

## From Institutional Design to Everyday Practice: Mobilization in an Aesthetic Education Assistance Project in Rural China

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### ABSTRACT

In recent years, China has invested substantial resources in promoting educational equity and expanding access to aesthetic education. However, limited research has examined how the diverse interests of multiple actors in educational assistance projects are translated into effective mobilization mechanisms. This study adopts the framework of Actor-Network Theory to analyze a case of aesthetic education assistance in northern Guangdong Province, exploring how the demands of different stakeholders are negotiated and transformed into mobilization strategies. This study is based on semi-structured interviews with 35 participants, including college student volunteers, local teachers, students, parents, and college teachers. The findings show that different actors hold different interests in the project, but these differences are not coordinated through formal mechanisms. Project implementation does not mainly rely on institutional design. Instead, it is gradually adjusted through classroom teaching and everyday collaboration. Mobilization strategies are mostly developed during practice rather than being fully planned at the beginning of the project. This research deepens the understanding of mobilization mechanisms in educational assistance initiatives and provides practical insights for improving aesthetic education policies and practices in underdeveloped areas.

## 1. Introduction

In the field of global education governance, the *United Nations' Transforming our World: The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development* highlights the goal of ensuring inclusive and equitable quality education and promoting lifelong learning opportunities for all (United Nations, 2015). Similarly, the *World Bank's World Development Report 2018* stresses that improving learning outcomes is central to reducing inequality and enhancing education quality (World Bank Group, 2018). However, scholars argue that measuring progress toward these goals remains a persistent challenge, as existing metrics often fail to capture the complex dimensions of equity (Tikly, 2011; Unterhalter,

2017). Recent empirical studies further suggest that while educational inequality between urban and rural China has generally declined, significant regional disparities remain (Guo & Li, 2024). This indicates that the advancement of educational equity is shaped not only by macro-level policies but also by complex structural forces and local variations.

This tension between goal-setting and measurement becomes especially evident in the practice of education assistance projects. As Riddell and Niño-Zarazúa (2016) note, such projects often reveal a gap between ideals and realities, marked by misalignment between policy objectives and local implementation as well as insufficient coordination among actors. In underdeveloped areas in particular, rural schools have long struggled to attract and retain teachers, while geographic isolation and limited resources further undermine implementation (Li et al., 2020). Preda and Toma (2021) identify interrelated rural education challenges including insufficient modern educational resources, overloaded and ill-adapted curricula, and constraints on teachers' professional development. These factors frequently hinder the effectiveness of education assistance projects, reducing not only their short-term impact but also their long-term sustainability.

In recent years, aesthetic education has emerged as a new focus within China's efforts to advance educational equity. Since 2019, the Ministry of Education has launched the one-to-one Aesthetic Education Assistance Project, pairing universities and colleges with primary and secondary schools in underdeveloped areas to improve local conditions through resource sharing, teacher training, and curriculum support (Ministry of Education of the People's Republic of China, 2019). While this initiative has expanded access to aesthetic education and contributed to equity goals, new challenges have also surfaced. Actors differ in their expectations, mobilization strategies lack coherence, and challenges frequently arise during implementation. These issues highlight the complexity of Aesthetic Education Assistance Projects; however, systematic scholarly discussion remains limited, providing the entry point for this study.

It is important to clarify that the dilemmas of aesthetic education assistance are not simply due to resource shortages or implementation deviations, but rather the result of interactive games among diverse actors. Human actors, including governments, school administrators, teachers, college student volunteers, and students, as well as non-human actors such as curricula, institutions, and digital platforms, jointly influence the progress of the project (Xu, 2024). However, most existing literature only provides fragmented descriptions of individual cases or single perspectives. It lacks an overall framework to analyze the relationship between actors' appeals and mobilization strategies from the perspective of the entire Aesthetic Education Assistance Project.

To avoid conceptual ambiguity, this study first defines the core term *appeals*. In this study, *appeals* refer to the explicit or implicit demands, claims, and expectations put forward by various actors in the process of aesthetic education assistance. These actors include human actors such as local teachers, college student volunteers, and parents, as well as non-human actors such as curricula and digital platforms. Their appeals are reflected through their inherent attributes and functional positioning. These appeals cover multiple dimensions, including resource allocation, professional development, and curriculum adaptation, and they are also the core driving force for the formation and operation of mobilization strategies. In line with the analytical framework adopted in this study, the term *actors* in this paper includes both human and non-human subjects,

while *stakeholders* is used interchangeably with *human actors*, specifically referring to individuals with direct interests in the Aesthetic Education Assistance Project.

