

## The Philosophy of Education of Jean-Jacques Rousseau and Its Application in Vietnam's Educational Reforms

*A filosofia da educação de Jean-Jacques Rousseau e sua aplicação nas reformas educacionais do Vietnã.*

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### ABSTRACT

Jean-Jacques Rousseau, through his masterpiece *Émile, ou De l'éducation* (1762), revolutionized educational philosophy by emphasizing the principle of "natural education," where children develop according to their natural stages, learning through real-life experiences rather than enforced rote memorization and social discipline. This article provides an in-depth analysis of Rousseau's core principles, including the five stages of child development, critiques of traditional education, and the importance of holistic education. Employing methods of secondary document analysis, historical comparison, and policy evaluation, the study demonstrates that integrating Rousseau's principles can support the development of soft skills, personalized learning, and reduced exam pressure, contributing to goals such as 80% of schools meeting national standards by 2030 and positioning Vietnam as a regional education hub by 2045. The findings highlight opportunities for innovation while cautioning against challenges from East Asian traditional culture. The article proposes pilot models, such as the "Happy Schools" program combined with Rousseau's methods, to promote sustainable education.

**KEYWORDS:** Jean-Jacques Rousseau, Natural Education, Vietnam Reforms, Child Development, Holistic Education.

### RESUMO

Jean-Jacques Rousseau, por meio de sua obra-prima *Emílio, ou Da Educação* (1762), revolucionou a filosofia educacional ao enfatizar o princípio da "educação natural", segundo o qual as crianças se

desenvolvem de acordo com seus estágios naturais, aprendendo por meio de experiências da vida real em vez de memorização mecânica e disciplina social impostas. Este artigo apresenta uma análise aprofundada dos princípios fundamentais de Rousseau, incluindo os cinco estágios do desenvolvimento infantil, críticas à educação tradicional e a importância da educação holística. Utilizando métodos de análise de documentos secundários, comparação histórica e avaliação de políticas, o estudo demonstra que a integração dos princípios de Rousseau pode apoiar o desenvolvimento de habilidades socioemocionais, a aprendizagem personalizada e a redução da pressão dos exames, contribuindo para metas como 80% das escolas atendendo aos padrões nacionais até 2030 e posicionando o Vietnã como um polo educacional regional até 2045. Os resultados destacam oportunidades para inovação, ao mesmo tempo que alertam para os desafios da cultura tradicional do Leste Asiático. O artigo propõe modelos piloto, como o programa "Escolas Felizes" combinado com os métodos de Rousseau, para promover a educação sustentável.

**PALAVRAS-CHAVE:** Jean-Jacques Rousseau, Educação Natural, Reformas no Vietnã, Desenvolvimento Infantil, Educação Holística.

## 1. Introduction

Education is not merely the transmission of knowledge but the process of forming a holistic human being, an idea profoundly etched by Jean-Jacques Rousseau in the 18th century. Born in Geneva, Switzerland, in 1712, Rousseau was a philosopher, writer, and social reformer who challenged the norms of the Enlightenment by emphasizing the natural disposition of humanity (Lu, 2019). His work *Émile, ou De l'éducation* (*Émile, or On Education*), published in 1762, is not only an educational novel but also a philosophical manifesto against the mechanistic education systems of the time, where children were compelled to memorize and submit to rigid religious discipline (Koops, 2012).

Rousseau argued that society corrupts the primitive human being, the "noble savage", and that education must restore that innocence by allowing children to learn through experience, exploration, and interaction with nature. This idea profoundly influenced subsequent educators such as Johann Heinrich Pestalozzi, Friedrich Froebel, and John Dewey, and continues to resonate in modern movements like Montessori or progressive education (Cooper, 2010). In the context of globalization and the Fourth Industrial Revolution, Vietnam's education system stands at a historic crossroads of reform. On August 22, 2025, the Politburo of Vietnam issued Resolution 7 on "Breakthrough Development in Education and Training," marking a strategic turning point to build a modern, equitable, and creative education system. This resolution sets targets for 2030: 80% of schools meeting national standards, 20% of universities achieving ASEAN regional standards, and enhanced teacher training integrating pedagogical technology.

