



RESEARCH PAPER

Conflict Transformation and Reclaiming the Heart and Soul of Educational Institutions through the JoyfulTalisman Design Canvas: A Design Thinking–Based Framework

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ABSTRACT

In an increasingly transactional world where crass commercialization is the goal, a large number of educational institutions face relational tensions arising from pressures to enroll maximum students, performance, and hierarchical governance structures. The complex pressures and relations lead to emotional burnout, and diminishing trust among students, educators, and administrators. Conventional disciplinary and managerial approaches often address conflict as a behavioural or compliance issue, neglecting its relational, emotional, and ethical dimensions. This paper introduces the JoyfulTalisman Design Canvas (JTDC) as a relational–pedagogical human-centred, values-based framework for conflict de-escalation and the cultivation of joyful, trust-based educational cultures. It aims to explore a practice-oriented model for educational institutions seeking to integrate wellbeing, harmonious and value-based workplace, democratic participation, and ethical learning into everyday institutional life.

Keywords: Conflict-escalation, design thinking, human-centred, joyful learning, restorative practice, participatory pedagogy

Conflict is organic part of our lives. As every human beings think differently, there is bound to be differences in how we perceive and understanding things and situations. These differences can be handled and resolved constructively. However, conflict arises when individuals are not able to resolve these differences properly. This is true for every institutions right from families, organizations, the community, and globally.

In educational institutions, conflict arises from diversity of perspectives, power asymmetries, role ambiguities, and emotional investments in learning and governance processes. There are different forms of conflicts in these institutions involving

students, faculties/teachers, administration, and management. External stakeholders like parents and other authorities can also contribute to conflicts. Kundu and Sharma (2022) in their study of conflicts in schools lists wide ranging reasons for conflicts starting at the intrapersonal level to group level and its impact on all the stakeholders like students, faculties, administration, and management. The study also found how most educational institutions follow the traditional conflict resolution

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approaches in education mostly relying on top-down disciplinary procedures or ad hoc mediation, which may suppress visible disagreement without addressing underlying relational fractures. In fact several researches shows how unmanaged or poorly managed conflict in educational settings undermines psychological safety, institutional trust, and learning outcomes (Valente & Lourenço, 2020; Tamunodiepiriye *et al.* 2022). Further, Morrison & Vaandering (2012) point out how unresolved conflict undermines trust and disengages learners in educational settings.

It is in this context that it is important to focus on conflict transformation strategies in educational institutions. Several studies highlight the importance of relational trust, psychological safety, and joy in learning as important foundation for a healthy educational experience. (Bryk & Schneider, 2002; Hargreaves, 2003; Immordino-Yang *et al.* 2019). In the absence of trust, institutions rely on surveillance and control, which exacerbate conflict and disengagement.

Also, in the traditions of peace education and restorative justice, the focus is on dialogue, dignity, and participatory processes in addressing conflicts and harm. (Freire, 1970; Lederach, 2005; Zehr, 2015).

Meanwhile, Kundu and Sharma (2022) argue on the need to introduce nonviolent communication and peer mediation to constructively resolve conflicts. They underline that nonviolent communication should be the framework of the communication ecosystem in educational institutions. In their manual on peer mediation, they try to establish how by promoting mediation mindset of students, much of the conflicts involving students can be resolved constructively.

This chapter will explore how the process of design thinking can be used in conflict transformation in educational institutions. Specifically, it would analyze a specific design thinking approach, the JoyfulTalisman Design Canvas and its aim to develop human-centred joyful educational institutions while reclaiming the heart and soul of the educational institution.

Design thinking is considered to be a human-centric tool that can be utilized to address and resolve design problems in both businesses and the social sector. In this context, according to Martin (2009) design thinking is a human-centered process that involves a balanced mix of analytical and intuitive thinking, which is expected to provide a competitive advantage.

Meanwhile, Rösch, Tiberius and Kraus (2023) describes design thinking as an iterative problem-solving and innovation process in organizations, based on specific principles (such as a focus on user needs, multidisciplinary, etc.) and uses specific methods (such as creative thinking, visualization, experimentation, etc.).

Simó-Solsona *et al.* (2025) explains how design thinking is different from other problem solving methods. In this they point out there is a 'combination of empathy, problem definition ideation, prototyping and testing'. "This approach promotes interdisciplinarity and collaboration among various stakeholders; and it is not only applicable to product or service design but also to social transformation and innovation across different disciplines, although it is still largely underexplored," they note.

