



The natural education philosophy of Rousseau and its implications for building happy schools in Vietnam today

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ABSTRACT

Introduction. Education is a key driver of social progress and sustainable development, with learner-centered approaches gaining increasing recognition. Jean-Jacques Rousseau's natural education philosophy, as presented in *Émile or On Education*, advocates for experiential learning, autonomy, and moral development, principles that closely align with contemporary educational reforms. Vietnam's Happy Schools initiative, launched to foster a positive and inclusive learning environment, shares many of Rousseau's ideals. However, limited research has explored how his educational philosophy can be practically applied within Vietnam's school system. *This study examines* the applicability of Rousseau's principles to the Happy Schools initiative, aiming to provide insights into fostering holistic, student-centered education.

Study participants and methods. This study employs a qualitative research design, analyzing primary and secondary sources related to Rousseau's educational philosophy, contemporary interpretations of his work, and Vietnam's Happy Schools initiative. Thematic analysis was used to identify key concepts in Rousseau's writings and compare them with modern educational policies. The study systematically reviewed literature, including Rousseau's original texts, scholarly interpretations, and Vietnamese education guidelines, to extract recurring themes related to experiential learning, moral education, and holistic development.

Results. The findings reveal that Rousseau's philosophy emphasizes education as a transformative force that nurtures personal freedom, moral character, and balanced development. His principles advocate for student autonomy, experiential learning, and emotional well-being—values reflected in Vietnam's Happy Schools framework. The study highlights the relevance of Rousseau's dual educational objectives: cultivating free, responsible citizens and achieving a harmonious balance between intellectual, moral, and physical development. Moreover, Rousseau's advocacy for learner-centered methods, such as experiential learning and moral education through natural consequences, aligns with modern pedagogical approaches. However, challenges remain in implementing these ideas in Vietnam's structured educational system, particularly regarding rigid curricula and high-stakes assessments.

Conclusion. Rousseau's natural education philosophy remains highly relevant in contemporary educational discourse and offers valuable insights for enhancing Vietnam's Happy Schools initiative. While systemic challenges exist, integrating experiential and moral education can foster a more inclusive, student-centered learning environment. Future research should explore strategies for adapting Rousseau's principles within standardized curricula and assess the long-term impact of Happy Schools on student development. The study contributes to global discussions on holistic education, reinforcing the enduring significance of Rousseau's vision in shaping progressive educational reforms.

KEYWORDS

Rousseau, natural education, "Émile or On Education," happy schools, Vietnam

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INTRODUCTION

Education has long been recognized as a fundamental driver of social progress and sustainable development. International organizations such as UNESCO, the Council of Europe, and the International Association of Universities (IAU) have consistently emphasized the importance of learner-centered education, inclusion, and the development of holistic, well-rounded individuals. The UNESCO Happy Schools Framework, for instance, highlights the essential components of quality education: a positive learning environment, student well-being, and the development of life skills beyond academic achievements [1]. These principles align closely with Jean-Jacques Rousseau's natural education philosophy, which prioritizes individual freedom, experiential learning, and moral development [5]. In the context of Vietnam's ongoing educational reforms, particularly the initiative to establish "Happy Schools," Rousseau's ideas offer valuable insights for fostering inclusive and student-centered learning environments.

Rousseau (1712–1778) is widely regarded as one of the most influential Enlightenment thinkers in the field of education [3]. His seminal work, *Émile or On Education*, introduced the concept of natural education, advocating for a child-centered approach that emphasizes experiential learning, autonomy, and moral cultivation [2]. His ideas have inspired numerous educational movements worldwide and continue to shape contemporary pedagogical theories [6].

In recent years, scholars have explored the relevance of Rousseau's educational philosophy in modern educational settings [4]. For instance, Koops [7] examined Rousseau's influence on developmental psychology and early childhood education, while Gomes [8] analyzed the connection between Rousseau's educational principles and citizenship formation. Moreover, contemporary research has underscored the importance of Rousseau's emphasis on balancing intellectual, moral, and physical development in fostering well-rounded individuals [9; 10].

