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Original Article

The Pedagogy of Encounter as Via Pulchritudinis: Humanizing 21st-Century Teaching-Learning through Education 5.0 and the Global Compact on Education

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Abstract

Pope Francis champions accessible education as an act of hope, reminding educators that the distinctive feature of Catholic education is true humanization. Yet, the rise of Education 4.0, driven by digital learning, often lacks a coherent ethical, human-centered framework. This study investigates the ethical challenges posed by Education 4.0's reliance on AI, data analytics, and immersive technologies, aiming to evaluate these through Education 5.0 and Pope Francis' Global Compact on Education (GCE) to propose a theological-pedagogical framework that re-centers Catholic education on humanization. Employing qualitative textual analysis informed by the synodal methodology of listening, discernment, and participation, it explores three questions: (1) What are the pedagogical features of Education 4.0 and 5.0? (2) What opportunities ("lights") and challenges ("shadows") emerge when Education 4.0 is viewed through the GCE lens? (3) How can Education 5.0 and the GCE be synthesized into a theological-pedagogical framework for humanization? Findings show Education 4.0 enables AI-enhanced instruction, personalized learning, hybrid modalities, immersive tools, and collaboration, but risks dehumanization, bias, and digital divides. Integrating Education 5.0's human-centered innovation with the GCE, the study proposes the Pedagogy of Encounter as Via Pulchritudinis (Path of Beauty), a framework affirming beauty as a path to God and a means of proclaiming the Gospel. This offers Catholic education a principled, hopeful way to humanize teaching and learning in the 21st century.

Keywords: Catholic Education, Education 5.0, Global Compact on Education, Humanization, Pedagogy of Encounter, Via Pulchritudinis

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Introduction

As expressed in *Ex Corde Ecclesiae* (ECE), Catholic universities are vital to advancing Christian culture and human progress (ECE, 10). The Church has long emphasized education's role in building society. Pope Paul VI's *Gravissimum Educationis* urges gratitude to priests, religious, and laypeople for their dedication to pedagogy (GE, 12). Pope Benedict XVI affirms that "the true nature of education is to fully and authentically form the person by promoting a culture of listening, dialogue, and responsibility" (Dicastery for Culture and Education, n.d.). Pope Francis highlights accessible education as an act of hope, stressing humanization and encounter (Vatican News, 2024; Francis, 2013; Congregation for Catholic Education, 2022). In the same spirit, Pope Leo XIV calls universities the "pathway of the mind towards God" (Vatican News, 2025). Yet Education 4.0's rapid expansion raises pressing ethical questions.

Despite the rapid proliferation of technology-driven educational frameworks, particularly Education 4.0, there remains a lack of critical integration between these developments and a coherent anthropological and ethical vision of education. While Education 4.0 emphasizes innovation, efficiency, and data-driven learning, it often risks reducing education to functional and technological outcomes, thereby neglecting the holistic formation of the human person. In response, emerging discourse on Education 5.0 calls for a shift toward human-centered, value-oriented education. However, the conceptual relationship between Education 4.0 and 5.0 remains underdeveloped, particularly when examined through the lens of Catholic educational thought and the Global Compact on Education (GCE). This study therefore seeks to: critically examine the pedagogical features of Education 4.0 and Education 5.0; evaluate the opportunities ("lights") and limitations ("shadows") using the Seven Commitments of the GCE; and propose a synthesized framework, the Pedagogy of Encounter as *Via Pulchritudinis* that reorients education toward human dignity and integral formation.

In this study, Education 4.0 is examined as a technologically driven paradigm characterized by AI integration, personalization, and datafication, while Education 5.0 is analyzed as human-centered response that emphasizes ethical responsibility, relationality, and the common good. To operationalize the Pedagogy of Encounter as *Via Pulchritudinis*, the Seven Commitments of the GCE serve as practical pillars for rehumanizing teaching and learning, particularly within digital contexts. This study addresses a gap in current literature by showing how Education 5.0, when aligned with these commitments, can overcome the shadows of Education 4.0, namely dehumanization, depersonalization, algorithmic bias, and digital divides.

