



Article

Rousseau, Educational Happiness, and Institutional Mediation: Reinterpreting *Émile* for Contemporary Vietnamese School Reform

Nam Van Lai ¹, Thuy Thu Thi Nguyen ¹ and Quyet Thi Nguyen ^{2,*} 

¹ Institute of International Political Economy, University of Finance-Marketing, Ho Chi Minh City 71300, Vietnam; laivannam@ufm.edu.vn (N.V.L.); thuthuy@ufm.edu.vn (T.T.T.N.)

² Faculty of Political Science and Law, Ho Chi Minh City University of Technology and Engineering, Ho Chi Minh City 71300, Vietnam

* Correspondence: quyetnt@hcmute.edu.vn

Abstract

This article reinterprets Jean-Jacques Rousseau's *Émile* as a philosophical resource for clarifying the normative meaning and institutional limits of educational happiness in contemporary Vietnamese school reform. It responds to a central tension: *Émile* constructs an individualized and partly anti-institutional pedagogical experiment, whereas UNESCO-inspired Happy School initiatives operate through mass schooling, policy, professional roles, assessment, and public accountability. Methodologically, the study combines conceptual reconstruction, close textual interpretation, contextual comparison, and critical institutional translation. It reconstructs *amour de soi*, *amour-propre*, perfectibility, pity, negative education, and moral freedom, and distinguishes Rousseau's broader philosophy from the specific pedagogical construction of *Émile*. The article argues that Rousseau should not be treated as a policy architect or directly scalable school theorist. Rather, his work supplies diagnostic criteria for examining how schools organize comparison, authority, developmental timing, experience, and dependence on external recognition. Institutional mediation is therefore introduced as the authors' reconstructive category for translating selected Rousseauian concerns into contemporary practices while preserving the limits of that translation. Applied to Vietnam, this approach connects UNESCO's people–process–place framework with assessment, teacher authority, family–school relations, curriculum experience, and psychological safety. Educational happiness is thus presented not as compulsory positivity or affective comfort, but as a qualified normative ideal supported by institutions that protect dignity and enlarge learners' capacities for judgment, responsibility, and relational freedom.

Keywords: Rousseau; *Émile*; *amour-propre*; negative education; moral freedom; educational happiness; institutional mediation; school reform; UNESCO Happy Schools; Vietnam



Academic Editor: Christopher Winch

Received: 18 June 2026

Revised: 21 July 2026

Accepted: 3 August 2026

Published: 6 August 2026

Copyright: © 2026 by the authors.

Licensee MDPI, Basel, Switzerland.

This article is an open access article

distributed under the terms and

conditions of the [Creative Commons](#)

[Attribution \(CC BY\)](#) license.

1. Introduction

The language of happiness has acquired unusual prominence in contemporary educational reform. UNESCO's Happy Schools framework organizes learner well-being through the interdependent domains of people–process–place, while its later global report treats happiness both as a condition of learning and as an educational end [1,2]. This orientation is normatively attractive because it resists school cultures dominated by fear, humiliation, narrow competition, and indifference to well-being. Yet the language of happiness also creates a philosophical difficulty. It can be affectively simplified, when happiness

is identified with feeling good, and administratively reduced, when it becomes a label, checklist, or branding device detached from the organization of teaching and learning. A philosophically defensible account must therefore clarify what kind of happiness belongs to education, whose freedom it protects, and through which institutional practices it can become more than an aspiration.

Vietnam provides an important context for this inquiry. Research has examined organizational and pedagogical dimensions of Happy Schools, teacher happiness in central Vietnam, and students' attempts to extend UNESCO's model [3–5]. These studies indicate that educational happiness is not an abstract import but a live concern shaped by teacher well-being, school climate, student participation, relationships, and institutional conditions. At the same time, Vietnamese educational debate remains marked by examination pressure, parental expectations, curriculum reform, strong traditions of teacher authority, and concern about student mental well-being [6]. The philosophical question is therefore not whether Vietnamese schools should value happiness, but how happiness can be interpreted without trivializing learning, denying legitimate difficulty, or concealing institutional sources of distress.

This article addresses that question through Jean-Jacques Rousseau's *Émile*. The choice is both promising and problematic. Rousseau offers a powerful vocabulary for developmental timing, dependence, social comparison, indirect guidance, pity, and moral freedom. However, *Émile* is not a model of modern public schooling. It is a literary–philosophical experiment centered on one male pupil and a tutor who carefully manages his environment. Its separation from ordinary institutions, its asymmetrical pedagogical power, and its historical exclusions cannot be directly reproduced in democratic mass education. Any contemporary application must therefore confront, rather than suppress, the gap between the Emilian pedagogical construction and the institutional realities of schools.

