

Progressivism in Context: A Critical Psychological Examination of John Dewey's Educational Theory in African Schooling Systems with a Case Study of Zimbabwe

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ABSTRACT

John Dewey's progressivist educational philosophy, grounded in inquiry, experiential learning, and democratic classrooms, has informed numerous African curriculum reforms. This paper critically examines the psychological viability of Deweyan progressivism in sub-Saharan African contexts, focusing on Zimbabwe as a case study. Empirical evidence indicates that learner-centred, inquiry-based approaches have the potential to enhance engagement, higher-order thinking, and democratic dispositions. However, gaps in foundational skills (literacy, numeracy), language complexities, teacher capacity, and misaligned assessments frequently hinder the realisation of these ideals. Recommendations include adopting hybrid pedagogical models, sustained teacher professional development, assessment redesign, and sequenced policy implementation.

Keywords: progressivism, Zimbabwe, educational psychology, policy implementation

INTRODUCTION

John Dewey's seminal work *Democracy and Education* (1916) argued that education should foster experiential growth, reflection, and social interaction rather than merely transmit fixed knowledge. Across Africa, Deweyan principles have influenced curriculum reforms, particularly under competency-based curricula (CBC) frameworks. Despite policy enthusiasm, the cognitive and psychological demands of learner-centred pedagogy (LCP), including prior knowledge, working memory, language comprehension, and scaffolding, are often under-recognised in practice.

This study addresses three key questions:

1. What psychological strengths and limitations accompany the adoption of Deweyan progressivism in African schooling systems?
2. How has Zimbabwe implemented progressivist reforms, and what empirical outcomes, both successes and challenges, have emerged?
3. What pedagogical, curricular, and policy adaptations can optimize the psychological fit and effectiveness of progressive educational reforms in resource-constrained African contexts?

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

1. Deweyan Progressivism and Constructivism

Deweyan progressivism emphasises that education should prepare individuals for meaningful participation in democratic life by focusing on inquiry, collaboration, and learning through experience (Dewey, 1916). The philosophy promotes a shift away from rote memorisation and passive learning, arguing that knowledge should

be actively constructed by learners through engagement with real-world contexts. Constructivist theory builds on these ideas by emphasising that learners interpret new information in light of prior knowledge, which shapes how they organise and retain learning (Bransford, Brown, & Cocking, 2000). Both perspectives prioritise student agency, suggesting that learners develop a deeper understanding when they can explore, question, and apply concepts in authentic ways. The teacher in this framework becomes a facilitator, guiding students while allowing them freedom to explore ideas independently and collaboratively. Classroom practices, therefore, include hands-on projects, problem-solving tasks, and interactive discussions that mirror real-life decision-making. This vision positions the classroom as a living laboratory for intellectual growth and democratic participation.

Central to Dewey's progressivism is the concept of "learning by doing," which asserts that learners understand concepts more deeply when they can act on them in practical ways (Dewey, 1916). For instance, conducting experiments in science, simulating economic transactions in business studies, or engaging in role-play in social studies can transform abstract concepts into meaningful, memorable experiences. Constructivist research confirms this by showing that students develop stronger mental models when they actively interact with content rather than passively receive information (Bransford et al., 2000). These practices also reinforce metacognitive awareness, as learners reflect on their approaches and adjust strategies accordingly. In turn, students learn to view mistakes not as failures but as opportunities for growth, which cultivates resilience and adaptive thinking. Teachers, therefore, play a critical role in scaffolding these experiences, ensuring that students are supported as they navigate complex concepts. This cycle of action, reflection, and adjustment is at the heart of progressivist and constructivist learning.

Another important element of Deweyan progressivism is its democratic ethos, which frames the classroom as a microcosm of society where students practice skills of dialogue, negotiation, and shared responsibility (Dewey, 1916). Constructivist principles support this by emphasising the role of social interaction in learning, highlighting that collaboration enables learners to co-construct meaning and gain multiple perspectives (Bransford et al., 2000). Group projects, cooperative problem-solving, and peer feedback exercises embody these ideas by creating contexts where students learn from one another. Such practices not only enhance academic achievement but also build social competencies such as empathy, communication, and cultural awareness. By fostering inclusive and participatory learning environments, teachers help students see knowledge as a shared resource rather than a private possession. This prepares learners for active roles in democratic societies where dialogue and cooperation are crucial. In this sense, education becomes simultaneously intellectual, moral, and social.

