

## From Policy to Classroom: The Implementation of Aesthetic Assistance Projects in Underdeveloped Areas of China

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### ABSTRACT

Since 2019, China has promoted aesthetic education assistance projects to reduce the gap in aesthetic education between developed and underdeveloped areas. This study uses Actor-Network Theory as a framework to explore how aesthetic education assistance policies were translated from design to practice in underdeveloped areas of Guangdong Province. Based on interviews with 27 policy actors and text analysis, the study found that policy implementation is not a top-down process. Instead, it involves negotiation and re-creation by multiple actors under conditions of limited information. Local teachers and volunteer college students showed creativity despite limited resources. They adapted classroom activities and integrated local culture into their teaching. In this way, they connected policy goals with local experiences. At the same time, emotion played a bridging role in policy practice. It promoted understanding and connection, and gave the policy new social meaning. The study points out that the sustainable development of aesthetic education assistance depends on collaboration between different systems and a deeper understanding of culture. This study enriches theoretical discussions on education policy localization and practice translation. It also provides empirical references for education governance in underdeveloped areas.

**Contribution/Originality:** This study contributes to the existing literature on aesthetic education policy. It uses Actor-Network Theory to investigate policy translation in underdeveloped areas and documents how multi-actor interactions shape classroom practice.

## 1. Introduction

Over the past two decades, aesthetic education has increasingly been recognized worldwide as a vital component of holistic student development. Music, as one of the core subjects within aesthetic education, is not only a form of cultural expression but is

also widely regarded as a powerful means to foster creativity, enhance social cohesion, and promote emotional well-being (Hallam, 2010; Wright, 2019).

However, in underdeveloped areas in China, access to high-quality music education remains unequal (Xuan & Haris, 2025). Hardcastle (2009) highlighted that the quality of music education in rural regions often lags behind urban settings, creating long-term disparities in both learning opportunities and outcomes. This inequality has driven the emergence of various educational assistance and partnership projects worldwide. For example, in Australia, Hardwick-Franco (2018) examined collaborations between rural schools in South Australia and non-governmental organizations such as Musica Viva. High-quality partnerships significantly improved music teaching and learning and enhanced community well-being, including among disadvantaged or at-risk students.

Similarly, Foster and Causby (2024) reported that although rural music teachers in U.S. middle schools had opportunities to connect with university professors, geographical and cultural distances limited higher education professionals' understanding of rural music education. This finding indicates that cross-regional collaboration in music education must adequately consider spatial and cultural differences to ensure that support models are contextually effective.

China has adopted a similar approach, embedding aesthetic education into its broader agenda for educational modernization (Ministry of Education Of the People's Republic of China, 2023). Since 2015, the Ministry has issued a series of policies (Ministry of Education of the People's Republic of China, 2015), positioning aesthetic education at the center of basic education reform and emphasizing equal access to music and arts education for students in underdeveloped areas. National initiatives such as the Aesthetic Education Immersion Action Plan (Ministry of Education of the People's Republic of China, 2019) and the Hundred-Thousand-Ten Thousand Project (Ministry of Education of the People's Republic of China, 2017) illustrate systematic efforts to channel high-quality aesthetic education resources from urban centers and colleges to schools in underdeveloped areas. Within this policy framework, music education has become a critical component of aesthetic assistance projects.

Although China's education policies have increasingly emphasized the importance of aesthetic education in recent years, the implementation of music education in underdeveloped areas remains constrained by structural limitations, such as unequal distribution of educational resources (Du & Leung, 2022) and the long-term shortage of qualified music teachers (Xuan & Haris, 2025). Much less is known about how education policies are actually interpreted, re-defined, and transformed into classroom practices when they reach local schools.

In cross-regional aesthetic education assistance programs, policies must pass through multiple layers of actors—including college instructors, local education bureaus, school leaders, frontline teachers, volunteer college students, students, and parents. Throughout this process, policy transmission is often shaped by information gaps, mismatched administrative timelines, restricted teaching autonomy, and the absence of local cultural resources. However, current literature has not systematically examined how these factors interact to shape policy implementation on the ground.

Accordingly, this study asks the following core question: How are aesthetic education policies in Guangdong's underdeveloped areas gradually translated into concrete music

education practices through the interactions, institutional constraints, and cultural contexts that involve multiple actors?

## **2. Literature Review**

### **2.1. Challenges in Implementing Music Education in Underdeveloped Areas in China**

In China, many rural schools still lack qualified teachers, adequate teaching facilities, and culturally responsive instructional materials (Sun & Leung, 2014), highlighting a persistent gap between policy aspirations and classroom realities. Although policy documents place music education alongside other aesthetic forms, effective implementation in diverse rural contexts continues to require supportive mechanisms, sustained resource investment, and culturally adaptive teaching strategies (Xuan & Haris, 2025).