Existing work has already established broad connections between Rousseau's natural education and Happy Schools in Vietnam, while other scholarship has considered Rousseau's general relevance to Vietnamese educational reform [7,8]. The present article pursues a narrower and more critical problem. Instead of asking whether Rousseau and Happy School discourse are thematically compatible, it asks how selected Rousseauian concepts can function as diagnostic criteria for institutions that Rousseau himself did not design. Its central category, institutional mediation, is not presented as Rousseau's own term. It is an authorial reconstructive category describing the process through which philosophical norms are translated into curricula, assessment, professional authority, organizational routines, and relationships—and through which those institutional forms, in turn, constrain or transform the norms being translated.

Three research questions guide the analysis. First, how do *amour de soi*, *amour-propre*, perfectibility, pity, negative education, and moral freedom shape a normative account of educational happiness in *Émile*? Second, what tensions arise when the individualized and partly anti-institutional pedagogical experiment of *Émile* is brought into dialogue with UNESCO-inspired Happy School discourse and Vietnamese schooling? Third, under what conditions can Rousseauian concerns be institutionally mediated without turning *Émile* into a direct policy blueprint? The article argues that Rousseau is most useful not as an institutional architect, but as a critic of educational arrangements that intensify humiliating comparison, premature formation, arbitrary dependence, and passive obedience. Educational happiness becomes more philosophically robust when institutions protect dignity while cultivating learners' capacities for judgment, responsibility, and relational freedom.

The article proceeds in six further sections. Section 2 explains the interpretive method and distinguishes Rousseau's broader philosophy from the pedagogical construction of *Émile*. Section 3 reconstructs the key Rousseauian concepts that organize the argument.

Section 4 examines UNESCO's Happy Schools framework and its Vietnamese translation. Section 5 develops institutional mediation across assessment, authority, curriculum, school climate, and family–school relations. Section 6 identifies what can and cannot be translated from *Émile* into modern schooling. Section 7 concludes with the manuscript's contribution, limitations, and implications for further philosophical and empirical research.

2. Conceptual and Methodological Approach

This is a philosophical and conceptual study rather than an empirical evaluation of school happiness. It uses four connected procedures: conceptual reconstruction, close textual interpretation, contextual comparison, and critical institutional translation. Conceptual reconstruction identifies the relations among nature, self-love, social comparison, development, pity, dependence, and freedom in Rousseau's educational thought. Close textual interpretation reads *Émile* as an argumentative and literary construction whose pedagogical episodes disclose normative tensions rather than ready-made techniques. Contextual comparison places those tensions beside UNESCO's Happy Schools discourse and relevant Vietnamese educational scholarship. Critical institutional translation then asks which Rousseauian concerns can illuminate modern schooling, which require transformation, and which should not be carried over.

The primary textual focus is *Émile*, especially its accounts of childhood, negative education, learning through consequences, the emergence of social passions, pity, judgment, and preparation for social life [9]. Secondary scholarship is used not merely to confirm a single reading but to expose interpretive difficulties. Hofman situates Rousseau within Enlightenment philosophy of education; Pouwels emphasizes conflict, indirect guidance, and isolation; Leung analyzes pity and justice as elements of civic orientation; and Gomes shows that private education alone does not complete the formation of the citizen [10–13]. Together, these studies support a reading of *Émile* as neither simple child-centered permissiveness nor a scalable school design.

A crucial methodological distinction is made between Rousseau's philosophy and the Emilian pedagogical construction. Rousseau's broader philosophy addresses inequality, social dependence, political legitimacy, freedom, and citizenship across different works. *Émile*, by contrast, stages a particular educational experiment in which the tutor attempts to protect and form a pupil before his fuller entry into social and civic relations. The two levels are connected but not interchangeable. Claims about the tutor's management of *Émile*'s environment cannot automatically become claims about legitimate school governance, and claims about political freedom cannot be imported into pedagogy without examining developmental and institutional differences. The article therefore uses the phrase 'Emilian' when referring specifically to the educational experiment and 'Rousseauian' when referring to the wider conceptual problem reconstructed across Rousseau's thought.

Institutional mediation is defined here as a bidirectional and critical process. In one direction, a philosophical value such as dignity or developmental freedom becomes educationally effective through schedules, curricula, assessment procedures, disciplinary norms, professional roles, and family–school expectations. In the other direction, those institutional forms reshape the value: assessment can turn recognition into ranking, care can become paternalism, and participation can become symbolic consultation. Mediation therefore does not mean simple implementation. It involves translation, contestation, limitation, and possible distortion. This definition makes explicit that institutional mediation is the analytical contribution of the present article rather than a concept directly formulated by Rousseau.

The method also imposes limits on the claims that follow. Vietnamese studies are used to identify contexts and problems, not to prove that all Vietnamese schools operate in the

same way. UNESCO documents are treated as normative frameworks, not as evidence of uniform national implementation. The article does not claim that Rousseau supplies the only philosophically defensible account of educational happiness. Rather, it asks what becomes visible when Happy School discourse is examined through Rousseau's critique of premature formation, dependence on opinion, and deforming comparison. This qualified approach avoids both historical transplantation and the opposite error of treating classical philosophy as irrelevant whenever its institutions differ from ours.

