



## Reintegrating Northern Delta Cultural Identity into Primary Art Education in Vietnam: A Practice-Based Inquiry

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### Abstract

This study explores the ways in which the cultural identity of Vietnam's Northern Delta is integrated into primary-level art education through three data sources: analysis of Art textbooks (Grades 1–5), pedagogical experiments with sample lessons, and interviews with teachers. Employing a qualitative and practice-based methodology, the study examines the symbolic depth, contextual relevance, and embodied affective engagement of learners. Findings indicate that while regional cultural identity is minimally present in current textbooks, it holds strong potential for reactivation through experiential and memory-based teaching. Based on these insights, the article proposes an approach grounded in affective, embodied pedagogy that repositions cultural symbols not only as knowledge units but rather as affective memory fields that nurture student identity. The study contributes a situated voice to global discussions on arts education and advocates for context-responsive curricula grounded in local cultural spaces within postmodern educational paradigms.

**Keywords:** Arts Education, Regional Culture, Student Identity, Primary Art Textbooks, Affective Pedagogy

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### 1. Introduction

In primary art education, teachers do more than transmit visual skills or knowledge—they silently cultivate memory. Often, the lines, colors, and patterns children encounter in early lessons serve as their first contact with the symbolic world of their homeland. Thus, integrating regional cultural identity into teaching must not be reduced to decorative illustration; it should be understood as a profound pedagogical approach that fosters aesthetic sensitivity grounded in lived space, community memory, and indigenous culture.

The Northern Delta, rooted in an agrarian heritage, contains layers of symbolic resources with deep educational value—from folk visual arts such as Dong Ho and Hang Trong paintings, temple carvings, and vernacular architecture to handicrafts, rituals, beliefs, and everyday life tied to seasons, rice fields, and rivers. These images transcend the visual, carrying collective memory and vernacular knowledge distilled across generations. When skillfully incorporated into lessons, they can open a world of art that is both intimate and enriching, cultivating students' cultural sensibilities from an early age.

Yet in practice, the inclusion of local cultural elements in primary art education remains fragmented. Lessons may employ folk paintings or traditional motifs, but often in a mimetic fashion, failing to activate the latent cultural vitality within these images. The absence of a triadic relationship between artwork, learner, and lived environment renders such integration superficial, at times reduced to folkloric embellishment devoid of pedagogical depth.

This study proposes a more systematic and pedagogically grounded approach: integrating the Northern Delta's cultural identity is not about inserting visual materials into lessons, but about constructing a teaching space where teachers and students co-create, empathize, and co-interpret folk culture.

It is guided by three critical questions: What forms of Northern Delta cultural identity are pedagogically potent for primary art education? What educational principles must guide this integration to avoid superficiality? And what viable lesson structures can organically and enduringly nurture students' cultural-aesthetic sensibilities?

At a deeper level, these questions address a neglected issue in primary education: the role of indigenous culture not only as supplementary content, but rather as a foundational structure where identity, aesthetic reception, and artistic thought are co-formed.

## 2. Literature Review

The integration of local cultural identity into primary art education has gained increasing scholarly interest amid curricular globalization and the marginalization of indigenous knowledge in modern schooling. While international scholarship has laid important theoretical foundations, critical gaps remain—particularly in engaging specific cultural spaces like Vietnam's Northern Delta, where aesthetics and communal memory are inextricably linked as living epistemologies.

Place-based education theorists such as Gruenewald (2003)<sup>[11, 12]</sup>, and Smith (2002, 2007)<sup>[23, 24]</sup>, emphasize that lived environment, communal memory, and local practices are not merely educational contexts but epistemic agents. In art education, models like Reggio Emilia (Edwards, Gandini & Forman, 1998; Manera, 2022)<sup>[8, 16]</sup> and art for environmental awareness (Inwood, 2008; Jokela, 2021)<sup>[13]</sup>, redefine classrooms as participatory cultural spaces where children not only learn about art but make art from their surrounding world. UNESCO (2024)<sup>[28]</sup>, has repeatedly underscored the need to embed intangible cultural heritage into education not simply as illustrative content but rather as an ethical and humanistic orientation.

