



# AWARENESS

*Newer Horizons in Human Excellence*







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## Table of Contents

1. Scope of the Journal	1
2. Types of Articles	5
3. Instructions for Authors	8
4. Benediction - <i>Prajñānam Brahma</i> - Awareness is Divine – Sri Madhusudan Sai	24
5. Editorial: Striving Toward Perfection – K. J. S. Anand, S. P. Setty	27
6. Theorizing a Humanizing Pedagogy of Love – S. C. Molina	30
7. Leading Causes of Life in Medicine: Pilot studies – T. F. Cutts, G. R. Gunderson	41
8. Approaches for unraveling Complex Human Genetic Diseases – N. B. Ramachandra, C. S. Srushti, K. R. Meghana	49
9. Vaginal Sacrocolpopexy in Vault Prolapse: A case series – Padmasri R., P. Holla, Keerthi A. V.	63
10. Definitions of Resilience in Childhood and Adolescence – A. M. Lee, Z. V. Carter, C. R. Rovnaghi, K. J. S. Anand	71



Essay

## Theorizing a Humanizing Pedagogy of Love

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**Abstract:** Historically, in many parts of the world, the roots of education were grounded in spirituality and wholeness. The enchanting pull of digital technologies and materialistic endeavors has resulted in higher levels of depression, anxiety, and risky behaviors amongst our young people. This review of the literature theorizes a pedagogy of love, which in essence, is a return to the roots of education grounded in the nurturing of wholeness in every child. The literature suggests that a pedagogy of love involves creating learning environments that centers the students, leverages their cultural, linguistic, and spiritual backgrounds and talents, prioritizes care, connection, and empathy that contributes to student sense of belonging, empowerment, and overall sense of well-being. In addition, a pedagogy of love stipulates a sense of criticality that seeks to promote equity and justice by removing systemic barriers and obstacles to student learning and thriving in schools and in society. This article proposes a humanizing pedagogy of love, grounded in integral and critically conscious education, to once again, nurture the wholeness in our youth as we work towards collective healing and well-being.

**Keywords:** pedagogy of love; spirituality, empathy; critical consciousness; mental health

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### 1. Introduction

The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (2021) documented an upward trend in persistent feelings of sadness and hopelessness amongst 42% of youth with 22% contemplating suicide [1] (p. 58). According to the World Health Organization (2021), 1 in 7 adolescents experience mental health conditions [2]. Most recently, the World Health Organization (2023), reported that approximately 280 million people in the world suffer from depression [3]. Project Hope cautions us that mental health issues often begin at the early stages of life with over half beginning before the age of 14. Young people living through conflict are especially vulnerable and prone to mental health conditions [4].

A substantial body of research links digital media use including social media to mental health issues in children and adolescents. This evidence led the U.S. Surgeon General, Dr. Vivek Murthy, to issue an advisory in June 2023 on the potential harm of social media use on “youth mental health” [5]. Twenge & Campbell (2019) found that the use of digital media such as smartphones, social media, gaming, or simply being online, for example, is linked to lower psychological well-being among adolescents in two countries, based on three large surveys (n = 221,096) [6]. Those using digital media less than an hour a day were far better off in terms of mental health than moderate users and especially heavy users who use digital media five or more hours a day [6].

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The likely impacts of digital media use on the mental health of children and adolescents call us to question our approach not only to parenting, but education as a whole.

In addition, researchers have found links “between materialism and mental health problems such as anxiety and depression, use of psychoactive substances such as alcohol and drugs, and egoistic attitudes and behaviors” [7]. Trzcińska et al. (2023) cite multiple studies that show a progressive decline in emotional well-being in our adolescents and children at younger and younger ages, which is cause for alarm.

This review of the literature theorizes a pedagogy of love, which in essence, is a return to the roots of education grounded in the nurturing of wholeness in every child. The literature suggests that a pedagogy of love involves creating a learning environment that centers the students, leverages their cultural, linguistic, and spiritual backgrounds and talents, prioritizes care, connection, and empathy, that contributes to a student’s sense of belonging, empowerment, and sense of well-being. In addition, a pedagogy of love stipulates a sense of criticality that seeks to promote equity and justice by removing systemic barriers and obstacles to student learning and thriving in schools and in society.