The Seven Commitments of GCE

These seven commitments exemplify the core mission of the broad educational alliance as they recalibrate education in a holistic and humanized way, extending beyond theoretical classroom knowledge to resolving major contemporary challenges. They are as follows: Primarily, a committed vigor to place the person at the center of every educational program, both formal and informal, expresses the primacy of the human person and their inherent and infinite dignity (Dicastery for the Doctrine of the Faith, 2024). Next, to fully listen to the voices of children and young people requires genuine engagement, not merely consultation. By actively participating, young people become partners in shaping the future of education, rather than remaining passive recipients of knowledge (Global Compact on Education, n.d.). Also, a hearty encouragement of the full participation of girls and young women in education affirms gender equity as essential to meaningful

participation and strong leadership within educational contexts (Global Compact on Education, n.d.). In strongly establishing the family as the first and essential place of education recognizes that they are the primary educators of their children's values, habits, and worldviews (Global Compact on Education, n.d.). Echoing Pope Francis, Cardinal Giuseppe Versaldi, former Prefect of the Congregation for Catholic Education, emphasizes the family as the first educational community. He affirms that since love is the basis of education, all stakeholders, families, schools, and communities, should work together, animated by this shared and profound motivation (Vatican News, 2020). Moreover, educating ourselves toward openness to the most vulnerable and marginalized calls for a culture of inclusion instead of exclusion (Global Compact on Education, n.d.). In articulating a renewed vision for education toward 2030, UNESCO affirms that inclusion and equity in and through education are the cornerstones of a transformative educational agenda. Accordingly, it commits to addressing all forms of exclusion and insists that no educational goal can be considered achieved unless it is achieved by all learners (UNESCO, 2016). Significantly, finding new ways of understanding the economy, politics, growth, and progress calls for a fundamental reimagining of economic and political systems as structures meant to serve human flourishing and the common good (Global Compact on Education, n.d.). Ultimately, safeguarding and cultivating our common home encourages environmental stewardship, sustainable lifestyles, and reverence for creation. (Global Compact on Education, n.d.).

Methodology

This research employs a synodal hermeneutical framework grounded in listening, discernment, and participation, as articulated in the *Vademecum* for the Synod on Synodality (Synod of Bishops, 2021). Rather than functioning as an empirical methodology involving human subjects, the synodal approach serves here as an interpretive paradigm for textual analysis. The study examines a purposively selected corpus consisting of three categories: (1) Ecclesial documents, such as *Gravissimum Educationis* (GE), *Ex Corde Ecclesiae* (ECE), and the *Vademecum* of the Global Compact on Education (GCE), which provide theological and anthropological foundations; (2) International educational reports, including UNESCO's Education 2030 Framework for Action and Global Education Monitoring Report 2023, alongside World Economic Forum publications on Education 4.0; and (3) Scholarly literature on Education 4.0, Education 5.0, digital pedagogy, and critiques of data-driven learning. Texts were selected based on their relevance to Education 4.0, Education 5.0, GCE, and human-centered education, institutional or scholarly authority; and contribution to discussions on technology, ethics, and human formation. Within this framework, listening signifies attentiveness to diverse textual contexts, particularly the "lights and shadows" of Education 4.0; discernment entails theological and critical evaluation, especially in relation to Education 5.0 and the Global Compact on Education; and participation denotes the constructive synthesis of insights into a pedagogical proposal, namely the Pedagogy of Encounter as *Via Pulchritudinis* (Path of Beauty). In this way, the synodal methodology functions as a theologically grounded lens for textual interpretation, consistent with the Catholic tradition of reading contemporary realities as the "signs of the times."

Findings

As the Synod Fathers affirm, the term "lights and shadows" signifies both challenges and opportunities for conversion (Turkson, 2009). By carefully "listening" to these realities within Church life, immediate missionary fruits emerge (General

Secretariat of the Synod, 2023). In this perspective, the lights (opportunities) of Education 4.0 include advancing learning through AI and data analytics, implementing blended and hybrid models that integrate digital and face-to-face instruction, harnessing immersive tools such as VR/AR and gamification to enhance engagement, and fostering creativity and innovation through project-based and collaborative learning. Conversely, the shadows (challenges) of Education 4.0 involve the risk of dehumanization, where over-reliance on technology diminishes attention to the learner's inner life; depersonalization, as efficiency and automation overshadow holistic formation; algorithmic bias, whereby data-driven personalization reinforces stereotypes and inequities; and digital divides, evident in unequal access to devices and connectivity that exacerbate inequality. These "lights and shadows" through the lens of the Seven Commitments of GCE, therefore demand a thoughtful response that focus education on human dignity and authentic flourishing.

