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Introduction: This Is No Ordinary Love

Because the word is overused and often undertheorized, I want to begin with how I define the concept of love, and specifically, the concept of radical love. Love, in the context of education, continues to be misunderstood and underused as a powerful tool for social justice. But what exactly is social justice education? This book serves as a radical and loving testimony to continuously answer this question throughout the peaks and valleys of every chapter. This book targets those who teach in K-12 classrooms, administrators, and leaders who work directly with teachers, directors of higher education teacher certification programs (secondary/elementary) as well as education consultants working with schools and districts to implement social justice teaching and learning methods.

The concept of love in education is not a novel idea. I wonder though, if there was ever a time when love was unique. Maybe when the world began? That question is directly connected to one's ideological beliefs, or perhaps one's religion. Can you imagine someone discovering love for the first time? Many tend to understand this feeling personally, in the sense of romantic love. But I want us to understand that we are *born* into love. I do not want to assume that I know or understand the hearts of all those who bring life into the world: biological parents, surrogate mothers, and adoptive parents; their experiences are all different in important ways. As a mother, I know there is an unimaginable amount of love that goes into carrying, birthing, and raising children.

Some experiences are certainly more privileged than others, some less. Once a child leaves the womb and enters the world, what happens to them depends on the parents, guardians, and caretakers that await them, and on the world, they encounter through institutions, organizations, and the outdoors.

Those who are not biological parents share in various aspects of parental love too, as aunts or uncles, godparents, babysitters, friends, and neighbors. There are many ways to show deep love for others, and it is often assumed to be a more “serious” matter when bloodlines are at stake. But we know that, although our understanding of love tends to be confined to familial and romantic notions, love is in fact universal, and it exists outside of these relationships. I want to discuss this love that exists within us, and that cannot exist without us. Love needs us and we need love.

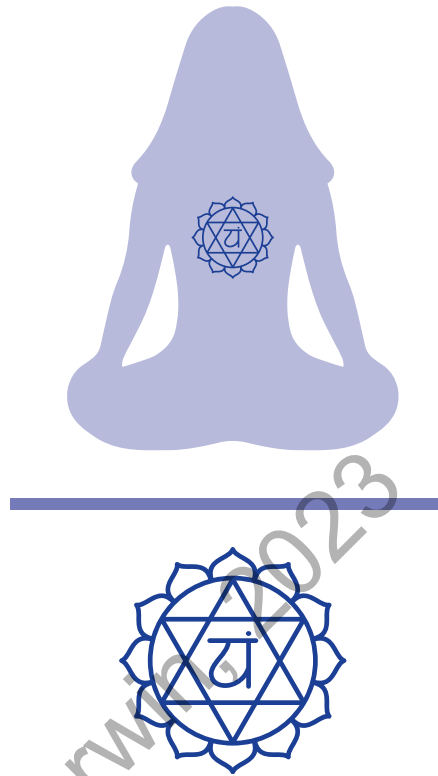
To be educated can mean many things. In the most basic terms, to be educated is to be taught or to learn something, either by oneself or with others. Therefore, to teach is an act of love, or it should be, as it facilitates the acquisition of knowledge through a relationship of care. Sharing information that can improve someone’s life in some way, shape, or form is powerful. Exposing someone to information they were not privy to before can lead to an exchange of ideas, which leads to an expansion of the mind, and critical thinking.

But what if the knowledge shared is dangerous and harmful to the group of people learning it because it ignores their lived experiences? Is this kind of teaching still an act of love? Surely, it is not. This is why teaching as an intentional act of love is something all teachers should be prepared for; knowing what is and isn’t harmful isn’t always easy or intuitive. In an ever-changing and highly diverse society that encompasses a rich array of races, ethnicities, cultures, languages, and sexual and gender identities as well as a range of abilities, teaching with love must be understood as an intersectional process.

There are students all over the nation—rural and urban, rich, and poor—who are being taught in classrooms that need clearer and more direct evidence of love. This love cannot be witnessed in the structures of term papers or the occasional handshake before entering the classroom. This love must be made so visible that it is an actual feeling of clear and present safety upon walking into the school building and its classrooms. This love looks and sounds like vulnerability among teachers and students. This love looks like students making mistakes and receiving the affirmation they need to try again. This love looks like understanding *who* a student is outside of standardized test scores and grade point averages. This is no ordinary love. It is *radical* love from the depths of the heart. As explored in the book *Street Data: A Next-Generation Model for Equity, Pedagogy and School Transformation*, the love I am describing is also reflective of a “vision of what is possible when we build classrooms and schools and systems around students’ brilliance, cultural wealth, cultural wealth and intellectual potential, rather than self-serving savior narratives that have us ‘fixing’ and ‘filling’ academic gaps” (Safir & Dugan, 2021, p. 4).

