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FROM NATURAL EDUCATION TO MORAL FORMATION: A CONTEMPORARY REINTERPRETATION OF ROUSSEAU'S ÉMILE

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ABSTRACT

Contemporary education faces growing concerns about moral deformation, including bullying, intolerance, academic dishonesty, digital misconduct, and declining empathy. This study aims to reread Jean-Jacques Rousseau's Émile as a philosophical resource for reconstructing moral education through the concept of naturalistic moral formation. Using library research, the study analyzes Rousseau's natural education through thematic coding, conceptual analysis, and philosophical interpretation. The analysis focuses on five dimensions: protection of the child's nature from social distortion, autonomy of child development, epistemology of direct experience, graduality of natural education, and nature as a formative space. The findings show that Rousseau's "return to nature" is not a rejection of education, but a critique of artificial, coercive, adult-centered, and instruction-based moral formation. Natural education forms moral agency by protecting the child from premature social pressures, grounding knowledge in lived experience, respecting developmental stages, and using nature and everyday life as pedagogical environments. The discussion argues that Rousseau's framework complements contemporary character education, civic education, and social-emotional learning while challenging their tendency toward formalized value transmission. This study contributes to educational philosophy by formulating naturalistic moral formation as a non-indoctrinative, experiential, and developmentally appropriate model for addressing moral deformation in contemporary education.

Keywords: *Rousseau, Émile, natural education, moral deformation, naturalistic moral formation.*

INTRODUCTION

Contemporary education faces a persistent dilemma: while schools are increasingly expected to produce competent, creative, and adaptable learners, they also face recurring signs of moral fragility among students. Problems such as bullying, violence, intolerance, academic dishonesty, digital misconduct, and the erosion of empathy indicate that moral education cannot be treated merely as an auxiliary component of schooling. Recent empirical and review evidence supports these concerns. Studies in Indonesian educational settings identify family, peer, and victim-related factors in bullying (Alwi et al., 2023) and educational as well as sociocultural factors in student intolerance (Cardinale et al., 2021). International reviews also show continuing problems of academic dishonesty in online learning (Surahman & Wang, 2022) and cyberincivility among adolescents in digital environments (Kim et al., 2023). These phenomena suggest a deeper crisis in the formation of autonomous, reflective, and responsible moral subjects. Recent literature in moral education, educational philosophy, and character formation increasingly

conceptualizes moral development not as the simple transmission of fixed rules, but as a complex process shaped by individual dispositions, social pressures, institutional cultures, and wider moral ecologies (Hanley, 2008; Letseka, 2014; Phillips & McMillian, 2011; Slonina, 2024). Within this context, the notion of moral deformation is useful for describing the distortion of moral sensibility under conditions that encourage conformity, competition, performative virtue, and dependence on external approval.

The expression moral deformation is used here as an author-defined analytical category, not as a standardized psychological diagnosis or a claim that every instance of misconduct has the same cause. It denotes a socially mediated distortion in the formation of moral judgment, sympathy, and responsible autonomy when learners are encouraged to seek rank, approval, or obedience without developing an understanding of others and of the consequences of their actions. Its philosophical basis is traceable to Rousseau's account of the degradation of morals under socially cultivated desires and dependence. Balieiro (2012) directly examines nature and moral degradation in Rousseau. Hanley (2008) identifies corruption through commerce and comparison. Hermann (2013) discusses the attempt in *Émile* to protect the heart from socially generated error and vice. Landrum (2014) explains how *amour-propre* can be educated rather than assumed to be irredeemably corrupt. Tennyson & Schwarze (2024) further connect Rousseau's critique of character education to domination and dishonesty. These studies support the conceptual problem, whereas research on bullying, intolerance, and cyberincivility documents particular contemporary phenomena rather than proving a common Rousseauian causal mechanism. The category is therefore a heuristic for interrogating educational relations, not an empirical label applied to students.

The problem is intensified by the limitations of conventional approaches to moral education. Instructional and disciplinary models often emphasize value transmission, verbal explanation, punishment, formal obedience, and the memorization of moral principles. Although such approaches may produce outward compliance, they do not necessarily cultivate moral judgment, empathy, responsibility, or inner motivation. Scholars have therefore criticized moral education that relies excessively on rule-based discipline and abstract instruction, arguing that moral learning must involve affective development, social recognition, care, and lived experience (Fraistat, 2016; Hanley, 2008; Warner, 2014). From this perspective, moral failure in education is not simply caused by the absence of moral content in the curriculum. It may also arise from pedagogical forms that demand rational obedience before children have developed sufficient emotional maturity, experiential understanding, and relational awareness. Moral formation, therefore, requires more than instruction; it requires the shaping of conditions in which children can experience, interpret, and internalize moral meaning.

This study addresses the problem by returning to Jean-Jacques Rousseau's *Émile*, a foundational yet contested text in the history of educational thought. Rousseau's educational philosophy remains significant because it challenges artificial, socially conformist, and adult-centered forms of schooling. In *Émile*, education is not conceived as the rapid adjustment of the child to existing social expectations, but as the careful

protection and cultivation of natural development. Rousseau argues that children should not be treated as incomplete adults whose minds must immediately be filled with adult concepts, moral doctrines, or social ambitions. Instead, childhood has its own rhythm, needs, capacities, and modes of understanding. This insight has made *Émile* central to discussions of natural education, child-centered pedagogy, freedom, experience, and developmental appropriateness (Önder, 2018; Stachoň, 2021; Terquem, 2012). Yet Rousseau's relevance for contemporary moral education lies not only in his defense of childhood, but also in his diagnosis of how society can deform moral life.

The general solution suggested by Rousseau is not a rejection of education, but a reorientation of education toward nature, experience, and developmental timing. Natural education does not mean abandoning the child to instinct or removing all guidance. It involves arranging the educational environment so that the child learns through direct contact with things, natural consequences, practical needs, and gradually expanding social relations. This approach challenges the assumption that moral formation begins with explicit moral teaching. For Rousseau, premature moral instruction risks producing verbal knowledge without moral consciousness. A child may repeat moral terms such as duty, goodness, or justice without yet understanding them through experience. Natural education therefore seeks to delay artificial moralization until the child is capable of connecting action, consequence, feeling, and judgment. In this sense, Rousseau offers a philosophical alternative to moral education that is overly prescriptive, authoritarian, or dependent on external approval.

Conceptually, these principles address the identified forms of moral deformation by shifting attention from rule recital and external compliance toward the educational conditions in which learners experience consequences, regulate dependence on peer approval, and gradually develop judgment and responsibility. This is a philosophical, not causal, claim: Rousseau does not provide a direct intervention for bullying, intolerance, academic dishonesty, or digital misconduct, but a framework for reconsidering the conditions under which moral agency is formed.

