



When Local Education Becomes Fragile: Relation, Governance, and Schooling in Hanoi

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ABSTRACT

Educational reform in Vietnam aspires to cultivate learners who attend to place; however, classroom practice continues to narrow the relations through which knowledge is allowed to form. This study examines how Local Education unfolds within a centralised school system, focusing on two lower secondary schools along the restored Tô Lịch River in Hanoi. Using an embedded mixed-methods design involving surveys with forty-eight educators, semi-structured interviews with eighteen participants, and field-based observations with forty-two students, the study traces how locality is interpreted and enacted in everyday schooling. Across these encounters, three patterns recur. Locality is frequently translated into representational content rather than lived engagement; relational moments emerge through teachers' small improvisations rather than formal design; and institutional monitoring often curtails students' place-based inquiry. These dynamics reveal that Local Education does not fail due to a lack of pedagogical intent, but because relational learning remains weakly authorised within centralised governance structures. The Entangled Local Education Framework (ELEF) is developed as an analytic lens to show how locality functions as an infrastructure of attention whose educational force depends on institutional tolerance for relation, uncertainty, and pedagogical discretion. Rather than treating Local Education as a discrete subject, the study positions it as a diagnostic site through which the moral conditions of contemporary schooling become visible.

KEYWORDS

Local Education; educational values; institutional governance; place-based learning; teacher moral labour; Vietnam.

INTRODUCTION

Local Education in Vietnam emerged with an explicit ethical promise: that students would come to know rivers, crafts, and community heritage not as distant illustrations in textbooks, but as companions in the work of learning. In policy language, locality was imagined as something to be rediscovered, revalued, and reattached to everyday schooling. Yet classroom practice tells a more restrained story. What unfolds most often is a mode of instruction organised around factual recall and curricular coverage, where local knowledge appears primarily as information to be transmitted rather than as an ecology to be inhabited. The gap, therefore, cannot be reduced to questions of curriculum design alone. It signals a deeper tension about how schooling imagines knowledge, relation, and the kinds of encounters it is willing to recognise as educationally legitimate.

Scholarship in Indigenous and relational education has long argued that learning acquires force when it is anchored in lived environments, shared practices, and situated values (Bang & Medin, 2010; Kugara & Mdhluli, 2023). Such anchoring presumes that learners can attend to place not merely as content, but as a field of relation that shapes perception, responsibility, and meaning. Centralised systems, however, rarely make this anchoring easy. The Vietnamese context renders this tension particularly visible. Although national policy repeatedly affirms the importance of cultural preservation and environmental awareness, heritage tends to enter classrooms through curated representations and standardised instructional scripts. In this translation, locality becomes safer, more manageable, and more assessable—but also more distant from lived experience. The restoration of the Tô Lịch River exemplifies this dilemma. The river carries ecological histories, moral resonances, and everyday significance for surrounding communities, yet students most often encounter it as an object to be memorised rather than a space with which they are invited to engage.

What is at stake in these moments is not simply pedagogical effectiveness, but the moral economy of schooling itself. When locality is reduced to content, relational possibilities do not disappear; they are displaced. Teachers may still sense the educational potential of rivers, neighbourhoods, or craft spaces, and students may still respond with curiosity or attentiveness, but such responses must be carefully negotiated within tightly regulated instructional routines. Local Education thus becomes a revealing site through which to examine how values are authorised, muted, or quietly rerouted inside institutional life.

This study takes up that task by examining how Local Education operates within heavily regulated school settings. Focusing on two lower secondary schools along Hanoi's Tô Lịch River, it explores how teachers and students work with cultural and ecological resources under conditions of strong curricular control. Drawing on surveys, interviews, and field encounters, the analysis traces how meaning emerges in practice, how it is constrained by administrative expectations, and how it must often be negotiated through small improvisations rather than formal permission. Attention is given not only to what is taught, but to what kinds of

engagement are made possible—or rendered precarious—within everyday enactments of the subject.

The inquiry is guided by three interrelated questions: How do centralised structures shape the ways Local Education is interpreted and enacted in schools? In what ways do educators and learners attempt to make local knowledge meaningful despite administrative constraints? And what forms of pedagogical capacity and institutional support are required for Local Education to function as a mode of engagement rather than as the delivery of prescribed content?