In practice, however, even though national policies call for the provision of adequate and high-quality art courses (Ministry of Education of the People's Republic of China, 2022), rural schools often reinforce such mandates in minimal ways. Under pressures of limited time, scarce resources, and exam-oriented priorities, they tend to offer only a small number of basic courses or occasional extracurricular activities. Such superficial implementation undermines the intended policy outcomes (Liu & Gong, 2021).

Similar challenges are evident globally. For instance, Jansen van Vuuren (2011) observed that music teaching in rural South Africa often depends on untrained educators, who lack both the necessary subject knowledge and appropriate teaching resources. These teachers are forced to respond to infrastructural limitation by constructing instruments and adapting classroom spaces, which limits students' interest and ability to continue music learning at higher levels. Likewise, Bates et al. (2020) argued that in the United States, music education has been marginalized as a non-core subject, lacking policy and financial supports.

### **2.2. Policy Translation and Localization in Education**

The transmission of educational policies from national to local schools is rarely a linear process. Ball et al. (2011) argue that local educators reinterpret national policies based on their professional understanding, institutional goals, and available resources. This nonlinear process of translation has been observed across different education systems. For instance, within Sweden's compulsory education system, Ståhlkrantz (2023) found that school principals creatively recontextualize national curriculum standards based on local circumstances and personal experience, producing localized curriculum practices.

In underdeveloped areas, policy localization often occurs through cultural adaptation. Teachers and schools reinterpret national guidelines to align with local values, ensuring that music education resonates with students' cultural backgrounds. In China, aesthetic education often faces shortages of qualified teachers and limited resources, which makes standardized curricula less responsive to students' cultural backgrounds (Sun & Fan, 2018).

To address similar challenges, Guan et al. (2023) note that many international educators adopt culturally responsive pedagogies that incorporate local folk songs, dialects, and

festive music into classrooms to strengthen students' cultural identity. Likewise, Kawano (2023) emphasizes that successful localization depends on the collaborative mechanisms among schools, families, and communities ensuring that local cultural values are meaningfully embedded in school systems and daily classroom practices—a foundation for culturally sustainable education.

### **2.3. Actor Network Theory in Educational Research**

Educational policy research has shifted from a focus on institutional structures toward the interactions and networked relationships among actors (Fenwick, 2011). Early studies revealed persistent tensions between policy goals and classroom realities, showing that implementation processes are shaped by social contexts, organizational cultures, and actor relationships (Malen & Knapp, 1997).

Actor-Network Theory (ANT) offers a fresh analytical perspective by emphasizing the co-construction of educational practice through both human and non-human elements, such as policy texts, technologies, resources, and institutional arrangements (Fenwick & Edwards, 2019; Latour, 2003). Fenwick and Edwards (2010) further argues that ANT illuminates the dynamic interplay between texts, institutions, and practices, exposing how policies are translated, negotiated, and recreated across multiple levels and contexts.

Within education research, ANT has been widely applied to examine the intricate linkages between policy and practice. Studies have demonstrated its capacity to reveal the networked negotiations and relationships underpinning curriculum reform (Fenwick & Edwards, 2010), to analyze the multiple interests embedded in educational technology and policy discourses, such as the global diffusion and localization of MOOCs (Silva, 2021), and to explain how cross-sector collaboration and resource integration influence educational interventions and learning outcomes (Chiari et al., 2023). Collectively, these studies show that ANT captures the interactional mechanisms between human and non-human actors in educational practice, offering a more explanatory framework for understanding the localized implementation and dynamic evolution of educational policy.

### **2.4. Stakeholder Coordination in Music Education Assistance**

In underdeveloped areas, the challenge of cultural adaptation in music education assistance extends beyond curriculum design and teaching content. As Schmidt (2012) notes, educational practice is not shaped solely by policy directives but emerges from the interaction between institutional structures and local cultures. This perspective helps explain why the sustainable adaptation of aesthetic education requires coordination across different levels of the system, rather than reforms limited to the curriculum alone.

In addition, Stakeholders at different levels pursue distinct objectives and evaluation standards. Huang et al. (2003) discuss national policies that prioritize quantitative indicators such as curriculum coverage, student participation, and academic achievement. In contrast, Gleeson and Husbands (2003) highlight how local education authorities place greater emphasis on performance evaluation and administrative compliance. Gleeson and Husbands (2003) note that local education authorities tend to focus on performance evaluation and administrative compliance. Rattenborg et al.