While Deweyan and constructivist approaches are influential, they are not without critique, as some argue that overly unstructured inquiry may lead to superficial understanding if learners are left without sufficient guidance (Dewey, 1916). Similarly, constructivist classrooms can be challenging to implement in large or under-resourced settings, where individualised attention and scaffolding are difficult to provide. Standardised testing systems also pose barriers, as they prioritise memorisation and uniformity over exploration and critical thinking. Nevertheless, empirical evidence suggests that when implemented effectively, progressivist and constructivist practices foster deeper comprehension, creativity, and problem-solving skills (Bransford et al., 2000). The challenge lies in balancing freedom with structure, ensuring that learners have both autonomy and support. Teachers who integrate explicit instruction with inquiry-based tasks often achieve the most successful outcomes. Such a balance allows these theories to remain practical as well as philosophically appealing.

Deweyan progressivism and constructivism provide a foundational framework for learner-centred education that emphasises agency, experience, and collaboration. They challenge teacher-centred models by shifting the focus toward active, participatory learning that connects with students' real lives. Their emphasis on democratic practice and social interaction highlights the interconnected cognitive, social, and ethical purposes of education. While challenges of implementation exist, these theories remain highly influential in shaping progressive curriculum and pedagogy. Importantly, their integration with psychological frameworks such as cognitive load theory and self-determination theory enhances their applicability in modern classrooms. By situating these philosophies within a broader evidence-based framework, educators can design practices that are both visionary and practical. This synthesis ensures that learning remains meaningful, motivating, and sustainable across diverse contexts.

2. Cognitive Load Theory (CLT)

Cognitive Load Theory (CLT) is a psychological framework that emphasises the limitations of working memory and the importance of designing instruction that reduces unnecessary processing demands (Sweller, 2022). According to CLT, human working memory is finite, and when instructional materials impose excessive demands, learners experience overload that hinders comprehension and retention. This is particularly relevant for novice learners, who lack well-developed schemas and therefore require structured guidance to avoid cognitive strain (Ashman & Sweller, 2023). Instructional strategies such as worked examples, scaffolding, and gradual release of responsibility are recommended to optimise learning by aligning with cognitive architecture. Scholars have extended CLT to digital and online learning, where poorly designed multimedia can add extraneous load that distracts from core content (Skulmowski & Xu, 2022). In this context, simplicity, clarity, and careful sequencing become vital for maximising efficiency. The theory thus provides an essential counterbalance to purely discovery-based models of instruction.

Recent developments in CLT highlight its evolving nature and relevance to modern education, with scholars examining how individual differences affect learners' ability to manage cognitive demands (Sweller, 2024). For example, students with higher prior knowledge or stronger metacognitive skills may handle more complex problem-solving tasks without overload, while novices require more structured guidance. This variability underscores the importance of differentiated instruction, where educators adjust strategies based on learners' readiness levels. Emerging research also explores the role of technology in mitigating or exacerbating cognitive load, particularly as online platforms become central to education (Ouweland, Lespiau, Tricot, & Paas, 2025). Effective use of visual aids, interactive simulations, and adaptive technologies can reduce cognitive demands and enhance understanding when properly designed. Conversely, poorly structured digital materials can overwhelm learners with distractions, irrelevant information, or excessive multitasking. CLT thus offers important insights for both traditional and modern classrooms.

CLT also intersects with motivational perspectives, particularly self-determination theory, offering a holistic understanding of how cognition and motivation interact during learning (Evans, Vansteenkiste, Parker, Kingsford-Smith, & Zhou, 2024). Excessive cognitive load can reduce learners' sense of competence, leading to frustration and disengagement, whereas well-structured instruction enhances confidence and motivation. By ensuring that learners experience manageable levels of challenge, teachers support the psychological needs of autonomy, competence, and relatedness that drive intrinsic motivation. This highlights the importance of scaffolding, where instructional supports are gradually withdrawn as learners gain proficiency. Such alignment ensures that educational practices are both cognitively efficient and motivationally supportive. In this way, CLT complements broader theories of learning by situating cognition within a dynamic motivational context. Educators who apply this integration are more likely to foster sustained engagement and achievement.