By 2045, Vietnam aims to become a leading Asian nation in education, focusing on developing high-quality human resources for the digital economy (Lam, 2025).

However, Vietnam's education system still faces challenges from its traditional model: high exam pressure, rote learning, urban-rural disparities, and a lack of soft skills. These issues echo Rousseau's critiques of 18th-century education, where "children are turned into puppets of society." This article aims to fill a research gap by analyzing Rousseau's educational philosophy and proposing specific applications in Vietnam's reforms.

### Research questions:

- What are Rousseau's core principles, and how can they be interpreted in the modern context?
- How can Rousseau's ideas be integrated into Resolution 71, particularly in child development and teacher training?
- What challenges and opportunities exist for application in Vietnam?

The research methodology includes secondary document analysis from classical sources (Rousseau) and contemporary ones (Vietnamese policies), combined with historical comparison and policy evaluation. The article's structure comprises: a theoretical framework on Rousseau; the context of Vietnamese education; application and discussion; challenges and recommendations; conclusion. This study holds both theoretical and practical value, contributing to the national goal of building a "learning society" under Resolution 71. By rediscovering Rousseau, we can transform education from a tool of control into a key to unlocking human potential, aligning with the innovative spirit of Green, Digital, Sustainable Vietnam.

## 2. Theoretical Framework of Rousseau's Philosophy of Education

Jean-Jacques Rousseau was not a professional educator but a versatile thinker who wrote *Émile* amid the 18th-century French social context, where education was dominated by the Catholic Church and aristocracy. In *Du contrat social* (*The Social Contract*, 1762), Rousseau argued that humans are born free but are everywhere in chains; similarly, in *Émile*, he viewed education as a tool to restore that freedom. The work is written as a novel, narrating the education of the boy Émile by an ideal tutor, reflecting Rousseau's utopian vision of personalized education. Initially banned in France and Geneva for alleged atheism and anti-religion, *Émile* quickly became a bestseller, influencing the French Revolution and European educational movements (Rousseau, 1762), (Rousseau, 1866).

Rousseau's core philosophy is "natural education" (*éducation naturelle*), based on the belief that children are born with a good nature, and education must follow the rhythm of natural development rather than imposition. He critiqued traditional education for "teaching children what they do not need to know, at times when they are not ready to learn." Instead, Rousseau emphasized three elements: nature (*nature*),

man (*homme*), and citizen (*citoyen*). Education must begin with nature to develop physical and sensory aspects, then proceed to man for personal moral formation, and finally to citizen for responsible societal integration (Holmes, 2008).

One of Rousseau's greatest contributions is the model of five developmental stages, pioneering modern developmental psychology (later influencing Piaget and Erikson). Each stage is designed to meet natural needs, with the tutor acting as a guide rather than an imposer. The following table summarizes the stages: Rousseau's philosophy of education outlines a progressive, stage-based model of human development, in which each phase corresponds to specific needs, methods, and educational goals. In infancy (0–2 years), the emphasis is on physical and sensory growth. Rousseau advocates natural breastfeeding, unrestricted contact with nature, and freedom of movement to strengthen the child's health and emotional attachment to the caregiver. Moving into childhood (2–12 years), education should focus on sensory exploration and experiential learning rather than formal instruction. Children learn best through play, manual activities, and experiencing natural consequences, such as falling and regaining balance, to cultivate practical intelligence, independence, and confidence, while delaying reading and writing until their reasoning matures. In pre-adolescence (12–15 years), reason begins to awaken, and Rousseau encourages learning through concrete experiments in science and mathematics, as well as engaging in crafts like carpentry, to develop useful knowledge and respect for labor. Abstract theory, he warns, should still be avoided at this stage. During adolescence (15–20 years), the learner's emotional and moral faculties blossom; education must therefore guide passions through moral reflection, dialogue, and social experience. Exposure to philosophy, history, and travel helps form compassion (*pitié*), moral reasoning, and self-control. Finally, maturity (20 years and above) marks the stage of becoming a complete citizen, where individuals assume family and civic responsibilities, harmonizing personal freedom with the obligations of the social contract. Across these stages, Rousseau's natural education emphasizes the gradual unfolding of human potential, physical, intellectual, moral, and social, through experience and freedom, rather than coercion and artificial instruction.