However, many theoretical frameworks remain generalized, assuming ideal conditions of curricular autonomy, teacher capacity, and governance that postcolonial and post-socialist systems—like Vietnam—struggle to meet. Emerging approaches such as *a/r/tography* (Irwin & Springgay, 2008; Springgay, Irwin & Kind, 2005) and multimodal literacy (Rowse, 2013)<sup>[22]</sup>, enable connections between artistic expression, experiential knowledge, and self-awareness, but retain Western orientations and lack sufficient localization. Meanwhile, theories by Eisner (2002)<sup>[7]</sup> and Efland (2002)<sup>[6]</sup>, have asserted the centrality of art in cognitive and intellectual development, yet are rooted in Western paradigms with limited resonance in Southeast Asian cultural settings. Ethnomusicological works by Feld (1982)<sup>[9]</sup>, and Weidman (2006) show how sound art can encode emotion, memory, and social structure in ritual performance, but remain distant from formal art education discourse.

From applied linguistics, pragmatic theories of communication such as those by Levinson (2000)<sup>[15]</sup>, Sperber & Wilson (1995)<sup>[26]</sup>, and Blakemore (2002)<sup>[3]</sup>, offer useful conceptual tools for viewing art as implicit communication—where context, intention, and inference shape meaning—but have not been operationalized in primary arts pedagogy.

In terms of cultural policy and the social impact of art, Cohen *et al.* (2006)<sup>[5]</sup>, demonstrate that participation in cultural programs can improve physical health, mental well-being, and social functioning among the elderly, extending art's

humanistic potential. Bamford (2006)<sup>[2]</sup>, further supports this by showing how the arts contribute to holistic learner development across global education systems.

In Southeast Asia, programs like Indonesia's Merdeka Belajar and the Philippines' K to 12 reforms have begun to integrate regional art and culture into schooling but lack deep theoretical models and sustained implementation. In Vietnam, the 2018 national curriculum mandates inclusion of traditional and local culture in primary art education (MOET, 2018)<sup>[17]</sup>. Yet, as Bạch Ngọc Diệp and Tạ Kim Chi (2017)<sup>[11]</sup>, note, the delineation of "specialized competencies" in art education remains detached from classroom realities. The textbooks for Grades 1–5 (MOET, 2020)<sup>[18]</sup>, mention cultural elements, but mainly as sporadic illustrations without coherent epistemic or expressive frameworks.

Meanwhile, cultural studies by Ngô Đức Thịnh (2019)<sup>[19]</sup>, Nguyễn Bá Tùng (2012)<sup>[20]</sup>, and Nguyễn Huy Hoàng (2010)<sup>[21]</sup>, offer rich symbolic mappings of Northern Delta culture—from festivals and village architecture to crafts and ritual sounds. However, these remain within ethnographic or heritage preservation paradigms, rarely mobilized in pedagogical practice, and lack theoretical transposition into curricular or methodological forms suitable for primary art education.

These gaps reveal the need for a framework that can translate symbolic memory and cultural practice into aesthetic competencies within primary schooling. Current approaches remain skewed toward technical training or individual creativity, with insufficient attention to cultural semiotics, embodied expression, and communal visual grammar in identity formation.

This article intervenes precisely at this intersection—where identity is not merely referenced in art education, but reconstructed through pedagogical engagement. Focusing on the Northern Delta within Vietnam's primary education system, it articulates three primary aims: first, to reconceptualize cultural memory as pedagogical infrastructure—not content but a semantic, affective, and aesthetic field; second, to explore how traditional symbols, craft skills, and ritual aesthetics can be transformed into lesson structures, content, and expressive capacities; and third, to contribute a theoretically grounded local voice to global discourses on art education, positioning Southeast Asia not as an object of study but rather as a site of theoretical production.

## 3. Theoretical Framework and Research Methodology

This study is grounded in two intertwined conceptual strands. The first is the notion of "local culture as pedagogical infrastructure," where cultural identity is not merely represented but structurally embedded as knowledge. The second is the framework of place-based art pedagogy, which views "place" not as backdrop but rather as an active agent in primary art education.