Applications of CLT have extended beyond traditional classrooms to professional and medical training, where complex tasks require careful management of cognitive demands (Szulewski, Howes, van Merriënboer, & Sweller, 2021). In such contexts, training programs that begin with guided practice before progressing to independent performance have been shown to enhance learning outcomes. This approach is equally applicable in school settings, where gradual release strategies help learners transition from dependence on teacher support to autonomous problem-solving. By ensuring that students do not face excessive demands too early, educators create conditions for deeper comprehension and skill mastery. Furthermore, integrating CLT into assessment design ensures that tasks measure conceptual understanding without overwhelming working memory. This aligns with the broader principle that education should build durable knowledge rather than short-term performance. Consequently, CLT has wide-ranging implications across diverse educational domains.

Cognitive Load Theory offers essential insights into the design of effective instruction that respects human cognitive limitations. Its emphasis on guided learning, schema development, and reduction of extraneous load provides a strong counterbalance to unstructured discovery methods. By incorporating recent innovations and acknowledging individual differences, CLT remains highly relevant in both traditional and digital learning environments. Its integration with motivation theories such as self-determination theory further strengthens its explanatory power, showing how cognitive efficiency and psychological needs interact to shape learning. Importantly, CLT offers practical strategies for scaffolding, sequencing, and differentiating instruction to support

diverse learners. For this reason, it remains one of the most influential cognitive frameworks in education today. Its ongoing refinement ensures continued relevance in addressing contemporary educational challenges.

3. Self-Determination Theory (SDT)

Self-Determination Theory (SDT) provides a robust framework for understanding motivation in education by emphasizing the role of autonomy, competence, and relatedness in promoting intrinsic motivation (Ryan et al., 2022). When students feel that they have meaningful choice and control over their learning, their intrinsic motivation is enhanced, leading to deeper engagement and persistence in academic tasks (Guay, 2022). Competence refers to the learner's sense of effectiveness, which grows when instructional support and feedback are structured to build mastery gradually (Gagné et al., 2022). Relatedness, on the other hand, reflects the importance of supportive social relationships in learning, highlighting the role of teachers and peers in fostering belonging (Ryan, 2023). These three elements are interdependent, meaning that effective motivation emerges when all needs are met simultaneously. The theory also distinguishes between intrinsic and extrinsic motivation, noting that reliance solely on rewards or punishments can undermine long-term engagement. As such, SDT suggests that educational environments must be carefully designed to balance autonomy with guidance and connection.

In classroom contexts, autonomy-supportive teaching practices are crucial for applying SDT principles effectively. Teachers who provide students with meaningful choices in assignments or learning activities encourage a sense of ownership, which enhances motivation (Guay, 2022). At the same time, they structure lessons in ways that provide necessary guidance and scaffolding to prevent learners from feeling overwhelmed. Research shows that autonomy-supportive environments lead to higher academic achievement, greater persistence, and increased creativity in problem-solving (Ryan et al., 2022). For example, when students can select topics for projects or engage in inquiry-driven activities, they tend to invest more effort and display stronger intrinsic interest. Teachers can also foster autonomy by adopting non-controlling language, encouraging reflection, and validating students' perspectives even when mistakes are made. By positioning students as partners in the learning process, autonomy-supportive practices align with the democratic ethos of progressivism. This demonstrates how SDT complements Deweyan philosophy in contemporary education.

Competence is another core element of SDT that has direct implications for instructional design and assessment. Students develop a sense of competence when they receive constructive feedback, experience success in appropriately challenging tasks, and perceive progress over time (Gagné et al., 2022). Teachers can foster this by designing assessments that provide opportunities for growth rather than simply measuring outcomes. Formative assessments, scaffolded tasks, and opportunities for revision all contribute to building learners' confidence in their abilities. Research indicates that when students feel competent, they are more likely to adopt mastery-oriented learning goals, which prioritise understanding over performance (Ryan et al., 2022). This competence-driven motivation enhances resilience, allowing learners to persist through challenges rather than avoiding difficult tasks. Importantly, competence is not about perfection but about the perception of gradual and meaningful progress. This shows the importance of aligning assessment practices with motivational theories to foster sustained learning.

