

Soul-Centered Education as a Transformative Framework for Human Development, Social Cohesion, and Ethical Citizenship

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Abstract: Contemporary societies face a profound educational paradox. Never before have human beings had such broad access to information, technological resources, and formal learning opportunities; however, many educational systems continue to struggle with emotional disconnection, social fragmentation, ethical fragility, institutional distrust, and a growing crisis of meaning. In this context, education cannot be reduced to the transmission of knowledge, the acquisition of technical skills, or the preparation of individuals for the labor market. Education must recover its deeper human mission: to form persons capable of living with dignity, acting with responsibility, relating with care, thinking critically, creating meaning, and contributing to the common good. This article proposes the concept of soul-centered education as a humanistic, ethical, and sociological framework for educational transformation. The term soul is not used in a confessional or religious sense, but as a symbolic and anthropological category that integrates coherence, dignity, care, truth, and purpose. From this perspective, education with soul seeks to reconnect knowledge with life, learning with meaning, and individual development with social responsibility. The article develops a theoretical-propositional model structured around five dimensions: the personal dimension, focused on self-knowledge and emotional maturity; the relational dimension, centered on empathy, respect, and care; the institutional dimension, aimed at building educational cultures of dignity and trust; the civic dimension, oriented toward ethical citizenship and social cohesion; and the transformative dimension, which understands education as a force capable of renewing communities and societies. The paper also highlights the role of art, experiential learning, and reflective pedagogy as vehicles for awakening human sensitivity and developing integral competencies. Its main contribution is to offer a conceptual framework that may guide educators, institutions, policymakers, and social leaders in the construction of more humane, inclusive, and purpose-driven educational systems. Soul-centered education is presented not as an alternative to academic excellence, but as its deepest foundation: excellence without humanity produces efficiency without meaning; education with soul seeks to unite knowledge, ethics, emotion, creativity, and action in the service of human flourishing and social transformation.

Keywords: Soul-centered education; humanistic education; sociology of education; ethical citizenship; social cohesion; care; purpose; art-based learning; human development.

INTRODUCTION

Education is one of the most powerful instruments for transforming the world, but only when it transforms the human being first. A society cannot be renewed exclusively through laws, technologies, economic reforms, or institutional strategies if the people who inhabit that society remain emotionally disconnected, ethically fragile, spiritually empty, or indifferent to the suffering of others. Every social crisis is also, in some way, an educational crisis. Every crisis of coexistence, leadership, inequality, violence, exclusion, loneliness, and meaning reveals a deeper question: what kind of human beings are our educational systems forming?

For decades, educational discourse has been dominated by the language of performance, employability, innovation, competitiveness, measurable outcomes, and digital transformation. These dimensions are important, but they are insufficient. Biesta (2010, 2015) has warned against reducing education to measurement, while Nussbaum (2010) has defended the humanities as essential for democratic life. A technically skilled person without ethical orientation may become

efficient but not necessarily responsible. A brilliant mind without empathy may produce knowledge without wisdom. A society full of information but lacking purpose may become faster, but not necessarily more humane.

This article argues that education must recover its soul. By soul, this paper does not refer to a strictly religious notion, but to the deepest human dimension where meaning, dignity, coherence, care, truth, and purpose converge. Soul-centered education is therefore an educational approach that seeks to integrate knowledge and conscience, intelligence and sensitivity, autonomy and responsibility, personal growth and social commitment.

The proposal is especially relevant in a historical moment marked by social fragmentation, mental health challenges, technological acceleration, institutional distrust, and a growing demand for more humane forms of leadership. Education cannot remain neutral in the face of these challenges. If education does not consciously cultivate humanity, it may unintentionally

reproduce indifference. If it does not cultivate ethical judgment, it may produce technically competent individuals who lack moral direction. If it does not cultivate emotional awareness, it may leave learners unprepared for the complexity of life.

The central thesis of this article is that soul-centered education can become a transformative framework for human development, social cohesion, and ethical citizenship. Its purpose is not merely to add emotional content to existing curricula, but to rethink the meaning of education itself. Education with soul asks not only what students know, but who they become; not only what they can do, but what they choose to serve; not only how they succeed, but how they contribute to the dignity of others.

METHODOLOGICAL APPROACH

This article is designed as a conceptual and narrative review. It does not present empirical data from a field study, but develops a theoretical-propositional framework based on humanistic education, sociology of education, ethics of care, critical pedagogy, experiential learning, transformative learning, art-based learning, and meaning-centered approaches to human development.