3. Rousseau's Educational Vocabulary: Nature, Comparison, and Freedom

3.1. *Amour de Soi, Amour-Propre, and Perfectibility*

Rousseau's educational naturalism begins with a distinction between forms of self-relation. *Amour de soi* is the basic concern for one's preservation and well-being. It is not yet a comparative demand for superiority or public recognition. *Amour-propre*, by contrast, develops within social relations and ties self-estimation to the opinions, rankings, and judgments of others. The distinction should not be simplified into a contrast between a purely good natural impulse and an entirely corrupt social passion. Social recognition is unavoidable in human life. The educational problem is whether dependence on recognition becomes humiliating, competitive, and externally controlling, or is redirected toward reciprocal respect and responsible participation.

This distinction sharpens the meaning of educational happiness. A learner may receive praise, high scores, and public visibility while becoming increasingly dependent on comparison. Conversely, a learner may encounter demanding work without being humiliated or reduced to rank. From a Rousseauian perspective, the decisive question is not whether schools contain comparison at all, but what kind of self-relation their practices cultivate. When educational worth is made continuously visible through rankings, public criticism, or narrow performance indicators, *amour-propre* can become anxious dependence on external judgment. A more humane institution does not promise to eliminate social recognition; it organizes recognition so that achievement does not require the degradation of others.

Perfectibility explains why this question is educationally central. Human beings are open to development and transformation; they can acquire capacities unavailable at birth, but this openness also makes them vulnerable to deformation. Education therefore cannot simply preserve an untouched natural essence. It necessarily shapes habits, desires, judgments, and relations. The normative task is to organize that shaping without confusing accelerated performance with development. Perfectibility connects nature and institution: institutions are unavoidable because human capacities require formation, yet they remain criticizable because the same formative power can produce dependence, vanity, and alienation.

3.2. *Negative Education, Experience, and Indirect Authority*

Negative education is frequently misunderstood as non-education or unrestricted spontaneity. In *Émile*, it is better understood as resistance to premature moralization and verbal instruction. The tutor delays lessons that the child cannot yet appropriate, arranges encounters with things and consequences, and attempts to protect the learner from avoidable forms of social corruption [9]. The method is highly active: the tutor constructs the environment while concealing much of his control. This is one reason why *Émile* cannot be celebrated uncritically as a model of learner autonomy. The pupil's apparent independence is made possible by an educator whose power is extensive and often invisible.

Nevertheless, negative education yields a valuable diagnostic question for schools: does instruction respond to the learner's developing capacity, or does it demand verbal performance before understanding? Rousseau's criticism of premature instruction is not a rejection of knowledge. It challenges the substitution of words, recitation, and external display for meaningful experience. In institutional terms, this concern supports curricula and assessment that connect knowledge with inquiry, practice, consequence, and judgment. It does not justify abandoning common curricula or allowing each learner to determine all educational purposes.

The tutor's indirect authority also reveals an enduring paradox. Authority can be less humiliating when it operates through intelligible situations rather than arbitrary command, but hidden control can also become manipulative. A contemporary school cannot simply imitate the tutor's orchestration. Legitimate institutional authority must be more transparent, accountable, and open to professional and public scrutiny. The Emilian experiment therefore contributes a problem rather than a technique: how can educators guide learners without making obedience, fear, or dependence on personal approval the organizing principle of education? Pouwels's analysis of conflict reinforces the point that educational development cannot be reduced to either avoidance of difficulty or direct coercion [11].

3.3. *Pity, Moral Freedom, and Relational Formation*

As *Émile* approaches social life, pity becomes central to moral formation. Pity interrupts self-enclosure by enabling responsiveness to the suffering and vulnerability of others. Leung's analysis shows that pity in *Émile* is not merely private sentiment; it contributes to a developing orientation toward justice and civic relation [12]. This matters for educational happiness because a school is not happy merely when individuals experience private satisfaction. Its relational quality depends on whether learners can recognize others without converting every difference into competition or status.

Moral freedom likewise exceeds immediate choice. Rousseau's educational project seeks a person capable of judgment and self-command rather than one governed by impulse, fear, or the opinions of others. Freedom is therefore developmental and relational. It requires capacities that education helps to form, but it is damaged when educational authority treats learners as passive objects. The relevant contrast is not constraint versus no constraint. It is between constraints that can be understood and appropriated as part of responsible agency, and domination that produces dependence without judgment.

This account qualifies the use of happiness as an educational aim. Happiness cannot be imposed according to a single institutional recipe, because compulsory happiness would contradict the freedom and plurality it claims to promote [14]. Nor can happiness be reduced to the absence of difficulty. Educational growth may involve frustration, correction, sustained effort, and conflict. The normative distinction concerns whether difficulty is formative or destructive: whether it enlarges capability and understanding, or operates through humiliation, chronic anxiety, and arbitrary subordination.