Relatedness highlights the social dimension of SDT, emphasising that students thrive when they feel supported, respected, and connected to others in their learning environment (Ryan, 2023). Teachers play a critical role in creating classroom climates where students feel valued, and peers are encouraged to collaborate rather than compete. Practices such as group projects, peer mentoring, and class discussions allow students to develop both academic and social skills simultaneously. Strong relationships also help reduce anxiety and build resilience, particularly in challenging learning contexts (Chiu, 2022). In online or hybrid settings, maintaining relatedness requires intentional efforts, such as fostering virtual communities and providing regular personalised feedback. By prioritising relational support, educators ensure that learners' motivation is not only cognitively sustainable but also emotionally grounded. This reflects the holistic perspective of SDT, where motivation is seen as an outcome of both internal needs and social context. Such insights highlight the inseparability of cognitive and affective dimensions in education.

SDT provides a powerful lens for understanding how motivation can be cultivated in ways that sustain engagement and promote deeper learning. Its emphasis on autonomy, competence, and relatedness aligns closely with progressivist and constructivist philosophies that prioritise active, student-centred learning. By integrating SDT into instructional practices, educators can move beyond surface-level compliance to foster genuine investment in learning tasks. Research consistently shows that autonomy-supportive environments lead to improved academic achievement, persistence, and well-being (Ryan et al., 2022). This makes SDT not only a theoretical model but also a practical guide for designing learning environments that meet both cognitive and emotional needs. Furthermore, its compatibility with cognitive load theory highlights the importance of balancing challenge with support to sustain motivation. Together, these theories provide a comprehensive understanding of how students learn best.

4. Sociocultural and Language Considerations

Sociocultural theories of learning emphasise that education occurs within a social and cultural context, where language plays a central role in shaping how knowledge is understood and applied. In multilingual classrooms, the language of instruction is often not the students' mother tongue, which can create additional barriers to comprehension and engagement (Cummins, 2000). This situation imposes extraneous cognitive load because learners must simultaneously decode linguistic structures and process academic content (Skulmowski & Xu, 2022). Such dual demands can hinder working memory efficiency and reduce overall learning outcomes. From this perspective, sociocultural considerations intersect with cognitive load theory by showing how language can either support or hinder learning depending on instructional design. Teachers who recognise these challenges can adapt strategies, such as using visual aids, scaffolding vocabulary, or allowing code-switching, to support learners. These practices help balance linguistic demands with cognitive processing, enabling more equitable access to education.

Cultural context also shapes how learners interpret knowledge and engage in classroom practices. Students from diverse cultural backgrounds may have different expectations regarding participation, collaboration, or authority in learning settings. For example, some cultures emphasise collective learning and respect for authority, while others prioritise individual expression and critical questioning (Cummins, 2000). If classroom practices do not account for these differences, students may feel alienated or less motivated to participate fully. Therefore, culturally responsive pedagogy becomes essential in bridging the gap between learners' backgrounds and school expectations. This involves recognising students' cultural assets, integrating culturally relevant materials, and adopting inclusive instructional strategies. Such practices not only enhance engagement but also foster a sense of belonging and validation. This highlights how sociocultural theory complements progressivist and motivational perspectives by situating learning within real-world cultural dynamics.

Language barriers also affect assessment practices, as students may underperform not due to a lack of understanding but because of limited proficiency in the language of instruction. Standardised assessments that do not accommodate multilingual learners risk misrepresenting their actual knowledge and skills (Cummins, 2000). This creates equity concerns, as students may be unfairly disadvantaged based on linguistic rather than academic factors. Addressing this requires alternative forms of assessment, such as oral presentations, project-based evaluations, or bilingual support, that allow students to demonstrate understanding without unnecessary linguistic strain. Research indicates that multilingual learners benefit from scaffolding strategies such as pre-teaching vocabulary, using visual organisers, and providing simplified language without diluting academic content (Skulmowski & Xu, 2022). These adjustments align with cognitive load theory by minimising extraneous processing. Consequently, equitable assessment practices must integrate sociocultural awareness with cognitive insights.

In addition to linguistic and cultural factors, sociocultural theory emphasises the role of peer interaction and community in shaping learning outcomes. Peer collaboration allows students to engage in dialogue that helps clarify ideas, test hypotheses, and co-construct meaning (Bransford et al., 2000). In multilingual contexts, peers can also provide translation support or share cultural references that make concepts more relatable. Such interactions not only support cognitive development but also build social bonds that fulfil motivational needs of relatedness, as emphasised in SDT (Ryan, 2023). Group work, cooperative projects, and peer tutoring, therefore, embody the convergence of cognitive, motivational, and sociocultural theories in practice. Importantly, these

practices help students develop empathy, communication skills, and cross-cultural awareness. This integration demonstrates how learning is simultaneously cognitive, social, and cultural. Teachers who leverage peer dynamics thus enrich both academic and interpersonal development.