Viewed through the lens of "discernment", the integration of Education 5.0 and Pope Francis' Global Compact on Education (GCE) emerges as a comprehensive response, addressing the opportunities and challenges of Education 4.0 and guiding 21st-century teaching and learning toward a more humanizing path. First, in placing the human person at the center, Education 5.0 and the GCE embrace a holistic vision of learning: to know, to do, to live together, and to be, promote human-technology interaction, and advocate for human-centered digital education. Second, in listening to young people, they align with a dialogical orientation, emphasize learners' agency, voice, and co-agency, and highlight youth participation as essential for fostering democratic values and ethical engagement. Third, in advancing women, Education 5.0 and the GCE critique gendered and racial biases in AI systems, support inclusive design, encourage female participation in STEM and digital learning, and promote women's safe and meaningful engagement with technology. Fourth, in empowering families, they provide strategies for parental involvement (Epstein, 2018), support family access to digital resources, and emphasize mindful integration of technology in family interactions. Fifth, in welcoming the vulnerable and marginalized, Education 5.0 and the GCE analyze racial and social biases embedded in algorithms, promote digital literacy to counter echo chambers, and advance digital inclusion across diverse populations. Sixth, in finding new ways of understanding our world, they critique extreme individualism in neoliberal societies, advocate for equitable approaches to structuring work and professional life, and promote interdisciplinary, socially connected learning that fosters democratic participation. Seventh and finally, in safeguarding our common home, Education 5.0 and the GCE integrate digital literacy with sustainability, encourage ethical stewardship of resources, and highlight systems thinking that underscores the interconnection between humans and the environment.

Integrating all these in *Evangelii Gaudium*, it points that every form of catechesis would do well to attend to the way of beauty (*Via Pulchritudinis*). This "participation" is a renewed esteem for beauty as a means of touching the human heart and enabling the truth and goodness of the Risen Christ to radiate within it. So, a formation in the *Via Pulchritudinis* ought to be part of our effort to pass on the faith. (EG, 167). With the lights and shadows revealed in Education 4.0, researchers and educators are called to challenge the digital era by expressing truth, goodness, and beauty, which shine forth in fidelity to the Gospel message through the Pedagogy of Encounter as *Via Pulchritudinis*.

Discussion

Listening: The “Lights” of Education 4.0 through the Seven Commitments of GCE

Education 4.0 casts its light on making the human person the center, as seen in individualized learning paths enabled by technology (Hussin, 2018). This approach is necessary to cultivate the unique skills and potential of each student for the Fourth Industrial Revolution (Fisk, 2017). The concept that Education 4.0 is fundamentally about personalized and student-centric learning. It represents a move away from the “one-size-fits-all” industrial model of schooling. Pope Francis accentuates that education should be of service to the uniqueness and dignity of the human person (Congregation for Catholic Education, 1997).

Education 4.0 illuminates new ways of listening to the voices of children and young people as it fosters collaboration and project-based learning (PBL) as learners deal with solving complex problems, cultivating a sense of teamwork and group dynamics (World Economic Forum, 2026). Pope Francis calls for an alliance that includes young people as active protagonists, not passive recipients. The *Vademecum* explains that this commitment involves creating spaces where the dreams, ideas, and concerns of the youth are heard and taken seriously in the educational planning process (Congregation for Catholic Education, 2022).

Education 4.0 shines a light on advancing the role of women through utilization of digital platforms, online courses, and mobile learning (UNESCO, 2023). Educational Technology is seen as a vital solution for reaching girls in crisis-affected regions to ensure continuity of learning when traditional schooling is not an option (Malala Fund, 2020). Evidence of true involvement actively works to eliminate all forms of discriminatory acts and guarantees that girls and women have equal access to quality education, a primary path to their participatory democracy in society (Congregation for Catholic Education, 2022).

Education 4.0 brings light to empowering the family as the primary educator with the emergence of Learning Management Systems (LMS) and technologies that provide parents with real-time access to monitor children's progress, assignments, and learning materials (Hornby & Blackwell, 2018). Also, the commitment to “see in the family the first and indispensable educator” reflects a long-standing principle of Catholic social teaching, upholding that parents are the first and foremost educators of their children and that school institutions are partners who assist them in this role (Congregation for Catholic Education, 2022).