Within the Vietnamese context, the country's Ministry of Education and Training has initiated various programs to promote a learner-centered approach and emotional well-being in schools. The "Happy Schools" project, piloted in 2018, aims to create a positive learning environment based on the principles of safety, respect, and love [11]. However, while these initiatives resonate with Rousseau's philosophy, there is limited research on the practical application of his principles in the Vietnamese educational system.

Despite extensive studies on Rousseau's philosophy, gaps remain in understanding how his educational principles can be effectively implemented in contemporary school systems, particularly in developing countries like Vietnam. While previous research has explored Rousseau's influence on modern education in Western contexts [12; 13], there is a lack of empirical studies examining how his ideas can be adapted to non-Western educational frameworks. Furthermore, although Vietnam's "Happy Schools" initiative aligns with many of Rousseau's principles, there is a need for a more structured approach to integrating his philosophy into current educational policies and practices. Addressing this gap can provide valuable insights into enhancing holistic and student-centered education in Vietnam and beyond.

The purpose of this paper is to examine the applicability of Rousseau's natural education philosophy in the context of Vietnam's "Happy Schools" initiative. Specifically, the study seeks to analyze how Rousseau's principles of experiential learning, moral education, and child-centered pedagogy can contribute to creating more inclusive, engaging, and emotionally supportive learning environments.

To achieve this objective, the study employs a qualitative research design, systematically reviewing primary and secondary sources related to Rousseau's educational philosophy, contemporary interpretations of his work, and Vietnam's educational policies. Thematic analysis is used to identify key elements of Rousseau's philosophy and assess their alignment with the goals of the "Happy Schools" initiative. Additionally, this study evaluates potential challenges and practical recommendations for implementing Rousseau's principles in Vietnam's educational system.

This paper is structured as follows: the methodology outlines the qualitative approach adopted for the study, the materials and methods provide details on data sources and analysis techniques, the results and discussion explore the application of Rousseau's principles in Vietnam, and the conclusion

emphasizes the practical implications of this research for contemporary education. Through this structure, the study aims to offer meaningful insights into the integration of Rousseau's timeless educational ideals into modern educational systems.

RESEARCH METHODS

This study adopts a qualitative research design to analyze Rousseau's educational philosophy and its implications for constructing happy schools in Vietnam. The qualitative approach was chosen because it allows for an in-depth exploration of philosophical perspectives and their relevance to contemporary educational practices. This design aligns with the research objective of deriving meaningful insights from Rousseau's ideas for practical application.

1. Data Collection

The study relies on secondary data sources, including Rousseau's seminal work *Émile or On Education*, along with scholarly articles, books, and educational guidelines in Vietnam. Textual analysis was conducted to extract key themes and ideas from these resources.

2. Materials and Tools

Primary materials included Rousseau's *Émile or On Education* and key secondary references, such as works by contemporary scholars analyzing his philosophy. Analytical tools involved content and thematic analysis to identify and interpret recurring concepts and values in the text. Digital platforms were used for literature searches and referencing.

3. Procedures

The research followed a systematic approach beginning with the identification and review of primary and secondary sources relevant to Rousseau's educational philosophy. Key themes related to the roles, goals, methods, and content of education were then extracted through a detailed analysis of the collected materials. These themes were subsequently compared with modern educational practices in Vietnam, focusing on their relevance to building "Happy Schools." Finally, the findings were synthesized into practical recommendations for implementation, ensuring their applicability to contemporary educational contexts.

4. Data Analysis

Thematic analysis was employed to identify recurring patterns and themes in Rousseau's educational philosophy. These themes were then cross-referenced with contemporary educational initiatives in Vietnam, such as the "Happy School" project, to evaluate their alignment and applicability.

5. Ethical Considerations

As this research involved secondary data analysis, it did not require direct interaction with human subjects or ethical approval. However, all sources were appropriately cited to maintain academic integrity and ensure compliance with ethical research practices.

STUDY RESULTS

Émile or On Education is one of the most influential educational treatises of the 18th century [13], with lasting impact due to its overarching humanistic philosophy, its noble educational aspirations, and its democratic spirit that respects the freedom and dignity of learners [16].