## 2. Pedagogy of Love

*Undoubtedly, it is only through the power of such love that teachers can embrace a revolutionary pedagogy and remain uncompromisingly committed to the restoration of our humanity [8] (Dardar, 2002, p. 148)*

A pedagogy of love infuses both integral and critically conscious education. Integral education attends to the whole child, not only at the intellectual level, but at the socio-emotional and relational levels. Conscious education takes into consideration the historical, political, social, economic, community, and individual contexts that influence how students experience the world around them. Oftentimes, these contexts shape the ways in which students are centered or marginalized in educational spaces. Becoming a conscious educator entails the ability to become aware of and work towards transforming one’s own prejudices and biases and becoming advocates for equity against systems of power that continue to oppress, disenfranchise, and divide.

### 2.1. Integral Education

There are many schools that have returned to nurturing the innate goodness in our children. Moving from a focus on academic excellence or knowledge production for material gain, holistic education focuses on six areas that have the whole child at the center whereby each naturally leads to academic excellence. These areas include: spiritual/moral development, social-emotional development, appreciation of arts and culture, physical fitness, values-based education, and care for the environment. For the remainder of this discussion, we will focus on three areas that have an increasing presence in the literature, namely, empathy, love, compassion, and spirituality that contribute to the holistic development of the child.

#### 2.1.1. Empathy

Brené Brown (2012), renowned researcher on empathy and author of “Daring Greatly: How the Courage to be Vulnerable Transforms the Way We Live, Love, Parent, and Lead” emphasizes that “*Empathy is a strange and powerful thing. There is no script. There is no right way or wrong way to do it. It’s simply listening, holding space, withholding judgment, emotionally connecting, and communicating that incredibly healing message of “you’re not alone”* [9] (p.81). The Dalai Lama extends this further and elucidates a broader perspective on empathy within the concept of compassion. One of the Dalai Lama’s global initiatives that builds on empathy and compassion is Social, Emotional and Ethical or SEE Learning®. Launched in 2019, SEE Learning has reached classrooms in over 40 countries so far, enriching those educational systems [10]. The Dalai Lama states, “*A compassionate attitude helps you communicate more easily with your fellow human beings. As a result, you make more genuine friends and the atmosphere around you is more positive, which gives you greater inner strength. This inner strength helps you spontaneously concern yourself with others, instead of thinking only about yourself*” [11]. In essence, these thought leaders offer interconnected viewpoints on empathy. Whereas Brown emphasizes the importance of listening and emotional support, the Dalai Lama emphasizes compassion as a comprehensive framework for empathy, selfless action, and engagement with others. Together, their insights shed light on the multifaceted nature of empathy and its potential to create a more empathetic and interconnected world.

Empathy is one of five competencies within the framework of Emotional Intelligence, coined by Michael Beldoch in 1964 in his article titled *Sensitivity to Expression of Emotional Meaning in Three Modes of Communication* [12] and popularized by Daniel Goleman in his book *Emotional Intelligence* in 1995 [13]. Whereas IQ or intelligence was historically given prominence in schools and society in the past, the notion of emotional intelligence has been elevated in more recent times, whereby research suggests that 67% of the success of top performance is not intelligence or expertise, but emotional competencies [14]. For leaders, this increases to 90% with only 10% of their success dependent on their intelligence. The five competencies of emotional intelligence collectively contribute to building and maintaining healthy relationships, making sound decisions, and effectively managing oneself and others in various personal and professional settings. Developing and honing these competencies can lead to greater emotional well-being, improved communication, and enhanced overall success and satisfaction in life. The competencies are defined as follows:

- *Self-awareness*: Self-awareness is the ability to recognize and understand one's own emotions, strengths, weaknesses, values, and beliefs. It involves being in tune with our own feelings, thoughts, and motivations, and having a clear understanding of how they impact our behavior and interactions with others.
- *Self-regulation*: Self-regulation refers to the ability to manage and control our emotions, impulses, and behaviors. It involves exercising restraint, managing stress effectively, and adapting to changing circumstances without becoming overwhelmed. Self-regulation allows us to think before acting and make thoughtful decisions rather than being driven solely by our emotions.
- *Motivation*: Motivation refers to the drive and enthusiasm to achieve personal and professional goals. It involves setting high standards for oneself, having a sense of purpose, and being resilient in the face of challenges. Motivated individuals are passionate, proactive, and strive for continuous improvement.
- *Social skills*: Social skills encompass the ability to build and maintain positive relationships with others. It includes effective communication, active listening, conflict resolution, collaboration, and the ability to work well in teams. Having strong social skills enables us to navigate social situations, influence others positively, and establish connections based on trust and mutual respect.
- *Empathy*: Empathy is the capacity to understand and share the emotions, perspectives, and experiences of others. It involves being able to put ourselves in someone else's shoes, listen attentively, and respond with genuine care and concern. Empathy fosters understanding, compassion, and supportive relationships, and it plays a crucial role in effective communication and conflict resolution [14].