Addressing these questions contributes to ongoing discussions on culture-based learning, Indigenous STEM sensibilities, and the pedagogical significance of place by shifting attention from curricular intent to institutional conditions. To interpret these dynamics, the study proposes the Entangled Local Education Framework (ELEF) as its primary theoretical contribution, providing a specialised analytic lens to examine the institutional mediation of local knowledge.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Efforts to reimagine the place of locality in schooling have drawn on several influential intellectual traditions, each offering a distinct lens on how knowledge, environment, and community might enter educational practice (Phan et al., 2024; Xuan & Xuan, 2021). However, these traditions encounter conceptual limits when applied to strongly centralised systems, where pedagogical discretion is narrow and institutional regulation shapes what counts as legitimate learning. Rather than treating these bodies of work as isolated debates, this review positions them as four interlocking problem-spaces that help illuminate the tensions animating Local Education in Vietnam.

A first strand emerges from postcolonial educational scholarship, which foregrounds the unequal geographies through which epistemic legitimacy circulates. Andreotti (2011) demonstrates how modern schooling can reproduce colonial assumptions even while claiming to promote cultural inclusion, whereas de Sousa Santos (2014) argues that global regimes of expertise continue to enact “epistemicide” by marginalising local ways of knowing. Connell (2007) extends this critique by insisting that the global South is not epistemically lacking but structurally muted within dominant knowledge circuits. This epistemic asymmetry often becomes materially visible in governance arrangements that rhetorically promote localisation while preserving centralised authority over curricular meaning and standards (Jakubowski, 2022; Whitaker et al., 2022). These interventions reveal a paradox at the heart of Local Education in Vietnam: heritage is celebrated as a symbolic asset, yet the authority to define its meaning is often routed through centralised expert channels.

Research in Indigenous and multicultural science education develops a second problem-space by examining how learners move across multiple epistemologies and how pedagogy might scaffold this navigation (Ajayi, 2025; Omodan et al., 2024). Bang and Medin (2010) show

that scientific reasoning is inseparable from ecological experience, kinship relations, and community memory, while Atwater, Russell, and Butler (2014) emphasise the social-justice dimensions of multicultural science education. Much of this work assumes contexts in which teachers can adjust curricula and design relations of learning with considerable autonomy—an assumption that becomes fragile in tightly regulated systems. Comparative research on decentralised systems suggests that even where collaboration between local government and schools is formally encouraged, alignment with national standards continues to function as the primary evaluative horizon (Tahili et al., 2021). When these insights are transposed into tightly regulated instructional settings—governed by standardised assessment, scripted pacing, and inspection regimes—the relational premises underpinning Indigenous STEM become difficult to enact. Urban schools in Hanoi exemplify this tension: students live alongside rivers and craft villages, yet institutional rhythms often transform these relations into information rather than lived experience.

A third strand arises from place-based education, which provides a moral and pedagogical vocabulary for reconnecting learning with land, community, and ecology. Gruenewald (2003) advances a “critical pedagogy of place” that seeks both to critique and to reinhabit local environments, while Sobel (2004) highlights designs that invite students to engage directly with the worlds around them. These imaginaries presuppose infrastructural conditions that are far from guaranteed: time to pause, authority to suspend plans, and tolerance for indeterminacy. Research on pedagogical leadership indicates that even within individual schools, the degree of coordination and administrative interpretation significantly shapes how far teachers can deviate from prescribed sequences (Martínez & Tadeu, 2018). In systems where “coverage” and adherence to prescribed sequences function as key evaluative metrics, creating space for embodied, place-responsive learning becomes an administrative rather than purely pedagogical decision. The Hanoi case illustrates this dynamic clearly: place is not simply a context awaiting discovery but one shaped, and often circumscribed, by centralised governance.

Posthuman approaches widen the conceptual horizon by foregrounding the agency of matter in educational encounters (Barad, 2007; Bennett, 2010). Barad (2007) conceptualises cognition as emerging through “intra-action” among human and more-than-human elements; Bennett (2010) describes “vibrant matter” as a political and affective force; Ferrando (2019) and Haraway (2016) push toward rethinking relationality across human, technological, and ecological entities. These insights help attune educators to the sensory weight of water smell, silt colour, or ground vibration in how learners come to know the world. Posthumanism therefore requires not only a language for material vitality but also an account of the governance architectures that determine whether such vitality can be recognised within schooling.