The core analytical framework of this study is Actor-Network Theory (ANT). This theory emphasizes that human and non-human actors work collaboratively in networks, with particular attention to interest coordination during the processes of translation and mobilization (Callon, 1986; Latour, 2001; Law, 1992). Existing studies have shown that ANT can reveal how elements such as policies, teachers, curricula, and information platforms are reconstructed in practice (Fenwick, 2011; Silva, 2021). However, in the field of Aesthetic Education Assistance, this theoretical perspective has not been fully utilized. It is particularly difficult to explain how interactions between human and non-human actors generate practical challenges, and how mobilization unfolds as a continuous dynamic process rather than a fixed institutional design.

Most existing studies focus on institutional design, while this study shifts its focus to daily practice. This helps to understand the mobilization mechanism in education assistance projects more meticulously, clarifying how actors' appeals are negotiated, translated, and implemented in specific contexts, rather than simply being carried out as policy directives. However, in the context of Aesthetic Education Assistance, this perspective remains scarce, especially the lack of systematic analysis of the role of human and non-human factors in the generation of dilemmas.

Based on this, this study takes the Aesthetic Education Assistance Project in the mountainous areas of northern Guangdong Province as a case study, and attempts to answer the following two research questions:

- i. What are the main appeals of different actors in the Aesthetic Education Assistance Project?
- ii. How are these appeals translated and implemented into specific mobilization strategies?

## 2. Literature Review

### 2.1. Divergent Interests and Expectation Gaps

Research on education assistance generally emphasizes the important impact of interests and appeals on project progress. Recipient parties often expect more material resources and external support (Samoff & Carrol, 2004). Donor parties tend to pursue short-term results and quantifiable achievements (Riddell & Niño-Zarazúa, 2016). This expectation gap is one of the main reasons why assistance projects are difficult to sustain.

Some studies also point out that teachers have diverse appeals. These include opportunities for professional development (Szelei et al., 2020), improved teaching conditions (Shirrell & Reininger, 2017) and more social recognition (Zhang et al., 2023). Most existing literature, however, focuses on macro-level national policies or international assistance experiences. It rarely involves the diverse appeals of multiple actors at the local level, which is closely related to the focus of this study on Aesthetic Education Assistance Projects.

For example, college student volunteers often take on teaching or mentoring roles in education assistance, including Aesthetic Education Assistance (Maker Castro & Cohen,

2021). Internal appeals for career development and personal growth have not received sufficient attention in existing literature. This further confirms the lack of research on the appeals of multiple actors at the local level. This gap limits understanding of how education assistance projects, especially Aesthetic Education Assistance Projects, coordinate the needs of multiple parties in practice.

## **2.2. Limitations and Innovations in Mobilization Strategies**

The smooth implementation of education assistance projects, including Aesthetic Education Assistance, depends on the effectiveness of mobilization strategies. Existing studies mostly emphasize institutional and organizational mobilization. Examples include policy promotion, administrative coordination and fund allocation (Julian, 2016). In many low-income countries, the mobilization of education projects mainly relies on top-down resource allocation and policy drive from the government.

Tikly (2011) points out that research and practice frameworks for education quality often start from a macro policy background. Local implementation and the diverse appeals of actors are rarely taken into account. This problem is particularly prominent in Aesthetic Education Assistance Projects. Such rigid mobilization often ignores flexible mechanisms at the local level (Julian, 2016). In the fields of educational sociology and educational policy research, scholars have gradually realized the importance of interpersonal and emotional mobilization.

For example, Zimmerman and Halfacre-Hitchcock (2006) found in their study on college students' mobilization for sustainable development that insufficient coordination in campus communities and emotional interaction among students are key factors affecting project success or failure. The emotional bond between teachers and students (Mainhard et al., 2018) and the sense of mission and identity of volunteers (Gray & Stevenson, 2020) are often key driving forces for promoting the implementation of education assistance projects, including Aesthetic Education Assistance Projects.

With the advancement of educational digitalization, digital platforms and social media have gradually become non-human actors in education assistance projects. They play a new role in resource sharing, information transmission and public opinion mobilization (Lingard & Sellar, 2013). However, international literature is still in its initial stage in this field. It lacks in-depth discussion on the role of platform mobilization in Aesthetic Education Assistance. This prevents us from fully understanding the whole picture of diverse mobilization methods in Aesthetic Education Assistance Projects.