To help visualize this love, let us think about chakras. In yoga and meditation, chakras refer to how energy moves through the body. The various emotional, physical, and spiritual energies of teachers and students inside and outside of the classroom impact how they interact with one another daily. Of the seven main chakras, the fourth is the heart chakra, located at the center of your chest. This chakra is said to impact your ability to love while understanding and accepting people for who they are. When I imagine the kind of love capable of transforming and uplifting a classroom space, it is fourth-chakra love: the ability to both heal and inspire others due to a deeper understanding of oneself and one’s purpose in the world. This healing love is what helps distinguish personal/familial love and radical love. To teach with a fourth chakra love is to teach with a radical desire to understand and to heal oneself through one of the most radical acts of compassion: teaching (Figure 1).

FIGURE 1 ● The Heart Chakra, Also Called *Anahata*, Is Located in the Center of the Chest and Is Associated With Openness and Cooperation



Source: iStock.com/Ramziya Abdrakhmanova

The heart chakra controls our ability to create stable bridges between our world and the worlds of others. These bridges are in the form of various relationships throughout the course of our lives: friendships, partnerships, book clubs, organizational memberships, etc. To nurture and sustain the health of these relationships, we must have an open heart. Our hearts represent the space where we allow compassion to lead instead of the ego. By “the worlds of others,” I mean the physical spaces people inhabit as well as the experiences, ideas, actions, and knowledge we obtain when interacting with people. The more bridges we build, the more our heart chakra opens to the possibility of deeper forms of compassion and love. The deeper our compassion and love, the better our teaching.

I have learned, however, that due to various levels of preparation in the teaching profession (which includes traditional

and alternative routes to certification), many teachers are underprepared to teach in a way that is humanizing, compassionate, and loving for both them and their students. Additionally, culturally responsive teacher preparation programs that are centered on social justice teaching and learning frameworks are not the norm nationwide. As a result, what should be a noble act (teaching) often becomes a performative dance among state mandates, overzealous testing companies more interested in profit than student learning (Strauss, 2015), and oppressive pedagogical practices.

Understanding your motivation for teaching (and what that entails in the 21st century) is, therefore, crucial for creating spaces of love and healing in schools and the communities that surround them. We must desire more, and better, than what is mandated. When we intentionally create pedagogical spaces that are holistic, healing, and anti-oppressive, we are taking part in a radical act because it is outside of the typical ways of teaching and learning that focus on data more than the minds, bodies, and souls of how students, teachers, leaders, and staff engage in the daily processes of schooling. Our understanding of data itself must expand to include "...students' homes, in the hallways, in virtual meetings, in phone calls, and in the micro-interactions among teachers and students" (Safir & Dugan, 2021, p. 4). An expansion of how we see and understand student progress is a critical component of social justice teaching and learning methods.

Love is the beginning of this conversation. To go deeper, radical love is the critical fourth-chakra extension, which strengthens from the root. Think of a beautiful tree covered in flowers. Its leaves and blooms are probably the first thing you notice, but it is the soil and the roots that support its growth and existence. Let us think about this image in the context of schools. Do teachers and schools operate in service of deep, healthy roots? Or do they operate as if only fruit and flowers matter? Based on my lived experiences as a teacher, consultant, professor, and educational researcher, many schools throughout the nation operate in service of only one or the other. Some will care deeply for their students but fail to prepare them for state-mandated tests. Others will excel with high test scores but neglect their students' identities. Creating a social justice education grounded in radical

love requires caring for the root, trunk, and branches, seamlessly strengthening all aspects of education in a more enlightened, loving, and healing way. Schools need to be mini replicas of the strongest trees around us, providing security, shade, oxygen, food, and lasting love that can withstand the storms that always come.

I began this introduction by writing about birth and love due to the biases and perspectives that I have as a Black mother in a world that despises Black people. To birth a child is to literally bring new life into the world. This act, often used metaphorically in creative ventures, implies the creation of something *new*, something we *do not yet understand*, something we *aspire to*, or something we have reimagined or re-envisioned. Yet, because of where they live, their class status, the status of their parents, and the kinds of healthcare or food they have access to, many children are placed into predetermined boxes upon birth. Therefore, even the act of birthing, literal or figurative, is subject to liberating and oppressive forces, depending on your race, class, gender, ability, and sexuality.

As I write these words, the impact of the coronavirus has had a disproportionate effect on Black people nationwide due to the impact of racism and inequities of all kinds, from the economic to the geopolitical. This was true at the beginning of the pandemic, and it remains true now, three years later. George Floyd in Minnesota, Breonna Taylor in Kentucky, Ahmaud Arbery in Georgia, and Maurice Gordon here in my home state of New Jersey were all murdered at the hands of police. It would be easy for me, living in a Black body, with Black children and a Black partner, in a world that seemingly hates Black people, to reject the notion of radical love, to turn away from my fourth chakra.