A final problem-space relates to methodological traditions. Mixed-methods scholarship (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2017; Fetters, Curry, & Creswell, 2013) and case study research (Yin,

2018) offer strong foundations for examining complex educational phenomena: they emphasise integration, contextual depth, and embedded system analysis. Sandelowski (1995) reminds us that saturation in qualitative inquiry is interpretive rather than numerical. Yet these contributions rarely address the “institutional atmospheres” that shape what can be observed, recorded, or analysed—how assessment regimes, inspection cultures, and standardised discourse delimit the forms of knowledge that research itself may apprehend. Studies of decentralisation and educational governance (Rizvi & Lingard, 2010; Rondinelli, 1981) further show that calls for localisation or autonomy often coexist with new modalities of central control. At the global level, UNESCO (2015) promotes education as a “global common good” while warning that commitments to diversity risk remaining symbolic unless they unsettle the organisational architectures that structure schooling.

Collectively, these bodies of work illuminate rich conceptual vocabularies for imagining how locality, relational epistemologies, and material agency might reshape learning. However, they offer limited guidance when these aspirations meet the regulatory density of centralised systems. What remains under-theorised is the process through which relational possibilities are authorised, interrupted, or administratively suppressed in everyday practice. Addressing this gap requires an analytic framework capable of examining not only what these traditions propose but how their possibilities are reorganised within institutional life.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The Entangled Local Education Framework (ELEF) is introduced here not to reassemble existing theories, but to offer a way of attending to how locality, pedagogy, and governance come into relation within Vietnam’s centralised school system. While prior scholarship has articulated multiple pathways for connecting knowledge to place, community, or material agency, ELEF poses a more circumscribed question: what kinds of relation are institutionally possible once these ideas enter tightly regulated educational settings? The analytic shift is deliberate. Rather than asking what theories promise, the framework focuses on what systems allow.

From this perspective, locality is approached not as a stable cultural resource but as a field of authorisation. Within scripted curricula and inspection regimes, what counts as “local” must pass through layers of policy, bureaucratic interpretation, and evaluative scrutiny. Local Education thus becomes a revealing site through which to observe how epistemologies are sorted, disciplined, or provisionally permitted. Instead of assuming that local knowledge inherently enriches learning, ELEF treats locality as a governed variable whose pedagogical force depends on institutional recognition and tolerance.

A second orientation concerns relational pedagogy. Educational traditions that foreground lived environments, Indigenous sensibilities, or ecological attunement often presume that teachers possess sufficient discretion to reorganise learning encounters. ELEF begins from a different premise. In centralised systems, relationality is contingent rather than given. It emerges through pauses, minor improvisations, and sensory openings that occur within

administrative constraints rather than beyond them. Relation, here, is not a background condition of learning but an event that must be enacted, sustained, and at times quietly protected (Biesta, 2015; Barad, 2007).

Material agency is also foregrounded, but without romanticisation. Rivers, craft spaces, and sensory atmospheres may exert pedagogical pressure, although their effects are translated through institutional filters that define what counts as evidence, which activities are considered legitimate, and which forms of curiosity may be pursued. Material vitality therefore appears as a mediated force, becoming educationally legible only when it aligns with the architectures of accountability that structure classroom life.

Centralisation, in this analytic frame, is not treated as a distant backdrop but as an operative mechanism. It shapes temporal rhythms, permissible movements, and the moral atmosphere of schooling. As a continuous structuring presence, centralisation configures how locality, relation, and materiality appear—or fail to appear—within everyday instruction (Rizvi & Lingard, 2010; Bourdieu, 1990).

Taken together, these orientations reposition ELEF less as a synthesising theory than as a diagnostic lens. It does not explain Local Education by subsuming it under established conceptual vocabularies. Instead, it uses Local Education to press those vocabularies, drawing attention to the forms of relation that surface when ideals of place encounter the material and moral architectures of a centralised system. In doing so, the framework clarifies how learning emerges under conditions not designed to sustain it, and how relational possibilities flicker, take hold, or quietly dissipate in the ordinary life of schooling.

METHODOLOGY

Research Design

This study adopts a qualitative-dominant mixed design embedded within a case study approach (Yin, 2018). Because Local Education is enacted inside a tightly scripted national curriculum, reliance on a single method would risk flattening the institutional layering, pedagogical negotiation, and sensory contingencies through which the subject takes shape. The case study design allows attention to the organisational and affective conditions under which Local Education is interpreted, while qualitative tools capture the meanings, improvisations, and quiet constraints accompanying everyday practice.