Education 4.0's light is focused on welcoming the most vulnerable and marginalized. It reframes the problem of marginalized communities, such as refugees, the poor, and those with disabilities, as an opportunity for solidarity (Congregation for Catholic Education, 2020). Refugees and displaced persons utilize language apps and skills-based courses that are delivered via smartphones, which are often one of the few possessions refugees retain. Assistive Technologies, such as screen readers and voice-to-text software, aid individuals with disabilities as they access digital learning materials (UNESCO, 2023). Lastly, the Open Educational Resources (OER) for those in impoverished or remote communities provide free digitalized textbooks and course materials that significantly reduce educational costs (International Federation of Catholic Universities, 2021).

Education 4.0 provides the light needed for finding new ways of understanding the economy and politics, explicitly designed to move beyond rote memorization to cultivate advanced cognitive skills. The World Economic Forum critically evaluates and challenges current norms. Their reports state that students should deconstruct complex problems, question assumptions, and understand how

different systems interact (World Economic Forum, 2026). Pope Francis highlights that this involves creating economic and political systems that prioritize human dignity and the well-being of the planet over profit and power (Congregation for Catholic Education, 2020).

Education 4.0's light emphasizes caring for the Earth, relating to everyone's involvement in the Global Connectivity and Citizenship in Education, which connect learners globally, breaking down classroom walls (UNESCO, 2018). This fosters Global Citizenship Education (GCED), a framework promoted by organizations like UNESCO, which aims to empower learners to assume active roles in addressing and resolving global challenges. The Collaborative Online International Learning (COIL) leads diverse learners to collaborate in creating concrete solutions to fight climate change (O'Dowd, 2021). This model aligns with GCE's commitment to care for our common home, a principle which Laudato Si' calls "ecological conversion." In this sense, environmental education must broaden its focus to foster a sense of global solidarity and shared responsibility (Francis, 2015).

Listening: The "Shadows" of Education 4.0 through the Seven Commitments of GCE

Lurking in the shadows of Education 4.0's promise to make the human person the center is the risk, as Biesta argues, of the "learnification" (Biesta, 2015) of education, which reduces education to a process of acquiring measurable learning outcomes. Han explores how neoliberalism has evolved from disciplining the body to programming the psyche. Emphasizing the data-driven "achievement-subject" (Han, 2017) constantly self-optimizes based on external metrics, leading to psychic burnout and the erosion of a contemplative inner self, and losing interiority through datafication. In relation to this, Zuboff provides the foundational theory for understanding the large-scale "datafication" (Zuboff, 2019) of human experience, showing how technology companies perceive human life as behavioral data for prediction and control serves as the mechanism behind reducing students to mere metrics.

The shadows cast by Education 4.0's implementation reveal the difficulty in truly listening to the voices of children and young people, a problem echoed in Freire's perception of the "banking model of education" (Freire, 2018), which relates to the idea of students as passive consumers. As seen, the teacher "deposits" data and information to students who are regarded as empty vessels. Moreover, Kohn argues against an overreliance on standardized tests that forces teachers to "teach to the test" (Kohn, 2000). This mechanism results in a narrowed, top-down curriculum, highly discouraging the students from exploring the power of inquiry. This "programmed instruction" (Watters, 2019) model treats students as passive recipients whose learning paths are regulated by "algorithmic efficiency" and not by their personal curiosity or distinctive experiences.

The darker side of Education 4.0's technology can undermine the advancement of the role of women, as O'Neil explains how "algorithmic bias" (O'Neil, 2016) can reinforce discriminatory education. She details how models, trained on historically biased data, can lead to decisions that can disadvantage certain groups, which, in an educational context, can steer girls or women far from fields like STEM. This explanation is related to UNESCO's Report, which tackles how gender bias is embedded into technology products. It directly links "digital skills gender gap" (West et al., 2019) to cultural norms and the risk of online harassment, significantly hindering girls' and women's participation in digital spaces. Furthermore, a tendency in algorithmic bias is tangible in Educational Technology (EdTech) on how AI-driven

tools for personalized learning and proctoring perpetuate gender and racial biases (Vaidya, 2023), which impacts student opportunities and reinforces existing inequalities like the STEM gap.