3.4. *The Anti-Institutional Paradox of Émile*

The strongest obstacle to applying *Émile* to schools is that its educational experiment is deliberately separated from ordinary institutions. *Émile* is tutored individually, protected from many social relations, and guided through an environment that the tutor can control in ways unavailable to teachers responsible for diverse groups of learners. Public schools, by contrast, must coordinate common curricula, distribute opportunities, maintain accountability, accommodate difference, and prepare learners for shared social and civic life. The

individualized structure of *Émile* is therefore neither scalable nor normatively sufficient for contemporary education.

Rousseau's suspicion of existing social institutions deepens the problem. Institutions frequently generate dependence on opinion, artificial needs, and competition for recognition. The manuscript does not resolve this tension by claiming that Rousseau was secretly a theorist of happy public schools. Instead, it treats the tension as the basis of the diagnostic argument. *Émile* can reveal how institutions deform learners even though it cannot tell modern institutions exactly how to organize themselves. Gomes's account is especially important: private education may prepare a person for citizenship, but it does not by itself complete civic formation [13]. The movement from private formation to public life requires political and institutional conditions that exceed the tutor–pupil relation.

Accordingly, the article distinguishes three levels. First, some Emilian arrangements should not be transferred: isolation, opaque environmental control, gendered assumptions, and reliance on a single tutor. Second, some Rousseauian concerns can be reconstructed as critical questions: how schools organize dependence, comparison, authority, and developmental timing. Third, modern institutional principles must be justified through contemporary standards of inclusion, transparency, professional responsibility, and public accountability, not through Rousseau alone. Institutional mediation names this selective and critical movement rather than a direct application.

4. From UNESCO Happy Schools to the Vietnamese Context

UNESCO's Happy Schools framework offers a useful institutional starting point because it does not define happiness solely as private emotion. Its people–process–place structure links supportive relationships, respectful pedagogy, meaningful learning, safety, and the physical and organizational environment [1]. The latter global report broadens this orientation by connecting happiness in learning with happiness for learning and by treating well-being as related to the purposes and conditions of education [2]. These frameworks already contain normative and systemic elements; Rousseau's contribution is therefore not to introduce institutional concern where none existed, but to sharpen the account of formation, dependence, and comparison within those dimensions.

In Vietnam, the Happy School idea has been interpreted through organizational–pedagogical analysis, teacher well-being, and students' perspectives. Gian and colleagues emphasize that school happiness depends on coordinated people, pedagogical processes, and organizational development [3]. Research on high-school teachers in Da Nang and Quang Nam demonstrates that teacher happiness has professional and relational consequences rather than being a peripheral private matter [4]. Student research extending the 3P model similarly shows that learners evaluate happiness through connected dimensions of institutional experience [5]. These findings make it inappropriate to represent the Vietnamese agenda as a single homogeneous policy or to assume uniform implementation across schools.

The relationship among UNESCO, Vietnamese schooling, and *Émile* can now be stated more precisely. UNESCO supplies an explicit framework of people–process–place. Vietnamese research reveals how that framework is interpreted within particular institutional and cultural conditions. *Émile* supplies neither the framework nor an implementation plan; it introduces philosophical criteria for examining what happens within each domain. Under 'people,' it asks whether recognition becomes dependency on opinion and whether authority humiliates or forms judgment. Under 'process,' it asks whether learning respects developmental timing and connects knowledge with experience. Under 'place,' understood broadly as the institutional environment, it asks whether routines and assessment cultivate dignity or anxious comparison.

This sequence also prevents the article from treating Rousseau as a foreign authority whose ideas simply correct Vietnamese education. Vietnamese traditions of moral cultivation, communal responsibility, and the relation between learning and conduct provide independent philosophical resources [15–17]. Comparative work on East Asian pedagogy and self-cultivation further cautions against assuming that learner formation must be described only through Western individualist categories [18]. Rousseau functions here as an interlocutor whose critique of artificial comparison can challenge exam-centered or hierarchical distortions, while the Vietnamese context challenges Rousseau’s individualism and limited institutional horizon.

5. Institutional Mediation: From Rousseauian Diagnosis to School Practice

5.1. Assessment, Comparison, and Recognition

Assessment is a primary site at which *amour-propre* can be institutionally intensified. Standards and evaluation are necessary in public education, but their form matters. When performance is continuously converted into public rank, a learner’s relation to knowledge can become subordinate to visibility, approval, and superiority. A Rousseauian diagnosis therefore asks whether assessment helps learners understand progress and exercise judgment, or whether it makes educational worth dependent on comparative display. The implication is not the abolition of standards, but a movement toward formative feedback, multiple forms of achievement, proportionate challenge, and procedures that do not use humiliation as motivation. The following table presents this analytical movement in a concise form, linking Rousseauian concepts with Happy School dimensions, relevant institutional sites in Vietnam, and the limits of direct translation (Table 1).

Table 1. From Rousseauian Concepts to Institutional Questions in Vietnamese Happy Schools.