Brown and Waltz (2010) while underscoring on the usefulness of design thinking as a problem solving method, point out how many initiatives fail, as they are not designed based on the needs of clients or customers; they are never 'prototyped to solicit feedback'. In fact, experiences suggest that instead of preconceived notions on what could be the needs and solutions, different challenges in the society needs systemic solutions. Importantly, these solutions need to be grounded in the needs of the stakeholders, whether clients or customers. Traditionally, the designers whether in businesses or social sectors have been focusing on how a particular product or service could be improved in terms of their both looks and functionality. However, increasingly we find designers broadening their approaches and it is in this context design thinking has been getting greater traction. Here it is essential to understand that design thinking process relies on

the ‘ability to be intuitive, to recognize patterns, to construct ideas that have emotional meaning as well as functionality’ (Brown, 2009).

Simó-Solsona *et al.* (2025) delineates the different steps of phases in design thinking process, they may not be sequential but are iterative. The phase one is the empathy phase that involves developing understanding of the needs, emotions, and behaviours of the people or groups involved in the problem. In phase two, the collected information is synthesized to have a clear definition of the addressable problem. Phase three is the ideation round that is aimed at generating wide ranging potential solutions through creativity and co-creation. Different techniques like brainstorming and mind mapping are used to explore different options. The phase four is the prototyping phase. In this phase, initial versions of solutions are created to assess their feasibility. Testing is done in phase five. In this phase, the prototypes are assessed with users to refine and enhance the final solution.

While design thinking is extensively used as a tool of problem solving in different business organizations and social enterprises, scholars like Loewe (2019) see these processes lacking in critical or deep thinking. Loewe bases the arguments in sync with other design scholars like Richard Buchanan who stressed that the more design opens up to social, ecological and political questions, the broader the practice, study of, and research that informs design become. He argues, “Design thinking needs to become more critical to allow it to provide designers and their collaborators with a viable means for dealing with the social, technological, economic and political paradoxes of a complex world, as well as its own paradoxical existence.”

Similarly, Escobar (2018) argues for “designs for the pluriverse,” where design is understood as world-making rather than problem-solving. His central claim is that design always creates worlds- the ways of living, relating, producing, and knowing. Designs actually shape social relations, human-nature relationships, and cultural meanings. Hence, designs cannot be said to be neutral. Escobar also critiques modern western design for reinforcing

what he calls the one-world world. It is in this context he proposes the pluriverse as an alternative where different worlds coexist, overlap, and sometimes conflict.

The Philosophy of the JoyfulTalisman

“Mahatma Gandhi’s Talisman serves as an enduring guidepost, urging us to direct our thoughts and actions towards the welfare of the most vulnerable in society. Drawing inspiration from this ideal, the JoyfulTalisman approach invites us to journey to the innermost depths of our being—nurturing human values not only to enhance our own happiness, but also as a steadfast moral compass for ethical and compassionate action in the world.”- Vedabhyas Kundu and Munazah Shah (Building Trust Together: Collective Healing through JoyfulTalisman Values)

Kundu and Shah (2024) taking inspiration from Mahatma Gandhi’s Talisman, constructed their framework of the JoyfulTalisman that underlines the essence of nurturing human values for a joyful world and overall well-being. Delving on the philosophy of the JoyfulTalisman, Kundu and Shah (2026) notes:

The concept argues that nurturing of human values can contribute towards our mental health and avoid unnecessary stress. It emphasizes the need to turn inwards underlining the essence of loving-kindness, self-acceptance, self-compassion, and respect for oneself and others. It nudges us to measure our nonviolent and solidarity footprints through self-reflection, and self-introspection. It underlines the importance of human interdependence literacy and sensitivity to the interconnectedness between human-nature-and all other living beings. Further, it underlines the need to evoke the spirit of caring for others and volunteerism. These, we argue, are the foundational pillars for individual and collective well-being.

Kundu and Shah further pointing on the framework of the JoyfulTalisman says:

We believe that the philosophy of JoyfulTalisman centres on revisiting our human values like loving-kindness, empathy, compassion, integrity, and respect as the foundation for personal happiness and

collective well-being, especially by encouraging self-healing and positive transformation. It teaches that nurturing compassion and gratitude within ourselves enables us to create joyful, harmonious relationships and resilient communities in a world often afflicted by negativity and division.