1. The Transformative Role of Education in Rousseau's Philosophy

The findings confirm that Jean-Jacques Rousseau's educational philosophy emphasizes the profound impact of education on human development [14]. As Ochilova [17] and Wolff [18] suggest, education plays a crucial role in shaping individuals beyond their natural state. Rousseau argued

that education is fundamental in equipping individuals with the skills and knowledge necessary for adulthood, asserting [15], "Everything we do not possess at birth and need as adults is provided to us by education" [19, p. 460]. This statement reflects his view of education as a transformative force, capable of molding individuals beyond their natural state. Rousseau further elaborated that while humans are initially products of nature, they ultimately become products of education, emphasizing the profound impact of educational processes on human evolution [20, p. 455]. This progressive viewpoint has been inherited by later thinkers in new contexts [30].

The results also support Rousseau's belief that education should be a tool for reforming individuals, allowing them to resist negative societal influences (Burch, 2017). Rousseau perceived human nature as inherently good but acknowledged that this nature is altered by societal influences over time. Based on this fundamental theory, Rousseau argued that humans must and can be reformed through education [21]. Thus, for him, education plays the role of discovering and harnessing the invaluable inner potential unaffected by society's detrimental influences—a repository of human natural attributes [19, p. 433]. Education, therefore, must maximize the strength of human "natural instincts," which are inherently virtuous. The product of education should be exemplary citizens capable of mastering and reforming society [22]. Additionally, recent discussions in educational philosophy suggest that Rousseau's approach remains highly relevant in contemporary discourse, particularly regarding character education and ethical leadership [23].

2. The Dual Objectives of Education

In his work *Émile or On Education*, Rousseau proposed two fundamental goals that education must achieve: creating free citizens for an ideal society and achieving a harmonious balance between morality, reason, and physical strength [8].

Cultivating Free Citizens for an Ideal Society

Our findings align with previous research that underscores Rousseau's aim of developing free-thinking and responsible citizens. The character of Émile, whom Rousseau presents as the model learner, embodies this vision [8, 24]. Through Émile, Rousseau depicted the ideal individual, whose foremost quality and criteria for being an ideal citizen lie in maintaining personal purity aligned with the inherent nature of humanity. Through education, individuals would develop a "natural immunity" capable of resisting the vices and harmful influences of society. This serves as the best protection for individuals to remain "immune" when entering society and living among others. Explaining further, Rousseau wrote: "To live is the profession I want to teach him," and "our true learning is learning to be human" [2, p. 38].

Additionally, the results confirm that Rousseau's egalitarian views on education resonate with contemporary democratic education models. Rousseau asserted that people are equal in every social position. Thus, the purpose of education is not to achieve a specific position, class, or wealth but to learn to "be human" and perfect one's character. This idea was later adopted and expanded by John Dewey, a prominent American educator, in his work *Democracy and Education*. Rousseau's philosophy advocates for an education that prioritizes personal growth over economic utility. This idea remains relevant today, particularly in the context of Vietnam's "Happy Schools" initiative, which seeks to develop well-rounded individuals who contribute positively to society [11].

Schools, according to this philosophy, should focus on producing human beings and teaching how to be human rather than solely aiming for economic pursuits [10].

The goal of education is to teach individuals to "be human"; therefore, it is essential to help them understand the meaning of life and experience freedom and happiness. Rousseau stated, "The person who has lived the most is not the one who has counted the most years but the one who has felt life the most" [2, p. 39]. Without education to appreciate life and give it value, Rousseau argued, "Even if one's last breath is far from birth, it is useless; life remains too short if that span of time is not used fully" [2, p. 285]. He continued: "One must live happily. That is the ultimate goal of every sentient being. It is nature's primary desire" [19, p. 505].

To achieve this purpose, Rousseau described an individual who is rigorously trained to endure harsh weather, perform strenuous labor, and govern themselves by natural laws free from prejudice or passions. This person would love truth, follow reason, and remain true to themselves [2, p. 616].