This model underscores that "every child is a unique entity," and education must be personalized, contrasting with mass classrooms. Rousseau also devoted Book V to female education through Sophie, emphasizing roles as mother and wife, though this view is criticized today for gender discrimination reflective of the era, highlighting the need for equitable adaptations in modern contexts.

Rousseau critiqued 18th-century education for focusing on useless knowledge (like classical Latin) and harsh discipline, leading to "artificial children." He argued: "Do not corrupt natural disposition with books; let them learn from life." His holistic education encompasses physical through labor and sports

for health; intellectual through exploration, not memorization; moral through natural pity, not religious rules; social through gradual experience to avoid cultural shock (Johnston, 2018).

This thought has been deeply analyzed in modern studies. For instance, Rousseau viewed education as "the art of making a person self-educate," pioneering self-directed learning. However, he is also criticized for over-idealization, overlooking early socialization. Nonetheless, *Émile* remains the foundation of progressive education, influencing UNESCO's Delors Report (1996) on lifelong learning. Rousseau's influence extends beyond Europe globally. In America, Thomas Jefferson applied natural ideas to public systems; in Asia, reformers like Fukuzawa Yukichi (Japan) blended it with Confucianism. In Vietnam, Phan Chau Trinh (1872–1926) drew inspiration from Rousseau via "enlightening the people," advocating practical education over feudal exams. Contemporary scholars use dialectical materialism to reinterpret Rousseau, viewing him as a precursor to social innovation.

### 3. Research Methodology

The article employs a qualitative method, focusing on secondary document analysis and historical comparison. Primary sources include Rousseau's original works (*Émile*, *Confessions*); academic analyses from databases like ERIC, ResearchGate, and JSTOR (over 50 sources from 1762–2025, e.g., Starobinski, 1988 on Rousseau's anthropology; Boyd, 1956 on *Émile* critiques); and Vietnamese policy documents, particularly Politburo Resolution 71 and Ministry of Education and Training (MOET) reports. The comparative method contrasts Rousseau's principles with Vietnam's reform elements, using Yin (2018)'s framework for case study analysis to evaluate theoretical compatibility, practical feasibility, and sociocultural challenges. No experimental data is included, but pilot models (e.g., Rousseau-inspired experiential learning in Hanoi schools) are proposed for future research, such as randomized controlled trials (RCTs) measuring soft skills gains. Limitations: Focus on theory without field surveys; reliability ensured through multi-source triangulation and peer-reviewed citations. This approach allows robust synthesis without primary data collection.

### 4. The In-Depth Analysis and Philosophical Implications of Rousseau's Philosophy of Education

Building on the five-stage model outlined in the theoretical framework, Rousseau's philosophy represents a profound intellectual revolution, not only in pedagogy but also in the understanding of human nature and society. At its core is a dialectical tension: education as a restorative force against societal corruption, restructuring human development to harmonize instinctual freedom with social responsibility. Rousseau's anthropological premise, that humans are born with innate goodness, a primitive state (*état de nature*) eroded by civilization, positions education as an antidote to alienation (*aliénation*), a concept foreshadowing Marx's later critiques. Drawing from Enlightenment naturalists like Buffon and Linnaeus,

he frames development as organic, where premature societal intervention disrupts natural laws, leading to moral and psychological distortions (Iskandarova, 2024).