Kundu and Shah have been applying the philosophy of the JoyfulTalisman in different areas like conscience building, trust repair, consensus building, and dialogue building. Further, educationists like Lescano (2025) have been using the JoyfulTalisman philosophy to explore the role of education in human interdependence. Underlining the essence of human interdependence literacy, which is the second pillar of the JoyfulTalisman philosophy, and its role in furthering education, Lescano notes, “The world needs fewer speeches and more experiences capable of healing, connecting, and transforming. Literacy in human interdependence is not a distant utopia but an urgent necessity. It is the ethical foundation for positive coexistence, planetary citizenship, and a real culture of peace lived out in everyday life.”

Based on these areas of work, Kundu and Shah (2026) framed the JoyfulTalisman Design Canvas, which underscores that design must evolve from being merely human-centered to being relationally restorative and joy and value-centered. They explain the Canvas as a ‘participatory, human-centered framework that integrates design thinking, consensus building, trust repair, servant leadership, and the nurturing of human values such as joy and dignity to guide collective decision-making and relational renewal in complex social contexts’.

Exploring the JoyfulTalisman Design Canvas

As noted above Escobar (2018) had argued for ‘designs for the pluriverse’, where design is understood as world-making rather than problem-solving. The JoyfulTalisman Design Canvas aligns with this shift by treating design as a moral and relational intervention. Escobar critiques solutionism arguing that modern design seeks to fix whereas pluriversal design seeks to care for relations. In the same way,

the JoyfulTalisman approach underlines the essence of human values and relationships; it argues on the importance of the little inner voice and overall on moral, ethical, and spiritual development. In the JoyfulTalisman framework, the endeavour to find the best possible approaches to handle a particular issue do not begin with problem; instead the thrust is on joy, trust, emotions, and shared human values.

Kimbell (2011) argues how conventional design thinking process is many times reduced to some fixed sets of tools or steps. These fails to take into account the exact context, power relations, ruptures in relationships, trust factors, and the socially situated nature of design practice. As argued by Kundu and Shah (2026) all stakeholders in the process of the Design Canvas are actually co-creators and partners in shaping outcomes and not users. They further argue that trust and relationship health is the foundational architecture and not optional. This foundational pillar helps in the acknowledgement that power, history, and emotions do contribute towards shaping the design outcome. The JoyfulTalisman Design Canvas also underscores the importance of inclusive voice equity and power awareness rather than superficial user mapping. The Canvas also treats joy, dignity, and well-being as central design values; they are not by-products of a solution. By emphasizing on shared meanings and values, the Canvas tries to explore common ethical ground not just what users want or need; it is much deeper than these are.

Kundu and Shah (2026) delineate nine interrelated design dimensions of the JoyfulTalisman Design Canvas. These include: shared purpose, stakeholder inclusion, trust repair, lived experience, values alignment, joyful co-creation, ethical prototyping, consensus-building, and reflective renewal. This framework positions conflict as a pedagogical resource rather than a disruption.

In-depth interviews of educationists using design thinking points out how the JoyfulTalisman Design Canvas can be a useful tool that goes beyond the traditional approaches as it incorporates ideas of trust, consensus, joy, human values, and human interdependence. For instance, Bina Sarkar,

Associate Professor, Ajeekya D Y Patil University points out, “The JoyfulTalisman Design Canvas is a transformative tool that elevates design beyond outputs to nurture trust, consensus, and dignity. The nine iterative elements from shared purpose to joyful renewal masterfully weave relational healing into innovation, addressing blind spots in conventional design thinking like power imbalances and emotional repair. Fostering legitimate co-creation and accountability, promising sustainable harmony in teams facing today’s complex stakeholder dynamics. Pilot it with measurable well-being outcomes to showcase return of investment ; this could redefine organizational peace-building.”

Meena Mishra, Chairperson, Brain Behaviour Trust, which imparts mental health education talking on the Design Canvas notes, “It is a relational design framework that uses purpose, emotions, values, power awareness, and co-creation to restore joy, trust, and shared meaning in any collective system. All nine elements exist to **restore healthy relationships**, not merely solve problems. Joy in the context of the Design Canvas means aliveness and belonging, not pleasure.”