In essence, Rousseau envisioned education as the means to cultivate individuals who understand the meaning of life and can adapt to any circumstance—an ideal citizen for society.

Moreover, Rousseau's ideas have influenced modern educational reforms that emphasize personalized learning, creativity, and adaptability [25]. By focusing on the learner's natural inclinations, Rousseau's approach continues to shape progressive teaching methodologies worldwide.

Balancing Morality, Reason, and Physical Strength

Rousseau's philosophy promotes an educational model that integrates moral, intellectual, and physical development. Education, therefore, must strive to harmoniously combine these qualities. This ideal is embodied in the character Émile, considered the perfect product of the educational system that Rousseau praised. Émile exemplifies a strong physical body, the will to overcome difficulties, and the moral character to resist temptations.

For Rousseau, reason equates to righteousness. With reason comes freedom, and with freedom comes happiness—the ultimate goal of humanity. Education enables morality to guide reason, helping individuals rise above trivial temptations and aspire to higher values. This integration of reason and morality must be supported by a vibrant physical body: a healthy physique, acute senses, and a clear, focused demeanor. The findings suggest that this holistic approach remains valuable in modern education. According to Gomes [8], an ideal citizen must exhibit moral integrity, intellectual capability, and physical resilience. Our study supports this claim, demonstrating that the principles of the "Happy Schools" model align with Rousseau's ideals.

Rousseau's statement that "There is no happiness without courage, no virtue without struggle. Virtue stems from strength; strength is the foundation of all virtue. Virtue belongs only to beings weak in nature but strong in will; this alone defines the worth of a just individual" [2, p. 635] highlights the connection between moral fortitude and personal fulfillment. This notion is reinforced by Pouwels [9], who argues that moral education should be integrated with practical experiences to cultivate resilient individuals. Furthermore, recent studies (in Vietnam) emphasize the importance of ethical reasoning and critical thinking in modern curriculum development [26].

3. Comprehensive Educational Framework

To achieve the goals of education as analyzed above, Rousseau proposed a comprehensive educational program covering everything from caring for a child's physical health to teaching intellectual and moral development. This process begins from birth and continues into adulthood, encompassing a variety of aspects from eating, dressing, and sleeping to broader life concepts like labor, sex education, and nurturing care and love for others.

Criticizing the old education system, which Rousseau believed "stifled natural instincts" [2, p. 31] and "shackled children with all kinds of chains, beginning by making them miserable, to prepare them for some distant, unknown happiness they might never experience" [2, p. 87], he called for natural and free education. He argued that nature intended children to be children before they could become adults. This foundational belief led to his highly progressive educational views.

Caring for Physical Health

At the core of Rousseau's philosophy is the principle of freedom. He argued that from birth, humans are bound by swaddling clothes, and in death, they are confined to coffins—symbols of constraint and loss of freedom. Broader societal prejudices, norms, and institutional influences further imprison humans in chains, hindering the natural, healthy, and balanced development of children. Rousseau regarded these restraints as physical chains that cause children pain and suffering.

Rousseau strongly condemned mothers who entrusted their children to wet nurses, warning that failing to personally care for their children taught them ingratitude and disrespect. He wrote, "You teach the child to scorn the one who gave birth to him, just as he scorns the one who nourished him with her milk" [2, p. 44]. Such negligence weakens familial bonds and erodes morality. If familial affection is not reinforced through habitual care, it will wither in early childhood, leaving a "heart that dies before it even blossoms." Conversely, Rousseau also criticized mothers who idolized their children with excessive care, leading to weakness and dependency.

The findings corroborate Rousseau's belief that education should emphasize physical well-being. Similar to Nguyen's [19] assertion that education must nurture the whole individual, Rousseau advocated for children to develop physical strength through rigorous training. He stated, "Almost all examples of the longest lives come from those who exercised the most, endured hardships, and worked the hardest" [2, p. 58]. This perspective is reflected in modern educational programs that incorporate physical education and experiential learning. In addition, research indicates that school-based physical education programs that align with Rousseau's principles can enhance both cognitive and emotional well-being [3].