(2019) add that frontline teachers are more concerned with teaching resources and professional development, while students and parents place greater value on participation and emotional experiences. Without effective coordination, these differing priorities can weaken the overall implementation of policy.

Music education shows persistent structural differences across countries and regions. These disparities are not only related to resource levels but also appear in curriculum design, teacher preparation, and the broader system of institutional support. Frierson-Campbell (2007) identified persistent disparities among schools in terms of curriculum provision and teacher qualifications in the United States. Similarly, Abril (2019)'s study in Ecuador found that even when national policies formally included music education, policy fragmentation, insufficient funding, and weak institutional coordination continued to constrain educational equity. Despite their different contexts, both studies point to a similar pattern: the fairness of music education is shaped not only by resource conditions but also by broader structural factors such as curriculum policies, teacher allocation, and institutional coordination.

Recent research also indicates that urban schools tend to offer more structured music curricula, better facilities, and a greater number of qualified teachers, while rural schools continue to face shortages of instruments, limited course offerings, and a lack of specialist music staff (Xuan & Haris, 2025). Evidence from Northeastern China further shows that limited local government investment, weak teacher professionalism, and an incomplete understanding of curriculum reform principles have continued to constrain the development of rural music education (Sun & Leung, 2014). Under the recent "double reduction" policy, research by Wen and Jianmin (2022) also reveals that rural schools still struggle with a lack of qualified music teachers and inadequate instructional facilities, resulting in a widening gap between urban and rural schools.

Taken together, these studies suggest that improving rural music education requires more than additional resources. It calls for a coordinated network of actors capable of aligning policy goals with local cultural and institutional realities. Building on this insight, the present study examines how multi-actor collaboration and cultural adaptation shape the implementation of policy.

### **3. Research Methods**

This study focused on five primary and secondary schools in Shaoguan, Guangdong Province, that participated in an aesthetic assistance project. These schools represented 62.5% of all local participating institutions and included key actors such as college teachers, college volunteers, local music teachers, students, and parents. A snowball sampling strategy was employed, where existing participants recommended new ones. In total, 27 one to one semi-structured interviews, each lasting no more than 120 minutes, were conducted. Theoretical saturation was reached at the 8th interview.

The interviews covered topics such as policy translation, stakeholder coordination, collaboration challenges, and coping strategies. Written informed consent was obtained, and all sessions were audio-recorded and transcribed. Data were analyzed using thematic coding, which proceeded through open coding, axial clustering, and theme generation. Triangulation across multiple sources further ensured the robustness and validity of the analysis. All research procedures followed ethical guidelines. Data were anonymized and securely stored. Ethical approval was obtained from the Universiti

Malaya Research Ethics Committee, and permission was granted by the participating schools.

#### **4. Findings**

This study is based on interviews with multiple actors and an analysis of textual materials. The findings are summarized into four main themes: uneven information distribution during policy implementation, gradually perceived changes, sustainability challenges, and multi-actor dynamics. Together, these themes reveal the dynamic process and structural tensions of the aesthetic education assistance project, tracing its evolution from policy design to local implementation. They highlight not only the information gaps embedded in institutional execution but also the flexible adaptation and innovative practices developed at the local level under limited resources.

##### **4.1. Uneven Information Distribution during Policy Implementation**

As policy texts move into practice, information is not shared evenly, which leads to gaps in how the policy is implemented. The policy moves from higher to lower levels in the administrative system, yet the information is neither evenly communicated nor exchanged in a two-way manner—from colleges to local schools, then to teachers, college students, students, and parents. This multi-layered and filtered communication chain created a clear gap in engagement: enthusiasm was high at the top but weak among the front liners. This gap between knowledge and action formed the first structural tension in the project's local execution.

Local schools acted as reactive implementers in a largely passive initiation process. The implementation of the project usually began quickly through administrative orders. Local teachers were often the first to notice the arrival of the policy. One local teacher (LT1-2) recalled, "About a month after the semester started, we received notice that college students would come to teach. We had to immediately adjust the timetable, reducing core courses like Chinese, math, and English to make space for music classes." Several teachers expressed dissatisfaction about the sudden change of the midst of semester. Another teacher (LT1-3) added, "It increased the workload of the academic office and disrupted our original teaching plan." The rapid rollout and lagging communication meant that teachers became implementers rather than designers, having to interpret the meaning of the policy through the process of carrying it out.

Policies were recognized by local actors but not fully understood, indicating a gap between perception and comprehension. There was a clear information gap in the transmission of the policy. Most parents and students were unaware of the project's policy background. Several parents mentioned that they first heard of the aesthetic education assistance project during the interviews, assuming that the college students were simply temporary new teachers. Students held the same perception. One student (ST-4) said, "I don't know what the aesthetic education assistance project is. I just know the new teacher teaches us songs, and it's fun."