Sociocultural and language considerations highlight the critical role of context in shaping educational outcomes. They emphasise that learning cannot be separated from linguistic, cultural, and social realities, which deeply influence how students engage with content. Multilingual classrooms present unique challenges by imposing additional cognitive demands, but these can be addressed through inclusive instructional strategies. Culturally responsive pedagogy ensures that learners' identities and experiences are valued rather than marginalised. Moreover, sociocultural perspectives align with cognitive load theory and self-determination theory by showing how language, culture, and social interaction interact with motivation and cognition. Together, these insights reinforce the importance of designing education that is not only cognitively efficient and motivationally supportive but also culturally inclusive. This comprehensive perspective ensures that diverse learners are empowered to thrive in modern classrooms.

LITERATURE REVIEW

African Context

Across sub-Saharan Africa, learner-centred pedagogy (LCP) has been actively promoted through curriculum reforms and donor-supported initiatives, but the results remain inconsistent. In Uganda, Sikoyo (2010) highlighted how large class sizes, language diversity, and scarce teaching resources diluted the intended impact of problem-solving pedagogies. Similarly, Mwalongo (2016) documented Tanzanian teachers' experiences where overcrowded classrooms, assessment systems misaligned with learner-centred ideals, and a lack of resources restricted authentic adoption of progressive teaching. These studies show that while Deweyan ideals of inquiry and active learning are attractive, their implementation requires structural support, material provision, and policy alignment. Research further demonstrates that without contextual adaptation, imported pedagogical models often clash with deeply rooted traditional teaching cultures. Donor-driven reforms sometimes fail to sustain momentum once external funding or technical assistance diminishes. Thus, African experiences highlight that policy rhetoric alone cannot transform teaching without considering sociocultural and institutional realities.

In contrast to these challenges, Rwanda presents a positive case of progressivist pedagogy producing measurable learning outcomes. Mbonimana and Sikubwabo (2024) reported that when active and cooperative learning strategies were integrated with comprehensive teacher training, classrooms showed improved student engagement and achievement. The Rwandan government invested heavily in teacher capacity building, textbook provision, and aligned assessment frameworks that supported learner-centred instruction. These measures reduced the cognitive and resource burden on teachers, enabling them to consistently implement progressive practices. Rwanda's case underscores that LCP thrives when teachers are not only trained but also supported with continuous mentorship and resource availability. This indicates that reforms must be systemic rather than piecemeal, linking curriculum design, teacher preparation, and assessment reform. Moreover, community involvement and political will also emerged as crucial enablers of sustainability.

The African experience demonstrates both the promises and pitfalls of adopting Deweyan progressivism in diverse contexts. While some nations have achieved localised successes, the majority continue to grapple with challenges such as misaligned assessments, inadequate teacher preparation, and infrastructural barriers. Lessons from Uganda and Tanzania emphasise that reform without attention to context often results in superficial adoption rather than genuine pedagogical transformation. Meanwhile, Rwanda shows that when reforms are systematically designed and adequately resourced, progressive pedagogies can reshape classroom practice and learner outcomes. The comparative evidence highlights that success in Africa hinges on a balance between ambitious educational ideals and grounded contextual realities. Hence, the broader African literature calls for a cautious but innovative approach that combines Deweyan principles with local adaptations.

Zimbabwe Case Study: Policy and Implementation

Zimbabwe has embarked on ambitious education reforms, emphasising competency-based curricula, learner

and inclusive education through the Education Sector Strategic Plans (ESSP 2016–2020; 2021–2025). According to MoPSE (2021), these plans aimed to strengthen early literacy, numeracy, and inclusive classroom practices to ensure no learner was left behind. To support these reforms, the TEACH programme, implemented in partnership with the Education Development Trust, trained over 17,000 teachers and school leaders by 2023. The initiative particularly targeted professional standards, foundational teaching skills, and the creation of supportive school leadership environments. These reforms demonstrate Zimbabwe's recognition of progressive pedagogical ideals and its efforts to translate them into actionable strategies. However, the actual classroom implementation remains far more complex and fragmented.