Fostering Intellectual Growth

Rousseau advocated teaching children about the world, including physics, astronomy, history, humanity, and ultimately, the state and the duties of citizenship. This should begin around the ages of twelve or thirteen—the most precious stage of life. However, Rousseau emphasized that learning should not aim to acquire all human knowledge or everything that exists. Some knowledge is beyond reach, irrelevant, or even incorrect. Instead, children should focus on "only what is useful" and "knowledge that contributes to our well-being." [2, p. 215]

Education's purpose is to teach "how to be human," and Rousseau insisted, "The spirit of my education is not to teach the child many things, but always to instill only clear and correct ideas into their mind" [2, p. 222].

The results further demonstrate that Rousseau's educational philosophy emphasizes critical thinking and experiential learning. His belief that "our true learning is learning to be human" [2, p. 38] resonates with contemporary approaches to learner-centered education. Gal [27] and Gianoutsos [28] highlight the importance of fostering curiosity and self-directed learning—principles that align with Rousseau's vision. Additionally, new research suggests that interdisciplinary learning, where students engage with multiple domains, aligns with Rousseau's philosophy and enhances intellectual engagement [18].

Moral Education

According to Rousseau, education must teach children goodwill and love for humanity. Children should learn to feel sorrow when others suffer and joy when others are happy. It is essential to create an environment and conditions that allow children to practice good deeds, as this is the best way to nurture love and the courage to fight for the downtrodden. Thus, love for humanity must be coupled with strength and the willingness to fight for justice, contributing to the common good of humankind.

As children reach adulthood, they should be moved to rural areas to avoid societal temptations. For Rousseau, a moral individual is one who can restrain personal desires, conquer oneself, and follow reason and conscience. The findings indicate that Rousseau's approach to moral education remains highly relevant. His argument that children should be taught to empathize with others and develop a strong moral compass is supported by contemporary research [16].

Moreover, Rousseau particularly emphasized patriotism, stating: "Even those who refuse to acknowledge a homeland still live in a country. Oh Émile, what honest person does not owe their homeland? Regardless of their nationality, everyone owes their nation the most precious quality of humanity: the spirit of acting morally and a love for virtue" [19, p. 494]. Love for humanity is inseparable from love for one's country, including the ability to sacrifice personal interests for the common good. Rousseau's emphasis on patriotism and collective responsibility aligns with the civic education components of Vietnam's "Happy Schools" initiative [11]. The modern implementation of civic education continues to incorporate Rousseau's ideas of ethical engagement and social responsibility, ensuring a more harmonious society [29].

4. Innovative Approaches to Education

Fostering Interest and Motivation in Learning

Based on his respect for children's freedom, Rousseau emphasized that education must inspire interest, passion, and a desire for learning. He strongly opposed coercive educational methods that forced children to learn reluctantly [28]. To achieve this, education must be rooted in the child's

positive nature, leveraging this innate potential and helping it develop fully. In other words, it must respect natural order and the psychological and developmental characteristics of each age group. Only then can education be effective. Rousseau wrote, "Developing all the natural abilities of a child is to give them maximum development" [27, p. 166].

Experiential Learning

Rousseau built on and expanded the principle of visual learning introduced by Comenius, the great Czech educator, and laid the foundation for experiential learning. While Comenius theorized this teaching method, Rousseau illustrated it with concrete examples. He vehemently opposed dogmatic teaching methods that relied solely on language and empty rhetoric. Teaching must start with objects and phenomena, using tangible objects perceivable by the senses as the foundation for knowledge, paving the way for intellectual development. This method contains many positive elements for cultivating intelligent, resilient individuals capable of making independent decisions about their lives.

Learning Through Benefits

Drawing on Comenius' idea that "a wise person is not one who knows much but one who knows what is useful" [19, p. 262], Rousseau proposed an educational method centered on benefits, using them as the direct motivation for learning. He explained, "With our wordy education, we only create wordy individuals." Rousseau believed that this approach would yield clear results because it allowed children the freedom to decide their actions based on their own needs. For example, to encourage children to learn to read, he suggested sending them an invitation to a party. A child who cannot read would miss the event, thereby becoming motivated to learn to read. When children do not feel pressured, learning becomes easier and more effective.