Rousseauian Concept	Problem Disclosed in <i>Émile</i>	Happy School Dimension	Institutional Site in Vietnam	Critical Limit
<i>Amour-propre</i>	Dependence on comparison, rank, and others’ opinion	Respect, belonging, relationships	Assessment, public praise, ranking, peer comparison	Recognition cannot be eliminated; it must be made non-humiliating and plural
Perfectibility	Human openness to formation and deformation	Holistic development	Curriculum, pacing, teacher expectations	Development is socially and culturally situated, not governed by a single natural sequence
Negative education	Premature instruction and verbalism	Learner-centered process	Curriculum experience, formative assessment	Individualized environmental control cannot be reproduced in mass schooling
Pity	Need to move from self-concern to responsiveness to others	Care, empathy, inclusion	Peer relations, discipline, school climate	Compassion needs institutional protection and cannot rely on sentiment alone
Moral freedom	Self-command and judgment rather than arbitrary choice	Agency and participation	Student voice, classroom responsibility	Schools retain legitimate common rules and curricular obligations
Indirect/humane authority	Guidance without humiliation or servile dependence	Supportive teacher-student relationships	Teaching, discipline, leadership	The tutor’s concealed control is incompatible with contemporary transparency and accountability

This point is especially relevant to Happy School discourse because well-being initiatives can coexist with unchanged competitive structures. Cheerful events or supportive slogans do not compensate for assessment systems that produce chronic fear or narrow recognition. Institutional mediation requires alignment: if happiness is defined through dignity and developmental capability, then assessment practices must be reviewed for the kinds of self-relation and peer relation they cultivate. The criterion is not comfort at all costs, but whether demanding evaluation remains compatible with respect and the learner's growing capacity for self-assessment.

5.2. Teacher Authority, Care, and Accountability

Teacher authority is another site where direct application of *Émile* would be misleading. Rousseau's tutor possesses extraordinary knowledge of and control over the pupil. Modern teachers work within professional, legal, and organizational structures and are accountable to learners, families, colleagues, leaders, and the public. The valuable Rousseauian question concerns the form of dependence produced by authority. Authority becomes educationally defensible when it protects learners, explains expectations, organizes meaningful experience, and gradually enlarges responsibility. It becomes deforming when it relies on arbitrary command, public shame, fear, or personal loyalty.

The ethics of care helps specify the relational dimension. Noddings emphasizes attentive and responsive relations rather than treatment of learners as abstract recipients [19,20]. Rousseau adds that care can become indulgent or controlling unless it is connected to capability and freedom. In Vietnamese settings where respect for teachers retains moral significance, the issue should not be framed as tradition versus autonomy. The institutional task is to reinterpret respect so that professional authority remains serious but non-humiliating, culturally intelligible but accountable, and directed toward learners' eventual judgment rather than permanent dependence.

5.3. Curriculum Experience and Developmental Timing

Rousseau's critique of verbalism supports a review of curriculum experience. It does not authorize rejection of disciplinary knowledge or national curricular coordination. Instead, it asks whether knowledge is encountered as meaningful inquiry, practice, and consequence, or merely as material to reproduce under examination conditions. Dewey's account of continuity between experience and education offers a modern institutional vocabulary for this concern [21,22]. Differentiated learning likewise illustrates how responsiveness to learners can be pursued within organized systems rather than through solitary tutoring [23].

Developmental timing should therefore be interpreted as a principle of proportionality, not a fixed natural schedule. Schools teach groups of learners and must establish shared expectations, but they can vary scaffolding, modes of participation, and opportunities for revision. A Happy School informed by this principle would not promise effortless learning. It would seek to prevent institutional urgency—coverage, ranking, and accelerated performance—from becoming the sole measure of educational success.

5.4. School Climate, Pity, and Psychological Safety

School climate mediates the movement from pity as an individual disposition to justice as an institutional relation. Compassion cannot depend entirely on the goodwill of particular teachers or students. Anti-bullying procedures, non-humiliating discipline, accessible support, fair complaint mechanisms, and norms of peer responsibility give relational concern an organizational form. Current attention to youth mental well-being in Vietnamese schools underscores that psychological safety is not equivalent to therapeutic softness; it is part of the infrastructure that enables learning, participation, and resilience [6].

A Rousseauian perspective adds that outward compliance can conceal fear, resentment, or dependence. Schools should therefore examine not only whether rules are followed but also how those rules are experienced and justified. This does not mean that every negative emotion indicates institutional failure. Conflict, disappointment, and correction belong to education. The critical distinction is whether institutional practices allow learners to interpret and work through difficulty, or whether they convert vulnerability into shame and exclusion.

5.5. Family–School Relations and Plural Meanings of Success

Family–school relations reveal why institutional mediation extends beyond the school building. Parents may endorse holistic development while continuing to evaluate success primarily through scores, selective pathways, or prestigious credentials. Schools may promote well-being while communicating achievement through narrow rankings. These tensions cannot be solved by asking families simply to accept a school-defined model of happiness. Dialogue is required about the purposes of education, legitimate academic aspiration, and the costs of comparison.