However, their lack of awareness of the policy did not prevent them from noticing the changes in the classroom. All students said the school had become livelier, with new events such as choir competitions. Many parents also mentioned that their children sang more at home. The policy therefore became present in daily school life in an implicit way: it was visible in practice, but not truly understood; it was implemented, but not

meaningfully interpreted. As one college teacher (CT-1) noted, “The documents do get to the school, but very few people really understand them.” This situation revealed both the one-way nature of policy communication and the deeper gap between formal compliance and genuine understanding in education reform.

Institutional coordination tended to rely on task-driven cooperation rather than sustained collaboration. In practice, cooperation between colleges and local schools was largely administrative and task-oriented. Both college teachers and college students described the process as top-down and procedural. One college teacher (CT-1) explained, “Once we received the document, we contacted the local education bureau, then assigned teachers and students according to their needs.” This approach ensured efficiency but replaced negotiation with directives. From the implementation side, a college student (CS-4) observed, “When we arrived, the school didn’t really know what the specific requirements were. They just told us to start teaching.”

Local teachers had a similar experience. One teacher (LT2-5) said, “We were directly informed by the local education bureau, and we simply followed the order.” College teachers even described the collaboration as task matching. As one college teacher (CT-1) admitted, “It didn’t feel like co-design. They waited for us to take the task, and we hurried to meet the deadline.” Several participants noted that the way the administrative process was organized left little room for discussion or shared decision-making, shaping communication into a one-way procedure rather than a collaborative exchange. Meetings between colleges, local teachers, and college students were mainly about reporting progress rather than discussing teaching practices. As one college teacher (CT-2) said, “We completed the checklist but rarely discussed how much students actually learned.” Under this task-centered cooperation model, collaboration gradually turned into compliance, and the spirit of the policy was diluted by bureaucratic procedures.

## **4.2. Gradually Perceived Changes**

Although the transmission of aesthetic education policies carried a strong administrative tone, their implementation at the school level often unfolded through perception rather than instruction. Teachers, students, and parents typically experienced the changes first and only later understood their policy significance. This perceptual implementation reveals the process through which the policy was translated from bureaucratic text into embodied experience and emotional resonance.

### *4.2.1. Music being heard again*

The joint efforts of college students and local teachers revitalized music lessons in rural schools. One college student (CS-3) recalled, “The college-level textbooks were too difficult, so I adapted the songs into versions the children could sing and added rhythms from Yao ethnic folk songs.” Another college student (CS-2) added, “When we practiced rhythm, we used bottles and tables as percussion instruments. The children loved it.” These improvisational practices are not merely ad-hoc adjustments, but small acts of agency that teachers exercise within a constrained environment—teachers redefined the meaning of policy execution through creative practice. As another student teacher (CS-4) explained, “Since the speakers were broken, we used our phones to play the backing tracks.” Such small acts symbolized teachers’ regained agency in the classroom.

The vitality of the policy no longer depended on administrative precision but on the creative flexibility of front-line teachers who transformed mandates into possibilities.

#### *4.2.2. From observation to empathy*

Teachers and parents were especially sensitive to the emotional changes in the classroom. A local teacher (LT3-10) said, “The children can now sing and dance, and we also learn new things from them.” A parent (P-2) shared, “I used to think music was just for fun, but when my child won a prize in a singing contest, I felt proud.” This emotional return marked a shift in educational roles—from passive recipients to active participants. These emotional moments made the policy more tangible in daily school life. For those involved, music classes became more than assigned tasks; they became shared experiences of connection and understanding. As one college student (CS-8) expressed, “Sometimes when I saw them singing with such passion, I was deeply moved. That feeling was more real than any number on a report form.”

#### *4.2.3. Challenges in stakeholder participation*

Many teachers noticed gender differences in classroom participation. Female students tended to be more active and engaged, while male students appeared distracted or resistant. One college student (CS-9) recalled, “The girls loved singing, but the boys easily lost focus or made noise. I spent half of the class managing discipline instead of teaching music.” A local teacher (LT1-2) shared a similar view: “The girls followed the songs eagerly, but the boys just sat there talking or playing with pens.”

This pattern was not coincidental but rooted in local gender ideologies within rural education. Music was often perceived as a “soft” subject associated with femininity. One college student (CS-13) explained, “Some parents said singing is for girls—boys should play basketball instead.” Such views reinforced boys’ disengagement from music and normalized their absence from participation.