Indira Dasgupta Cherukuri, who runs the Anandalaya School in Jharkhand points out, “In the JoyfulTalisman Design Canvas, the work is not to solve problems alone but to heal relationships, where joy signifies aliveness and belonging rooted in shared humanity rather than pleasure.” She further stresses, “All nine elements of the JoyfulTalisman Design Canvas are oriented toward restoring healthy relationships rather than merely resolving discrete problems.”

Reclaiming the Heart and Soul of Educational Institutions through the Joyful Talisman Design Canvas

As noted above wide ranging issues like pressures of performance, need to increase student’s intake, increasing commoditization of education and transactionalism are leading to not only erosion of values but also increasing conflicts in educational institutions. The challenge is not only to stem the

erosion of values but also develop a value-based reformative ecosystem where conflicts can be handled constructively. Conflicts happen due to increasing trust deficit and emotional exhaustion amongst all stakeholders. In short, the challenge is to reclaim the heart and soul of educational institutions as there is soul crisis. Here it would be pertinent to explore how JoyfulTalisman Design Canvas- based intervention can contribute to healing in relationships due to conflicts and help reclaim the heart and soul of the institution. These can through various interactive sessions and dialogues. The guiding premise of using this Design Canvas is, “We are not here to fix people. We are here to redesign how we live together.”

Further, it would be apt to underline the core objectives of reclaiming the heart and soul of educational institutions through the JoyfulTalisman values. (Kundu & Shah, 2025) In the context of schools, these include:

- (i) Reclaiming classrooms as living spaces where loving kindness, empathy, gratitude, reflection, and co-growth flourish.
- (ii) Enabling school authorities and teachers to embody authenticity, care, mindfulness, and nonviolent communication (which we propose must become the central communication architecture of all schools).
- (iii) Empowering students to trust and respect themselves and one another as co-learners while fostering cooperation over competition.
- (iv) Integrating socio-emotional learning with human values rooted in our deep-rooted wisdom and cultural traditions.
- (v) Building measurable pathways for inner and relational growth as part of everyday classroom culture.

Stage 1: Shared Purpose and Intention

In the first stage, instead of focusing on the problems right at the beginning, the aim of the sessions is to guide the stakeholders to turn inwards for self-reflection and self-introspection. Deeper inner enquiry is important to reflect on the issues in the educational institution. As the

overarching goal is the reclaim the heart and soul of the institution and develop a constructive conflict transformation ecosystem, the sessions need to involve the management, administrators, teachers, students, and parents. The dialogues should be such that encourage a shared moral horizon. Students and teachers could share their vision of belongingness; administrators reflect on sustainability, ethical and moral responsibility; and parents could reflect on character building.

Stage 2: Stakeholders as Co-creators and Strengthening of Relationships

The thrust of the Design Canvas is inclusive participation; it rejects user–designer hierarchies, aligning with participatory design traditions (Schuler & Namioka, 1993). Inclusion of marginalized voices is central, as many processes of conflict resolution do not have spaces for such voices due to hierarchical structures.

In this session, instead of mapping hierarchies, it would be pertinent to map relational experiences. Generally conflicts arise when students feel invisible in decision making; and when there are instances of favouritism, etc. Also when teachers start to feel mistrusted or overburdened, there are possibilities of conflicts. Similarly, administrators could share about the pressures and isolation in the ecosystem. Through this session, the institution can start seeing as a web of relationship and not a space for only transactionalism.

Stage 3: Trust Acknowledgement and Repair

Delving on the emotional landscape

Kundu & Shah (2026) constructed their JoyfulTalisman Trust Repair Model in their book, *Building Trust Together: Collective Healing through JoyfulTalisman Values*. They point out, “Working on our inner sanctuary, having compassionate clarity, nurturing nonviolent communication, and courageous stewardship of our relationships are all essential ingredients for trust repair and strengthening of trust.” These are the essential ingredients of the trust repair model.

In this stage, during the session a trust acknowledgement and repair circle is organized. The trust repair circle can be organized with use of nonviolent communication as the communication ecosystem. The aim is to have open and flexible communication with stakeholders encouraged to reflect on things like ‘what hurt me most during the conflict was...’ There are no interruptions, no rebuttals, just acknowledgement. Usually in situations of trust deficit there are lots of issues of emotions that are involved. There are issues of anger, fear, expectations, loss, etc. The aim of this stage is to repair trust and further institutional emotional intelligence.