Previous scholarship has emphasized several dimensions of Rousseau's educational alternative. Fraistat (2016) for example, reads *Émile* through the tension between domination and care, showing that Rousseau's educational project can be interpreted as an attempt to protect moral freedom from coercive forms of dependence. Warner (2014) examines pity, friendship, and the limits of Rousseauan moral learning, indicating that affective relations are important but insufficient unless they are situated within broader moral and social conditions. Hanley (2008) similarly draws attention to Rousseau's concern with corruption, commerce, and the deformation of virtue through social comparison. These studies illuminate the moral stakes of Rousseau's pedagogy: the child must be protected not only from ignorance, but also from forms of recognition that inflame amour-propre, produce vanity, and make moral life dependent on reputation. Natural education thus becomes a way of managing the fragile relation between freedom, social life, and moral formation.

Other scholars have extended this discussion by examining Rousseau's relation to development, freedom, sensibility, and moral judgment. Önder (2018) highlights Rousseau's emphasis on the child's innate purity and the need to safeguard freedom from artificial social constraints. Engh (2019) in comparison with Wollstonecraft, shows that natural education aims at liberty through sensibility and experience while also revealing the difficulty of realizing such education within unjust social structures. Reuter (2014) and Slonina (2024) further complicate the picture by showing that Rousseau's moral education cannot be reduced to rational development alone; affect, imagination, gendered experience, and social judgment also shape the emergence of moral agency. Phillips & McMillian (2011) and Letseka (2014) add a civic dimension by reminding us that moral education must balance autonomy, public responsibility, and the formation of persons capable of living with others. These contributions suggest that Rousseau's relevance lies in his ability to connect personal formation with broader questions of recognition, care, and social order.

Despite the richness of existing scholarship, a clear research gap remains. Studies of Rousseau often position *Émile* as a foundation of naturalism, child-centered education, progressive pedagogy, religious education, or critique of traditional schooling. Meanwhile, contemporary moral education studies commonly focus on character education, civic education, social-emotional learning, compassion, or value reinforcement in schools. However, there is still limited work that systematically reconstructs Rousseau's natural education as a philosophical framework for addressing moral deformation in contemporary education. This gap is significant because Rousseau does not build moral formation primarily through indoctrination, direct preaching, or disciplinary compliance. Rather, his educational model emphasizes the protection of the child's nature from social distortion, the autonomy of child development, direct experience as the basis of knowledge, the graduality of moral growth, and nature as a formative space. These dimensions offer a distinctive conceptual vocabulary for rethinking moral education beyond instruction-centered paradigms.

This study aims to analyze Jean-Jacques Rousseau's concept of natural education in *Émile* and to reconstruct its philosophical relevance as a conceptual framework for addressing moral deformation in contemporary education. Its novelty lies in proposing the concept of naturalistic moral formation, understood as moral education grounded in the protection of the child's natural development, experiential learning, and developmental graduality. The study does not claim that Rousseau provides a final or directly applicable solution to contemporary educational crises. On the contrary, it treats *Émile* as a critical philosophical resource that must be selectively interpreted in light of plural, institutional, and digital school contexts. By doing so, the article contributes to educational philosophy and moral education by rereading Rousseau beyond naturalism and child-centered pedagogy, positioning *Émile* as a source for theorizing non-indoctrinative, humanistic, contextual, and developmentally appropriate moral formation.

Unlike interpretations that primarily emphasize Rousseau's naturalism, child-centered pedagogy, freedom, sensibility, or critique of conventional schooling, the term

naturalistic moral formation is used here to integrate the same five dimensions identified in this study and relate them explicitly to the contemporary problem of moral deformation. The novelty therefore lies in this contemporary philosophical reconstruction of Rousseau's existing educational insights, not in claiming that Rousseau himself formulated a separate doctrine under this name.

RESEARCH METHOD

Library Research as Reconstruction of Classical Texts for Contemporary Problems

This study employs library research as its primary methodological design. The choice of this method is based on the nature of the research problem, which does not seek to measure the empirical effect of Rousseau's educational thought on present-day students, but to reconstruct the philosophical relevance of natural education in *Émile* for addressing moral deformation in contemporary education. Library research is particularly appropriate for educational philosophy because it allows classical texts to be interpreted, contextualized, and conceptually rearticulated in relation to enduring educational problems. In this study, Rousseau's *Émile* is treated not merely as a historical document of eighteenth-century educational thought, but as a philosophical text that can illuminate contemporary tensions between autonomy and conformity, care and domination, experience and instruction, and natural development and social distortion.

The methodological logic of this study follows the view that classical pedagogical texts may be reread as resources for present educational problems when they are interpreted with attention to historical context, conceptual structure, and contemporary relevance. Studies of Rousseau have repeatedly demonstrated that *Émile* can be placed in dialogue with broader traditions of educational, moral, political, and civic thought. France (1995) for example, reads Rousseau alongside Quintilian to illuminate persistent connections between rhetoric, education, character formation, and civic virtue. Schaeffer (2010) shows how Rousseau's political-pedagogical reflections can be used to examine the possibility of reform, while Dalbosco & Rossetto (2019) discuss Rousseau through Dewey's educational thought to clarify the formation of human capacities in democratic education. These studies indicate that library-based reconstruction does not simply repeat the past; it interprets older texts as sources of conceptual orientation for contemporary problems.

The primary corpus is Jean-Jacques Rousseau's *Émile* (originally published in French in 1762), read in the 2024 E-Kitap Projesi & Cheapest Books edition of Barbara Foxley's English translation, *Emile* (ISBN 9786155529795). Foxley's translation first appeared in 1911 with J. M. Dent & Sons, London; the 2024 publication is a later edition of that translation, not a new translation made in 2024 (Rousseau, 2024, Book I). The text is analyzed as a philosophical account of natural education grounded in the assumption that human beings possess natural goodness, while moral deformation emerges when social pressures, artificial needs, adult-centered instruction, and premature moralization distort the child's development. This theoretical premise follows the research instrument used in this study, which identifies natural education as a form of education that allows

the child's innate potential to develop freely without being damaged by the negative influence of society. The instrument further emphasizes that learning should follow the rhythm of the child's natural development rather than impose adult reason, social norms, or abstract moral instruction too early.