Despite its promise, Education 4.0's shadows impact the effort to empower the family as the primary educator, as Hohlfeld et al. speaks of a “digital divide” in skills, preventing parents from effectively engaging with their children's digitally mediated schoolwork and alienating them from the process (Hohlfeld et al., 2010). Also, Selwyn avers that educational systems often promote technology in ways that assume a digitally competent household. This leads unintentionally to “sidelining parents” (Selwyn, 2011) who are not equipped to participate, thus outsourcing a part of the educational process to technology that weakens the communitarian and traditional role of family. In this regard, Turkle discusses the isolation of family members through the usage of digital devices, leading to a sense of being “alone together,” (Turkle, 2017), wherein family members are physically present but psychologically distant, engaged in their own digital worlds.

The unwelcome shadows of Education 4.0 also fall heavily on the most vulnerable and marginalized, recognized as Noble explains how digital platforms can amplify xenophobia and other forms of discrimination. She demonstrates how the “algorithms of oppression” (Noble, 2018) are brought about by subjective search algorithms and biased systems prioritizing racist and sexist content. The term “filter bubble” (Pariser, 2011), used as a primary mechanism that fosters digital tribalism and intolerance, fosters personalized algorithms on media platforms, leading to isolation and varying viewpoints. With this comes a seminal academic analysis of the “echo chamber” (Sustein, 2017) effect. Sustein argues that the internet allows people to filter out opinions they disagree with. This work directly supports the idea that digital environments foster intolerance.

The economic and political thinking of Education 4.0 carries shadows that prevent finding new, holistic ways of understanding these systems, with Brown analyzing how neoliberalism reshapes all aspects of life, including education, into an economic model, whereby citizens are seen as “human capital,” and education becomes a tool for edifying one's market value to benefit the national economic output. This directly supports the critique of education being reduced to a tool for the economy, fostering “hyper-individualism” (Brown, 2015) and competition. Likewise, Giroux argues that market-driven policies have transformed education from a public good into a private commodity, producing compliant workers for an unstable, market-driven society, including the “gig economy” (Giroux, 2014). Sunstein explains how political polarization feeds to create “echo chambers” and “information cocoons” (Sustein, 2017) that reinforce existing beliefs and shield users from opposing views, leading to increased division and a fragmented public sphere.

The growing shadows of the digital world challenge Education 4.0's commitment to caring for our common home. With the resulting piles of “e-waste” (Crawford, 2021), the author argues that the digital world has a massive, often hidden, physical footprint. Likewise, Louv speaks of a disconnect from the natural world due to contemporary lifestyles like excessive screen time. He coined the term “nature-deficit disorder” (Louv, 2008) to describe humans deviating from nature, diminishing usage of the senses, dwindling attention, and dealing with higher rates of physical and emotional illnesses. While focusing on data and privacy, Zuboff explains the economic engine driving unsustainable consumerism, which creates a “behavioral surplus” (Zuboff, 2019) to predict and modify user behavior for gaining profit, fundamentally being tied to consumerism.

Discernment: The Response of Education 5.0 and GCE in Addressing the “Shadows” of Education 4.0

The first commitment of GCE is to place the human person at the center. Education 5.0 embraces a holistic vision, where learning empowers individuals ‘to know, to do, to live together, and to be’ (Delors et al., 1996). In line with this vision, Education 5.0’s relational anthropology prompts a human-technology interaction in education (Rosa, 2019), while simultaneously highlighting how data-driven systems can undermine human dignity, reinforcing the need for human-centered digital education (Eubanks, 2018).

The second commitment of GCE is to listen to young people. Education 5.0 grounds participatory, experience-based learning that aligns with a dialogical orientation (Dewey, 1997). It emphasizes learners’ agency, voice, and co-agency in shaping their educational experiences, rather than passively following standardized instruction (OECD, 2019). Moreover, it frames youth participation as essential for fostering democratic values and ethical engagement in education (UNESCO & UNODC, 2019).

The third commitment of GCE is to advance women. In this light, Education 5.0 highlights gendered and racial biases in AI systems, advocating for human-centered design in education (Crawford, 2021). It further calls for educational policies and programs that increase female participation in STEM and digital learning (Vogt & Korte, 2020) and emphasizes initiatives that ensure women’s safe and meaningful engagement with technology (UNICEF, 2021).

The fourth commitment of GCE is to empower the family. Education 5.0 supports families in accessing digital resources and participating in digital learning (Warschauer, 2011). It presents research-based strategies for fostering meaningful parental involvement in students’ learning (Epstein, 2018) and provides empirical evidence on how family interactions are shaped by technology, reinforcing the need for mindful integration in educational practice (Radesky et al., 2014).