Stage 4: Values and Human Dignity

This is a critical stage as during the session the stakeholders discuss the values that seem to be violated and which remain non-negotiable. Some of the values that need to be discussed include dignity, fairness, care, autonomy, and mutual respect. In the context of conflict transformation, this session reframes conflict as value misalignment and not bad intent. The aim of this session is to return to ethical roots and avoid compliance culture that is authoritarian in nature.

Stage 5: Points of Friction and Systemic Stressors

In this stage, the session focuses at the micro-level on where exactly the system generates stress and misunderstanding. This needs to be core finding of this session. There could be areas like: one-way communication channels, ambiguous evaluation criteria, absence of student voice in governance, time pressure masquerading as urgency. Many of these issues create differences and conflicts. So, instead of blaming individuals, the focus shifts to design flaws, i.e., problems in the system. Soul searching is needed as there are possibilities that the institution has outgrown some of its own structures.

Stage 6: Power, Voice, and Inclusion

This is a critical stage of the Design Canvas. In this session, the stakeholders explore on who

decides, who complies, and who disappears. The areas of concern could involve how administrators carry invisible pressure from regulators and other higher authorities, how teachers are consulted late or sometimes are not even taken into confidence. Through this stage, the aim would be to rediscover democratic education as a lived practice.

Stage 7: Shared Meaning and Common Ground

This is a stage for consensus building. In this session, the aim is to find on what all are agreed on by the stakeholders. There would of course be arguments on the approaches to be adopted to reach on what is agreed. Teachers may have one set of views, and the administrators another set of opinion. However, the overarching aim would be to reclaim the heart and soul of the institution and focusing on academic excellence with humanity. The whole process of the Design Canvas is aimed at encouraging reflection on the loss of institutional ethos and how to reclaim it. Finding common ground would mean the emergence of consensus building as an instrument of decision making.

Stage 8: Joyful Co-creation of Possibilities: Joy as a design force

Initiation of gentle experiments

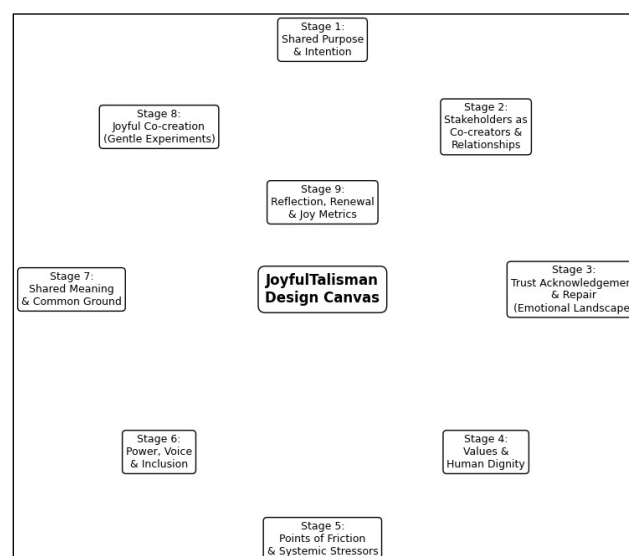
Following consensus building, it is time to experiment on the different possibilities in this session. It is time to be creative, alive, and express sense of belonging to the institution. There is no need for harsh reforms but gentle experiments that could be more far-reaching. For instance, there could be development of some transparent workload audits, and joint teacher-student-administrator review panels for creative ideas to germinate. Through this process, change can become participatory and humane, and not imposed.

Stage 9: Reflection, Renewal, and Joy Metrics

Once consensus is made and the solution is being implemented it would be appropriate to go back and make self-reflection on whether it is giving the desired results. It is important to evaluate

whether the issues or conflict has been resolved constructively. Evaluation includes relational and well-being indicators, aligning with emerging well-being and human development metrics (Stiglitz, Sen & Fitoussi, 2009).

In the reflection session, the stakeholders reflect on whether in the institution all are showing a renewed sense of hope, aliveness, and pride in belongingness. There is psychological safety and enhanced curiosity in classrooms that is expanding the learning outcomes. It is also reflected on whether the felt sense of trust is restored and if the institution has been able to reclaim its living spirit- the joy of learning and teaching.



The figure presents the JoyfulTalisman Design Canvas as a non-linear, nine-stage framework for reclaiming the heart and soul of educational institutions. The stages move from shared purpose and relational awareness to trust repair, ethical reflection, systemic diagnosis, participatory governance, consensus building, joyful co-creation, and reflective evaluation. The circular arrangement emphasizes iterative sense-making and relational renewal rather than sequential problem-solving.