Table 1. Analytical instrument for coding Rousseau's natural education in *Émile*

Variable	Indicator	Description	Research Questions
Philosophy of Naturalistic Education	"Back to Nature"	Education aims to allow children's innate potential to develop freely without being damaged by the negative influences of society.	1. How can education provide children with the freedom to develop their innate potential without being excessively influenced by social pressures or negative societal values? 2. Why are the negative influences of society considered harmful to children's natural development, and what is the role of educators in protecting this developmental process?
Philosophy of Naturalistic Education	Child-Centered Education	The learning process is adjusted to children's interests, talents, and stages of psychological development, rather than forcing children to adapt to predetermined instructional demands. Rousseau rejects rote learning through books. He argues that emotions should be educated before reason and emphasizes learning through direct experience and exploration.	1. Why should the learning process be adapted to children's interests, talents, and stages of psychological development? 2. How can teachers design learning activities that correspond to each child's needs, abilities, and psychological development?
Philosophy of Naturalistic Education	Direct Experience	Rousseau rejects rote learning through books. He argues that emotions should be educated before reason and emphasizes learning through direct experience and exploration.	1. Why does Rousseau reject rote learning through books and prioritize direct experience in the learning process? 2. How can educating emotions before reason help children learn more naturally through exploration and real-life experience?
Philosophy of Naturalistic Education	Stages of Child Development	Education must be adapted to specific age phases, including infancy, childhood, adolescence, and youth. Each phase has its own learning needs and educational focus.	1. Why should education be adapted to children's age phases, from infancy and childhood to adolescence and youth? 2. How do differences in learning needs at each developmental stage influence the ways teachers or parents educate children?
Philosophy of Naturalistic Education	Contextual Learning	The universe is treated as an open laboratory for understanding science, ecology, and social life.	1. How can the universe serve as an open laboratory for understanding science, ecology, and social life? 2. Why is nature-based learning important in helping students understand the relationship between human

beings, the environment, and society?

The analytical instrument consists of five indicators: “Back to Nature,” the child as the center of learning, direct experience, developmental stages, and contextual learning. These indicators guide the reading of *Émile* and allow the study to organize Rousseau’s scattered educational reflections into a coherent framework of naturalistic moral formation. The first indicator examines how education protects the child’s natural potential from social distortion. The second focuses on the child as a developmental subject whose learning must correspond to interests, capacities, and psychological stages. The third examines Rousseau’s critique of rote learning and bookish verbalism, emphasizing experience and exploration. The fourth analyzes the gradual structure of education according to infancy, childhood, adolescence, and youth. The fifth reads nature as a pedagogical environment for understanding knowledge, ecology, work, independence, and social life.

Thematic Coding, Conceptual Analysis, and Philosophical Interpretation

The analysis was conducted through three complementary procedures: thematic coding, conceptual analysis, and philosophical interpretation. Thematic coding was used to identify recurring ideas, motifs, and pedagogical concerns in *Émile*. Although thematic coding is commonly associated with empirical qualitative research, it can also function as a disciplined procedure in philosophical text analysis by enabling the researcher to identify patterns of meaning across a text. In Rousseau scholarship, several recurring themes have been identified as central to *Émile*, including freedom, care, domination, amour-propre, pity, sympathy, natural development, and experiential learning. Fraistat (2016) provides an important methodological example by reading *Émile* through the normative tension between domination and care. Landrum (2014) clarifies the role of amour-propre in moral subject formation, while Warner (2014) examines pity, friendship, and the limits of Rousseauan moral learning. Slonina (2024) extends Rousseau’s moral thought by exploring the formation of moral judgment through Julie, or the New Heloise. These studies demonstrate that careful thematic reading can reveal the moral architecture of Rousseau’s educational philosophy.

In this study, the initial coding was guided deductively by the five indicators in the analytical instrument, but the interpretation remained open to conceptual refinement during the reading process. Passages related to the protection of natural development, the critique of artificial education, the child’s psychological autonomy, direct experience, natural consequences, developmental graduality, and the formative function of nature were identified and grouped into thematic clusters. These clusters were then compared to determine whether several quotations or textual substances expressed similar meanings. When similar meanings appeared across different passages, they were generalized into broader conceptual phrases, such as protection of the child’s nature from social distortion, autonomy of child development, epistemology of direct experience, graduality of natural education, and nature as a formative space.

For analytical transparency, a textual unit was defined as a sentence, paragraph, or pedagogical episode in *Émile* that expressed a claim relevant to one or more of the five indicators. The five indicators functioned as the initial deductive codes. Textual units were assigned to these codes, compared within and across indicators, and grouped when recurring conceptual meanings overlapped. The generalized category labels were retained only when they could be traced back to multiple relevant passages. Interpretive validation consisted of repeated rereading, checking the fit between each source passage, its assigned indicator, and the generalized category, and comparing the resulting interpretation with established Rousseau scholarship. This procedure provides an interpretive audit trail appropriate to philosophical text analysis rather than treating coding as a statistical reliability exercise.

Conceptual analysis was then used to clarify the meaning and relation of key Rousseauian concepts. Natural education, freedom, care, domination, experience, development, and moral formation are not self-evident concepts; each requires careful definition and contextual interpretation. Fraistat (2016) account of domination and care provides a conceptual basis for understanding natural education as a non-dominative form of moral formation. Landrum (2014) discussion of *amour-propre* helps explain how moral deformation may arise from social comparison and dependence on recognition. Engh (2019) by reading Rousseau alongside Wollstonecraft, highlights the relation between nature, sensibility, freedom, and social constraint. Reuter (2014) also reminds us that Rousseau's account of education is marked by tensions, especially when examined through the lens of gender and social formation. These works help ensure that the analysis does not romanticize Rousseau's thought but reconstructs it critically.

Philosophical interpretation was used to bridge textual meaning and contemporary relevance. This procedure moved from close reading of *Émile* to broader interpretation of how Rousseau's ideas can inform current debates on moral deformation. The interpretation remained cautious: the study does not claim that Rousseau offers a direct empirical solution to bullying, digital misconduct, intolerance, or declining empathy. Rather, it argues that Rousseau provides a conceptual framework for questioning instruction-centered and discipline-centered moral education. This approach is consistent with scholarship that treats *Émile* as a critical resource rather than a ready-made pedagogical program. Önder (2018) emphasizes Rousseau's concern with protecting children from artificial constraints, while Zagorac (2020) shows the relevance and limits of compassion-oriented education. Phillips & McMillian (2011) and Letseka (2014) further indicate that moral education must engage autonomy, civic responsibility, and social recognition, not merely private virtue or classroom discipline.

Practical Research Workflow for Analyzing *Émile*

The practical workflow of this study began with corpus construction. The primary corpus consisted of *Émile* as the central text, while secondary literature was selected to support interpretation of Rousseau's natural education and its relevance for moral formation. The secondary sources included works on domination and care, *amour-propre*,

sympathy, moral judgment, civic education, compassion, natural development, and cross-textual interpretations of Rousseau. This corpus reflects the methodological practice of reading *Émile* both internally, through its own conceptual structure, and externally, through its reception in contemporary educational and philosophical scholarship.