The fifth commitment of GCE is to welcome the most vulnerable and marginalized. Education 5.0 analyzes racial and social biases embedded in technology and algorithms, advocating for equity-focused interventions (Benjamin, 2019). It examines how social media reinforces ideological silos or ‘echo chambers’, highlighting the need for digital literacy education (Bakshy et al., 2015), and explores strategies for promoting digital inclusion across diverse and vulnerable populations (Eynon & Malmberg, 2021).

The sixth commitment of GCE is to find new ways of understanding our world. Education 5.0 critiques the social consequences of extreme individualism in neoliberal societies (Brown, 2015). It explores equitable and human-centered approaches to structuring work and professional life (Susskind & Susskind, 2015) and advocates for interdisciplinary, socially connected learning that fosters democratic participation (UNESCO, 2021).

The seventh commitment of GCE is to safeguard our common home. Education 5.0 focuses on digital literacy and the responsible use of technology to support sustainable practices (Bawden & Robinson, 2020). It calls for educational approaches that foster care for the planet and ethical stewardship of resources (UNESCO, 2021) and offers a holistic systems perspective that emphasizes the interconnection between humans and the environment (Capra & Luisi, 2014).

Participation: The Pedagogy of Encounter as *Via Pulchritudinis*

In “Education: The Global Compact,” Pope Francis reiterates three languages which focus on the mind (thinking), the heart (feeling), and the hands (doing). Pope

Francis calls for religious traditions, which have always played a leading role in schooling, from teaching literacy to higher education, to reaffirm their mission of integrally educating each individual: head, hands, heart and soul. “To think about what we are feeling and doing. To feel what we are thinking and doing. To do what we are feeling and thinking” (Francis, 2021). In essence, it points to the beauty and harmony of what it is to be fully human. He integrates these languages to fundamental human values, interweaving truth with mind, goodness with heart, and creativity with hands. Remarkably, he highlights the concept of beauty by stating that one cannot educate without leading a person to beauty or the heart to beauty (Francis, 2020). This person-centered approach implicitly contains the “path of beauty,” which is a move away from education as a mere instrument for the economy and toward education as the cultivation of the unique, unrepeatable dignity and creativity, pertaining to the “beauty” of every individual (Congregation for Catholic Education, 2017).

In this light, the study advances a Theology of Catholic Education titled, The Pedagogy of Encounter as *Via Pulchritudinis*. This framework centers on the seven commitments of the Global Compact on Education (GCE) and articulates a four-step process that integrates the cognitive, affective, and conative dimensions of Catholic education toward the *Via Pulchritudinis*, the Path of Beauty, as a transformative journey. The process begins with Mind (Thinking/Cognitive), which analyzes the “lights and shadows” of Education 4.0; proceeds to Heart (Feeling/Affective), which integrates values from the *Vademecum* of the GCE; moves to Hands (Doing/Conative), which expresses the response of Education 5.0 and the GCE; and culminates in the Path of Beauty, a theological and pedagogical proposal for humanizing 21st-century teaching and learning (see Figure 1).

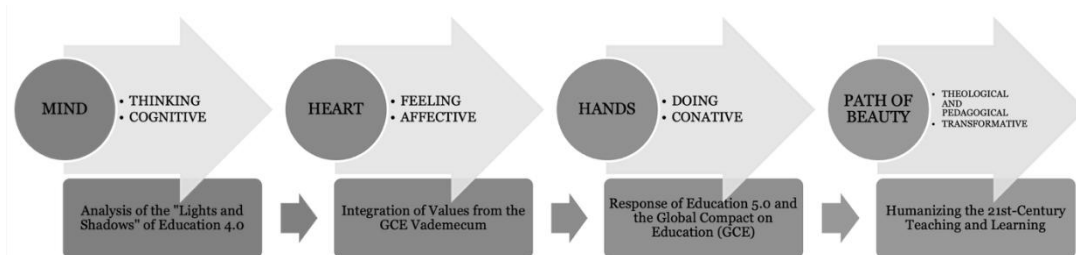


Figure 1. The Pedagogy of Encounter as *Via Pulchritudinis*

The first commitment of GCE is to place the human person at the center. Accordingly, Education 4.0 brings the opportunities of individualized learning paths (Hussin, 2018; Fisk, 2017) and integral human development (Congregation for Catholic Education, 1997), while also casting challenges like “learnification” (Biesta, 2015), the “achievement-subject” (Han, 2017), and “datafication” (Zuboff, 2019). Its core value is upholding the dignity and universal rights of every individual through an inclusive, holistic education that respects and develops all dimensions of their unique identity without discrimination (Global Compact on Education, 2020). Education 5.0 and GCE embrace a holistic vision (Delors et al., 1996), human-technology interaction (Rosa, 2019), and human-centered digital education (Eubanks, 2018). The “Path of Beauty” fortifies learners to put a human face on the global goals, moving beyond statistics to focus on the lived experiences of individuals in their community. This project shifts the focus from problems to people, teaching students that the first step to solving a global issue is to understand the human person at its heart.