CONCLUSION: Reclaiming the Heart and Soul of Educational Institutions

This paper has argued that many contemporary educational institutions are experiencing not merely operational or governance challenges, but a deeper soul crisis—manifested in erosion of trust, emotional

exhaustion, value dilution, and recurring conflicts among stakeholders. Pressures of performance, market-driven logics, increasing commoditization of education, and transactional relationships have collectively narrowed the moral and relational horizons of educational institutions. Within such contexts, conflicts are often addressed through compliance-based mechanisms or managerial fixes that fail to heal underlying relational wounds. The central challenge, therefore, is not simply conflict resolution and conflict transformation, but the reclamation of the heart and soul of educational institutions through the restoration of trust, dignity, shared meaning, and joy in collective life.

The JoyfulTalisman Design Canvas has been presented as a values-based, participatory, and relational intervention framework capable of responding to this challenge. Grounded in the guiding premise that *“we are not here to fix people, but to redesign how we live together,”* the Canvas reframes conflict not as dysfunction or deviance, but as a signal of misaligned values, strained relationships, and systemic stressors. By foregrounding inner reflection, emotional literacy, ethical dialogue, and co-creation, the Canvas offers a humane alternative to instrumental and adversarial approaches to institutional conflict.

Across its nine stages, the JoyfulTalisman Design Canvas demonstrates how conflict transformation in educational settings can become a pathway to institutional renewal. Beginning with shared purpose and moral intention, the Canvas invites stakeholders—management, administrators, teachers, students, and parents—to reconnect with the deeper educational calling of nurturing human flourishing. This inward turn is crucial, as it shifts attention away from blame and defensiveness toward self-awareness, responsibility, and ethical imagination. The emphasis on stakeholders as co-creators further dismantles hierarchical and exclusionary structures, enabling the institution to be experienced as a living web of relationships rather than a transactional system.

A distinctive contribution of the Canvas lies in its explicit engagement with the emotional and trust

dimensions of institutional life. Through trust acknowledgement and repair circles, supported by nonviolent communication, the framework legitimizes emotions as vital data rather than disruptive forces. This process strengthens institutional emotional intelligence and enables collective healing, aligning with the JoyfulTalisman Trust Repair Model articulated by Kundu and Shah (2026). In doing so, the Canvas addresses one of the most persistent blind spots in educational reform—the failure to attend to emotional exhaustion, fear, and unspoken hurt that often underlies conflicts.

Equally significant is the Canvas’s emphasis on values and human dignity. By reframing conflicts as value misalignments rather than malicious intent, it restores ethical depth to institutional dialogue and resists authoritarian compliance cultures. The stages addressing systemic stressors and power asymmetries further shift the locus of inquiry from individuals to structures, revealing how design flaws—such as opaque evaluation systems, exclusionary decision-making, and one-way communication—generate recurring tensions. This systemic orientation allows institutions to evolve without scapegoating, acknowledging that they may have outgrown certain inherited structures.

The later stages of shared meaning, joyful co-creation, and gentle experimentation underscore the Canvas’s orientation toward positive transformation rather than mere damage control. Consensus building emerges not as forced agreement, but as a process of discovering common ground rooted in academic excellence with humanity. Joy, in this framework, is not understood as pleasure or superficial positivity, but as aliveness, belonging, and relational vitality. By encouraging small, participatory experiments rather than sweeping reforms, the Canvas makes change less threatening and more sustainable.

Finally, the emphasis on reflection, renewal, and joy metrics aligns the Canvas with emerging human development and well-being frameworks (Stiglitz, Sen & Fitoussi, 2009). Evaluation is expanded beyond performance indicators to include relational health, psychological safety, trust restoration,

and a renewed sense of pride and belonging. In this way, the success of educational institutions is redefined in terms of their capacity to sustain humane relationships and meaningful learning environments.

In conclusion, the JoyfulTalisman Design Canvas offers a compelling and timely framework for reclaiming the heart and soul of educational institutions. It positions schools not merely as sites of instruction, but as moral and relational ecosystems where conflicts, when approached with care, can become catalysts for renewal. By integrating human values, emotional intelligence, participatory design, and ethical reflection, the Canvas contributes to a growing body of work that reimagines education as a deeply human endeavor—one where joy, trust, and shared meaning are not peripheral ideals, but central indicators of institutional health and educational excellence.

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