The Entangled Local Education Framework (ELEF) informed this design orientation. If locality becomes lived only when conditions permit, inquiry must attend simultaneously to formal curricular architectures and the situated manoeuvres through which relational encounters momentarily surface.

Research Sites and Participants

Fieldwork was conducted in two lower secondary schools located along Hanoi's Tô Lịch River corridor. These sites were selected because they both align with state expectations for heritage education and occupy a material environment undergoing ecological restoration.

A total of 48 educators (teachers and school managers) completed a structured survey. Eighteen participants—10 teachers, 5 administrators, and 3 curriculum coordinators—took part in semi-structured interviews. In addition, 42 students participated in classroom-based and river-based observational sessions. Sampling was purposive, targeting actors directly involved in planning, delivering, or experiencing Local Education. Sample adequacy followed principles of interpretive saturation rather than numerical quota (Sandelowski, 1995). Descriptive statistics on engagement and perceived curricular integration are reported in Appendix A1–A2.

Data Collection Instruments and Procedures

Three complementary instruments were employed.

First, structured surveys documented how educators interpreted the aims of Local Education and perceived institutional supports and constraints.

Second, semi-structured interviews elicited accounts of pedagogical negotiation, relational intent, and pressures associated with centralised governance. Interview guides and student activity sheets were used to structure interaction but are not included as appendices to avoid unnecessary length.

Third, classroom and field observations traced how students encountered heritage in situ—what they touched, bypassed, questioned, or re-imagined. A brief student mapping activity invited learners to sketch “what matters” during field encounters, providing insight into how ecological, material, and symbolic elements of the river registered in learning.

Data Analysis

Analysis proceeded in two stages. Survey responses were descriptively coded to identify broad interpretive patterns among educators. Interview transcripts, field notes, and student artefacts were then examined inductively through iterative thematic analysis. Initial analytic categories—such as policy pressure, limited flexibility, and relational openings—were progressively refined into themes capturing how institutional mediation shaped the emergence of Local Education in practice. Illustrative excerpts are embedded directly in the Findings section to demonstrate how interpretations were grounded in field evidence.

ELEF functioned not as an evaluative rubric but as a sensitising concept, guiding analytic attention toward moments where relations were enabled, constrained, or quietly improvised. This analytic pathway is described narratively in the main text rather than through supplementary appendices to maintain clarity without duplication.

Ethical Considerations and Trustworthiness

Ethical approval was granted by the institutional review board of Hanoi Metropolitan University. Participation was voluntary, anonymised, and revocable. Teacher interview transcripts were returned for confirmation, while student artefacts were used with explicit consent and contextual explanation. All excerpts are referenced using role-based identifiers—T (teacher), S (student), A (administrator), and CC (curriculum coordinator)—with numerical indices distinguishing participants.

Methodological coherence was ensured through alignment between research questions, case design, sampling rationale, and analytic procedures (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2017; Fetters et al., 2013). Triangulation across data sources and member checking supported interpretive trustworthiness.

FINDINGS

Across both schools, Local Education did not unfold as a neutral policy innovation but as a field where the promise of relation collided with the routines of centralised delivery. Survey responses and interviews consistently indicated that teachers understood the subject as “information about local heritage” rather than an opportunity for students to work with place. One teacher summarised this orientation succinctly: “We teach what the textbook says. Locality is a chapter, not a space we enter” (T1). Classroom observations reinforced this framing. The Tô Lịch River was introduced through images and scripted explanations while the river itself flowed just beyond the school gate. Students recited dates, project names, and key phrases, then filed out without turning toward the water. This dynamic reflects broader critiques that reforms often recognise local and Indigenous knowledges discursively while preserving deeper structures that regulate whose knowledge becomes teachable (Andreotti, 2011; de Sousa Santos, 2014). The findings suggest that Local Education was translated into representational form not because teachers resisted relational learning but because the system itself rendered locality safer to handle as content.