More specifically, the idea of "local culture as pedagogical infrastructure" builds upon Gruenewald's (2003)<sup>[11, 12]</sup>, assertion of "the best of both worlds"—a model in which learners simultaneously thrive intellectually while rooted in their native soil. The Reggio Emilia approach (Edwards *et al.*, 2012)<sup>[8]</sup>, expands this vision into art education, positioning children as co-creators with their environments, including the tacit cultural symbols of their communities. Inwood (2008)<sup>[13]</sup>, furthers this by suggesting that ecological art practices

enable full-bodied modes of learning, not merely intellectual ones. UNESCO (2024) <sup>[28]</sup>, synthesizes this layered perspective, asserting that intangible heritage should serve not as decorative curriculum material but rather as a transgenerational force that sustains cultural diversity—while also cautioning that its fragmentation into curricular afterthoughts risks eroding this potential. Within the Vietnamese context, the revised national curriculum (MOET, 2018) <sup>[17]</sup> and the specialized competency framework for Art Education (Bách & Tạ, 2017) <sup>[1]</sup>, reflect growing concern about the place of traditional culture in formal schooling. However, a theoretical model for transforming symbolic heritage into aesthetic competencies in primary education remains lacking. Cultural studies by Ngô Đức Thịnh (2019) <sup>[19]</sup>, Nguyễn Bá Tùng (2012) <sup>[20]</sup>, and Nguyễn Huy Hoàng (2010) <sup>[21]</sup>, offer rich symbolic materials but have yet to be translated into pedagogical infrastructures. Meanwhile, frameworks such as *a/r/tography* (Irwin & Springgay, 2008) and multimodal literacy (Rowell, 2013) <sup>[22]</sup> introduce creative modes of inquiry but require deep contextualization within lived cultural environments.

Accordingly, this study proposes a theoretical model of "foundational symbolic infrastructure," wherein the cultural identity of the Northern Delta is not merely depicted but "made knowable" through art classrooms—shaping students' abilities in visual expression, symbolic reasoning, and affective locality. This framework is intended to contribute both to grounded local theory and to the broader discourse of international art education.

The study employs a qualitative, practice-based research design, situated within the philosophy of *a/r/tography*, in which the researcher operates simultaneously as artist, educator, and theorist (Irwin & Springgay, 2008). Anchored in a localist epistemology—one that treats regional culture as an embedded structure of pedagogical knowledge—the study mobilizes three complementary axes of inquiry to investigate how cultural identity is restructured through primary art education:

**First**, the study conducts a qualitative content and semiotic analysis of the current Grade 1–5 art textbooks published by the Vietnam Education Publishing House (2020) <sup>[18]</sup>, which function as official articulations of aesthetic, identity, and community representations in the curriculum. Twenty-five key lessons (five per grade) were coded for image and textual content, with particular attention to Northern Delta cultural symbols such as attire, craft traditions, village architecture, festivals, and visual iconography. These were then cross-referenced with cultural frameworks established by Ngô Đức Thịnh (2019) <sup>[19]</sup>, Nguyễn Bá Tùng (2012), and Nguyễn Huy Hoàng (2010) <sup>[21]</sup>, to evaluate cultural depth and representational fidelity.

**Second**, the study designed and implemented three pilot art lessons incorporating regional symbols, delivered at a primary school in Thanh Trì district—an area typifying the rural–urban interface of Hanoi's suburban landscape. The lessons were structured around the aesthetic competency framework of the 2018 general education reform, integrating motifs such as village gates, Đông Sơn drum patterns, communal festivals, *tò he* (figurine) craft techniques, and Northern Delta folk figures. Each lesson lasted 35–40 minutes, documented through video, field notes, and student art outputs. Content was iteratively adapted based on real-time feedback, following an action-based research design.

**Third**, in-depth interviews were conducted with six primary art teachers and supplemented by classroom observations, aiming to uncover embodied pedagogical insights and to detect forms of expressive potential obscured by current curriculum models. Teachers were selected based on having at least five years of teaching experience, participation in the 2018 curriculum training program, and prior attempts to integrate local cultural content. Semi-structured interviews (45–60 minutes each) explored three thematic axes: (1) perceptions of identity in art education; (2) lived experiences in implementing cultural content; and (3) assessments of student response and structural constraints. Observations focused on students' affective reactions, interactional behaviors, image selection processes, and emergent aesthetic vocabularies during their creative work.