Despite these strong policy commitments, Zimbabwean classrooms continue to experience a wide gap between intentions and outcomes. Chimbi and Jita (2022) reported that history teachers found it difficult to sustain project-based and inquiry-driven activities due to a lack of resources, insufficient time, and pressure to prepare students for examinations. Similarly, Magudu and Gumbo (2022) highlighted persistent weaknesses in teacher education institutions (TEIs)–school partnerships, which limited the effectiveness of practical training for pre-service teachers. Mtetwa and Ndemo (2022) further argued that professional development opportunities for in-service teachers remain irregular and disconnected from the actual demands of classrooms. These findings highlight how systemic issues, ranging from inadequate training to rigid assessment regimes, limit the potential of progressive curriculum reforms. The challenges show that teacher empowerment must be central to reform for lasting transformation to occur.

The Zimbabwean case also illustrates the dangers of policy-practice disjuncture when reform is not accompanied by holistic support structures. While policies promote active learning, teachers often revert to traditional, lecture-based methods that guarantee exam success but undermine learner-centred objectives. Moreover, inconsistent funding and economic instability reduce the government's ability to sustain reform programmes, particularly in rural schools with limited infrastructure. The TEACH programme represents progress, yet without continuity and local ownership, gains may dissipate over time. The Zimbabwean literature suggests that sustained investment in teacher training, classroom resources, and assessment realignment is essential. Thus, the case shows that while Zimbabwe is rhetorically aligned with Deweyan ideals, practical realities demand systemic restructuring to close the policy-implementation gap.

Psychological Analysis of Implementation Gaps

Psychological theories provide insight into why learner-centred pedagogy struggles to gain full traction in Zimbabwe. Cognitive Load Theory suggests that inquiry-based and problem-solving tasks can overwhelm learners when they lack adequate foundational skills, particularly in numeracy and literacy (Sweller, 2022; Ashman & Sweller, 2023). In contexts where classrooms are multilingual and overcrowded, extraneous cognitive load further increases, reducing students' ability to process and retain new knowledge (Skulmowski & Xu, 2022). This means that even when teachers attempt active learning, students may disengage or perform poorly due to excessive mental demands. Additionally, teachers without strong training in scaffolding techniques may struggle to reduce unnecessary cognitive load. As a result, learners in Zimbabwe often fail to experience the intended benefits of progressive education.

Motivational theories also shed light on these challenges, particularly self-determination theory (Ryan et al., 2022; Gagné et al., 2022). Research shows that autonomy, competence, and relatedness are essential for intrinsic motivation, yet these conditions are not always met in Zimbabwean classrooms. Learner-centred pedagogy aims to increase autonomy, but when students lack competence due to weak foundational skills, autonomy can lead to frustration instead of motivation. Moreover, classrooms with large student-to-teacher ratios make it difficult for teachers to foster relatedness and individual support. This combination of factors often undermines student motivation and engagement, limiting the long-term effectiveness of reforms. Without proper scaffolding, autonomy support, and feedback, progressivist ideals risk collapsing into superficial classroom exercises.

Language and sociocultural considerations also add complexity to implementation in Zimbabwe. Many students learn in English, which is often a second or third language, leading to increased cognitive and emotional strain (Cummins, 2000). Multilingual environments create additional barriers to comprehension, making active learning more demanding than traditional rote methods. This issue is compounded when teachers themselves are

underprepared for teaching in multilingual contexts, leading to communication breakdowns. Consequently, students may disengage from inquiry-based tasks due to linguistic challenges rather than intellectual capacity. These findings highlight that professional development must not only focus on pedagogy but also on linguistic and cultural inclusivity. Thus, psychological perspectives reveal that without addressing cognitive load, motivation, and language challenges, progressive reforms in Zimbabwe will remain constrained.

RECOMMENDATIONS AND HYBRID PEDAGOGICAL MODEL

1. Hybrid Pedagogy

A hybrid pedagogical model that blends explicit instruction with scaffolded inquiry-based tasks is essential for balancing Deweyan ideals with Zimbabwe's classroom realities. Explicit instruction ensures that learners acquire foundational literacy and numeracy skills without cognitive overload, while inquiry-based activities develop higher-order reasoning and creativity. By sequencing these approaches, teachers can gradually reduce extraneous cognitive load and allow students to engage more meaningfully with problem-solving tasks. This scaffolding process not only promotes knowledge retention but also empowers students to transfer skills to new contexts. Evidence from both African and global research confirms that balanced models yield stronger outcomes than either fully traditional or purely progressive approaches. Hence, hybrid pedagogy provides a pragmatic pathway that acknowledges contextual constraints while sustaining educational innovation.