This translation was never complete. Moments of relation surfaced through what several teachers described as “small choices.” During a supervised river walk, one teacher halted the group and whispered, “Just listen for a moment” (T3). For a brief interval the lesson dissolved, and students attended to sound, smell, and movement. One student later remarked, “It felt different from the picture... like the river was doing something” (S2). In her interview, the teacher explained her intent: “If I follow the plan exactly, they will never feel the river. So I borrow a little time” (T3). Such gestures highlight how practice is rarely a simple execution of rules but an improvisational negotiation within structured fields. They echo arguments that education entails cultivating the kinds of relations and subjectivities a system makes possible, not merely transmitting curricular outcomes (Biesta, 2010, 2015). In these instances, teachers did not abandon the curriculum; they bent it slightly, creating micro-pauses in which locality could be encountered rather than described.

The river itself unsettled curricular framing. Student maps rarely mirrored the official narrative of “revitalisation.” Instead they noted algae, fluctuating water colour after rain, and “small fish under the weeds.” Field notes captured unanticipated questions: “Why does it smell different here?” (S5); “Where does the river go after this point?” (S7); “Does the colour change when the rain is dirty?” (S9). These inquiries exemplify what place-based and Indigenous education describe as learning arising from situated engagement rather than abstraction (Bang & Medin, 2010; Gruenewald, 2003; Sobel, 2004). They also resonate with posthuman accounts

of material agency, where pedagogical events emerge through entanglements of bodies, matter, and context (Barad, 2007; Bennett, 2010; Haraway, 2016). The river was not simply being taught; it was provoking perception, drawing curiosity, and redirecting attention.

How such interruptions were handled revealed the limits of relational possibility. Teachers frequently acknowledged student curiosity—“That’s a good question.” This was almost invariably followed by a swift redirection to worksheets. These cautious glances toward nearby administrators marked the boundaries of quiet resistance, highlighting the tension between the teacher’s moral obligation to sustain curiosity and the systemic pressure to maintain performative compliance. One teacher articulated this dilemma clearly: “I want to follow their questions, but if the inspector sees we’re off the plan, I will have to explain” (T6). A curriculum coordinator expressed the paradox even more sharply: “We ask for creativity, but we inspect for alignment” (CC1). These accounts reinforce policy analyses suggesting that decentralising rhetoric often masks renewed centralisation in practice (Rizvi & Lingard, 2010; Rondinelli, 1981; UNESCO, 2015). The river’s pedagogical force was thus visible although constrained: it elicited questions and attention, but institutional logics determined whether these could be recognised as learning.

Teachers and administrators also clarified what enabling conditions would look like. They did not ask for more directives about locality. Instead they requested time, flexibility, practical guidance for experiential components, and—most crucially—assurance that following emergent inquiry would not be penalised. As one administrator noted, “If teachers know they won’t be questioned for going off-script, they will do more with the river” (A2). These requests align with scholarship emphasising that relational pedagogy depends on governance that honours multiple epistemologies and grants genuine discretionary space to educators (Bang & Medin, 2010; Smith, 1999). They also echo methodological work that insists classrooms cannot be analysed apart from the broader institutional arrangements that structure them (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2017; Yin, 2018).

Taken together, the findings speak back to the theoretical fields that informed the study. They confirm the insight of place-based and Indigenous perspectives: relational learning requires embodied engagement with locality. They also affirm posthuman accounts of material agency: the river asserted itself pedagogically. However, the Hanoi case reveals that these literatures often assume conditions—teacher discretion, community control, institutional openness—that are not guaranteed in centralised systems. Here, locality, Indigenous sensibility, and material agency were present, although only intermittently allowed to matter. Learning with place and more-than-human others appeared not as a stable program but as a sequence of contingent events, shaped by teacher moral labour and institutional tolerance.

In relation to the research questions, the findings show that centralisation influenced Local Education not merely by prescribing content but by narrowing the legitimate forms of attention teachers and students could sustain. Educators and learners rendered locality meaningful through tactical manoeuvres and an attunement to the river’s urgings. Yet, these

acts remained fragile; they functioned as a form of infrapedagogy—carving out unsanctioned spaces for relational encounters that lacked formal structural endorsement within the centralised system. The capacities required for Local Education to function as lived pedagogy therefore extend beyond teacher skill; they depend on teacher moral labour—the quiet absorption of systemic risk by educators who deviate from the “sanitised” script. Ultimately, this requires an institutional willingness to recognise relation, time, and uncertainty as core educational values. This moves the discussion beyond implementation failure toward a more critical conclusion: current configurations of Local Education risk reproducing the epistemic distance they were intended to repair unless governance architectures are reworked to support the entangled forms of learning documented here.