The second commitment of GCE is to listen to young people. Consequently, Education 4.0 must highlight the strengths of student-driven learning (World Economic Forum, 2026; Bell, 2010) and positioning them as active protagonists (Francis, 2020; Congregation for Catholic Education, 2022), while avoiding the pitfalls of the “banking model” (Freire, 2018), a “top-down curriculum” (Kohn, 2000), or “programmed instruction” (Watters, 2019). We must advocate for a child-centered educational system where the community collaborates to provide a quality education that respects every child's right, adapting to individual needs and engaging their mind, hands, and heart (Global Compact on Education, 2020). Education 5.0 and GCE align with a dialogical orientation (Dewey, 1997), learners' agency, voice, and co-agency (OECD, 2019) and youth participation (UNESCO & UNODC, 2019). The “Path of Beauty” supports learners becoming community researchers, positioning young people as experts on their own lives to support responsive and inclusive decision-making. This project makes listening to children an active and impactful process, turning student opinions into data that can inform real-world decisions.

The third commitment of GCE is to advance women. Herein, Education 4.0 leverages the power of digital platforms that offer flexible learning opportunities (UNESCO, 2023; Malala Fund, 2020; Congregation for Catholic Education, 2022), but it must also confront the shadows of “algorithmic bias” (O'Neil, 2016), the “digital skills gender gap” (West et al., 2019), and “biased EdTech” (Vaidya, 2023). The fundamental goal is achieving gender equality by recognizing the equal rights and dignity of men and women, while actively ensuring girls' participation in education and women's inclusion in leadership roles (Global Compact on Education, 2020). Education 5.0 and GCE address gendered and racial biases in AI systems (Crawford, 2021) female participation in STEM and digital learning (Vogt & Korte, 2020) and women's safe and meaningful engagement with technology (UNICEF, 2021). The “Path of Beauty” empowers learners to become digital advocates who investigate the local digital divide affecting women and create a campaign to promote digital literacy and inclusion. This project transforms students from passive technology users into active digital citizens who use their skills to empower others.

The fourth commitment of GCE is to empower the family. For this reason, Education 4.0 requires building strong school-home partnerships (Hornby & Blackwell, 2018; Smith et al., 2020) and recognizing the family's primary role as educator (Francis, 2020; Congregation for Catholic Education, 2022), while mitigating challenges like the “digital divide” (Hohlfeld et al., 2010), the “sidelining of parents” (Selwyn, 2011), and the phenomenon of being “alone together” (Turkle, 2017). The guiding principle is to empower the family as the primary educator by ensuring parents participate in school decision-making and by implementing supportive, family-friendly policies, especially for the socio-economically disadvantaged (Global Compact on Education, 2020). Education 5.0 and GCE support families in accessing digital resources (Warschauer, 2011), meaningful parental involvement (Epstein, 2018) and family interactions integrated in educational practice (Radesky et al., 2014). The “Path of Beauty” lets learners become community organizers who host an Empowerment Fair for their own families and the wider community. This project moves beyond theory, allowing students to take on a meaningful role in strengthening their own families and community.

The fifth commitment of GCE is to welcome the most vulnerable and marginalized. Correspondingly, Education 4.0 utilizes tools like Assistive Tech and Open Educational Resources (UNESCO, 2021; International Federation of Catholic Universities, 2021) to care for the vulnerable (Congregation for Catholic Education, 2020), while actively fighting against the “algorithms of oppression” (Noble, 2018),

“filter bubbles” (Pariser, 2011), and “echo chambers” (Sunstein, 2017). This requires fostering a culture of encounter and openness, actively welcoming and integrating vulnerable and marginalized people through inclusive policies that directly counter a societal “throwaway culture” (Global Compact on Education, 2020). Education 5.0 and GCE analyze racial and social biases embedded in technology and algorithms (Benjamin, 2019), digital literacy education (Bakshy et al., 2015), and digital inclusion (Eynon & Malmberg, 2021). The “Path of Beauty” challenges learners to counter societal indifference by actively identifying and connecting with the stories of marginalized individuals in their community. This initiative transforms the abstract goal of inclusion into a tangible, face-to-face experience, fostering empathy and inspiring action.