The purpose of this methodological approach is threefold. First, it seeks to identify the limitations of purely instrumental models of education. Second, it proposes the concept of soul-centered education as an integrative framework for personal, institutional, and social transformation. Third, it outlines practical implications for educators, educational institutions, and policymakers interested in promoting more humane and purpose-driven educational cultures.

This conceptual methodology is appropriate for emerging frameworks that require theoretical clarification before empirical operationalization. The article therefore contributes to the construction of an interpretive model that can later be tested, adapted, and applied in educational contexts through qualitative, quantitative, or mixed-method research.

The review draws from several complementary bodies of literature: progressive education (Dewey, 1916, 1938), critical pedagogy (Freire, 1970, 1998; hooks, 1994), ethics of care (Gilligan, 1982; Noddings, 2005, 2013), democratic education and capabilities theory (Nussbaum, 2000, 2010; Sen, 1999), transformative learning (Mezirow, 1991),

social-emotional learning (CASEL, 2020; Elias *et al.*, 1997), humanistic psychology (Maslow, 1968; Rogers, 1969), meaning-centered approaches (Frankl, 2006), art education (Eisner, 2002), and UNESCO's educational futures agenda (Delors, 1996; UNESCO, 2015, 2021).

CONCEPTUAL FOUNDATIONS: WHAT IS SOUL-CENTERED EDUCATION?

Soul-centered education may be defined as an integral educational framework that places the full human being at the center of the learning process. It understands the learner not only as a cognitive subject, but also as an emotional, ethical, relational, creative, social, and purposeful being.

The word soul functions here as a symbolic category that synthesizes five essential educational principles: coherence, dignity, care, truth, and purpose.

Coherence refers to the alignment between what one thinks, says, feels, and does. Education with soul seeks to form people capable of living with integrity, avoiding the fracture between knowledge and behavior. In this sense, education cannot be limited to cognitive achievement; it must also cultivate moral consistency and personal authenticity.

Dignity refers to the recognition that every human being has intrinsic value beyond productivity, performance, origin, ability, or social status. A soul-centered educational system never treats learners as numbers, resources, or future workers only, but as persons. This principle connects directly with human rights, inclusive education, recognition theory, and democratic citizenship (Honneth, 1995; Nussbaum, 2000).

Care refers to the ethical commitment to oneself, others, communities, institutions, and the planet. Care is not weakness; it is one of the highest forms of social intelligence. The ethics of care, developed by authors such as Noddings (2005, 2013) and Gilligan (1982), offers a powerful foundation for educational models that understand relationships as central to learning.

Truth refers to the courage to seek, speak, and live in truth. This includes critical thinking, intellectual honesty, self-awareness, and the capacity to resist manipulation, superficiality, and falsehood. In a context marked by misinformation and social polarization, truth becomes an essential educational value.

Purpose refers to the orientation of learning toward meaning, contribution, and human flourishing. Purpose transforms education from a process of accumulation into a path of vocation and service. In this sense, soul-centered education is aligned with meaning-centered approaches to human development, particularly those inspired by Frankl's work on the search for meaning.

These five principles provide the foundation for an educational model that goes beyond instruction. Instruction transmits information; education with soul awakens consciousness. Instruction prepares for tasks; education with soul prepares for life. Instruction may develop abilities; education with soul develops humanity.

THE SOCIOLOGICAL NEED FOR EDUCATION WITH SOUL

The relevance of soul-centered education becomes clearer when viewed through a sociological lens. Education is never merely individual. It is one of the main mechanisms through which societies reproduce values, hierarchies, expectations, identities, and possibilities. Schools and universities do not only teach subjects; they shape ways of seeing the world, relating to others, interpreting success, understanding authority, and imagining the future.

When education becomes excessively instrumental, society risks producing individuals who are competent but disconnected; informed but not wise; ambitious but not compassionate; productive but not fulfilled. This has consequences beyond the classroom. It affects workplaces, families, public institutions, civic life, democratic culture, and social trust.

A society that educates without soul may normalize competition without solidarity, achievement without meaning, technology without ethics, and leadership without service. Conversely, a society that educates with soul can cultivate citizens capable of dialogue, empathy, critical responsibility, and constructive action.

From this perspective, soul-centered education is not a decorative proposal. It is a sociological necessity. It responds to several contemporary challenges: the crisis of meaning; the crisis of coexistence; the crisis of care; the crisis of ethical leadership; and the crisis of social cohesion.