Implementing hybrid pedagogy requires structured teacher support to ensure effective integration of methods. Teachers must be trained to recognise when learners need direct instruction and when they are ready for guided discovery or collaborative inquiry. Without such training, the risk is that teachers may default to teacher-centred practices or, conversely, overload students with open-ended tasks. Classroom demonstrations, peer observations, and mentorship programmes could equip teachers with the judgment needed to implement this balance effectively. Furthermore, curriculum designers should embed clear pedagogical guidelines within subject syllabi to assist teachers in sequencing instruction. Hybrid pedagogy represents a dynamic compromise between progressive ideals and Zimbabwe's systemic realities.

2. Assessment Reform

Assessment reform is critical to ensuring that curriculum ideals align with classroom practice. Current examinations in Zimbabwe remain dominated by rote memorisation and factual recall, which discourages teachers from adopting inquiry-based methods. To support progressive pedagogy, assessments must evaluate problem-solving skills, reasoning abilities, and application of knowledge to real-life contexts. Introducing project-based assessments and open-ended questions would motivate teachers to design lessons that nurture critical and creative thinking. Such reforms would reduce the policy-practice gap by harmonising what is taught and what is tested. Moreover, assessment transformation can shift learner motivation from surface learning to deep understanding.

However, successful assessment reform requires systemic planning and gradual implementation. Policymakers must consider piloting alternative assessment models before nationwide adoption to minimise disruption and resistance. Teacher training on designing and grading innovative assessments is essential to avoid inconsistencies in evaluation. Additionally, parents and communities must be sensitised to the value of broader learning outcomes beyond exam scores. Continuous monitoring and research will also be needed to ensure that assessment innovations improve rather than disadvantage learners, particularly in under-resourced schools. Therefore, assessment reform should be incremental, inclusive, and evidence-driven to be sustainable.

3. Sustained Professional Development

Short-term workshops alone cannot equip teachers with the capacity to implement learner-centred pedagogy. Sustained professional development models, such as mentoring, lesson study, and peer learning, offer more meaningful and long-term growth opportunities. These approaches allow teachers to continuously refine their instructional practices, share challenges, and co-create solutions in a supportive environment. Lesson study, in particular, encourages collaborative planning, observation, and reflection, making professional development

directly tied to classroom realities. By engaging in ongoing cycles of improvement, teachers build both confidence and competence in applying progressive pedagogies. Such sustained approaches foster professional communities of practice rather than isolated efforts.

Transitioning to this model requires systemic changes in teacher support structures. Education authorities must allocate time within the school calendar for collaborative professional learning activities. Head teachers and instructional leaders should also be trained to facilitate mentoring and peer observation effectively. Funding should be directed toward school-based capacity-building rather than one-off training events that lack follow-up. Furthermore, linking professional development to performance appraisal systems can incentivise teachers to continuously improve their practice. Shifting towards sustained professional learning ensures that progressivist reforms translate into consistent, high-quality classroom instruction.

4. Strengthened TEI–School Partnerships

Teacher education institutions (TEIs) must work more closely with schools to ensure that teacher preparation aligns with classroom realities. Stronger partnerships would bridge the gap between theory taught in colleges and the practical demands faced by teachers in schools. Pre-service teachers should undergo extended, supervised placements in diverse classroom settings where progressive pedagogy is being trialled. This would ensure that they graduate with both conceptual understanding and practical application skills. By integrating TEI expertise with in-school mentorship, teacher training can become more coherent and context-sensitive. Effective partnerships thus play a critical role in sustaining innovation in teacher practice.

Strengthening these partnerships also enhances accountability across the teacher education ecosystem. TEIs can provide ongoing professional support to graduates, while schools can provide feedback on classroom realities to shape training curricula. Joint research projects and action learning initiatives could further build evidence-based strategies for learner-centred pedagogy. Policy frameworks should encourage collaborative agreements between universities, colleges, and schools to ensure sustained engagement. This model not only enriches teacher preparation but also creates continuous professional learning networks. As a result, TEI–school partnerships can function as a vital backbone for progressive education in Zimbabwe.