But I chose to give birth to this book instead. I stand on the shoulders of great scholars before me, like Toni Morrison, James Baldwin, and Audre Lorde. I also stand in solidarity with current scholars who are pushing the field of education: Eve Ewing, Shawn Ginwright, and Yolanda Sealey Ruiz, to name a few. As I give birth to a text rooted in the traditions of social justice and Critical Race Theory (CRT), I invite you into my delivery room, where there are no machines, intravenous

contraptions, or drugs. In this delivery room, you will laugh, cry, smile, wonder, create, and grow. You will be pushed to reimagine an educational landscape that does not need to measure social justice frameworks in its schools because it is evident to every onlooker. You will be asked to admit your own shortcomings while being offered strategies to overcome them in your school, community, and family.

Start with Radical Love is a testament to love and the power of social justice to restructure oppressive educational practices and sustain new ways of teaching and learning alongside students. It uses a narrative and portraiture approach (Lawrence-Lightfoot & Davis, 1997) to unpack and uncover the nuances of teaching for justice in a nation where we still have to say “Black lives matter!” A portraiture approach is creative and is often coupled with personal narratives to blur the boundaries of research as a way to capture the complexity of the human experience (Miller, Liu, & Ball, 2020). Such an approach is aligned with the overall resistance to dehumanizing schooling practices described throughout the text along with strategies for us to do better as a collective community. This book is written for those of us who have been called to teach and to lead teachers, and for those who manage school leaders at the district level. It is important to note that this book is a radical testimony, centered in love and is an intentional disruption of traditional educational texts. This is not a curriculum guide or a handbook. This is not a pedagogical toolkit, although pedagogical activities are offered throughout the chapters as a social justice offering to restructure classrooms that operate primarily in the spaces of control and hierarchy. This book uses personal testimonies and lived experiences as a Critical Race counternarrative, which are narratives told from the perspectives of those who have been historically marginalized (Mora, 2014). These CRT counter-narratives will challenge the reader to reimagine how they perceive the act of schooling and how we can unlearn harmful ways of teaching and learning that oppress more than they inspire. The word counter implies resistance to dominant structures and ways of being/know, re: white.

In Chapter 1, we begin with an introduction to Social Justice Education (SJE) and its innate connection to radical love. In

Chapter 2, the roots of my SJE framework are broken down into theoretical and practical examples, which can be used in the classroom immediately. In Chapter 3, I introduce CRT and its connections to heart healing through teaching and learning, educator beliefs, and the structural inequities that plague our classrooms. In Chapter 4, we will apply what we have learned to Special Education and we will explore strategies for recreating inclusive classrooms that honor students with different needs. We will also explore the role of the School-to-Prison Pipeline and various policies and practices about Special Education. In Chapter 5, we will read the narratives of those who aspire to refine their craft as social justice educators on a daily basis, and we will hear their stories as they learn new strategies and implement them both inside and outside the classroom. Their narratives will be merged with my own perspectives and perceptions of their understanding of Social Justice Education. Chapter 6 concludes by emphasizing a new way of teaching and learning that is rooted in Social Justice Education, CRT, and student-centered approaches to pedagogy that embrace care, cultural curiosity, creativity, and of course, radical love.

To get the most out of this book, I want you to open your fourth chakra and feel that opening in the center of your chest. Inhale and exhale with me as we go through this journey together. As you breathe deeply, I want you to think about your own educational journey from kindergarten through high school. What worked and why? What was missing for you in school that you feel hindered your educational journey? If you have never had to think about these kinds of questions, I want you to look deeply into your heart and explore why that is the case.

Every chapter will include a radical love note that is connected to the theme of the chapter. As you read, the goal is to have you thinking pedagogically in a way that is centered on love. The radical love notes will be followed by chapter objectives to provide an overview of the structure of the chapter and its overall purpose about Social Justice Education. The chapters include a combination of pedagogical activities and some reflective prompts, primarily for educators to pause and reflect, as a way to honor self-care and our humanity. Lastly,

the chapters conclude with a radical love pedagogical activity and/or tips that embody key chapter themes, along with discussion questions that you can incorporate into your classrooms and are meant to be scaffolded according to grade level.

In order to gain the most from this book, it is important to remember that this is also an ongoing radical testimony, as told from the many spaces I have had the privilege of being an educator within. There is joy, there is pain and unapologetic truth-telling from the perspective of a Critical Race Theorist (myself) as I/you/me/we sit with the knowledge that CRT is currently being banned in several schools nationwide, simply for telling the truth about the complex history of racism in the United States. The way I choose to tell this story is an intentional disruption of the status quo and traditional conceptions of academic and educational writing. I hope you are excited about the journey ahead of you, it will definitely inspire you and challenge you, simultaneously.

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