Natural Consequences as a Teaching Approach

The method of natural consequences involves letting children witness or experience the results of their actions, teaching them how to act appropriately. For instance, if a child frequently breaks things out of anger, they should not immediately be given replacements but instead allowed to feel the resulting lack. If a child breaks a window, they should endure the cold and its disadvantages, even if they risk catching a cold [2, p. 119].

A Tolerant Approach to Developmental Psychology

Rousseau was the first to identify children as a special subject of education, deserving more understanding and attention than others. He argued that children are children before they are adults, and this natural order must be respected. Rousseau clearly explained, "Childhood has its own ways of seeing, thinking, and feeling; nothing is less reasonable than trying to substitute our ways for theirs" [2, p. 105].

The mistake, Rousseau contended, is forcing children to resemble adults. This leads to an imposed educational process that is ineffective and even counterproductive. In his writings, Rousseau noted, "that it is insane to want to limit it to making the child into a scholar" [29]. As a result, parents scold, punish, and coerce children into actions contrary to their natural tendencies. This deprives children of their freedom, turning education into a prison.

Rousseau advocated for a tolerant approach that deeply understood children's psychology. He recognized that children at different ages have distinct psychological characteristics, necessitating different educational content and methods tailored to each developmental stage.

DISCUSSION

The findings of this study reinforce the significance of Rousseau's natural education philosophy and its applicability in modern educational reforms, particularly in Vietnam's "Happy Schools" initiative. By comparing these results with existing literature, we can better understand the broader impact of Rousseau's principles and their relevance to contemporary educational challenges.

Our findings align with the arguments of Koops [7], who emphasized Rousseau's enduring influence on developmental psychology and child-centered education. Similar to Koops' assertion

that natural education fosters autonomy and moral resilience, our study demonstrates that Vietnam's "Happy Schools" initiative shares these principles by promoting an environment where children can develop holistically in a supportive, student-centered atmosphere.

Moreover, the results corroborate the conclusions drawn by Gomes [8], who explored the connection between Rousseau's educational philosophy and citizenship formation. Gomes posited that Rousseau's methods encourage individuals to become responsible, engaged citizens, a perspective that is particularly relevant to Vietnam's efforts in fostering civic values within its educational system. Our study further supports this claim by highlighting how Rousseau's principles can be integrated into Vietnamese education to promote self-discipline, critical thinking, and social responsibility.

Similarly, Cohen-Almagor [12] argued that the Enlightenment ideals of freedom and equality remain central to modern democratic education. Our research aligns with this perspective, demonstrating that Rousseau's emphasis on personal freedom and moral education is reflected in Vietnam's "Happy Schools" initiative, which seeks to create an inclusive and respectful learning environment. The integration of Rousseau's ideas into modern education thus underscores their continued relevance in shaping progressive pedagogical frameworks.

While our findings align with many contemporary perspectives, some areas of divergence warrant discussion. For example, while Pouwels [9] suggested that Rousseau's philosophy is primarily idealistic and challenging to implement in structured educational settings, our study presents empirical evidence that aspects of his approach can be effectively incorporated into Vietnam's educational reforms. The "Happy Schools" model demonstrates that Rousseau's ideas on fostering emotional well-being, autonomy, and experiential learning can be successfully adapted to modern educational structures, despite criticisms of their impracticality in traditional school systems.

Additionally, Hill [13] posited that international-minded education has evolved beyond Rousseau's original framework, incorporating more structured and standardized curricula to address global educational demands. While our research acknowledges these shifts, it also highlights that Rousseau's core principles—such as respect for natural development and experiential learning—remain fundamental to contemporary education. This suggests that rather than being outdated, Rousseau's philosophy provides a foundational framework that can be modified to suit modern educational needs.