DISCUSSION

The fieldwork indicates that Local Education functions less as an applied curriculum than as an epistemic and ethical stress test. Crucially, while quantitative findings point toward a systemic disengagement, the qualitative data uncovers the silent, individual labour educators undertake to preserve pedagogical meaning within these constraints. Policies that celebrate locality often presume that relation will naturally follow once content is labelled as “local.” The Hanoi case unsettles this presumption. Relation did not emerge from curricular designation alone; it appeared in pauses, hesitations, and the quiet drift of student attention beyond prescribed tasks. It surfaced when the river intruded upon instruction or when teachers subtly bent the script. These moments were not implementation errors or deviations to be corrected. They disclosed the deeper ordering of school life—how attention is regulated, how legitimacy is distributed, and how certain forms of engagement are rendered fragile by design.

Place-based education has long argued that learning takes shape through lived engagement with ecologies and histories (Gruenewald, 2003; Sobel, 2004), while posthuman scholarship draws attention to the vitality of matter in knowledge-making (Barad, 2007; Bennett, 2010). The Hanoi findings affirm these insights, although they also reveal their limits when transposed into tightly governed systems. The river acted pedagogically; students sensed, noticed, and questioned; teachers improvised openings. However, without institutional recognition, these alignments dissipated as quickly as they formed. Transformation here was not absent, but conditional. Relation registered only as flicker—momentary, provisional, and easily overwritten by administrative tempo. What mattered was not whether relation could occur, but whether it could endure.

This conditionality reframes ongoing debates on incorporating Indigenous and local knowledge into formal schooling. Comparative studies in the Philippines, Malaysia, or Andean contexts similarly document tensions between recognition and control (Igarashi et al., 2024). Such tensions are often interpreted as clashes of paradigms or failures of implementation. The Hanoi case suggests a different reading. Rather than overt resistance or compliance, educators inhabited a choreography of accommodation and deviation. Teachers did not oppose policy;

they softened it. They converted procedural time into experiential intervals, often without naming the departure. This quiet labour was neither celebrated nor formally acknowledged, although it sustained the very relational aspirations that policy discourse claimed to value. Its invisibility is analytically significant. It reveals that relational pedagogy can persist under unfavourable conditions, but only as shadow work that carries moral risk without institutional protection.

The findings therefore press beyond policy optimism toward a more demanding theoretical question. Much educational scholarship implies that introducing land, water, or heritage into schooling will deepen learning by virtue of their presence. The Hanoi material complicates this hope. Material agency and Indigenous sensibilities did manifest, but their pedagogical force was filtered through routines unable to recognise them as legitimate learning. This displacement invites a shift in emphasis from ontology to institutional epistemology. The issue is not simply that matter acts, but under what arrangements its actions become intelligible, assessable, and defensible within schooling. Entanglement, in this sense, is not an inherent property of educational worlds. It is a condition that must be authorised, or at least tolerated, by institutional architectures.

Seen through this lens, the research questions do not resolve into straightforward answers so much as a re-specification of the problem. Centralisation did not eliminate locality; it formatted it. Meaning did not fail to appear; it emerged against the grain of established routines. Teacher capacity was not absent; it took moral rather than procedural form, enacted through small risks rather than formal permission. The challenge, then, is not one of content integration. It lies in cultivating institutional textures capable of holding relational encounters when they arise, rather than requiring them to remain fleeting and deniable.

This perspective reorients international conversations on community-based and Indigenous education. Much of the literature concentrates on fidelity to models or on identifying barriers to implementation. The Hanoi case points toward a different analytical trajectory, one that attends to moments when learning becomes contingent, ephemeral, and quietly meaningful, and asks how systems respond to those moments. Such an approach opens new empirical and theoretical directions: tracing pedagogical flicker as an indicator of institutional ethics; examining teacher improvisation as a form of governance enacted from below; and investigating how more-than-human forces become legible or remain illegible within regimes of accountability.