All data were processed using thematic coding, supported by NVivo 12 Plus, to identify recurring patterns in cultural identity reconstruction, embodied expression mechanisms, and processes of symbolic internalization within art education. Findings were then critically juxtaposed with international place-based art pedagogy models to highlight the distinctiveness of the Vietnamese context and its potential for theory-building through localized practice.

#### 4. Research Findings

The analysis and triangulation of data from three sources—Grades 1–5 Art Education textbooks, classroom-based teaching experiments, and teacher interviews—revealed marked discrepancies between curricular directives, classroom implementation, and the embedded cultural knowledge of the Northern Delta in art education. All data were thematically coded using NVivo 12 Plus, organized into three core categories: symbolic appearance, contextualization of symbols, and affective memory linkage.

##### 4.1. Symbolic Appearance in Textbooks

In the first dataset—the analysis of 25 core lessons from the official art textbooks—symbols specific to Northern Delta cultural identity appeared in only 28% of the content, primarily through visual references to architecture, festivals, and handicrafts. However, merely 12% of these instances were accompanied by explanatory guidance or contextual activities to help students interpret regional distinctiveness. More critically, only 5% of the materials demonstrated potential to evoke personal or familial memory connections—indicating a relatively high degree of "affective detachment" within the current curriculum structure.

##### 4.2. Classroom-Based Symbolic Reconnection

In contrast, classroom-based teaching experiments painted a very different picture. Across three implemented lessons at T.T. Primary School in Thanh Trì district (Hanoi), involving 90 students in total, 74% of the pupils successfully identified and reproduced regional cultural symbols. Of these, 71% articulated the symbolic meanings in their own words, without relying on textbook imagery. Activities such as sculpting village gates, painting rural markets, or recreating Đông Hồ folk paintings from memory activated layers of rich personal experience.

Observations from Class 4B, for instance, revealed that in the project "The Village Gate of My Childhood," 66% of student drawings were accompanied by personal explanations referencing grandparents, ancestral villages, or family

memories. One student wrote: "I remember the village gate near my grandmother's house with a big banyan tree and a man selling to he figurines. This picture is me drawing our visit last New Year's Eve." (Observation, Class 4B, Student HS-17-TT).

These findings demonstrate that the process of "symbolic internalization"—the transformation of cultural signifiers into embodied personal meaning—only occurs when students are empowered to create based on their lived experiences. A visible shift from visual cognition to affective expression was observed in their choices of imagery, color palette, and spatial arrangement. Particularly in Class 5A, students drawing rural markets incorporated nuanced details such as a mother wearing a straw conical hat, a woman selling betel leaves, and a man vending bánh đúc—elements absent from the textbooks but rooted in students' everyday lives.

**4.3. Teachers' Pedagogical Perceptions**

In-depth interviews with six art teachers (coded as GV01–GV06) added a critical layer of insight into pedagogical reasoning. All expressed strong support for integrating local cultural identity into art education, yet 4 out of 6 admitted they lacked practical tools and visual materials, which discouraged them from exploring cultural content deeply. One teacher (GV04) remarked, "I once had students draw village festivals, but without reference images or video clips, they misunderstood and ended up drawing a lion dance from central Vietnam." Another (GV02) noted, "If textbooks clearly differentiated regional cultures, we'd be far more proactive in storytelling and customizing lessons."

The interviews also revealed a gap in pedagogical infrastructure: most teachers struggled to translate cultural symbols into classroom learning activities—lacking a framework for converting communal memory into experiential learning modes.

**4.4. Thematic Disparities across Data Sources**

A cross-comparison of thematic codes highlighted stark contrasts between the three datasets. The appearance of regional cultural symbols was highest in the teaching experiments (74%) and lowest in the textbooks (28%). Contextual explanation reached 71% in classroom settings but only 12% in curricular materials. Notably, the ability to associate symbols with personal memories surged to 66% in experimental lessons—almost entirely absent in the official curriculum.

These disparities affirm the decisive role of experiential, affectively attuned pedagogy while exposing a fundamental limitation in the existing curriculum: it fails to activate cultural symbols as living components of students' imaginative and emotional worlds.