## **2.3. Challenges in implementing China's Aesthetic Education Assistance Project**

It is almost normal for China's Aesthetic Education Assistance Projects to encounter challenges in the implementation process. Xue et al. (2024) have noted that rural education more broadly suffers from a lack of resources, insufficient teacher supply, and poorly adapted curricula. Within the context of aesthetic education, these difficulties become particularly pronounced. First, inadequate financial support, outdated facilities, and reliance on one-off donations undermine the sustainability of project funding (Postiglione, 2015). Second, Su and Yuan (2023) argue that schools receiving aids often lack professionally trained art education teachers and have high staff turnover, which further exacerbates the instability.

Moreover, many curricula are designed according to urban school frameworks, overlooking local culture and students' actual needs, which results in a poor fit with rural contexts. This observation echoes Fuller and Clarke (1994), who demonstrated that standardized teaching inputs often fail to achieve intended outcomes when cultural conditions are ignored. Taken together, these factors illustrate why Aesthetic Education Assistance Projects, despite being well-designed at the policy level, frequently encounter barriers in practice.

### 3. Research Methods

This study adopted a qualitative case study approach to gain an in-depth understanding of the interactions among multiple actors within a complex educational assistance project. The case study design enables the exploration of intricate social phenomena in authentic contexts, making it particularly suitable for analyzing stakeholders' appeals and the translation of mobilization strategies in Aesthetic Education Assistance Projects. This methodological orientation aligns with the argument of Steiner and Posch (2006), who argue that the dynamic processes and interactional logic of complex educational practices can only be revealed when examined within their actual contexts.

The research site was located in a county in the northern mountainous area of Guangdong Province, a typical underdeveloped region characterized by limited educational resources and geographical isolation. Despite these constraints, the area has hosted several Aesthetic Education Assistance Projects supported by colleges from developed regions. As shown in Table 1, the participants included five categories of human actors: local teachers, college teachers, students, college student volunteers, and parents. In addition, non-human actors, such as curricula, digital platforms, and funding mechanisms were also incorporated into the analytical framework in accordance with the Actor Network Theory perspective.

Table 1: Information of the research subjects

|   | Categories                                  | Number |
|---|---------------------------------------------|--------|
| 1 | volunteers from colleges (college students) | 16     |
| 2 | local teachers from underdeveloped areas    | 7      |
| 3 | students from underdeveloped areas          | 6      |
| 4 | parents from underdeveloped areas           | 4      |
| 5 | college teacher                             | 2      |
|   | Total                                       | 35     |

Data were collected through semi-structured interviews, classroom and school observations, and document analysis of policy and project materials. A total of 35 semi-structured interviews were conducted across the five stakeholder groups. The interviews focused on participants' appeals and mobilization strategies, each lasting between 45 and 90 minutes. All interviews were audio-recorded with participants' informed consent.

All interviews were transcribed verbatim, and the textual data were imported into Nvivo software for coding and analysis. Guided by the framework of Actor Network Theory, the coding process focused on themes related to interest translation and actor mobilization. Using the constant comparative method, categories were continuously refined and integrated to identify the core mechanisms underlying the network

interactions. Ethical approval for this research was obtained from the Universiti Malaya Research Ethics Committee.

## 4. Findings

### 4.1. Stakeholders' appeals in the Aesthetic Education Assistance Project

Stakeholders' appeals constitute a central driving force in the implementation of educational assistance projects. Previous studies have shown that expectation gaps between providers and recipients often undermine the sustainability of such initiatives (Riddell & Niño-Zarazúa, 2016; Samoff & Carrol, 2004). In the context of Aesthetic Education Assistance Projects in underdeveloped areas, clarifying the diverse appeals of different groups not only facilitates the effective mobilization of resources but also shapes classroom practices and long-term development.

Based on semi-structured interviews with local teachers, students, parents, college student volunteers, and college teachers, this study identified three major themes of stakeholder appeals: resource investment, classroom teaching, and career development.

#### 4.1.1 Theme 1: Resource Investment

Resource investment emerged as the most frequently mentioned and urgent concern among participants. In all 35 interviews, respondents consistently emphasized the importance of both hardware and software resources in improving aesthetic education.

##### a) Expectations for Hardware Resources

Local schools and teachers repeatedly highlighted the shortage of basic musical instruments and art materials. As one teacher explained, "The school once purchased some small instruments, but they were all flutes. After being used, they are difficult to clean and disinfect, so they cannot be shared. We hope to have small instruments that everyone can use" (LT3-9, local teacher). Similarly, students expressed frustration over the lack of art supplies: "This semester, we were given only two very thin sketchbooks, which are far from enough" (ST-3, student).