Research shows that children thrive both academically and emotionally in classrooms that foster and nurture empathy. Daniel Goleman and Peter Senge outline three kinds of empathy that students need for success at work and in life. These include cognitive empathy, emotional empathy and empathic concern. They define each as follows: "(1) *Cognitive empathy* is understanding how people see the world and think about it; (2) *Emotional empathy* is being able to sense what a person feels; and (3) *Empathic concern* is our ability to tune in and stop to help" [15].

A research study conducted in 2021 in the field of nursing entitled, *The Relationship between Empathy and Altruistic Motivations in Nursing Studies: A Multi-method Study*, found that high empathy scores were positively associated with altruistic motivational factors [16]. Felix Warneken, a professor in developmental psychology who studies cooperation and altruism in children, demonstrated through his research that children are naturally altruistic, which means that they care for the welfare of others selflessly. In his study, even when a child is happily playing, they stop what they are doing to assist others, which is a mark of putting others' interest before their own self-interest [17]. Given this natural empathy and altruistic motivations in children, it begs the question: What is it in the environment that makes children move towards self-interest and how can we once again, bring forth from within them, what already exists? Now, let us take a closer look at the resurgence of literature in recent years on the role of love, compassion, and spirituality in promoting student overall well-being.

### 2.1.2. Love and Compassion

In her TED talk, Dr. Shefali Tsabary (2010), a research psychologist in the area of conscious parenting describes the effect of parenting relationships on children's neurobiology. She demonstrates the impact of love on the development of

a child's brain through brain imaging of three-year old children. She states that when a child grows up in a loving home, it contributes to a healthy development of the brain. However, when a child is raised in a home with extreme neglect and devoid of love, the brain does not fully develop and is much smaller in comparison. She found that these children often grow up to have addictions and relational challenges [18].

The HeartMath Institute has found that the heart's magnetic field not only permeates every cell within us, but also extends out from us in all directions and can be measured. In his work with Syrian Refugee children in Lebanon, Kam-almaz from HeartMath Institute provided a holistic assessment and compassionate care to the children who were suffering from urinary control as a result of trauma, and through connecting them with their heart center, he found that 85% stopped having urinary incontinence [19]. In another experiment conducted by the institute with a boy and his dog, they show rhythmic patterns of the heart fluctuating when there is separation and then coming together in synchronicity when there is love and connection [20].

These studies show that developing relationships with students built on love and connection becomes significantly more important for teachers in the classroom, particularly when there is lack of safety and security in the students' homes. In addition, it may also be important to support students in self-regulation practices to help them connect with their heart center to promote inner calm in times of conflict or turmoil. This does entail, however, the teachers' commitment to their own inner, self-regulation, and mindfulness practices in order to model this for their students.

Next, we turn to a discussion on spirituality and its relationship to lower rates of depression, substance use and abuse, or engagement with risky behaviors for youth particularly in the second decade of their lives.

### 2.1.3. Spirituality

With the separation of church and state, the use of spirituality or religion has been met with a sense of wariness. As such, it is important to first define what is meant by spirituality within the context of this article. In his book *The Secret Spiritual World of Children*, Tobin Hart (2003) defines religion as a systematized approach to spiritual growth formed around doctrines and standards of behavior, generally inspired by spiritual insight... and developed to spread through teachings, rituals, values, and rules of conduct [21] (*ibid.*, p. 8). Spiritual, he says,

*...naturally pertains to spirit, that unquantifiable force, the mystery that animates all things and of which all things are composed. There is no separating us from it. Any aspect of this life contains an essence of the whole, just as any of our cells contain the code for our whole form; spiritual moments are direct, personal, and often have the effect if only for a moment, of waking us up and expanding our understanding of who we are and what is our place in the universe [21] (*ibid.*, pp. 7-8).*

Maria Montessori, a scientist, physician, and educator, believed that it is important to come together to respect and support the inner workings of children as they interact and engage with the wonders of the world and their inner lives. She believed that all children have an inner guide of their own, and that the education capable of saving humanity involves the spiritual unfoldment and enhancement of the values inherent in each child. The role of teachers is to walk together with the children on this path of life, she says, for all things are part of the universe and are connected with each other to form one whole unity.