The crisis of meaning is visible in many young people and adults who achieve academic or professional success but struggle to connect it with

a deeper life project. The crisis of coexistence is reflected in polarization, intolerance, bullying, exclusion, violence, and the deterioration of public dialogue. The crisis of care is evident in educational, professional, and social environments where people feel unseen, pressured, isolated, or emotionally exhausted. The crisis of ethical leadership is manifested in institutions that may be efficient but lack humanity, transparency, humility, and moral courage. The crisis of social cohesion is intensified by inequality, cultural fragmentation, technological disruption, and the weakening of shared values.

Education with soul does not claim to solve all these problems alone, but it offers a foundational response: to educate people who can become agents of humanization.

THE FIVE DIMENSIONS OF SOUL-CENTERED EDUCATION

The proposed framework is structured around five interconnected dimensions: personal, relational, institutional, civic, and transformative. These dimensions are not isolated components; they operate as a system. A learner's inner maturity influences their relational capacity; relational cultures shape institutional climate; institutional climate affects civic formation; and civic formation becomes meaningful when it is translated into transformative action.

The Personal Dimension: Self-Knowledge and Inner Maturity

The first dimension of education with soul is personal transformation. A person who does not know themselves may accumulate knowledge but remain unable to manage their emotions, recognize their limits, understand their wounds, or orient their life toward meaningful goals.

Self-knowledge is not a secondary educational luxury. It is a condition for responsible freedom. Learners need spaces to ask essential questions: Who am I? What moves me? What do I fear? What values guide me? What kind of person do I want to become? What pain have I experienced, and how can I transform it into learning rather than resentment?

Education with soul recognizes that personal development is not separate from academic development. Emotional maturity, resilience, self-awareness, and purpose are not external to learning; they shape the way a person learns, decides, relates, and contributes.

This dimension connects with humanistic psychology, especially the contributions of Rogers (1969) and Maslow (1968), who emphasized authenticity, self-actualization, and the development of the whole person. It also resonates with contemporary approaches to social-emotional learning, which recognize that emotional regulation, empathy, responsible decision-making, and self-awareness are central to educational success and human wellbeing (CASEL, 2020; Elias *et al.*, 1997).

The Relational Dimension: Empathy, Respect, and Care

No human being is educated in isolation. Learning is relational. The classroom is not only a place where content is delivered; it is a human ecosystem where identities are recognized, voices are heard or silenced, and dignity is either protected or wounded.

Soul-centered education places care at the heart of pedagogy. This does not mean lowering standards or avoiding effort. It means creating environments where effort is accompanied by trust, correction by respect, and excellence by humanity.

The relational dimension includes empathy, active listening, conflict transformation, compassion, cooperation, and the ability to recognize the other not as a competitor, threat, or instrument, but as a person. In this sense, education with soul contributes directly to the formation of more cohesive and peaceful societies.

A relational educational model also changes the role of the educator. The teacher is not merely a transmitter of information, but a witness, facilitator, mentor, and ethical presence. The educator's way of being becomes part of the curriculum. Students learn not only from what teachers say, but from how they listen, correct, accompany, and embody the values they teach. Palmer (1998) captures this idea by emphasizing the inner life of the teacher as central to the act of teaching.

The Institutional Dimension: Educational Cultures of Dignity

Educational transformation cannot depend only on individual teachers. Institutions themselves must have soul. A school, university, or educational organization has soul when its culture is coherent with its declared values; when it protects dignity; when it cares for students and educators; when it promotes justice, inclusion, participation, and trust.

Many institutions speak about values but operate through fear, excessive bureaucracy, pressure, or indifference. Soul-centered education requires institutional coherence. The hidden curriculum -- the implicit messages transmitted through daily practices -- must align with the explicit curriculum.

An institution with soul does not merely ask students to be respectful; it respects them. It does not merely teach ethics; it behaves ethically. It does not merely promote wellbeing; it organizes itself in ways that do not destroy the wellbeing of its members.

This dimension is particularly relevant for educational leadership. Leaders of educational institutions must understand that culture is not built through posters, mission statements, or strategic plans alone. Culture is built through daily decisions, rituals, conversations, recognition systems, conflict management, and the way power is exercised. Educational leadership with soul means leading with coherence, dignity, care, truth, and purpose.

The Civic Dimension: Ethical Citizenship and Social Responsibility

Education with soul is not individualistic. It does not seek only personal fulfillment, but also social contribution. The educated person is not only someone who knows more, but someone who takes greater responsibility for the world.

This civic dimension includes democratic values, human rights, intercultural dialogue, environmental responsibility, social justice, and the capacity to participate constructively in public life. It also includes the courage to question injustice and the humility to build bridges.