Secondary literature was selected purposively through targeted keyword searches and citation chaining. Search terms combined “Rousseau” and “*Émile*” with “natural education,” “moral education,” “amour-propre,” “child autonomy,” “experiential learning,” “moral judgment,” and, for contemporary comparison, “bullying,” “intolerance,” “academic dishonesty,” and “digital misconduct.” Inclusion required direct relevance to at least one of the five analytical indicators or to the problem of contemporary moral deformation, peer-reviewed or scholarly publication status, and sufficient bibliographic metadata for verification. For the reviewer-requested updating of the discussion, priority was given to literature published in 2021-2026, while earlier works were retained when foundational to Rousseau scholarship. Sources that mentioned Rousseau only incidentally or did not inform the analytical categories were excluded. For representative quotations reported in the findings, the study cites Barbara Foxley’s 1911 English translation of *Émile* and uses Book-level locators because pagination varies across editions.

After the corpus was established, the text was read repeatedly to identify passages relevant to the five indicators in the instrument. Coding was conducted by examining textual units that expressed Rousseau’s views on natural goodness, social corruption, negative education, child-centered development, experiential learning, staged growth, and nature-based learning. Each unit was assigned to an indicator and then interpreted in relation to the research question. The coding process was not limited to extracting quotations; it also involved identifying the underlying pedagogical assumption contained in each passage. For example, passages criticizing premature moral instruction were not only coded as a rejection of verbalism, but also interpreted as evidence of Rousseau’s belief that moral understanding must grow from experience and developmental readiness.

The next stage involved axial and selective interpretation. The coded data were grouped into larger conceptual categories when they carried similar or overlapping meanings. The category “protection of the child’s nature from social distortion” emerged from passages concerning natural goodness, society’s corrupting influence, artificial needs, and the need to delay premature socialization. “Autonomy of child development” emerged from Rousseau’s insistence that childhood has its own way of thinking, feeling, and learning. “Epistemology of direct experience” was derived from his critique of rote learning and his emphasis on action, observation, and natural consequences. “Graduality of natural education” reflected the developmental structure of *Émile*, while “nature as a formative space” captured Rousseau’s use of nature, objects, work, and everyday life as pedagogical media.

Finally, the findings were interpreted in relation to contemporary moral education. This translational reading connected Rousseau’s natural education with current concerns about moral deformation, especially the inadequacy of approaches based only on

instruction, discipline, and value transmission. The study therefore formulates naturalistic moral formation as an interpretive synthesis: moral education grounded in protection of natural development, direct experience, and developmental graduality.

Methodological Scope and Limitations

As a library-based philosophical study, this research does not generate empirical classroom data and does not test the effectiveness of Rousseauian pedagogy through intervention. Its contribution is conceptual rather than experimental. The study reconstructs *Émile* as a philosophical resource for contemporary moral education, while acknowledging that Rousseau's ideas cannot be transferred directly into modern plural, institutional, and digital schooling contexts. Some aspects of Rousseau's thought, including the isolation of the child from society and the gendered assumptions found in his broader educational project, require critical interpretation rather than simple adoption. This limitation is important because contemporary education operates within complex social, cultural, technological, and institutional conditions that differ substantially from Rousseau's imagined pedagogical setting.

The study therefore positions Rousseau not as a final authority but as a critical interlocutor. Its methodological value lies in clarifying how natural education can be reconstructed into a contemporary conceptual framework without ignoring its historical tensions. By combining thematic coding, conceptual analysis, and philosophical interpretation, the methodology enables a systematic reading of *Émile* while opening space for critical engagement with present educational problems. This approach supports the central aim of the article: to formulate naturalistic moral formation as a reflective, non-indoctrinative, humanistic, and developmentally appropriate response to moral deformation in contemporary education.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

From Natural Education to a Contemporary Framework of Moral Formation

The analysis of Rousseau's *Émile* produced five interrelated thematic findings that clarify how natural education may be reconstructed as a framework for naturalistic moral formation. The findings were generated by grouping textual substances and interpretive meanings that appeared repeatedly across the coded data. These themes are protection of the child's nature from social distortion, autonomy of child development, epistemology of direct experience, graduality of natural education, and nature as a formative space. Together, they show that Rousseau's concept of natural education is not merely a pedagogical appeal to nature in a physical sense, but a philosophical critique of artificial, socially imposed, and prematurely rationalized forms of moral education. The results also confirm that Rousseau's educational thought cannot be reduced to romantic naturalism. Rather, it offers a complex account of how the child's moral life may be formed through protection, freedom, experience, developmental timing, and concrete engagement with the world.

Table 2. Generalized thematic categories derived from the coding of Rousseau's *Émile*

Initial Theme in the Table	Similar or Related Meaning from Quotations/Substance	Proposed New Phrase	Generalized Conclusion of Findings
Education as the protection of natural disposition	Education is directed toward preserving children's innate potential, delaying the negative influence of society, protecting them from false needs, and safeguarding their natural development from artificial forms of education.	Protection of the Child's Nature from Social Distortion	In <i>Émile</i> , naturalistic education is understood as an effort to protect the child's nature from social corruption. The child is not viewed as a being who must immediately be shaped according to the will of society, but as a natural subject whose development must be safeguarded so that it unfolds according to the rhythm of nature.
The child as a developmental subject	Children have ways of thinking, feeling, needing, and experiencing the world that differ from adults. Education must therefore be adjusted to children's age, interests, needs, and psychological readiness.	Autonomy of Child Development	Rousseau places the child at the center of education. Good education does not force children to become adults prematurely, but respects childhood as a phase with its own value, logic, and specific needs.
Experience as the basis of knowledge	Knowledge is acquired through action, observation, natural consequences, exploration, and direct experience, rather than through memorization, moral preaching, or bookish verbalism.	Epistemology of Direct Experience	The findings from <i>Émile</i> show that Rousseau regards experience as the primary foundation of knowledge formation. Children learn more meaningfully when they directly encounter objects, events, difficulties, and the consequences of their own actions.
Education as gradual and age-appropriate	Education begins with the body and basic needs, then develops through the senses, guided freedom, practical knowledge, emotions, morality, and social relations.	Graduality of Natural Education	According to Rousseau, education is gradual. Each stage of life has a different educational focus, so educational content, methods, and goals must correspond to the child's physical, psychological, intellectual, and moral readiness.

Nature as a pedagogical laboratory	Nature, objects, work, life necessities, the environment, and everyday experience serve as primary sources of learning for understanding knowledge, independence, ecology, and social life.	Nature as a Formative Space	In <i>Émile</i> , nature is not merely the background of education, but a space for self-formation. Through interaction with nature and concrete experience, children learn to understand the world, develop independence, and build awareness of the relationship between human beings, the environment, and society.
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The generalized findings indicate that the most comprehensive conceptual phrase for the overall result is natural education as child formation through protection of nature, direct experience, and developmental graduality. This phrase captures the internal relation among the five categories. Rousseau's educational model seeks to protect the child from moral distortion, respect the child's developmental autonomy, ground knowledge in direct experience, organize education according to stages of growth, and use nature as a formative environment. This synthesis resonates with recent scholarship that interprets *Émile* as a critique of domination, coercive instruction, artificial socialization, and forms of education that reproduce dependence on external approval rather than cultivating moral autonomy (Fraistat, 2016; Landrum, 2014; Önder, 2018; Warner, 2014). The synthesis is functional rather than merely terminological: protection from social distortion and autonomy of child development specify the conditions of formation; direct experience and nature as a formative space identify its principal epistemic and pedagogical media; and graduality specifies its developmental timing. Their convergence around the formation of judgment, responsibility, and autonomy is what supports the overarching interpretive concept of naturalistic moral formation already proposed in this study.