5. Culturally Relevant Curriculum

For Deweyan ideals to resonate with Zimbabwean learners, curricula must reflect cultural relevance and local heritage. Embedding inquiry-based tasks in locally meaningful contexts allows students to connect learning with their lived experiences. For example, problem-solving activities could be based on community agriculture, heritage conservation, or traditional arts, which makes learning authentic and practical. Such contextualisation reduces cognitive barriers by linking abstract knowledge to familiar realities. Moreover, a culturally relevant curriculum promotes learner identity, pride, and motivation to engage in classroom activities. In this way, progressive pedagogy becomes a tool for empowerment rather than alienation.

Developing such a curriculum requires deliberate collaboration between policymakers, curriculum developers, and local communities. Teachers should be trained to design lessons that integrate local knowledge systems into formal learning. Additionally, textbooks and instructional materials should reflect Zimbabwean history, traditions, and contemporary issues rather than relying heavily on external examples. This approach ensures that pedagogy is inclusive and meaningful across urban and rural contexts. Beyond academic outcomes, culturally relevant curricula also strengthen social cohesion and civic values. Thus, grounding Deweyan ideals in Zimbabwe's cultural fabric enhances their sustainability and impact.

6. Policy Sequencing

Policy sequencing ensures that progressive reforms are introduced gradually and strategically. Instead of nationwide implementation, innovative practices such as project-based learning should be piloted in selected schools. These pilot programmes can provide valuable evidence on feasibility, effectiveness, and resource requirements. Lessons learned from small-scale trials can then inform more effective national scaling. This approach reduces resistance, manages risks, and allows continuous refinement of reform models. Sequenced

policy implementation also enables the government to allocate resources more sustainably over time.

Moreover, piloting fosters a culture of experimentation and adaptability within the education system. Schools that pioneer reforms can serve as centres of excellence and peer learning hubs for other institutions. Teachers in pilot schools may act as mentors, sharing best practices and challenges with their colleagues across districts. Policymakers, in turn, can use feedback loops to adjust reform designs before broader rollout. This iterative approach ensures that reforms remain flexible, context-sensitive, and evidence-driven. Sequencing reforms is essential for embedding progressive pedagogies in a manner that is both sustainable and scalable in Zimbabwe.

CONCLUSION

Dewey's progressivist vision remains highly relevant to contemporary African education, as it emphasises active, learner-centred approaches that foster critical thinking, creativity, and democratic participation. Across sub-Saharan Africa, policymakers and educators have sought to translate these ideals into practice through curriculum reforms, teacher training initiatives, and instructional innovations. However, the literature demonstrates that these aspirations often confront significant contextual challenges, including large class sizes, limited resources, linguistic diversity, and traditional pedagogical cultures. In Zimbabwe, for example, while national policies promote competency-based curricula and inclusive education, the realities of classroom implementation reveal persistent gaps between intended and actual teaching practices. These findings underscore that Deweyan principles are not inherently incompatible with African education, but their successful adoption requires careful adaptation to local realities and systemic support.

Evidence from both African and Zimbabwean studies indicates that hybrid pedagogical models provide a practical pathway for reconciling progressivist ideals with classroom realities. By combining explicit instruction in foundational skills with scaffolded inquiry-based tasks, hybrid approaches mitigate cognitive overload while sustaining opportunities for active learning. Complementary strategies, such as culturally relevant curricula, sequenced policy reforms, and learner-centred assessments, further enhance the effectiveness of these models. Sustained professional development, mentoring, and TEI-school partnerships play a pivotal role in equipping teachers to implement these approaches consistently and competently. Collectively, these strategies illustrate that translating progressive pedagogy into effective practice is not a matter of simple adoption but of systemic integration that addresses psychological, cultural, and institutional constraints.

Looking forward, there is a pressing need for longitudinal research to evaluate the efficacy of hybrid pedagogical models in diverse African contexts. Such research should examine not only learning outcomes but also the differential impacts of reforms across urban and rural schools, socioeconomic strata, and multilingual classrooms. Investigations into teacher experiences, professional growth, and institutional support systems are equally critical to understanding the sustainability of these reforms. By generating empirical evidence, policymakers and educators can refine strategies, scale effective practices, and ensure that Deweyan ideals translate into meaningful, equitable, and contextually relevant learning experiences for all students.

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