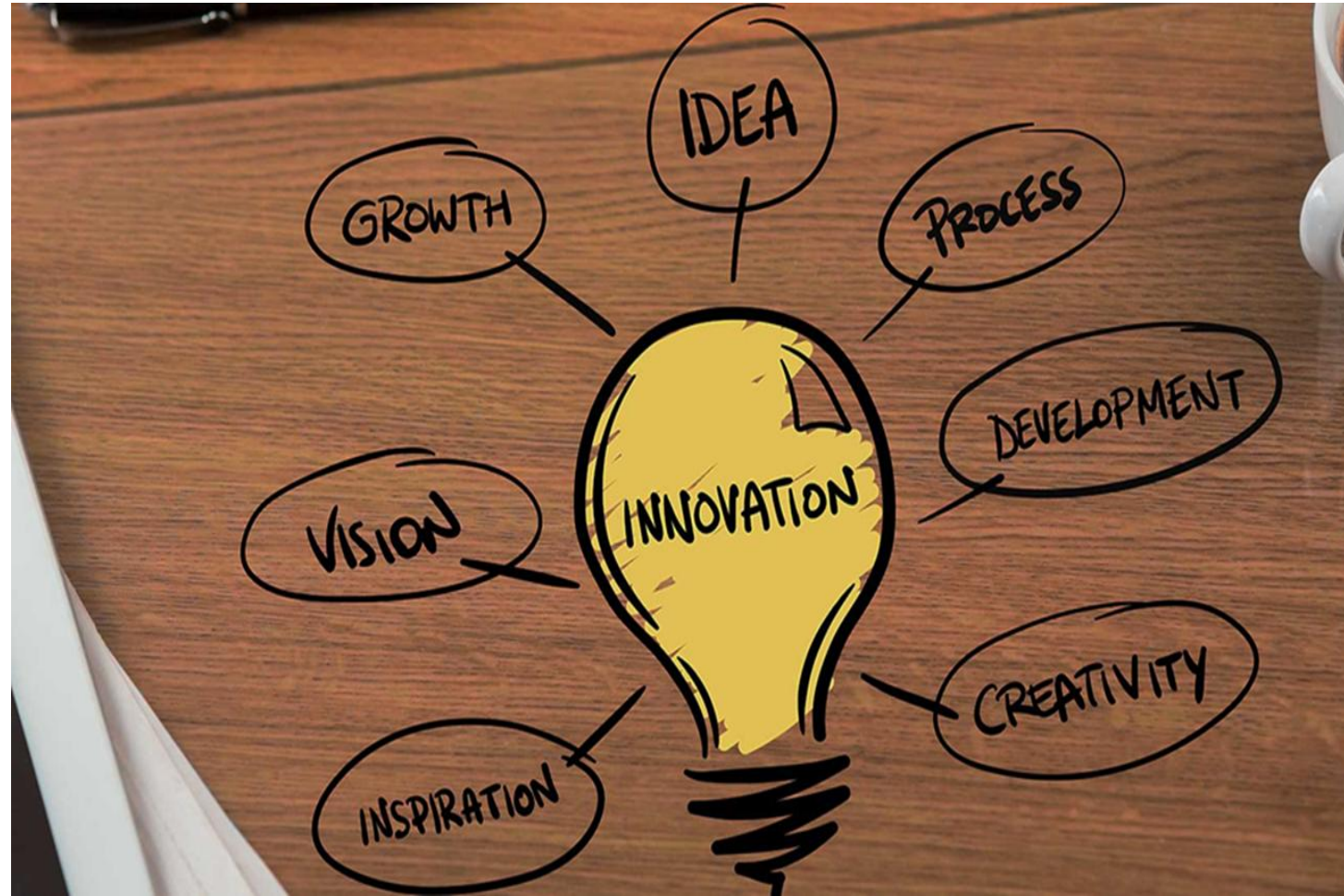
“Education is the regulation of the process of coming to share in the social consciousness”.

- **Key Point:** Education must be informed by the daily, experiential reality of our students lives.

The 4 Core Principles

John Dewey's model to reshape classrooms and address functional illiteracy:

- **UTILITY** - Learning must be useful and relevant.
- **INTEREST** - Tap into what learners actually care about.
- **EXPOSURE** - Broaden experiences through books and activities.
- **INTEGRATION** – Connect subjects and real-world contexts.



The Goal

- To reshape our imagination and the landscape of our classrooms.
- To defeat functional illiteracy in our schools.
- To deal with the scourge of functional illiteracy in our schooling system.



Curriculum Rooted in Experience and Real Problems

1. Problem-Based Inquiry

Lessons must originate from real, messy situations that cause genuine cognitive disturbance or doubt. Routine exercises do not trigger true reflective thought.

2. Action & Interaction

Learning must combine hands-on experimentation with minds-on evaluation. Students must test ideas and experience the direct consequences of their decisions.

3. Continuous Continuity

Every educational experience must build on prior knowledge and prepare the student for deeper future inquiries, creating an unbroken chain of development.

Dewey's Learning by Doing: A Pedagogical Framework

What is 'Learning by Doing'?



Dewey's 'Learning by Doing' posits that learners construct knowledge through purposeful, hands-on activities, guided discussion, and reflective practice.



It emphasizes that true learning occurs when experience is structured by a clear educational aim, integrating action, communication, and critical thinking.

Key Principles for Effective Implementation



Foster active learner engagement through hands-on experiences.



Link curriculum to real-world scenarios for relevance.



Integrate project-based learning, experiments, and simulations.



Cultivate collaboration, discussion, and critical reflection.



Teachers serve as facilitators, providing guidance, not just information.



Prioritize opportunities for learners to reflect and connect new knowledge to prior understanding.



Plan meticulously, providing necessary scaffolding to avoid cognitive overload, especially for novices.

Why Guided Experience Matters



For Dewey, experience is educational only when carefully structured. Unguided discovery can lead to 'pointless busy work' and cognitive overload for novice learners. Effective 'Learning by Doing' requires explicit teaching, worked examples, and rehearsal before independent investigation, ensuring all learners can benefit.



Structural Learning

Actionable Classroom Strategies for Reflection

Structured Journaling

Moving past simple summaries. Prompts should target Dewey's phases, specifically requiring students to define the core problem and evaluate their working hypotheses.

Community of Inquiry

Using collaborative dialogue, structured debates, and peer reviews to push students out of comfort zones and build the attitude of open-mindedness.

Formative Assessment

Evaluating the process of inquiry rather than just the final product. Grading focuses on how logically students reasoned and adapted to testing errors.

The Deliberate Pause

Building intentional periods of silence and retrospection directly into active tasks, preventing students from rushing through without mental mapping.

Siyabonga