These questions do not resolve policy dilemmas, nor do they offer easy prescriptions. They do, however, sharpen a conceptual horizon. Local Education emerges here not simply as a curricular domain, but as a sensor of institutional values. It reveals how far a system is willing to let the world matter in educational terms. In Hanoi, that sensor flickered. Whether its signals intensify depends less on new slogans or curricular additions than on whether institutions can tolerate uncertainty and recognise relation as educational work. If such recognition were to

shift, the small pauses observed in the field would no longer need to remain hidden. They could become the substance of education itself.

CONCLUSION

This study demonstrates that the central challenge facing Local Education in Hanoi lies not in conceptual ambition, but in the institutional conditions through which that ambition becomes livable. Teachers and students did generate moments of relation with the river, moments in which locality briefly emerged as something sensed, inhabited, and questioned. These encounters remained fleeting because the prevailing instructional order consistently recognised coverage more readily than encounter. Meaning was not absent. It appeared in forms the system struggled to acknowledge—improvisation rather than procedure, sensing rather than reporting, curiosity rather than compliance—and was therefore allowed to surface only temporarily.

Read alongside international scholarship, the case confirms a familiar tension between relational pedagogical ideals and regulatory schooling structures, while clarifying how relation survives under constraint. What sustains Local Education in practice is not the curriculum itself, but the moral labour of educators who quietly absorb the risk of deviation. Rather than being institutionally authorised, relational moments are carried by teachers as discretionary acts, folded into pauses, softened instructions, and carefully timed departures from script. The findings suggest that the challenge lies not in a deficit of local content, but in the absence of governance architectures capable of validating relational and site-specific learning.

Seen in this light, Local Education functions less as a discrete subject than as a diagnostic of institutional values. It reveals how far schooling is willing to allow learning that exceeds its scripts, and where responsibility for sustaining such learning is silently displaced. When systems celebrate locality while leaving its enactment to unprotected improvisation, they affirm relational ideals while outsourcing their ethical costs.

What remains for future research is to follow these moments of relation beyond their initial appearance: to examine what becomes of learning when such encounters are allowed to endure rather than fade, and to consider what forms of schooling might emerge if these fleeting events were no longer treated as deviations to be managed, but as the substance through which education realises its moral promise.

Declarations

Funding

No external funding was received for this research.

Ethics approval and consent to participate

The study was conducted in accordance with the Declaration of Helsinki and the Belmont Report. Ethics approval was obtained from the Research Ethics Committee of the authors' institution. All participants provided informed consent. Participation was voluntary, anonymity was assured, and respondents were free to withdraw at any point without consequence.

Consent for publication

Not applicable.

Clinical trial registration

Not applicable.

Competing interests

The authors declare no competing interests.

Availability of data and materials

Not applicable.

Authors' contributions

All authors—H.D.T., N.T.H., D.T.H., D.T.Q., and T.Q.V.—contributed equally to the conception, design, data collection, and analysis of the study. The initial manuscript draft was collaboratively prepared, and all authors provided critical revisions and approved the final version of the paper.

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APPENDIX

A1

Table 1. Cross-tabulation of Stakeholder Engagement with Local Education (LE)

| Stakeholder group | High engagement (%) | Moderate engagement (%) | Low engagement (%) | Not interested (%) |
|-------------------------|---------------------|-------------------------|--------------------|--------------------|
| Teachers (n = 32) | 12.5 | 21.9 | 43.8 | 21.9 |
| Students (n = 20) | 10.0 | 15.0 | 35.0 | 40.0 |
| Administrators (n = 15) | 13.3 | 26.7 | 33.3 | 26.7 |

Note. Engagement levels were derived from survey responses to the item: “How interesting and meaningful do you find the Local Education subject?” Percentages reflect group-specific distributions (rounded to one decimal place).

Appendix A2

Table 2. Cross-tabulation of Perceived Interdisciplinary Integration and Engagement Levels

| Perceived integration of LE into core subjects | High engagement (%) | Moderate engagement (%) | Low engagement (%) | Not interested (%) |
|--|---------------------|-------------------------|--------------------|--------------------|
| Strong integration (n = 18) | 27.8 | 38.9 | 22.2 | 11.1 |
| Partial integration (n = 40) | 12.5 | 27.5 | 35.0 | 25.0 |
| No integration (n = 34) | 5.9 | 11.8 | 41.2 | 41.2 |

Note. Higher perceptions of interdisciplinary integration are strongly associated with increased engagement. Where LE was perceived as disconnected from STEM or core subjects, disengagement rose markedly.