A soul-centered education forms citizens who understand that freedom without responsibility becomes selfishness, and responsibility without dignity becomes submission. Ethical citizenship requires both: autonomous individuals and a deep commitment to the common good.

This dimension connects with Nussbaum's defense of the humanities as essential for democracy, Freire's understanding of education as a practice of freedom, and Dewey's conception of democracy as a way of associated living. Education with soul therefore does not separate personal development from democratic life. It understands that the quality of a society depends, in part, on the quality of the human beings it educates.

The Transformative Dimension: From Learning to Action

The final dimension is action. Education with soul cannot remain in beautiful discourse. It must produce visible transformation in behavior, relationships, institutions, and communities.

Learning becomes transformative when it leads to action aligned with purpose. Students should not only analyze social problems; they should participate in projects that help address them. They should not only study empathy; they should practice it. They should not only reflect on dignity; they should defend it.

This dimension connects education with social innovation, service learning, community projects, artistic creation, leadership development, and institutional transformation. The aim is to move from knowledge to commitment, from reflection to responsibility, and from personal growth to collective impact.

Transformative learning theory, particularly the work of Mezirow (1991), helps to support this dimension. Learning is not merely the acquisition of new information; it can involve a deep transformation of assumptions, perspectives, identities, and ways of acting in the world. Soul-centered education extends this idea by emphasizing that transformation must be ethical, relational, and socially responsible.

THE ROLE OF ART IN EDUCATION WITH SOUL

Art is one of the most powerful vehicles for soul-centered education because it reaches dimensions of the human being that purely rational discourse often cannot access. Art awakens sensitivity, opens symbolic understanding, stimulates imagination, allows emotional expression, and creates spaces for shared meaning.

Through music, theatre, painting, literature, dance, cinema, and other artistic languages, learners can explore identity, pain, beauty, conflict, memory, hope, and transformation. Art humanizes because it allows people to see, feel, and understand realities beyond their immediate experience.

In educational terms, art can contribute to developing empathy, strengthening emotional literacy, cultivating creativity, promoting intercultural understanding, facilitating reflection on ethical dilemmas, transforming personal experiences into shared learning, and connecting knowledge with beauty and meaning.

A soul-centered pedagogy does not use art merely as entertainment or decoration. It uses art as a path to consciousness. Art becomes a mirror, a bridge, and a laboratory of humanity.

This artistic dimension is especially relevant in a world dominated by speed, screens, algorithms, and fragmented attention. Art invites slowness, contemplation, interpretation, dialogue, and emotional depth. It helps learners to experience complexity rather than merely define it. It allows the classroom to become a space where knowledge is not only explained, but also felt, embodied, questioned, and transformed.

The role of art is also connected with Vygotsky's understanding of symbolic mediation and with contemporary views of learning as situated, embodied, and socially constructed (Vygotsky, 1978; Wenger, 1998). In this sense, art-based education can become a privileged path for integrating cognition, emotion, imagination, and social meaning.

THE 4A PATHWAY: LEARNING, ATTITUDE, SOUL, AND ACTION

A practical expression of soul-centered education may be structured through four interconnected movements: Learning, Attitude, Soul, and Action.

Learning refers to the acquisition of knowledge, skills, awareness, and understanding. It must be experiential, reflective, and connected to life. Learning with soul is not passive reception; it is active construction of meaning.

Attitude refers to the inner disposition with which the learner faces reality. A constructive attitude does not deny difficulty; it chooses responsibility, openness, resilience, and growth. Attitude transforms the learner's relationship with failure, uncertainty, conflict, and change.

Soul refers to the integration of coherence, dignity, care, truth, and purpose. It is the ethical and human center of the educational process. Without soul, learning may become mechanical; with soul, learning becomes transformative.

Action refers to the translation of learning into behavior, projects, decisions, and social contribution. Action is the place where education proves its truth. A value that is not practiced remains incomplete; knowledge that does not serve life remains insufficient.

This pathway prevents education from remaining theoretical. It proposes a movement from knowing

to being, from being to relating, and from relating to transforming. In this sense, soul-centered education becomes both a pedagogy and a philosophy of social change.

IMPLICATIONS FOR EDUCATORS AND INSTITUTIONS

Implementing soul-centered education requires educators and institutions to rethink several dimensions of their practice.

First, teacher training should include not only pedagogical techniques, but also emotional intelligence, ethical leadership, conflict transformation, care-based communication, and reflective practice. The educator must be prepared not only to teach content, but to accompany human processes.