Protection of the Child's Nature from Social Distortion

The first finding shows that Rousseau's natural education is grounded in the protection of the child's nature from social distortion. The coded materials indicate that education is directed toward preserving the child's innate potential, delaying the corrupting influence of society, protecting the child from artificial needs, and preventing education from becoming a mechanism of premature social conformity. In this sense, education does not begin by imposing moral doctrine or social expectations on the child. It begins by guarding the conditions under which the child's natural development can unfold without being deformed by false needs, competition, vanity, and dependence on public opinion. A representative textual anchor is Rousseau's opening claim that "God makes all things good; man meddles with them and they become evil" (Rousseau, 2024, Book I), which directly expresses the contrast between natural disposition and socially

produced distortion.

This finding is consistent with the dominant interpretation of *Émile* in the literature. Önder (2018) emphasizes that Rousseau views children as naturally good and argues that education should protect them from artificial constraints produced by society. Fraistat (2016) deepens this interpretation by reading domination as a central threat to moral freedom in *Émile*. From this perspective, the child is not merely vulnerable to ignorance, but also to social relations that teach dependence, submission, and performative virtue. The danger of moral deformation emerges when education reproduces domination rather than cultivating care and freedom. Landrum (2014) discussion of *amour-propre* further clarifies this point. Social comparison may become morally destructive when the child's sense of self depends excessively on recognition, status, and external approval. Protection from social distortion therefore involves more than physical separation from society; it requires educational arrangements that prevent the premature inflation of socially dependent self-love.

Recent Rousseau scholarship supports this interpretation while sharpening its limits. Tennyson & Schwarze (2024) show that Rousseau's critique of education concerns how pedagogical practices can allow domination and dishonesty to flourish, reinforcing the present emphasis on social distortion. LeBlanc (2022), however, argues that *Émile*'s education does not by itself secure adequate judgment for navigating complex interdependent relations, cautioning against assuming that protection from domination automatically produces complete moral autonomy.

The analysis also indicates that Rousseau's critique of society should not be understood as a simple rejection of social life. The problem is not society as such, but social relations that produce artificial desires, domination, and moral dependence. Warner (2014) warns that intimate moral relations, such as friendship, cannot alone secure moral learning if they remain unsupported by broader non-dominative institutions. Zagorac (2020) similarly shows that compassion-oriented education can be valuable, but it has limits when institutions transfer moral responsibility entirely to individuals without addressing structural conditions. These insights help refine the finding: Rousseau's natural education protects the child not by denying the social world permanently, but by delaying and reorganizing the child's encounter with society so that moral growth occurs under conditions of care, freedom, and non-domination.

In relation to contemporary education, this finding suggests that moral deformation occurs when schooling rewards conformity, competition, reputation, and external compliance more than autonomous moral judgment. Bullying, digital misconduct, intolerance, and declining empathy may be interpreted not only as individual failures but also as effects of moral ecologies that normalize domination, status anxiety, and performative virtue. Rousseau's relevance lies in his insistence that moral formation must begin with the protection of the child's interior development before the child is fully exposed to social expectations that he or she is not yet prepared to interpret critically.

Autonomy of Child Development

The second finding concerns the autonomy of child development. The analysis shows that Rousseau treats the child as a distinct developmental subject with ways of thinking, feeling, needing, and experiencing the world that differ from those of adults. Education should therefore follow the child's age, interests, capacities, and psychological readiness. The child is not a miniature adult who must be accelerated into rational and social maturity. Childhood possesses its own integrity and must be respected as a meaningful phase of human formation. Rousseau's statement that "Nature would have them children before they are men" (Rousseau, 2024, Book I), directly anchors this developmental view of the child.

This finding aligns with child-centered interpretations of *Émile*. Önder (2018) highlights Rousseau's emphasis on infancy and early development, showing that education must protect and guide the child's natural capacities rather than impose adult-centered instruction. Simpson (1983) also contributes to this interpretation by comparing *Émile*'s moral development with stage-based theories of moral growth and by emphasizing that moral formation cannot be reduced to purely cognitive development. Autonomy emerges through the gradual interaction of affect, cognition, experience, and social understanding. In this respect, Rousseau's child-centered model anticipates later critiques of educational systems that prioritize adult-defined outcomes over developmental readiness. Recent studies also reveal both agreement and theoretical tension with the present finding. LeBlanc (2022) agrees that judgment must be cultivated rather than simply imposed, but identifies limits in *Émile*'s capacity to navigate interdependence. Slonina (2024) likewise shows that Rousseauian moral judgment can develop through pathways not exhausted by *Émile* alone. These studies support the present emphasis on developmental autonomy while cautioning against treating *Émile* as a complete or universal developmental script.

The coded findings also suggest that autonomy in Rousseau is not equivalent to unregulated freedom. It is a form of guided independence. The child is given space to act, explore, and encounter consequences, but the educational environment is carefully arranged so that freedom does not become abandonment. Fraistat (2016) care-centered reading is useful here because it shows that non-domination is not the absence of guidance, but a form of educational relation in which the adult's role is to support the child's freedom without coercively shaping the child's will. Landrum (2014) account of *amour-propre* adds that autonomy requires careful management of social recognition. The child must eventually learn to live among others, but without becoming enslaved to reputation or social comparison.

The literature also points to important limitations. Engh (2019) shows that natural education becomes problematic when social structures discredit particular voices or restrict freedom through gendered and cultural constraints. Slonina (2024) similarly complicates the *Émile*-centered account by highlighting alternative pathways to moral judgment through *Julie*, or the *New Heloise*. These interpretations show that autonomy cannot be understood as a universal developmental abstraction detached from gender,

culture, and institutional power. The result of this study therefore does not simply affirm Rousseau's child-centeredness. It reconstructs autonomy of child development as a critical principle: education should respect the child's developmental rhythm while also recognizing that social structures can either support or obstruct genuine autonomy.

Epistemology of Direct Experience

The third finding shows that Rousseau's natural education is grounded in an epistemology of direct experience. The coded materials repeatedly indicate that knowledge emerges through action, observation, exploration, natural consequences, and direct engagement with objects and situations. Rousseau's critique of rote learning, verbal instruction, and excessive dependence on books reflects a broader epistemological claim: children understand more deeply when they encounter the world through the senses, the body, practical activity, and lived consequences. The textual basis for this theme is explicit in Rousseau's instruction: "Give your scholar no verbal lessons; he should be taught by experience alone" (Rousseau, 2024, Book I).