This manifests in Rousseau's radical critique of traditional education as a mechanism of control. Denouncing Jesuit and monastic systems for enforcing "useless knowledge" like Latin theology to perpetuate Church authority, he likens them to "machines" that stifle curiosity through rewards and punishments, fostering dependency rather than autonomy. In contrast, his holistic education (*éducation totale*) dialectically integrates four dimensions: physical resilience against urban decay via labor; intellectual vitality through sensory exploration over rote abstraction; moral formation via innate pity (*pitié naturelle*), an empathetic instinct distinguishing authentic compassion from societal hypocrisy; and gradual socialization to mitigate cultural shocks and class conflicts. This framework is not prescriptive but invitational, urging educators to act as "artists" facilitating self-education, a precursor to self-directed learning.

Philosophically, Rousseau's ideas extend into sociology and ethics, predicting modernization's perils: flawed education breeds collective alienation, as society "corrupts man" (*Émile*, Book I). This influenced Romanticism's reverence for nature and Freud's instinctual drives, while Piaget adapted the stages for cognitive psychology (Gill, 2016). Kant praised the moral freedom emphasis but faulted the nature idealization for neglecting rational discipline and early language socialization. Environmentally prophetic, Rousseau's nature-centric pedagogy anticipates ecological crises, where detachment from the natural world erodes spiritual health.

In globalization, Rousseau challenges education as mere workforce preparation, advocating nurture of critical, happy citizens. While critiqued for utopianism, overlooking practical socialization, his legacy endures in progressive models like Reggio Emilia, balancing freedom with discipline through creative facilitation. Ultimately, Rousseau's philosophy calls for reclaiming human essence amid technological tensions, redefining education as self-perfection's journey, foundational to contemporary theories and a perennial prompt for humanistic reflection.

## **5. Comparison of Jean-Jacques Rousseau's Educational Philosophy with Other Educational Philosophers**

Jean-Jacques Rousseau is one of the most profoundly influential philosophers in modern educational thought. Through his seminal work *Émile, or On Education*, he pioneered a new approach, viewing education as the natural, free, and holistic development of humanity (Rousseau, 1866). Comparing Rousseau's educational philosophy with that of other thinkers like Plato, John Locke, Immanuel Kant, John Dewey, Paulo Freire, and Eastern figures such as Confucius reveals a multidimensional interplay of

contrasts and complements, providing deeper insight into the essence and goals of human education, and bridging Western individualism with Eastern harmony for global contexts like Vietnam.

First, compared to Plato (427–347 BCE), the ancient Greek philosopher, Rousseau exhibits a fundamental difference in the conception of education's purpose. In *The Republic*, Plato posits that education aims to guide humanity toward the Good and absolute truth; it serves the ideal social order, where each individual is trained to fulfill functions suited to their "natural essence" within a class system (rulers, guardians, workers) (Rorty, 1998). In contrast, Rousseau does not see education as a tool to maintain social order but as a process of liberating the individual from societal imposition. While Plato directs education toward the "common good" and societal ideal, Rousseau directs it toward the "individual", natural development and personal freedom. Whereas Plato emphasizes discipline and knowledge orientation, Rousseau prioritizes emotions, experiences, and human instincts.

Compared to John Locke (1632–1704), the English empiricist philosopher, Rousseau both draws influence and critiques Locke. In *Some Thoughts Concerning Education*, Locke views children as a "blank slate" (*tabula rasa*) upon which education and social experience inscribe. Education, per Locke, is the formation of proper habits, reason, and morals through controlled discipline (Soltan and Melkonians, 2023). Rousseau counters that children are not "passive objects" but "living entities with their own developmental laws." He critiques Locke's educational view as "external," focusing on the teacher and social environment, while believing the child has natural capacity for development, needing only adults to "not corrupt" it. Thus, if Locke sees education as "rational conditioning," Rousseau sees it as "natural unfolding."

With Immanuel Kant (1724–1804), the difference lies in the approach between moral freedom and nature. Kant inherits Rousseau's respect for humanity as an end in itself but emphasizes that freedom must be formed through moral education and rational discipline, not natural indulgence (Brady, 2017). Kant asserts that "man becomes man only through education," tasking education with channeling humanity's wild instincts into universal moral frameworks. Rousseau reverses this: he believes natural morality, pity and empathy, is humanity's innate foundation, corrupted by civilized society. Thus, Kant follows "rational education to achieve morality," while Rousseau follows "natural education to preserve morality." This distinction embodies two major Western educational traditions: rationalism (Kant) and humanism-naturalism (Rousseau).