Dr. Lisa Miller, author of *The Spiritual Child: The New Science on Parenting for Health and Lifelong Thriving* [22] and *The Awakened Brain: The New Science of Spirituality and our Quest for an Inspired Life* [23], and leading scientist conducting research connecting brain science, spirituality and psychology of the mind, found that particularly in the first two decades of our lives, our inborn natural spirituality is foundational to our mental health and well-being. Miller (2016) defines spirituality as some form of transcendent relationship – a belief in a higher power, be it God, be it love, be it the universe, which can be expressed through prayer or a feeling of oneness with the universe [22] (p. 25). In the research conducted with her team of scientists, she found that children with a strong spiritual connection tended to fair well with positive emotions and optimism, and those without a strong spiritual connection, particularly in the second decade of their lives, experienced “high rates of depression, substance use and abuse, and conduct problems involving risk-taking” [23]. She further elaborates,

*I've discovered that the awakened brain is both inherent to our physiology and invaluable to our health and functioning. The awakened brain includes a set of innate perceptual capacities that exist in every person through which we experience love and connection, unity, and a sense of guidance from the dialogue with life. And when we engage these perceptual capacities - when we make full use of how we're built - our brains become structurally healthier and better connected, and we access unsurpassed psychological benefits: less depression, anxiety, and substance abuse; and more positive psychological traits such as grit, resilience, optimism, tenacity, and creativity" [23] (Miller, 2021, p. 9).*

Miller's study with associates, on the *Neuroanatomical Correlates of Religiosity and Spirituality: A Study in Adults at High and Low Familial Risk for Depression*, found that for those who consider religion or spirituality as personally important to them, areas of their brains thickened and this thickening was related to higher emotional satisfaction and mental health. Therefore, when we engage our spirituality or find that spirituality or religion are important to us, our brain cortex becomes healthier and more resistant to depressive states [24] (p.133).

This body of research suggests that a teacher's awareness of the students' religions, spirituality, and/or indigenous wisdom traditions contributes to a better understanding and relational experiences with students where their beliefs and values are honored, rather than sidelined. As research begins to uncover the importance of attending to students' inner lives in order to nurture their overall well-being, teachers must also be conscious of the ways in which systemic barriers can negatively impact a students' sense of well-being.

The next section elaborates on the construct of conscious education, specifically critically conscious education and how this type of critical consciousness is required for teachers to enact change in their students' lived experiences and circumstances.

## 2.2 Conscious Education

Conscious educators take into consideration the historical, political, social, economic, community, and individual contexts that influence the experiences and achievements of students in their classroom. Oftentimes, these contexts shape the ways in which students are centered or marginalized in educational spaces. Critical consciousness entails the ability to become aware of and work towards transforming one's own prejudices and biases and then become advocates for equity against systems of power that continue to oppress, disenfranchise, and divide.

Darling-Hammond suggests that *"Developing the ability to see beyond one's perspective, to put oneself in the shoes of the learner, and to understand the meaning of that experience in terms of learning, is perhaps the most important role of universities in the preparation of teachers"* [25] (p. 170). Honoring students' funds of knowledge, their experiences, their backgrounds, and the literacies they bring into the classroom from an asset-based lens [26-31] and leveraging the individual and community wealth that students bring into educational spaces, will enhance learning opportunities for them. Yosso describes this as community cultural wealth including linguistic capital, cultural capital, familial capital, social capital, amongst others [32].

For conscious educators, Ramasubramanian et al. propose a framework that encourages teachers to: (1) Realize that dominant ideologies are embedded in our educational systems, (2) Recognize the long-term effects of systemic trauma on learners from aggrieved communities, (3) Respond to trauma by emphasizing safety, trust, collaboration, peer network, agency, and voice within learning environments, (4) Resist retraumatization within learning environments, (5) Replace egalitarianism with equity-mindedness and (6) Reframe deficit ideology with an asset-based lens to learners [33].