This finding is strongly supported by the literature. Engh (2019) emphasizes the role of sensibility and experiential learning in Rousseau's natural education, while Önder (2018) describes guided observation and protected experience as central to the child's development. Simpson (1983) argues that *Émile* challenges rationalist accounts of moral maturity by showing that affect and cognition develop together through lived practice. These interpretations affirm that Rousseau's educational philosophy does not reject reason but rejects premature abstraction. Reason must grow from concrete experience rather than replace it at the beginning of learning.

The analysis also indicates that direct experience has a moral function. Children do not learn responsibility merely by hearing moral rules; they learn through the relation between action and consequence. Natural consequences allow children to recognize limits, dependence, effort, harm, and responsibility in ways that verbal instruction alone cannot produce. This does not mean that all experience is automatically educative. Experience must be pedagogically arranged so that the child encounters meaningful situations rather than arbitrary punishment or uncontrolled exposure. In this respect, Rousseau's experiential epistemology differs from permissiveness. It requires an educational environment in which experience becomes intelligible and formative.

The contemporary relevance of this finding is particularly significant for moral education. Instruction-centered models often presume that moral concepts can be transmitted directly through explanation. Rousseau's model suggests that such transmission may produce verbal familiarity without moral understanding. Dalbosco & Rossetto (2019) by reading Rousseau in relation to Dewey, show that experience can be understood as part of a democratic and capacity-building educational project. Paiva (2015) also reinforces the tension between representation and lived educational processes, suggesting that pedagogical mediation must not replace concrete engagement with reality. The result of this study therefore identifies direct experience as the epistemic core of naturalistic moral formation: moral knowledge becomes meaningful when children

encounter real conditions that require judgment, effort, sympathy, restraint, and responsibility.

Graduality of Natural Education

The fourth finding concerns the graduality of natural education. The analysis shows that Rousseau organizes education according to developmental phases: infancy, childhood, adolescence, and youth. Each phase has different educational aims. Education begins with the body and basic needs, moves toward the cultivation of the senses and guided freedom, then develops practical knowledge, emotion, sympathy, morality, and social relations. This structure indicates that moral education should not be compressed into early verbal instruction. Moral formation unfolds gradually through the maturation of physical, sensory, affective, intellectual, and social capacities. The principle of graduality is condensed in Rousseau's paradoxical injunction, "Do not save time, but lose it" (Rousseau, 2024, Book I), which emphasizes the need to respect developmental timing rather than accelerate instruction.

The literature supports this staged interpretation. Önder (2018) emphasizes that *Émile* presents a child-centered progression in which each stage has distinctive developmental tasks. Simpson (1983) shows that Rousseau's account of moral development resists narrowly rational stage theories because moral maturity depends on the integration of affect, cognition, and experience over time. Hermann (2013) also contributes to the discussion by connecting virtue and love in Rousseau, suggesting that moral education involves affective formation rather than simple rule acquisition. Slonina (2024) extends the analysis by showing that moral judgment may emerge through more than one developmental pathway, especially when gendered and social contexts are considered.

The coded findings indicate that graduality functions as a safeguard against premature moralization. When adults demand rational obedience from children before children have developed the experiential and emotional basis for moral judgment, moral education becomes formalistic. Children may learn to repeat adult language without understanding the moral reality behind it. Rousseau's gradualism therefore insists on timing. The body, senses, practical reason, emotion, and social understanding must be cultivated in sequence, although not mechanically. The point is not to freeze children within rigid stages, but to prevent education from violating developmental readiness.

This finding offers an important contribution to contemporary debates on age-appropriate moral education. Schools often introduce moral values through abstract slogans, rules, and prescribed virtues. Rousseau's gradual model suggests that such content becomes meaningful only when it corresponds to the learner's developmental capacity and experiential world. Engh (2019) cautions that social inequality and gendered norms can interrupt the intended developmental process. Fraistat (2016) further reminds us that gradual development must be supported by non-dominative care. Thus, the result of this study reconstructs graduality not simply as a chronological sequence, but as a developmental ethic: education must respect the time required for moral understanding to

become embodied, affective, practical, and reflective.

Nature as a Formative Space

The fifth finding shows that nature in *Émile* functions as a formative space. Nature is not merely a physical environment or romantic background. It is a pedagogical medium through which children encounter objects, work, bodily experience, daily needs, ecological relations, and social realities. The coded data show that nature, objects, practical activity, and everyday life serve as primary sources of learning. Through interaction with the concrete world, the child develops independence, practical judgment, ecological awareness, and an emerging sense of relation between self, others, and environment. Nature as a learning environment is similarly condensed in the statement, “No book but the world, no teaching but that of fact” (Rousseau, 2024, Book I).

This finding is consistent with scholarship that reads Rousseau’s natural education as an environmental and experiential pedagogy. Önder (2018) explicitly describes *Émile* as a return-to-nature program that seeks to protect children from artificial constraints while enabling development through guided natural experience. Engh (2019) shows that nature and sensibility are linked to freedom, although social structures may restrict the realization of this freedom. Arne (2023) expands this interpretation by reading Rousseau’s herbarium as a reflection on the art of living together, suggesting that attention to nature can also be a way of forming moral perception and relational understanding. These studies help clarify that nature in Rousseau is both epistemic and ethical: it teaches the child how to know, but also how to live.

The analysis also suggests that nature as a formative space includes work and practical necessity. The child learns through handling objects, solving problems, understanding needs, and recognizing the consequences of action in concrete situations. Zhang (2022) in a different cultural context, shows how child-centered perspectives can be integrated into moral and cultural education, while Letseka (2014) demonstrates the importance of communal ethical frameworks such as Ubuntu for thinking about justice, recognition, and educational formation. These works broaden the interpretation of nature-based learning beyond a narrow Western naturalism. They suggest that formative environments may include ecological, cultural, and communal dimensions, provided that learning remains grounded in meaningful experience and relational responsibility.

In contemporary education, this finding has implications for ecological education, contextual learning, and moral formation. Nature-based learning should not be reduced to outdoor activity or environmental content. It should be designed as a moral and epistemic practice in which learners encounter interdependence, limitation, care, effort, and responsibility. Fraistat (2016) emphasis on care and non-domination is relevant here because nature should not be instrumentalized merely as a resource for human development. Rather, the child’s relation to nature can cultivate humility, attention, responsibility, and sensitivity to the more-than-human world. This reconstructs Rousseau’s natural education as a model that links moral formation with ecological and social awareness.

Taken together, the five findings show that naturalistic moral formation consists of more than the return to nature as a slogan. It is a structured philosophical model of education in which the child is protected from social distortion, respected as a developing subject, educated through direct experience, guided according to developmental graduality, and formed through concrete engagement with nature and life. The results indicate that Rousseau's *Émile* can be reread as a resource for responding to contemporary moral deformation, especially where schooling has become overly instructional, disciplinary, competitive, and detached from lived experience. At the same time, the findings require critical caution. Rousseau's model must be reinterpreted for plural, institutional, digital, and culturally diverse educational contexts. Its contribution lies not in providing a ready-made program, but in offering a conceptual grammar for moral education that is protective, experiential, gradual, contextual, and non-indoctrinative.