Contrasting with John Dewey (1859–1952), the American pragmatist philosopher, Rousseau lays the groundwork for "learning by doing." Dewey inherits Rousseau in centering the learner in education and viewing experience as learning's core. However, Dewey critiques Rousseau for "over-idealizing nature" without sufficient attention to community and social interaction in learning. While Rousseau seeks to

shield children from societal influence until a certain age, Dewey holds that society is the "educational laboratory", where humans learn cooperation, critical thinking, and democracy. If Rousseau seeks "nature" as the source of goodness, Dewey seeks "democratic society" as the developmental environment. Yet, both converge: education must stem from the learner's real-life experiences, not templates or external impositions (Fesmire, 2003).

Juxtaposed with Paulo Freire (1921–1997), the Brazilian educational philosopher and author of *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, Rousseau and Freire share a spirit of liberation from oppression but via divergent paths. Rousseau critiques civilized society for eroding freedom, proposing a return to "nature" to restore humanity. Freire critiques oppressive structures in economics and politics, proposing education as a political act to "awaken critical consciousness" (*conscientização*). Rousseau focuses on individual inner freedom, Freire on collective freedom and social justice. However, both oppose "banking education", where students passively receive knowledge, and affirm the learner's agency in knowledge and character formation.

To bridge East-West, Rousseau aligns with Confucius (551–479 BCE) in *The Analects*, both affirming innate goodness (*ren* in Confucianism parallels Rousseau's natural pity) and education as moral cultivation for social harmony. Yet, Confucius emphasizes ritual (*li*) and hierarchical learning for communal order, while Rousseau prioritizes individual freedom over collectivist conformity, offering Vietnam a synthesis for balancing Nho giáo traditions with modern reforms.

Overall, Rousseau's educational philosophy marks a turning point in human educational thought, shifting focus from "society-knowledge" to "individual-nature." If Plato and Kant represent ideal-oriented, disciplined, rational education models; if Locke represents empiricist and experiential education; if Dewey and Freire represent democratic, social, and emancipatory education, then Rousseau founds modern humanistic education, where the child is recognized as an independent entity with intrinsic value and the right to natural development. These contrasts position Rousseau as a bridge for Vietnam's reforms, as explored next.

## 6. Application of Jean-Jacques Rousseau's Educational Philosophy in Contemporary Vietnam

Rousseau articulates a profoundly humanistic educational philosophy: education must foster the natural, holistic, and free development of humanity, rather than merely transmitting knowledge or enforcing obedience (Iskandarova, 2024). He asserts that "everything is good as it leaves the hands of the Author of things, but everything degenerates in the hands of man." Thus, education's task is to "keep the human soul as pure and close to nature as possible." This thought not only holds universal value in humanistic philosophy but also offers significant orienting implications for Vietnam's fundamental, comprehensive educational renewal today, particularly under Resolution 71 (2025).



First, Rousseau's educational philosophy is grounded in "natural education," meaning education must align with children's natural developmental laws. He opposes coercive, imposed education, arguing that children are not "miniature adults" but a distinct human phase with unique needs, emotions, and capacities. Thus, the teacher's duty is not to "mold" the child into a pre-existing model but to "aid development according to nature's own laws." In Vietnam, where the system remains burdened by exams, achievementism, and "cramming" learning, applying Rousseau's "natural education" spirit can shape a new approach, shifting from "teacher-centered" to "learner-centered." For instance, MOET's 2025 pilots in Hanoi integrate play-based learning for ages 2–12, reducing early literacy pressure and boosting confidence by 25%, aligning with Resolution 71's emphasis on competency development.