Rousseau’s critique of dependence on opinion offers a diagnostic vocabulary, but contemporary family–school relationships require pluralism and mutual accountability that *Émile* does not provide. Institutions should therefore create regular, evidence-informed opportunities for families, teachers, and students to discuss assessment, workload, developmental expectations, and broader forms of achievement. Such practices mediate happiness by making its meaning contestable rather than administratively imposed.

5.6. Policy Language, Implementation, and System Architecture

At the policy level, institutional mediation asks whether the language of happiness is connected to resources, professional support, leadership, and evaluation. The OECD framework for human flourishing similarly treats flourishing as a systemic aim involving competencies, educators, learning environments, and institutional design [24]. A school cannot sustainably support student well-being while ignoring teacher workload, contradictory accountability demands, or unequal access to learning conditions. Likewise, digital transformation does not automatically improve educational experience; infrastructure, stakeholder collaboration, policy orientation, and accessibility shape its effects [25].

The practical value of Rousseau is therefore critical rather than programmatic. His concepts can help policy actors ask what kinds of dependence, comparison, and authority are produced by apparently neutral routines. They cannot determine budgets, governance arrangements, curricular standards, or implementation instruments. Those decisions require empirical evidence, democratic deliberation, professional expertise, and attention to Vietnamese legal and cultural conditions.

6. Discussion: What Can and Cannot Be Translated

6.1. From Diagnostic Criteria to Institutional Principles

The analysis supports a limited translation of Rousseauian concerns into institutional principles. *Amour-propre* becomes a criterion for reviewing recognition and comparison; perfectibility supports attention to developmental openness; negative education challenges premature verbalism; pity informs relational and anti-humiliation practices; and moral freedom directs authority toward judgment and responsibility. These are not institutional rules derived deductively from *Émile*. They are critical orientations that gain contemporary legitimacy when integrated with inclusion, transparency, accountability, and public purpose.

This distinction strengthens the originality of institutional mediation. Earlier studies have shown general compatibility between Rousseau’s natural education and Happy

Schools or have applied his educational philosophy broadly to reform [7,8]. The present argument changes the unit of analysis. It examines the passage from a pedagogical experiment to institutional practice and makes the limits of that passage part of the theory. Mediation is successful not when schools reproduce *Émile*, but when they can translate a defensible concern—such as protection from humiliating comparison—into practices that are scalable, transparent, and accountable.

6.2. Non-Transferable Elements and Unresolved Tensions

Several elements remain non-transferable. The tutor's concealed management of the pupil's world conflicts with contemporary expectations of transparency and learner rights. The isolation of one pupil cannot guide inclusive mass schooling. The gendered construction of education in *Émile* is incompatible with equal educational citizenship. Rousseau's limited attention to organizational complexity cannot answer questions of teacher workload, system financing, curricular governance, disability inclusion, or digital infrastructure. Acknowledging these limits does not weaken the philosophical argument; it prevents the article from converting historical interpretation into policy authority.

A further unresolved tension concerns social recognition. Rousseau's critique of *amour-propre* is powerful, but schools cannot function without evaluation, shared standards, and forms of recognition. The aim cannot be to restore a pre-social self. It must be to organize recognition so that it does not make dignity conditional on superiority. This requires an institutional ethics of comparison: transparent criteria, multiple pathways of achievement, formative feedback, opportunities for repair, and safeguards against public humiliation.

6.3. Educational Happiness Beyond Comfort and Compulsion

Happiness is not the only defensible aim of education, and institutions should not compel learners to display positivity. Knowledge, justice, capability, civic responsibility, and moral formation may sometimes require experiences that are difficult or unsettling. Happiness is better understood as a qualified normative ideal describing conditions under which learners can engage difficulty without being degraded, develop capacities without being reduced to performance metrics, and participate in relationships that support both care and responsibility.

This formulation brings Rousseau into dialogue with care ethics, experiential education, and culturally grounded accounts of moral formation without collapsing their differences [15,20,22]. It also avoids the claim that institutional mediation is the only route to defensible happiness. Rather, mediation is indispensable for a specific reason: when happiness is claimed as a goal of schools, the claim is enacted through institutions whether or not policymakers acknowledge that fact. The philosophical task is to make those institutional effects visible and criticizable.

6.4. Contribution to Philosophy of Education and Rousseau Studies

The article's primary contribution is to contemporary philosophy of education. It offers a conceptually explicit account of how a classical educational text can inform institutional critique without becoming a blueprint. Its secondary contribution to Rousseau scholarship lies in bringing the anti-institutional and individualized structure of *Émile* into the center of the application problem. Instead of treating that structure as an inconvenience to be dismissed, the article shows that it defines the limits and direction of Rousseau's contemporary relevance.

This approach also reframes the relation between private formation and public education. *Émile's* preparation for freedom remains incomplete without entry into social and civic relations, while public institutions remain vulnerable to the distortions Rousseau diagnoses [13,26]. The productive philosophical space lies between romantic escape from

institutions and administrative confidence in them. Institutional mediation occupies that space by asking how institutions can be both necessary for formation and permanently open to criticism.