Reconstructing Rousseau's Natural Education as Naturalistic Moral Formation

The findings presented in table 2 suggest that Rousseau's natural education can be reconstructed as a theory of naturalistic moral formation rather than as a narrow doctrine of child-centered naturalism. The five thematic categories identified in the results protection of the child's nature from social distortion, autonomy of child development, epistemology of direct experience, graduality of natural education, and nature as a formative space indicate that *Émile* offers a structured account of moral formation grounded in protection, experience, developmental timing, and non-coercive guidance. This reconstruction supports the view that Rousseau's return to nature should not be understood as a withdrawal from education or society, but as a normative strategy for preventing premature moral deformation. In this reading, the child is not abandoned to instinct; rather, the educational environment is carefully arranged so that moral awareness emerges through lived experience, guided freedom, and the gradual maturation of judgment.

This interpretation is consistent with scholarship that reads *Émile* as a critique of artificial and adult-centered education. Önder (2018) emphasizes that Rousseau's educational model protects the child from artificial social influences while providing appropriate experiences that correspond to natural development. Fraistat (2016) offers a sharper normative interpretation by framing *Émile* around the tension between domination and care. From this perspective, Rousseau's pedagogy is not simply permissive; it is an attempt to cultivate freedom by replacing coercive formation with non-dominative care. Such a reading helps clarify the moral significance of the first result category, namely protection of the child's nature from social distortion. Moral deformation occurs when education reproduces domination, artificial comparison, and dependence on external recognition rather than cultivating the child's capacity for reflective and responsible freedom.

The reconstruction of naturalistic moral formation also requires attention to the social and relational dimensions of Rousseau's thought. Landrum (2014) analysis of

amour-propre shows that recognition is not inherently destructive, but must be redirected toward public virtue and self-authorship. Slonina (2024) reading of Julie further expands Rousseauian moral formation by showing that moral judgment can develop through multiple routes, including gendered and socially situated experiences. These perspectives prevent an overly rigid reading of *Émile* as a universal developmental script. They suggest that naturalistic moral formation should be understood as a flexible philosophical framework that links autonomy, care, sensibility, and social recognition. It is therefore not merely a theory of protecting the child from society, but a theory of preparing the child to enter social life without becoming morally dependent on domination, vanity, or conformity.

Conceptual Tensions in Plural, Digital, and Institutional School Contexts

The contemporary application of Rousseau's educational thought raises several conceptual tensions. The most significant tension concerns the translation of an eighteenth-century pedagogical imagination into modern schools that are plural, bureaucratic, digital, and institutionally regulated. Rousseau's model presupposes a carefully controlled educational environment in which the tutor can shape the child's experiences, delay harmful social exposure, and protect developmental autonomy. Modern schools, however, operate within systems of standardized assessment, classroom management, digital communication, peer comparison, parental expectations, and public accountability. These conditions complicate the possibility of non-dominative moral formation. Fraistat (2016) care-centered reading of *Émile* is valuable precisely because it reveals domination as a normative danger, but it also makes visible how difficult it is to eliminate domination within actual institutional arrangements.

The findings therefore should not be interpreted as a call to reproduce Rousseau's pedagogical setting literally. Engh (2019) comparison of Rousseau and Wollstonecraft shows that natural education may fail when social structures impose gendered constraints or silence particular forms of experience. Warner (2014) similarly cautions that moral learning through intimate relations, such as friendship, cannot by itself generate robust virtue unless broader institutions sustain non-dominative moral development. These critiques are important for interpreting the second and fourth findings of this study: child autonomy and developmental graduality are not purely psychological matters. They require supportive social ecologies. Without institutional reform, appeals to child-centeredness may become rhetorical rather than transformative.

Pluralism adds another layer of complexity. Letseka (2014) discussion of Ubuntu and justice shows that moral education must be translated into local moral vocabularies and communal practices rather than imposed as an abstract universal model. Rousseau's emphasis on autonomy, nature, and freedom may productively inform moral education, but it must be interpreted alongside cultural traditions that emphasize reciprocity, communal responsibility, and relational personhood. This tension does not weaken the Rousseauian framework; rather, it clarifies its limits. Naturalistic moral formation becomes more persuasive when it avoids universalizing Western individualism and

instead enters dialogue with diverse ethical traditions. The aim is not to replace local moral ecologies with Rousseau, but to use Rousseau to ask whether educational practices protect the child's development, reduce domination, and cultivate responsible autonomy.

Digital culture presents an even more acute challenge. Landrum (2014) analysis of amour-propre is especially relevant for contemporary online environments, where recognition is intensified through likes, visibility, algorithmic attention, and performative self-display. Digital schooling and social media can magnify the very conditions Rousseau feared: dependence on public opinion, social comparison, vanity, and the desire to be seen rather than to become morally grounded. Phillips & McMillian (2011) caution that public reasoning does not automatically transform private moral life, which is particularly important in digital contexts where students may perform moral language publicly while remaining ethically disengaged privately. Zagorac (2020) analysis of compassion education also warns that empathy-centered pedagogy has limits when institutions do not support humane practices. These studies suggest that naturalistic moral formation must be adapted to digital moral ecologies by addressing recognition, attention, and performativity as core issues of contemporary moral deformation

Rousseau, Character Education, Civic Education, and Social-Emotional Learning

Rousseau's emphasis on protection, experience, and developmental graduality both complements and challenges contemporary approaches to character education, civic education, and social-emotional learning. It complements them because all three fields increasingly recognize that moral formation cannot depend solely on rule transmission or disciplinary compliance. Character education seeks to cultivate virtues, civic education develops public responsibility, and social-emotional learning emphasizes empathy, self-regulation, and relational competence. Rousseau's contribution lies in grounding these aims in a developmental and experiential framework. The results of this study indicate that moral values become meaningful only when connected to concrete experience, natural consequences, emotional maturation, and the learner's developmental readiness.

Fraistat (2016) concept of care as a counter to domination aligns closely with the relational aims of social-emotional learning. It suggests that schools should not merely teach empathy as a skill, but structure relationships so that students experience non-dominative care. Landrum (2014) treatment of amour-propre provides an important bridge to civic education because it shows how social recognition can be redirected toward public virtue rather than competitive self-display. Slonina (2024) expands this by indicating that moral judgment may develop through diverse pathways, including those shaped by gender and social imagination. These insights can strengthen contemporary moral education by shifting attention from abstract value instruction toward the conditions under which learners become capable of self-respect, mutual recognition, and public responsibility.