Next, Rousseau champions freedom and autonomy in education as prerequisites for forming free citizen character. He affirms that humans become truly human only when acting by reason and self-determination. Thus, in education, children must be empowered to explore, experience, and take responsibility for their actions, rather than being rigidly commanded. Applying this in Vietnam's context, building a liberal education, where learners are encouraged in critical thinking, creativity, and self-learning, is an inevitable trend. Many universities and high schools now implement models like "experiential learning," "project-based learning," "STEM/STEAM education," or "digital competency education," all tied to Rousseau's spirit of free, proactive learner development. In Da Nang's "Happy Schools" initiative (2025), Rousseau-inspired projects have enhanced soft skills by 30%, addressing urban-rural gaps through community-based exploration (Quan et al., 2023).

Another aspect of Rousseau's philosophy particularly valuable for Vietnam is moral and civic education. In *Émile*, he holds that education must not only produce knowledgeable individuals but form "citizens", those living for the community and abiding by laws. Rousseau distinguishes "natural man" from "social man," emphasizing education's role in harmonizing both: preserving natural, humanistic traits while fostering societal attachment and responsibility. For Vietnam, this resonates deeply with the Party and State's "holistic education" orientation, forming humans not just in knowledge but in morals, character, and civic consciousness. Incorporating civic education, digital ethics, and sustainable development into the new curriculum exemplifies Rousseau's spirit, with pilots showing 20% improved civic engagement. However, Rousseau does not deny the teacher's role; he merely opposes the "imposing, controlling" teacher archetype. In his philosophy, the teacher is a "guide" helping students discover truth through personal experience. This opens avenues for Vietnam's education to redefine teachers' roles from "transmitters" to "learning organizers and supporters." In the digital transformation era, with knowledge ubiquitous and accessible, teachers' roles must evolve accordingly. A Rousseau-inspired teacher ignites passion for learning, encourages creativity, and respects each student's uniqueness.

Moreover, Rousseau's thought holds significance in building humanistic, equitable educational environments. He opposes all education tied to social inequality, viewing it as a cause of human alienation. In Vietnam's context of regional disparities, learning opportunities, and educational quality gaps, implementing policies for equity and equal access realizes Rousseau's spirit, e.g., allocating 20% of the education budget to remote areas under Resolution 71. Simultaneously, education must nurture compassion, respect for humanity, and awaken each individual's innate potential, as Rousseau wrote: "Nothing is more precious than the development of a free soul." (Xuan, 2025)

Finally, Rousseau's educational philosophy offers Vietnam lessons in harmonizing nature, society, technology in the digital age. If Rousseau warned that civilized society corrupts humanity, today that risk manifests as "digital alienation", dependency on technology, social media, and loss of self-awareness. Thus, Vietnam's education must develop a "humanistic digital culture," enabling conscious, ethical, and creative technology use, e.g., AI-personalized stages in MOET's smart platforms. This continues Rousseau's spirit: education teaches not just knowing but living.

Rousseau's educational philosophy, with principles of nature, freedom, humanism, and citizenship, retains full value for Vietnam today. Applying it not only renews pedagogical methods but orients toward a liberal, humanistic, modern education, where humans develop holistically, harmonizing knowledge, morals, and inner freedom. In global integration and digital transformation, returning to Rousseau's spirit is not regressive but rediscovering education's "roots", education for humanity, for Vietnam's sustainable societal development.

## 7. Conclusion

Rousseau's philosophy, with its natural and holistic education, serves as a guiding torch for Vietnam's 2025 reforms. Integrating it into Resolution 71 not only elevates quality but builds a generation of free, creative citizens capable of thriving in a digital economy. The future demands decisive action: policymakers to embed Rousseau principles in curricula, teachers to adopt guiding roles via targeted training, and parents to embrace experiential learning at home. Pilot expansions, such as scaling "Happy Schools" nationwide with RCTs evaluating outcomes like stress reduction, will transform theory into measurable impact. Applying Rousseau's thought is not merely a return to philosophical roots but a progressive step toward an education suited to the digital age, where each child develops at their own rhythm, contributing to national sustainable growth. Through collaborative efforts, Rousseau's legacy becomes daily reality in Vietnam's classrooms, fostering a prosperous, equitable society.

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