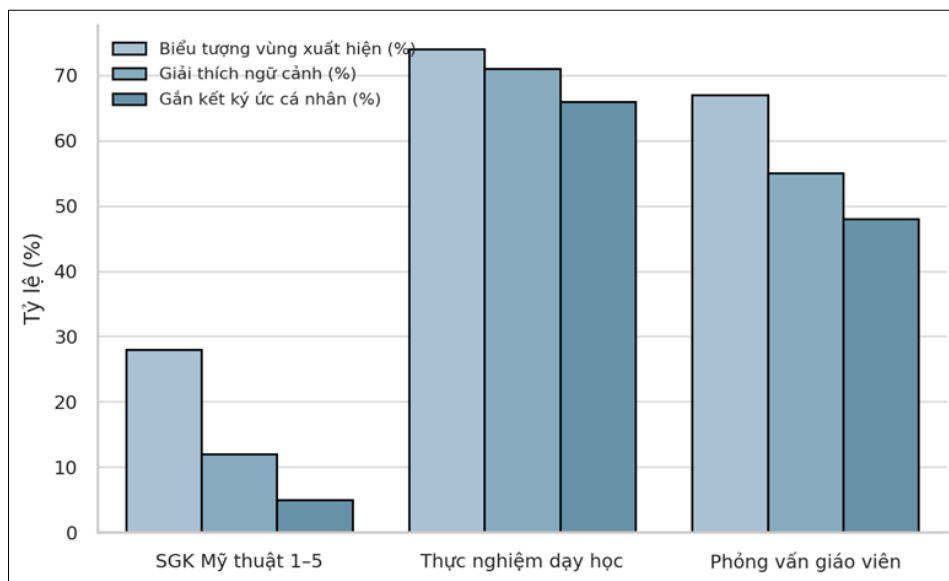
The qualitative insights are further substantiated by the synthesized figures from all three data streams—textbook analysis, classroom experiments, and teacher interviews. These variations not only reflect gaps in symbolic integration within primary art education, but also reveal unstructured dimensions of pedagogical knowledge—moving from image presence to affective resonance. Table 1 below provides a comparative summary, with accompanying figures illustrating the magnitude of these differences.

**Table 1:** Comparative Levels of Regional Cultural Symbol Integration Across Data Sources

Data Source	Symbolic Appearance (%)	Contextual Explanation (%)	Affective Memory Linkage (%)
Art Textbooks (Grades 1–5; 25 key lessons)	28%	12%	5%
Teaching Experiment (3 classes, 90 students)	74%	71%	66%
Teacher Interviews (6 participants)	67%	55%	48%

These figures are not mere indicators of the curriculum–practice gap; they reveal a knowledge structure that remains severed from communal memory in the current configuration of art education.

The following chart (Figure 1) provides a visual comparison of the percentages across the three primary data sources:



**Fig 1:** Comparison of Regional Cultural Symbol Integration Across Data Sources

The chart above (Figure 1) provides a visual comparison of the degree to which regional cultural symbols were integrated across the three primary sources of data. These findings clearly suggest that incorporating regional cultural identity into primary school art education is not simply a matter of textbook content, but requires a culturally sensitive and flexible pedagogical structure that positions students as creative agents. When this condition is met, cultural symbols cease to be mere objects of memorization and become living materials for identity formation—from within.

## 5. Discussion

The qualitative and experimental results of this study not only demonstrate the differing presence of regional cultural symbols across the three sources (textbooks, classroom practices, and interviews), but also illuminate a long-standing yet under-acknowledged reality in Vietnamese primary art education: local cultural identity appears in vague and superficial forms in official curricula, but shows remarkable vitality when introduced through embodied and contextualized teaching practices.

The fact that only 28% of lessons in Grades 1–5 Visual Arts textbooks include regional cultural symbols (Table 1), and merely 5% of those activate connections to students' personal memories, indicates that the current curriculum still favors a traditional model of transmitting cultural content—listing, illustrating, and describing symbols—rather than constructing a space for memory expression, emotional resonance, or intimate relations between students and symbols. This analysis echoes Smith's (2006) [25] heritage critique that "recognizing a symbol is insufficient if it fails to stir the imagination and emotional agency of its receiving community." In arts education, this is even more pertinent.