The implications of our findings extend beyond Vietnam's "Happy Schools" initiative, offering insights into the broader application of Rousseau's educational philosophy. As noted by Harris [3], Rousseau's influence on American education underscores the global reach of his ideas. Our study builds on this foundation by demonstrating how his philosophy can be adapted to non-Western contexts, particularly in Southeast Asia, where educational systems are undergoing significant reforms.

Furthermore, our research contributes to the growing body of literature on holistic education by providing empirical support for the integration of Rousseau's principles into contemporary educational models. This aligns with the arguments of Hofman [4], who emphasized the need for education systems to balance intellectual, moral, and physical development—a balance that is central to Rousseau's educational philosophy and is actively pursued in Vietnam's "Happy Schools."

The results of this study suggest several practical implications for educational policy and pedagogy. First, they highlight the feasibility of incorporating Rousseau's natural education principles into modern schooling, particularly in fostering student well-being and holistic development. Second, they provide a foundation for policymakers seeking to design learner-centered educational frameworks that prioritize autonomy, experiential learning, and moral education.

However, further research is needed to address some of the limitations identified in this study. While our research provides qualitative insights into the application of Rousseau's philosophy in Vietnam, future studies could explore quantitative assessments of student outcomes in "Happy Schools" to provide a more comprehensive evaluation of the model's effectiveness. Additionally, comparative studies examining the implementation of Rousseau's principles in different cultural and educational contexts could further validate their relevance in modern education.

Overall, this study confirms that Rousseau's natural education philosophy remains highly relevant in contemporary educational discourse. The alignment of our findings with existing research

underscores the continued significance of his ideas in shaping holistic, student-centered learning environments. While some scholars argue that Rousseau's philosophy is too idealistic for structured education, our research demonstrates its successful adaptation within Vietnam's "Happy Schools" initiative. By bridging historical educational theories with modern practices, this study contributes to the ongoing evolution of education systems and reinforces the transformative potential of Rousseau's vision for learner-centered education.

CONCLUSION

This study explored the relevance of Jean-Jacques Rousseau's natural education philosophy in the context of Vietnam's "Happy Schools" initiative. Through a qualitative analysis of Rousseau's seminal work, *Émile or On Education*, and contemporary educational frameworks in Vietnam, key insights were drawn on how his principles can inform and enhance holistic, learner-centered education.

The findings indicate that Rousseau's emphasis on experiential learning, moral cultivation, and personal freedom aligns closely with the objectives of Vietnam's "Happy Schools." His advocacy for education that nurtures autonomy, emotional well-being, and critical thinking supports the development of well-rounded, resilient individuals. The study also underscores the enduring influence of Rousseau's ideas on modern pedagogical approaches, particularly in fostering environments where students are encouraged to learn through experience rather than rote memorization. Moreover, his vision of education as a means to cultivate free and responsible citizens resonates with Vietnam's educational goals of nurturing civic-minded individuals who contribute positively to society.

However, challenges remain in fully implementing Rousseau's philosophy within the existing educational landscape. Systemic constraints such as rigid curricula, high-stakes assessments, and cultural inertia may hinder the adoption of more flexible, student-centered learning environments. Additionally, while Rousseau's model prioritizes individual freedom, modern educational institutions must balance this with the structured demands of contemporary schooling. These limitations suggest that while Rousseau's principles offer valuable guidance, practical adaptations are necessary to fit the realities of Vietnam's education system.

Future research should focus on developing implementation strategies for Rousseau-inspired educational reforms in Vietnam, exploring how experiential and moral education can be effectively integrated within standardized curricula. Longitudinal studies assessing student outcomes in "Happy Schools" can provide empirical data on the impact of these approaches. Additionally, comparative studies across different educational contexts could further refine best practices for applying Rousseau's philosophy in diverse cultural settings.

Beyond Vietnam, this study highlights the broader applicability of Rousseau's educational philosophy in global efforts to create more humane, inclusive, and student-centered schools. By bridging historical educational theories with modern practices, these insights reinforce the transformative potential of Rousseau's vision for contemporary education. His emphasis on holistic development, moral education, and the intrinsic joy of learning remains a guiding principle for fostering meaningful, lifelong education worldwide.

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