In response, some college students tried to break gender barriers through creative teaching strategies. As one (CS-4) described, “I designed rhythm-based percussion activities and included rap music so the boys could get involved. They loved those popular, modern rhythms.” This approach reflected teachers’ flexible adaptation in practice, showing that boys’ indifference was not rejection of music itself but a mismatch between curriculum content and their interests.

However, teachers’ room for innovation was constrained by the standardized curriculum and administrative requirements. Music classes were required to follow the unified textbooks, which mostly featured revolutionary songs or traditional folk tunes. One college student (CS-5) said helplessly, “The students didn’t want to sing those old revolutionary songs—they found them boring.” Another (CS-8) sympathized, noting that he had sung the same songs when he was a child. When teachers tried to introduce more engaging materials, they were often reminded to strictly follow the teaching plan. These layered constraints from policy to classroom limited teachers’ creative space and trapped them between institutional rules and practical realities.

As a result, teachers faced a complex tension between policy expectations and classroom realities. On one hand, they had to fulfill prescribed tasks within limited time and resources; on the other, they understood that music education only became meaningful

when students were emotionally engaged. As one college teacher (CT-1) summarized, “Music education cannot be taught by following policy documents—it must help children find their own rhythm.”

### 4.3. Sustainability Challenges

The implementation of the aesthetic education assistance project also faced sustainability challenges. Interview findings revealed that project development was not linear but cyclical. Each new phase required the redistribution of human resources, the restart of courses, and the reactivation of emotional investment; each interruption, in turn, brought stagnation and uncertainty. This intermittent rhythm weakened the project’s long-term sustainability, making the initiative resemble a series of temporary interventions rather than a continuous development mechanism.

#### 4.3.1. Limitations of short project cycles

The arrival of college students always brought a sense of excitement and anticipation to the school. One local student (ST-1) recalled, “Every time a new teacher comes, we know we can have music class again.” Yet, this joy was often short-lived. A college student (CS-3) said, “When the project ended, the children asked me when I would come back, but I couldn’t answer.” Within a limited time, they tried their best to make the class lively and engaging, fully aware that everything would reset once they left. As another volunteer (CS-15) reflected, “We light up their days for a while, but the light never lasts long.” A local teacher (LT1-2) expressed the same concern: “The biggest fear is that just when the children start to enjoy it, the classes stop.”

A college teacher (CT-1) explained the reason for this short duration: “Our funding is limited. We not only need to purchase instruments for local schools but also provide allowances for each college student. Continuous support is impossible with fixed funding.” This financial constraint shaped a shared anxiety among participants: they witnessed change, but also its fragility. The efforts of volunteers and local teachers were fragmented over time, preventing the formation of a stable educational structure. From the perspective of Actor-Network Theory, this anxiety stemmed from the absence of a stable network mechanism. The vitality of the policy was confined within the project cycle instead of extending naturally into everyday education. What emerged was not policy fatigue, but a deeper sense of temporal powerlessness—a longing for continuity, a hope for emotional persistence, and a concern about local capacity for self-sustained development.

The longevity of the project cycle affect how the policy was actually implemented. It reminded participants that the core of aesthetic education assistance lies not in what is done, but in whether it can continue to be done. When the implementation is short lived, the learning experience becomes fragmented. This lack of continuity is where sustainability problems begin.

#### 4.3.2. Misalignment between aesthetic education policies and school curriculum expectations

During the translation of policy from text to practice, a clear temporal gap emerged between different educational stages. Primary school teachers generally showed enthusiasm and openness, believing that the project brought vitality to their classrooms.

One local teacher (LT2-5) recalled, “Our school lacks arts teachers, so everyone was very motivated.” This enthusiasm stemmed from the flexibility of primary education, where aesthetic education assistance was viewed as an opportunity to introduce resources and refresh teaching.

In contrast, middle schools progressed more slowly and showed greater resistance. A college teacher (CT-2) shared, “When we contacted some middle schools, several principals were unwilling to participate. Some even hung up the phone. But since we had a task, we had to find ways to persuade them.” The reluctance of middle schools was not a rejection of aesthetic education itself, but rather a result of exam-driven priorities that shaped their daily decisions. As one parent (P-4) said bluntly, “Middle school is all about entrance exams. Music isn’t tested, so it’s normal not to have those classes.”

This temporal and institutional misalignment was further amplified in the collaboration between primary and middle schools. Policy documents expected both to advance aesthetic education simultaneously, yet the project schedules set by colleges and the operational schedules of local schools rarely aligned. The former progressed according to administrative timelines, while the latter was constrained by exams and assessments. As one college teacher (CT-1) said, “We have a plan, and they have exams, so in the end we just wait.” This delay illustrates how existing institutional arrangements limited schools’ ability to carry out innovative teaching practices.