In contrast, when lessons are designed with regional cultural integration—where students engage in art-making based on local materials and are guided through personal memories or lived experiences—the rate of affective expression increases dramatically: 66% of student products display clear emotional responses, and 71% of classroom activities provide contextual explanations of symbols. These figures not only reflect the pedagogical effectiveness of integrated methods but reaffirm Eisner's (2002) [7] claim that arts education must be understood as an "aesthetic epistemology," where emotion, experience, and symbol co-participate in the construction of knowledge.

Notably, in-depth interviews with teachers (coded: [INT-02-HN], [INT-04-TT], [INT-06-NB]) reveal a common contradiction: while they acknowledge the importance of regional culture in inspiring student engagement and local pride, they still struggle to "translate" such symbols into specific classroom activities, due to the lack of structured guidance and standardized teaching materials. One teacher admitted: "I wanted to include Dong Ho folk paintings in class, but didn't know where to start, which image was accurate, or how to explain it properly. I was afraid I'd misteach it." (INT-02-HN).

In comparison to international models, advanced systems of arts education—such as the "critical place-based art education" proposed by Finn and Checkoway (2021) [10]—have already redefined regional cultural spaces not as mere backdrops, but rather as living materials. These models enable learners to reconstruct symbols through their own creative experiences, thereby revitalizing not only local

culture but also learners' capacity for cultural discourse. Meanwhile, Vietnam's new curriculum (MoET, 2018) [17] has acknowledged the importance of national culture, but remains trapped between the logic of content delivery and the logic of affective learning, between preselected symbols and reimagined ones.

Thus, this study not only addresses the three core research questions but also expands the horizon of inquiry: that regional cultural identity should not be treated as a "content unit" to be integrated, but rather as a living force field to be regenerated in every lesson. Transforming a symbol into an affective phenomenon—something felt, redefined through experience—is a long-term pathway for ensuring that regional culture does not fossilize in textbooks but becomes part of students' living identities today.

## 6. Conclusion

This study has revealed a fundamental paradox in contemporary primary art education in Vietnam: although regional cultural identity is officially affirmed as a core pillar of the national curriculum for visual arts, its actual presence in textbooks and teaching practices remains fragmented, superficial, and lacking in affective depth. Through the triangulated analysis of three data sources—textbook content, classroom-based pedagogical experiments, and in-depth teacher interviews—the research demonstrates that the gap between curricular design and the capacity to activate cultural identity in students is both real and remediable, provided a suitable methodological orientation is in place.

The study's most significant finding lies in the decisive role of experiential and personally situated lesson design—where cultural symbols are not merely "taught" but are "relived" through the interplay of memory, emotion, and creative engagement. This is not a technical insight, but rather a philosophical one: art education, when properly enacted, serves not only to transmit visual knowledge but also to nurture cultural identity from within, in subtle yet enduring ways.

At the scholarly level, the study contributes to the expanding discourse on the integration of indigenous cultural identity into arts education—a topic of growing international concern (Chappell & Cahnmann-Taylor, 2013) [4], that still lacks grounded, practice-oriented perspectives from Southeast Asia. The article's proposed approach—which combines curriculum analysis, classroom observation, and teacher–student interaction—also helps articulate a multi-layered analytical framework with potential applicability in similar contexts across the Asian region.

Practically, the findings offer concrete implications for teacher training, lesson planning, and textbook revision, advocating for a more flexible curricular model that empowers educators to design teaching activities rooted in the cultural landscapes of their local communities. Rather than treating cultural symbols as closed units of content, they should be reimagined as "affective opportunities" through which learners can activate memory, emotion, and cognition by engaging directly with the visual world of their homeland. Future directions for this research may include expanding fieldwork across diverse geographical settings to assess the transferability of the regionally integrated art education model, or delving deeper into student artworks as a form of visual–cultural discourse that reflects the evolving relationship between individual and community. In an era

when arts education faces mounting pressures of globalization and standardization, re-embedding local symbols not only as tools for preservation, but rather as pedagogical acts of emancipation, may be key to cultivating cultural vitality from the earliest frames of childhood expression.

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