Second, curricula should integrate humanistic and civic questions across disciplines. Mathematics, science, technology, business, law, arts, and social sciences can all be taught with attention to ethical consequences and human meaning. Every discipline can ask: What kind of world does this knowledge help us build?

Third, assessment should not be limited to cognitive performance. While academic rigor must remain essential, institutions should also value collaboration, creativity, responsibility, communication, ethical reasoning, and social impact.

Fourth, leadership in educational institutions should model the values it seeks to transmit. Leaders who speak of dignity but manage through fear contradict the soul of education. Leaders who speak of innovation but ignore human suffering weaken the moral credibility of their institutions.

Fifth, educational systems should strengthen the connection between schools, families, communities, organizations, and society. Education with soul cannot be confined to classrooms. It must become a shared cultural project.

Finally, public policy should recognize that educational quality cannot be measured only through standardized performance indicators. Academic results matter, but they do not exhaust the meaning of education. A high-performing system that produces anxiety, exclusion, ethical indifference, or lack of purpose cannot be considered fully successful.

DISCUSSION

The proposal of soul-centered education may raise several questions. Some may argue that the concept of soul is too subjective or difficult to measure. This objection is important. However, many essential educational realities -- dignity, trust, meaning, empathy, ethical judgment, belonging -- are also complex and cannot be reduced to simple metrics. The difficulty of measurement should not lead to the abandonment of what is humanly essential.

Others may fear that soul-centered education could become moralistic. This risk exists if the model is imposed dogmatically. However, the approach proposed here is not based on indoctrination, but on reflective human development. It does not prescribe a single worldview; it invites learners to build coherence, respect dignity, practice care, seek truth, and discover purpose.

A third concern may be that educational systems are already overloaded. Yet soul-centered education should not be understood as an additional subject, but as an integrating framework. It can inform teaching methods, institutional culture, leadership practices, student support systems, civic projects, and the hidden curriculum.

Another relevant limitation is the need for empirical validation. As a conceptual article, this paper offers a theoretical framework but does not provide direct empirical evidence regarding the effects of soul-centered education. Future research should operationalize its dimensions and examine its impact on student wellbeing, ethical reasoning, sense of purpose, civic engagement, institutional climate, teacher motivation, and social-emotional development.

The deepest contribution of this model is its capacity to reconnect education with the human question. What is the purpose of educating if not to help human beings live more consciously, responsibly, and meaningfully? What is the purpose of knowledge if it does not contribute to dignity, justice, care, and human flourishing?

FUTURE RESEARCH DIRECTIONS

Future research on soul-centered education may develop in several directions.

First, qualitative studies could explore how students, teachers, families, and educational leaders understand the meaning of coherence, dignity, care, truth, and purpose in educational settings.

Second, quantitative research could design and validate instruments to measure the presence of soul-centered educational cultures in schools and universities. Possible dimensions may include perceived dignity, relational care, institutional coherence, sense of purpose, ethical climate, and transformative learning experiences.

Third, mixed-method studies could examine the effects of soul-centered pedagogical interventions on wellbeing, motivation, engagement, empathy, civic responsibility, and academic performance.

Fourth, comparative studies could analyze how soul-centered education may be adapted across cultural contexts, educational levels, and institutional models.

Fifth, action research projects could involve teachers and students in designing, implementing, and evaluating educational practices based on the five principles of coherence, dignity, care, truth, and purpose.

Finally, future research should examine the connection between soul-centered education and broader social transformation. If education with soul seeks to form people who contribute to the common good, its evaluation must consider not only individual outcomes, but also relational, institutional, and civic impact.

CONCLUSION

The world does not only need more educated people. It needs better educated human beings. It needs people capable of using knowledge with wisdom, power with responsibility, technology with ethics, freedom with care, and success with purpose.

Soul-centered education offers a framework for responding to this need. It proposes that education should not be reduced to performance, employability, or information transfer. It should become a transformative process that integrates the personal, relational, institutional, civic, and social dimensions of human life.

To educate with soul is to educate for coherence, dignity, care, truth, and purpose. It is to form people who do not merely adapt to the world as it is, but who feel called to improve it. It is to understand that every classroom can be a seed of social transformation, every teacher a guardian of humanity, and every learner a possible builder of a more ethical, compassionate, and meaningful world.

Education with soul is not a romantic dream. It is an urgent responsibility. Because the future will not be transformed only by those who know more, but by those who, knowing more, choose to serve better.

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