In primary schools, enthusiasm quickly generated visible outcomes—teachers and students co-created original songs, staged performances, and even won provincial awards. In contrast, the slower progress in middle schools made the network of aesthetic education assistance fragmented. As a college teacher (CT-1) concluded, “The document tells us to support both schools, but their institutional priorities and schedules are fundamentally different.” Policy timelines were standardized, while schools operated on different schedules shaped by exams and daily teaching demands. As a result, policy implementation often failed to align with the actual needs of school activities.

Within this temporal and institutional misalignment, the implementation of aesthetic education became uneven and fragmented—driven by policy, yet constrained by school realities.

#### **4.4. Multi-Actor Dynamics**

##### *4.4.1. Values: conflict and convergence*

Although the aesthetic education assistance project aimed to bridge the gap between developed and underdeveloped areas, interviews revealed that its implementation resembled an ongoing process of negotiation—between ideals and realities, conflicts and compromises, differences and mutual adaptation.

In practice, participants often encountered a mismatch between expectations and resources. One local teacher (LT3-10) explained, “We hoped to improve students’ music appreciation skills so they could participate in local competitions and win awards for the school, but the college team mainly taught Western choral works. They were wonderful, but not very practical for our situation.” This gap reflected a mismatch between the practical needs of local schools and the standardized resources provided by colleges. A

college teacher (CT-2) also reflected, “We assumed that systematic training would be more beneficial, but later realized they were more interested in learning how to integrate music knowledge into daily teaching.”

For many students, music competed directly with academic performance. One local teacher (LT1-2) noted, “Parents often ask, ‘Will this class improve my child’s grades? If not, they’d rather the child study math.’” Under both family and school pressures, music was viewed as an unprofitable subject with limited practical value. A student (ST-2) smiled and said, “I like music class, but my mom says it won’t help me make a living.”

The study also found that older students were less willing to participate in aesthetic education classes. As grades advanced, voluntary participation decreased. One music teacher (LT1-3) said, “To form a choir, we have to first convince parents, sometimes even promise that grades won’t be affected.” Music activities gradually became a field of negotiation between schools and families, where enthusiasm was often replaced by rational concerns about academic performance.

Despite these challenges, many local teachers continued music teaching even without subsidies. As one teacher (LT1-2) joked, “There’s no extra pay for enrichment classes. We just do it out of love.” Behind this humor lay both passion and fatigue, revealing the hidden emotional labor involved in maintaining aesthetic education in resource-limited contexts.

Overall, the tension between policy ideals and local realities persisted. Despite exam pressures and scarce resources, mutual understanding and empathy between teachers and students allowed music education to continue shining faintly amid constraints.

#### *4.4.2. Culture: disappearance and regeneration*

In many local schools, culture was not the starting point of aesthetic education but an absent presence. Although policy documents encouraged integrating local cultural resources, college students found it difficult to teach local folk songs. One college student (CS-3) said, “We wanted to teach the children to sing local mountain songs, but neither the students nor the teachers knew them.” Similarly, a local teacher (LT2-5) admitted, “Our curriculum requires us to include local culture, but we don’t really know much about it ourselves.”

The absence of local culture in aesthetic education classes was not just a gap in content but a sign of cultural disconnection. Melodies once sung in fields, temples, or village squares had been quietly replaced by the music products of modernization and urbanization. Music lessons had become an extension of national curricula rather than a continuation of local traditions. As one college student (CS-8) observed, “The textbooks are all standardized, filled with songs from across China like Jasmine Flower or Let’s Row the Boat Together. Children rarely get to hear their hometown’s sounds in class.”

Yet this cultural void also sparked new aspirations. One college student (CS-5), who was deeply passionate about teaching, said, “I really tried to learn the local Hakka dialect. It was difficult, but I believe it will help my future teaching, so I’m eager to learn more from local people.” Local teachers also shared their expectations, frequently expressing the hope that colleges could send student teachers with expertise in local art forms to help restore cultural roots. A local teacher (LT1-3) said earnestly, “It would be

wonderful if we could have college students or teachers who know Cantonese opera. Our school wants to teach it, but no one can." Cantonese opera, a vital symbol of local culture, had gradually faded from schools due to a lack of teachers and curriculum pressure.

However, these local expectations also posed new challenges for colleges. Many college students involved in the project were unfamiliar with local music traditions, making it difficult to effectively integrate intangible cultural heritage into aesthetic education. As one college teacher (CT-1) pointed out, "We need policy support and cooperation from cultural and tourism departments to bring local heritage into schools." Yet such cross-department collaboration typically requires longer timelines and higher-level institutional coordination. The gap between policy design and frontline implementation thus emerged as another key challenge for the sustainable development of aesthetic education assistance projects.