The sixth commitment of GCE is to find new ways of understanding our world. In the context of Education 4.0, it means developing advanced cognitive skills (World Economic Forum, 2026) and envisioning systems centered on human dignity (Francis, 2020), while confronting the dangers of “hyper-individualism” (Brown, 2015), the “gig economy” (Giroux, 2014), and “political polarization” (Sunstein, 2017). The core of this effort is investing in community-focused education to foster a renewed vision of economy, politics, and progress that is inclusive, sustainable, and dedicated to the common good (Global Compact on Education, 2020). Education 5.0 and GCE critique extreme individualism in neoliberal societies (Brown, 2015), equitable approaches to structuring work and professional life (Susskind & Susskind, 2015) and democratic participation (UNESCO, 2021). The “Path of Beauty” strengthens learners to act as a Youth Policy Council, tasked with reimagining their city's economy and politics through alternative, sustainable models. This project empowers students not just to learn about these systems, but to actively redesign them for a more just and sustainable future.

The seventh commitment of GCE is to safeguard our common home. Hence, Education 4.0 is illuminated by collaborative online models (UNESCO, 2018; O'Dowd, 2021) and a shared responsibility for the planet (Francis, 2015), but it is shadowed by the realities of “e-waste” (Crawford, 2021), “nature-deficit disorder” (Louv, 2008), and unsustainable consumerism (Zuboff, 2019). The heart of this commitment is protecting our common home by educating for more sustainable and sober lifestyles, investing in renewable energy, and actively preserving and promoting local green spaces (Global Compact on Education, 2020). Education 5.0 and GCE focus on digital literacy and the responsible use of technology to support sustainable practices (Bawden & Robinson, 2020), ethical stewardship of resources (UNESCO, 2021) and the interconnection between humans and the environment (Capra & Luisi, 2014). The “Path of Beauty” reinforces learners to become environmental stewards of their university, their immediate “common home”. This project moves students from awareness to action, making them direct participants in creating a more sustainable community.

From the foregoing statements, the synodal processes of listening, discernment, and participation serve as a hermeneutical structure. It “listens” to the realities of Education 4.0, it “discerns” realities through ethical and theological lenses, and “participates” through transforming insights into a constructive pedagogical vision. *The Via Pulchritudinis*, or Path of Beauty, further deepens this synthesis by emphasizing that education leads learners toward meaning, transcendence, and authentic human flourishing.

Conclusion

This study finds that Education 4.0 is characterized by technological integration, personalization, and innovation-driven learning, while Education 5.0 reorients education toward holistic human formation, ethical responsibility, and relationality. Together, these paradigms mark a shift from technology-centered to human-centered education. Examining the “lights” and “shadows” of Education 4.0 through the lens of the Global Compact on Education, the study highlights opportunities for inclusion, participation, and global connectivity, but also identifies risks of dehumanization, datafication, algorithmic bias, and community fragmentation when applied uncritically. Synthesizing Education 5.0 with the GCE provides a coherent humanizing framework that addresses these limitations. This integration culminates in the proposed Pedagogy of Encounter as Via Pulchritudinis, which restores dialogue, dignity, and beauty to the center of learning. Guided by synodal processes of listening, discernment, and participation, this framework offers a theological-pedagogical vision capable of transforming digital education into a path toward authentic human flourishing. To deepen this vision, the study recommends applying the Pedagogy of Encounter across academic disciplines, enabling educators, policymakers, and institutions to critically evaluate strategies, identify gaps, and develop context-specific approaches that foster equity, inclusivity, and moral development. Through sustained reflection, research, and evaluation, the dual aims of promoting academic excellence and nurturing ethically responsible individuals are realized.

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Declaration on the Use of AI

The researchers utilized ChatGPT, CoPilot, and Grammarly for grammar check and refinement of sentences and paragraphs.

Data Availability Statement

The data supporting the findings of this study are available from the corresponding author upon reasonable request.

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Conflict of Interest

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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