Dominant ideologies can include languages adopted as a medium of instruction, social class that is privileged in the curriculum, and cultural mindsets that influence how boundaries and limits are put on children based on their gender, socio-economic status, race, etc. It is important for conscious educators to be aware of the historical, generational, and individual traumas that students may bring to the classroom and create a warm and loving, learning environment for

them. Being sensitive to the possible traumas they bring and resisting retraumatizing students through particular topics or activities would be important. Truly understanding that opportunities are not equal for all people and working towards equity is one of the ways in which conscious educators can begin to raise awareness and transform systems of oppression.

*From time to time, deeply committed teachers can experience moments of despair as they struggle to challenge and oppose traditional methods, relationships, and structures within schools that oppress students, parents, and teachers alike. During these moments, it is helpful for teachers to stop and consciously reconnect with the historical nature of their work and the larger social struggle for economic democracy and social justice around the world [8] (Dardar, 2002, p. 64)*

In other words, critically conscious education is a form of problem-posing education, where teachers recognize manifold ways in which inequities present themselves within political, economic, social, and cultural systems that then influence educational systems. The next two sections provide examples on the role of dominant language ideologies and gender disparities particularly in educational spaces that perpetuate social inequality in order to illustrate what problem-posing education can look like.

### 2.2.1. Problem-Posing Example: Language

In many schools where dominant languages are used as a medium of instruction, student home languages, literacies, and cultural ways of being are often seen as “deficiencies to be overcome in learning” [31]. One of the outcomes of colonialism was the promotion and adoption of a national language as a unification strategy. The promotion of a national language was given priority over heritage languages, while at the same time, languages such as English were believed to be a *lingua franca* that would improve opportunities for economic mobility. As English and other dominant languages gained political and social capital, heritage languages suffered through devaluation, endangerment, and ultimately “linguicide” or linguistic genocide as Skutnab-Kangas articulated - this, she sees as a “human rights issue” [34].

*The colonizers spend centuries trying to impose their language. The colonized people were told either verbally or through message systems inherent in the colonial structure that they did not possess effective cultural instruments with which to express themselves. This language profile imposed by the colonizers eventually convinced the people that their language was in fact a corrupt and inferior system unworthy of true educational status [8] (Freire & Machado, cited in Dardar, 2002, p. 118)*

Milligan et al. argue that when a dominant language is used as a medium of instruction and children are not proficient in this language, this gap in language proficiency could lead to “limited access to schooling, high repetition, failure, and dropout rates; poor quality of education and low learner self-esteem” [35] (p. 118). Kosonen [36] and Benson [37] both found that the use of dominant languages as the medium of instruction resulted in significant gaps in educational access and attainment between the rich and poor, elite and marginalized, and males and females [36-37]. “Three groups most affected by injustices in language policy and planning in education are women and girls, the poor, and groups with languages not represented in formal structures” [38].

Recent research [39] confirms that the home language or heritage language facilitates literacy in the second language [40-42]. In addition, when a student’s home languages and cultures are valued in educational spaces, students develop a higher sense of self-esteem, higher self-confidence, and higher aspirations in schooling and in life [37].

Despite such findings and “the importance of heritage language or mother-tongue instruction having been recognized and re-emphasized (UNESCO, 1953, 2017), the force of globalization and English as the linguistic capital necessary to participate in systems of economic, political, and social power, has resulted in the loss and death of many heritage languages” [39]. As such, teachers should leverage the various forms of capital [29] that students bring into the classroom through asset-based pedagogies.

### 2.2.2. Problem-Posing Example: Gender

In many parts of the world, a girl child may not have access to education or may have been born in paternalistic cultures where gender disparities are entrenched. Many nonprofit organizations have garnered this sense of criticality in their work by providing opportunities for girls to receive an education to transform their lives.