## 5. Discussion

This study explored how China's aesthetic education policy was implemented in underdeveloped areas of Guangdong Province. The findings revealed that the policy did not follow a simple top-down linear transmission but instead evolved through ongoing interpretation, reorganization, and reconstruction among multiple actors. Actor-Network Theory (Latour, 2005) emphasizes that actions are generative and multi-directional; thus, policy meaning is continuously constructed within relational networks. Based on this perspective, the present study focused on how aesthetic education policies were produced and reshaped within local educational networks rather than merely executed as administrative orders. The following discussion is organized around three key themes: network operation, institutional constraints and pedagogical creativity, and the absence and reconstruction of local culture.

### 5.1. Network Operation

When reflecting on the aesthetic education assistance project, participants from different roles consistently described the need to reinterpret policies during implementation and to rely on collaboration among various actors to advance them. As Ball et al. (2011) argued, when education policies move across different administrative levels, they undergo processes of translation and redefinition. Similarly, Fenwick and Edwards (2010) emphasized that policies are not static texts but dynamic entities that acquire new meanings through interaction and collaboration among actors. The findings of this study demonstrated that local teachers, college students, and college teachers formed a dynamic network of cooperation in the process of implementing the policy, illustrating the socially constructed nature of policy execution (Bateman & McDonald, 2023).

Within this network, local teachers acted as crucial intermediaries. They served both as mentors for college students and as communication bridges between colleges and local schools. Through daily teaching supervision and administrative coordination, they helped college teachers and college students better understand the teaching environment and student characteristics in local schools, allowing pedagogical concepts from colleges to take root more effectively. College students functioned as mediators linking colleges with local schools, undertaking the dual tasks of knowledge transfer and contextual adaptation. Meanwhile, college teachers primarily provided curriculum concepts and training support. Although policy documents offered overarching

direction, their vitality depended on the continuous reinterpretation and negotiation by these front-line actors. As Hay (2025) argued, policy implementation is a socio-material process in which actors constantly negotiate and adjust to align institutional logic with local realities.

## **5.2. Institutional constraints and creativity in teaching**

The structural logic of the policy network could only acquire real meaning through classroom practice. It was at this meso-level that teachers—including college students, college teachers, and local teachers—interpreted, adjusted, and implemented policy intentions through daily music teaching. As Eisenhart et al. (1988) noted, the effectiveness of a policy does not stem from the document itself but from how teachers understand and transform it in practice. This finding echoes Ball (1993)'s claim that policy is recontextualized and reproduced through practice. Spillane et al. (2002) further argued that teachers are not passive executors but active constructors of meaning, and their interpretations determine how policies materialize in classrooms. Coburn (2001) similarly observed that teachers constantly negotiate between institutional mandates and local realities, engaging in creative adaptations to maintain the relevance of their teaching.

However, such creativity did not emerge in an unrestricted environment. Interviews indicated that teachers were frequently constrained by administrative inspections and performance assessments, which reduced their professional autonomy. As Little (1990) pointed out, performance-based policy instruments tend to erode teachers' professional autonomy, reducing teaching to a series of technical tasks. Rizvi and Lingard (2009) likewise found that education policies in developing countries often oscillate between centralized control and local innovation. The present study revealed a similar pattern: while higher authorities actively promoted policies, local implementation often became perfunctory. Teachers thus continually adjusted strategies within institutional limits to retain a degree of creative space. This finding aligns with Coburn (2004) argument that the essence of policy implementation lies not in the text itself but in how practitioners reinterpret and recontextualize it in everyday practice.

## **5.3. The absence and reconstruction of local culture**

Between institutionalized execution and local innovation, cultural issues emerged as the most overlooked yet fundamental concern. Most interviewees—both local teachers and college students—reported that the music textbooks they used were nationally standardized and contained almost no local folk or regional cultural content. Because both college students and local teachers had limited knowledge of local music traditions, the policy's goal of integrating regional culture into aesthetic education was difficult to achieve. Similar issues have been identified internationally. For example, Tan (2012) found in the case of Shanghai curriculum reform that although policy documents adopted global educational discourses, the cultural goals often remained superficial due to exam-oriented and administrative pressures. Teachers' insufficient understanding of local culture led to only surface-level localization in practice. Likewise, Sahlberg (2021) observed in Finnish education reform that policies could only become authentic educational experiences when teachers integrated community culture and students' lived experiences into the curriculum. Therefore, the local implementation of aesthetic education policies requires not only material resources but also the cultivation of cultural understanding and institutional support.