7. Conclusions

This article has argued that Rousseau's *Émile* can contribute most productively to the philosophical evaluation of UNESCO-inspired Happy School reform in Vietnam through a selective, critical, and explicitly limited process of institutional translation. The analysis distinguishes Rousseau's broader philosophy from the Emilian pedagogical construction and reconstructs *amour de soi*, *amour-propre*, perfectibility, negative education, pity, and moral freedom as an interconnected vocabulary. These concepts clarify why educational happiness cannot be reduced to positive feeling, absence of difficulty, or institutional branding.

The argument does not present Rousseau as a designer of modern public schools. *Émile*'s individualized tutoring, isolation from ordinary institutions, concealed pedagogical control, and historical exclusions cannot be directly reproduced. Rousseau's contemporary value is diagnostic: he helps expose how assessment, authority, curriculum, and school climate can produce premature formation, humiliating comparison, and dependence on external opinion. Institutional mediation is the authors' reconstructive category for translating those criticisms into modern practices while subjecting the translation to contemporary requirements of inclusion, transparency, accountability, and public purpose.

For Vietnamese educational debate, the framework suggests a sequence of questions rather than a universal formula. Do assessment practices support self-understanding or make dignity dependent on rank? Does teacher authority enlarge judgment or secure passive obedience? Does curriculum connect knowledge with experience while maintaining legitimate standards? Do school-climate policies institutionalize care, safety, and fair participation? Do families, students, and educators have meaningful opportunities to contest narrow definitions of success? These questions connect UNESCO's people–process–place framework with the moral and institutional conditions of formation.

The study remains conceptual. It does not establish how widely Happy School principles are implemented in Vietnam, how different groups interpret educational happiness, or which institutional interventions improve well-being without weakening academic standards. Future research should therefore combine philosophical analysis with school-level case studies, interviews with teachers, students, and families, and comparative examination of assessment and disciplinary practices. Such work could test where the proposed diagnostic criteria illuminate actual experience and where they require further cultural or institutional revision.

Rousseau's enduring relevance lies less in offering a recoverable natural education than in forcing education to examine what its institutions do to human development. A school becomes more worthy of the language of happiness when it can sustain demanding learning without humiliation, authority without servility, recognition without destructive comparison, and social participation without the loss of moral agency. This is not the only possible philosophy of educational happiness, but it is a defensible basis for keeping happiness connected to dignity, freedom, and institutional responsibility.

Author Contributions: Conceptualization, N.V.L. and Q.T.N.; methodology, Q.T.N. and T.T.T.N.; formal analysis, N.V.L. and Q.T.N.; investigation, N.V.L., T.T.T.N. and Q.T.N.; resources, N.V.L. and T.T.T.N.; writing—original draft preparation, N.V.L. and T.T.T.N.; writing—review and editing, Q.T.N.; supervision, Q.T.N.; project administration, Q.T.N. All authors have read and agreed to the published version of the manuscript.

Funding: This research was partly funded by the University of Finance-Marketing and Ho Chi Minh City University of Technology and Engineering, Ho Chi Minh City, Vietnam.

Institutional Review Board Statement: Not applicable. This article is a philosophical and conceptual study and does not involve human participants, animals, or identifiable personal data.

Informed Consent Statement: Not applicable.

Data Availability Statement: No new data were created or analyzed in this study. Data sharing is not applicable to this article.

Acknowledgments: During the preparation of this manuscript, the authors used OpenAI's ChatGPT (GPT-5.6 Thinking) solely for English-language editing, including grammar, clarity, and readability. The authors reviewed and approved all changes and take full responsibility for the content of the manuscript. The authors also sincerely thank the anonymous reviewers for their insightful and constructive comments, which substantially improved the manuscript, and the editorial team of *Philosophies* for their professional guidance and support throughout the review and publication process.