At the same time, Rousseau challenges contemporary moral education by questioning its tendency to institutionalize virtue through curricular slogans, assessment frameworks, and behavioral indicators. His emphasis on direct experience problematizes

educational practices that treat moral learning as a set of competencies to be delivered and measured. Simpson (1983) critique of overly rationalized moral-development models supports this concern by emphasizing the inseparability of affect and cognition in moral growth. Dalbosco & Rossetto (2019) Deweyan reading of Rousseau further suggests that experience must be tied to democratic capacity-building rather than reduced to activity-based learning. In this regard, Rousseau pushes contemporary education to ask whether its moral programs cultivate genuine judgment or merely produce disciplined performance.

The dialogue with civic education is equally significant. Phillips & McMillian (2011) show that liberal civic education must negotiate the relationship between public reasoning and private moral commitment. Rousseau's framework helps refine this debate by emphasizing that autonomy cannot be forced through public doctrine. It must grow through experience, care, and gradual self-formation. Letseka (2014) Ubuntu-based perspective also broadens this discussion by insisting that civic and moral education must consider communal responsibility and culturally grounded justice. A Rousseauian framework can therefore complement civic education when it is interpreted not as individualistic withdrawal, but as the formation of persons capable of entering public life without being governed by domination, vanity, or conformity.

Theoretical Contribution to Debates on Moral Deformation and Non-Indoctrinative Moral Education

The theoretical contribution of this study lies in rereading *Émile* as a resource for conceptualizing moral deformation as a social-educational process rather than as a mere failure of individual virtue. The findings show that Rousseau's educational philosophy identifies several sources of deformation: social distortion, premature adultification, verbalistic instruction, disregard for developmental timing, and detachment from concrete experience. This interpretation extends Fraistat (2016) care-based account by linking non-domination not only to the tutor-child relation, but also to school culture, moral pedagogy, and the design of educational environments. It also resonates with Engh (2019) concern that natural education cannot succeed when social constraints undermine freedom and sensibility. The advance over previous Rousseau scholarship is therefore not the assertion of a previously unknown Rousseauian doctrine. Rather, it consists in reorganizing established insights on natural development, non-domination, experience, developmental timing, and social recognition around a single contemporary analytical problem moral deformation and showing how these elements operate together as a framework of moral formation. In this sense, naturalistic moral formation functions as a second-order philosophical reconstruction for contemporary educational analysis rather than as a new historical claim about Rousseau's own terminology.

The concept of naturalistic moral formation contributes to debates on non-indoctrinative moral education by offering a framework that avoids two extremes. It rejects the view that moral education should be reduced to explicit instruction, discipline, and value transmission. It also avoids the opposite view that children should simply be

left to develop without guidance. Rousseau's model, as reconstructed here, proposes a more subtle pedagogy: protect the child's development, arrange meaningful experiences, delay premature abstraction, cultivate care, and respect developmental graduality. Warner (2014) critique of Rousseauian friendship helps refine this claim by showing that moral formation needs more than personal affection; it requires durable institutional conditions. Zagorac (2020) discussion of compassion education likewise indicates that moral cultivation must be supported by social arrangements that make compassion practicable rather than merely desirable.

This rereading also contributes to current debates on child autonomy. Autonomy is often understood either as individual choice or as rational independence. The Rousseauian framework developed here suggests a more developmental interpretation: autonomy emerges through protected growth, guided experience, regulation of amour-propre, and gradual entry into social life. Landrum (2014) is important in this respect because amour-propre reveals that autonomy is always entangled with recognition. Slonina (2024) further complicates autonomy by showing that moral judgment may be cultivated through plural and gendered routes. A non-indoctrinative moral education must therefore support autonomy without ignoring recognition, embodiment, affect, gender, culture, and institutional power.

At the level of educational policy, the framework provides questions for examining the moral ecology of schools rather than a ready-made assessment score. Review of school climate can ask whether disciplinary responses preserve students' dignity, whether the curriculum includes ethically meaningful experience, whether recognition practices reward competition over mutual respect, and whether demands for judgment match developmental readiness. France (1995) situates the long-standing connection between education and civic character, but Rousseau's pedagogical contribution here is interpreted as a reason to scrutinize how institutions exercise authority. Any institutional adoption should establish safeguarding procedures and participatory oversight rather than treating the teacher's discretion as unlimited.

Specific contexts make different aspects of this framework visible. In culturally plural schools, students' freedom and responsibility have to be interpreted in relation to legitimate local practices of reciprocity and recognition. Utami (2022) documents why interreligious competence matters in Indonesian public schools. At the institutional level, the meta-analysis by Cipriano et al. (2023) reports improvements associated with school-based social-emotional learning while also finding substantial variation across contexts and implementations. In digital settings, Kim et al. (2023) identify adolescent cyberincivility as a school-relevant issue requiring trust, family engagement, and community support. These literatures support the relevance of each setting, but they do not independently validate the five-part Rousseauian framework.

Beyond Rousseau scholarship, the practical value of naturalistic moral formation lies in offering adaptable design questions for schools, teacher education, community programs, and digital citizenship learning. Educators could begin by mapping where students encounter coercive authority or status competition, then design supervised

experiences—such as cooperative problem-solving, restorative dialogue, local ecological projects, and reflection on online interactions that connect action, consequences, care, and student voice. Developmental readiness would guide how much independence, mediation, and explicit moral discussion each activity requires; learner diversity and safeguarding obligations would constrain any use of ‘natural consequences.’ School leaders could review rules and recognition systems alongside curriculum, and teacher educators could use the five dimensions to analyze lesson plans and classroom relationships. This is a proposed translation, not a claim that these examples were tested in the present study. Evidence from school-based social-emotional learning supports attention to school climate and implementation variability (Cipriano et al., 2023), while recent work on culturally responsive programs cautions that adaptation to diverse learners must be deliberate (Lim et al., 2026). The framework’s wider applicability should be assessed through context-sensitive pilot studies that examine students’ judgment, agency, and experience, include their perspectives, and monitor unintended consequences. Its principal benefit is thus a critical, transferable set of questions for designing and evaluating moral-learning environments without reducing morality to compliance.

CONCLUSION

This study demonstrates that Rousseau’s natural education in *Émile* can be reconstructed as a framework of naturalistic moral formation through five key dimensions: protection from social distortion, autonomy of child development, direct experience, developmental graduality, and nature as a formative space. These findings show that moral education should move beyond instruction, disciplinary control, and value transmission toward educational environments that respect developmental readiness, reduce domination, and enable children to develop moral understanding through concrete experience and engagement with social and natural environments. The study contributes to the literature by extending interpretations of *Émile* beyond naturalism and child-centered pedagogy toward a philosophical model of moral education relevant to contemporary character, civic, and social-emotional education. Further research is recommended to examine the practical application of this framework in contemporary classrooms, digital learning environments, multicultural schools, and ecological education.

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