Despite institutional constraints, the interactions between teachers and students reflected the affective dimension of policy practice. Many participants mentioned that after the implementation of the policy, students became more interested in music, classrooms became more active, and parents' attitudes toward music education gradually improved. These transformations indicated that the impact of policy was not only structural but also emotional and relational. As Steiner-Khamsi (2004) argued, the circulation of education policies involves the reconstruction of social meaning, where understanding emerges through lived experience rather than mechanical execution. Greene and Boler (2004) further contended that emotion extends the life of policy, transforming it from a bureaucratic text into a medium of human connection. The findings of this study confirmed this view: when teachers used music to create new relational spaces, the meaning of policy was reactivated in their everyday teaching.

#### **5.4. Toward a collaborative cultural network**

Based on these findings, this study suggests that future aesthetic education assistance initiatives should move beyond administrative collaboration and shift toward open, culturally grounded networks of cooperation. As Hartman and Klein (2023) emphasized in their study of educational innovation in rural America, the key to sustainable reform lies not in institutional resource exchange but in long-term cross-system collaboration. Effective educational transformation emerges from synergistic networks built on shared goals, communication, and trust, fostering both educational innovation and social connectedness.

In the context of aesthetic education assistance, such collaboration involves the joint participation of colleges, local cultural institutions, and schools. Local cultural centers, intangible heritage practitioners, and folk artists could become vital members of the aesthetic education network. Their participation would not only provide authentic cultural materials but also inspire teachers with new pedagogical insights and cultural perspectives. As Niman (2025) demonstrated in a study on social studies education in Indonesian primary schools, partnerships between cultural institutions and schools significantly enhance students' social-emotional learning. By integrating local culture and community experience into the curriculum, students can gradually develop cultural identity and social responsibility, achieving holistic growth in emotional, cognitive, and moral dimensions.

Overall, this study underscores a central conclusion: the vitality of policy does not originate from the document itself but from the continuous interactions among implementers, students, and communities. When teachers find creative space within institutional constraints, and when culture and emotion serve as bridges between policy and classroom practice, aesthetic education policy transforms from an administrative directive into lived educational reality.

#### **6. Conclusion**

This study, based on interviews and text analysis with multiple actors, explores how aesthetic education assistance projects changed as they moved from policy design to local practice. The findings show that policy implementation is not simply an administrative task. Instead, it is a process of collaboration and ongoing negotiation. Under conditions of limited information, policies were constantly reinterpreted. Actors at different levels gave new meanings to the policies as they carried them out.

Local teachers and volunteer college students showed strong creativity despite limited resources. They adapted classroom activities and integrated local culture into their teaching. In doing so, they connected policy goals with the real-life situations of students. This finding supports the ideas of Ball (1993) and Spillane et al. (2002). They argue that teachers are not just policy implementers, but also active creators of meaning. However, the creativity of teachers was still limited by institutional pressure and performance evaluation. As a result, some of the original policy ideas were lost during local implementation.

The study also found that emotion played an important role in policy practice. Interactions between teachers and students did more than transmit knowledge. They also reshaped the social meaning of the policy. As Wilcox and Lawson (2018) point out, the value of education lies in the meaningful choices teachers make within constraints. This kind of emotional translation turned the assistance projects into something more than administrative tasks. It made them educational actions that promoted understanding and connection.

At the practical level, the study offers several suggestions. Future aesthetic education assistance projects should strengthen collaboration between different parties. A connected network involving colleges, local schools, and cultural institutions should be built. Local culture and student life experiences should be included in the curriculum. This would help aesthetic education become a way to support cultural identity and social and emotional learning. At the same time, more flexible feedback mechanisms should be created. This would give local actors more space to be creative during implementation.

This study has some limitations. The data came mainly from qualitative interviews and case studies in a specific cultural context in China. As a result, the findings may have limited generalizability. Future research could use quantitative or mixed methods to extend to a larger sample and examine whether or not the findings in the current study apply to a broader population. In conclusion, this study shows that the value of aesthetic education assistance projects lies not only in redistributing resources but also lies in rebuilding educational networks. Through these networks, a balance emerges between policy and culture, as well as between ideals and reality. This balance is key to making education sustainable.

### **Ethics Approval and Consent to Participate**

Ethical approval was obtained from the Research Ethics Committee of Universiti Malaya. All procedures involving human participants were conducted in accordance with ethical standards. Written informed consent was obtained from all participants.

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## Conflict of Interest

The authors reported no conflicts of interest for this work and declare that there is no potential conflict of interest with respect to the research, authorship, or publication of this article.

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