*Goats are assets and girls are liabilities*

Safeena Husain (2013) is the founder and board member at Educate Girls, an organization that aims to bridge the gender gap for education in India and promotes a change in the narrative of goats as assets and girls as liabilities. She shares the following statistics for girls out of school in India:

*[A girl out of school] is 70% more likely to become a child bride, which means that she would be married before the legal age. There is a real 15% chance that she will be married before the age of 11...If she doesn't go to school, she will in a lifetime, earn less than her counterparts...She's more likely to be trafficked, be in domestic violence situations, and there is only a 15% chance that she will ever learn how to read. The odds against [her] are immense. Only 1 in a 100 girls in rural India even makes it to class 12...For each year she stays in school, her family income goes up by 10-15%...Her marriage will be delayed...She would be 40% more likely to immunize her children... Being an educated mother, she is 500 times more likely to educate her own children. It is a cycle we need to break in our own lifetime [43].*

Much of this work entails going into communities and transforming limiting beliefs for girls. It is truly through transforming one mind at a time that cultures, communities, and societies can gradually shift, but this requires building trusting relationships through family, school, and community partnerships.

In this way, conscious educators “develop their power to perceive critically the way they exist in the world with which and in which they find themselves” and “come to see the world not as a static reality, but as a reality in process, in transformation” [44]. As such, teachers must engage in continual reflection and introspection as they transform their own beliefs and reconstruct knowledge as they work towards justice and equity in their classrooms [45] and in the communities in which they serve where visible and invisible hierarchical systems such as caste systems might exist. Equipped with this knowledge, teachers can encourage students to think about ways in which they can transform their own state or status, and their own limiting beliefs about themselves. Styslinger et al. argue that critically conscious educators “teach by raising student consciousness and then trusting that students ‘will feel increasingly challenged and obliged to respond’ to the inequities and injustices they come to recognize and realize” [46] and equips them with “a sense of agency and capacity to interrupt and change oppressive patterns in themselves and in the world which surrounds them” [46] (p. 9). Rather than a banking model of education [44], where teachers transmit knowledge into the minds of the students, this approach prepares students to take the knowledge and participate in it creatively and responsibly for their own transformation [46].

As described above, conscious education centers the co-creation of knowledge between teachers, students, and their families and communities within historical, political, economic, and social systems in which they operate, and works towards developing thoughtful and compassionate students who will continue to strive to work towards the transformation of themselves and their communities.

## 3. Concluding Thoughts and Future Directions

*“It is impossible to teach without the courage to love, without the courage to try a thousand times before giving-in. In short, it is impossible to teach without a...capacity to love” - [47](Freire, 1998, p. 3)*

A humanizing pedagogy of love attends to both the internal lives of the students and the external circumstances that influence the hidden curriculum – the how and what is taught and to whom. Relationships are at the core of happiness

as reiterated by Harvard professor, Arthur Brooks and television icon, Oprah Winfrey (2023), who share the science of happiness in their new book entitled, *Build the Life You Want: The Art and Science of Getting Happier*, building upon a longitudinal study on adult development by Harvard researchers. The four foundational pillars of happiness, they write, include family, friends, faith, and work as service [48]. As elucidated in this article, empathy, love, and compassion are at the heart of authentic relationships; one's faith, be it a particular religion, or spiritual, transcendent connection is integral to one's sense of well-being; and lastly, finding meaning and purpose in our life and work in the spirit of service is what can heal the hearts of our children and youth today for a better tomorrow.

*A humanizing education is the path through which men & women can become conscious about their presence in the world. The way they act and think when they develop all of their capacities, taking into consideration their needs, but also the needs and aspirations of others [49] (Freire & Betto, 1985, pp. 14-15 cited in Dardar, 2011, p. 498).*

The work of a teacher is indeed a work of service. To do this effectively, a teacher has to attend to their own transformation first through reflection of their own biases and tendencies, their privileges or lack thereof, and to understand the ways in which these manifest in their relationships, pedagogies, and practices. In addition, understanding their students, their backgrounds, their histories, and the interplay of cultural, social, and political influences within the educational contexts in which they situate themselves, can contribute to tailored interventions that can support teachers in unlocking each of their students' unique potential.

#### Why is this important?

*Freire exposed how even well-meaning teachers, through their lack of critical moral leadership, actually participate in disabling the heart, minds, and bodies of their students – an act that disconnects these students from the personal and social motivation required to transform their world and themselves [49] (Dardar, 2011 p. 498).*

Future studies can report on short-term and longitudinal qualitative and quantitative research that delves deeper into the impact of each of the components of integral and critically conscious education on student overall well-being, empowerment, and community advocacy for equity and justice to inform the evolving theorization of a humanizing pedagogy of love.

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