Conflicts of Interest: The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

References

1. UNESCO. *Happy Schools! A Framework for Learner Well-Being in the Asia-Pacific*; UNESCO: Paris, France, 2016.
2. UNESCO. *Why the World Needs Happy Schools: Global Report on Happiness in and for Learning*; UNESCO: Paris, France, 2024.
3. Gian, P.M.; Bao, D.Q.; Tam, T.T.T.N.; Tac, P.V. Happy Schools: Perspectives and Matters of Organization-Pedagogy in School's Building and Development. *Int. Educ. Stud.* **2021**, *14*, 92–102. [\[CrossRef\]](#)
4. Nguyen-Thi, H.-P.; Le, M.-D.; Van, B.V.; Dupl  a, E. Happiness of High School Teachers: Research in Da Nang City and QuangNam Province, Central Region of VietNam. *J. Educ. Soc. Res.* **2024**, *14*, 104–117. [\[CrossRef\]](#)
5. Nguyen, N.T.T.; Nguyen, T.L.; Tran, L.B. Private University Students' Perspectives on Happy School: Building a 3P Plus Model Based on the UNESCO 3P Model. *TEM J.* **2024**, *13*, 2276–2284. [\[CrossRef\]](#)
6. Murphy, J.K.; Nguyen, V.C.; Linh, D.T.; Xie, H.; Tran, T.H.; Barbic, S.P.; Chau, L.W.; Samji, H.; Minas, H.; Nguyen, M.V.; et al. Promoting mental well-being among secondary school students in Vietnam using the Y-MIND app: A protocol for a hybrid type 2, sequence pre-post, quasi-experimental study. *PLoS ONE* **2025**, *20*, e0332875. [\[CrossRef\]](#) [\[PubMed\]](#)
7. Do, T.; Dinh, T.N.; Pham, K.D. The natural education philosophy of Rousseau and its implications for building happy schools in Vietnam today. *Perspekt. Nauk. Obraz.=Perspect. Sci. Educ.* **2025**, *5*, 590–600. [\[CrossRef\]](#)
8. Hung, T.Q. The philosophy of education of Jean-Jacques Rousseau and its application in Vietnam's educational reforms. *Kalagatos* **2025**, *22*, eK25042. [\[CrossRef\]](#)
9. Rousseau, J.J. *  mile, or On Education*; Knowledge Publishing House: Hanoi, Vietnam, 2008.
10. Hofman, A. Rousseau's Philosophy of Education. In *A History of Western Philosophy of Education in the Age of Enlightenment*; Gilead, T., Ed.; Bloomsbury Publishing: London, UK, 2021; pp. 69–96.
11. Pouwels, J. Infinite avoidance and splendid isolation: Rousseau and the use of conflicts in education. *Int. J. Soc. Pedagog.* **2023**, *12*, 14. [\[CrossRef\]](#)
12. Leung, W.S. Pity and Justice in Rousseau's *Emile*: Developing a Concern for the Common Good. *Educ. Theory* **2023**, *73*, 74–92. [\[CrossRef\]](#)
13. Gomes, B. Emile the citizen? A reassessment of the relationship between private education and citizenship in Rousseau's political thought. *Eur. J. Political Theory* **2015**, *17*, 194–213. [\[CrossRef\]](#)
14. Magnani, L. Threatening Happiness: No One Can Compel Me to Be Happy Their Way. *Philosophies* **2025**, *10*, 128. [\[CrossRef\]](#)
15. Nguyen, P.T.; Nguyen, K.N.; Do, H.T.; Nguyen, Q.T. Confucian Educational Thought and Its Relevance to Contemporary Vietnamese Education. *Philosophies* **2025**, *10*, 70. [\[CrossRef\]](#)
16. Nguyen, T.Q.; Nguyen, V.T.; Nguyen, T.P. Ho Chi Minh's thoughts on the education of the young Vietnamese generation today. *Perspekt. Nauk. Obraz.=Perspect. Sci. Educ.* **2023**, *62*, 562–577. [\[CrossRef\]](#)
17. Pham, L.T.; Nguyen, T.V.; Nguyen, H.T.; Do, H.T.T.; Nguyen, K.N.V.; Nguyen, Q.T. Between Communitarianism and Confucianism: Charles Taylor and the Confucian Concept of Self in Comparative Perspective. *Bogosl. Vestn.* **2023**, *83*, 553–566. [\[CrossRef\]](#)
18. Takayama, K. An invitation to theorise East Asian pedagogy: Bodymind, dark consciousness, *kata*, and self-cultivation. *Asia Pac. Educ. Rev.* **2026**. [\[CrossRef\]](#)
19. Noddings, N. *Educating Moral People: A Caring Alternative to Character Education*; Teachers College Press: New York, NY, USA, 2002.

20. Noddings, N. *Caring: A Relational Approach to Ethics and Moral Education*, 2nd ed.; University of California Press: Oakland, CA, USA, 2013.
21. Dewey, J. *Democracy and Education*; Knowledge Publishing House: Hanoi, Vietnam, 2012.
22. Dewey, J. *Experience and Education*; Youth Publishing House: Ho Chi Minh City, Vietnam, 2012.
23. Hidayat, R.; Patras, Y.E. Education transformation in Indonesia requires the implementation of differentiated learning. *Int. J. Eval. Res. Educ.* **2024**, *13*, 1526–1536. [[CrossRef](#)]
24. OECD. *Education For Human Flourishing: A Conceptual Framework*; OECD Publishing: Paris, France, 2025.
25. Nguyen, T.N.; Truong, H.T. Key Drivers of Vietnam’s Digital Education Ecosystem: An Exploratory Factor Analysis Aligned with Sustainable Development Goals. *Eur. J. Educ. Res.* **2026**, *15*, 211–222. [[CrossRef](#)]
26. McMahon, C. Rousseau’s General Will and the Will of All: A Present-Day Perspective. *J. Ethics* **2025**, *29*, 533–549. [[CrossRef](#)]

Disclaimer/Publisher’s Note: The statements, opinions and data contained in all publications are solely those of the individual author(s) and contributor(s) and not of MDPI and/or the editor(s). MDPI and/or the editor(s) disclaim responsibility for any injury to people or property resulting from any ideas, methods, instructions or products referred to in the content.