Some parents also hoped for the construction of simple stages and lighting facilities to provide children with opportunities to showcase their artistic talents and to narrow the gap between rural and urban schools. These voices suggest that hardware resources represent not only essential teaching materials but also symbols of educational equity and respect (Postiglione, 2015)

##### b) Expectations for Software Resources

Teachers and education departments expected the Aesthetic Education Assistance Project to provide curriculum materials and teacher training. As one local teacher noted, "We sincerely hope that the project can bring professional teacher training and curriculum support to truly improve students' artistic literacy" (LT1-2, local teacher). Parents similarly viewed external support as a means to bridge urban-rural disparities: "We genuinely hope these resources will allow our children to receive higher-quality aesthetic education" (P-1, parent).

College student volunteers and teachers further emphasized the importance of interactive teaching software. One student volunteer commented, “If we could use new digital tools, classes would become much more interactive, and students would definitely be more engaged”(CS-11, college student volunteer). College teachers added that digital art tools not only help narrow the educational divide between urban and underdeveloped areas but also stimulate students’ interest in contemporary artistic forms.

#### *4.1.2 Theme 2: Classroom Teaching*

In the interviews, classroom teaching was repeatedly mentioned by different groups. However, their focus was not on instructional formats. Instead, it centered on teaching quality, course content, and student participation. For the participants, the classroom was the most direct place to judge whether the Aesthetic Education Assistance Project was truly effective.

##### *a) Enhancing Teaching Quality*

Several local teachers pointed out that aesthetic education classes had long been limited by a lack of specialized staff and relevant teaching experience. One local teacher described this reality clearly: “We have no full-time teachers for music and art. Most of us are not trained in aesthetic education and do not have enough teaching experience. As a result, we can only teach very basic content and cannot organize professional or in-depth classes”(LT1-1, local teacher).

Parents expressed more direct expectations for classroom teaching. They generally hoped that their children could receive systematic art training in class. One parent said, “I hope my child can develop skills in music and drawing, because this can help them build artistic and creative interests beyond regular classes”(P-3, parent).

In this context, the arrival of college student volunteers was seen as a form of support. One local teacher noted, “Working with colleges was an opportunity for us. We could see different teaching methods, and this was also helpful for our own teaching”(LT1-1, local teacher).

##### *b) Curriculum Design*

Although teachers expected improvements in teaching quality, many also pointed out that the existing course content was not always suitable for local students. They hoped that the involvement of the Aesthetic Education Assistance Project could not only raise the status of aesthetic education courses but also support more localized course design. One teacher explained, “We do not only need standardized courses. We also need courses that match students’ readiness and interests. The current courses are the same as those in urban schools, and students find music theory difficult to understand and absorb”(LT3-10, local teacher).

Students and college student volunteers described classroom experiences in more concrete terms. Several college student volunteers noted that students showed limited interest in lecture-based teaching and were more engaged in practical activities. One volunteer said, “Students prefer hands-on activities rather than listening to teachers all the time. They actually learn faster when they perform”(CS-9, college student volunteer).

Another college student volunteer added that student-centered teaching could have lasting effects: “In music class, students can work in groups to create a simple song and perform it. This not only encourages creativity but also builds cooperation and confidence” (CS-8, college student volunteer). These views highlight shared expectations for courses that are localized, appropriate to students’ levels, and more interactive and practice oriented.

#### *4.1.3 Theme 3: Career Development*

In the interviews, the Aesthetic Education Assistance Project was not understood only as a short-term teaching assignment. Instead, many participants viewed it as a practical experience closely related to personal development. Different groups focused on different aspects of career development, but all linked their project experience to future pathways.

College student volunteers generally believed that participation in the Aesthetic Education Assistance Project deepened their understanding of the teaching profession and strengthened their intention to pursue education-related careers. As one volunteer explained, “Participating in the Aesthetic Education Assistance Project gave me valuable teaching experience, which is very helpful for my future career in education” (CS-7, college student volunteer). Many also expressed the hope that the project could offer more opportunities for practice and career guidance to enhance their competitiveness in the job market.

Local aesthetic education teachers generally viewed the Aesthetic Education Assistance Project as an opportunity to break through existing limits in their professional development. For local aesthetic education teachers, the Aesthetic Education Assistance Project provided access to professional training and academic exchange, directly improving their teaching competence and career prospects. One teacher noted, “The training provided by the project significantly improved my professional skills and helped me gain more recognition in the promotion process” (LT3-9, local teacher). Another teacher added that the project fostered closer connections with colleges, which would facilitate future academic publication and research collaboration (LT1-4, local teacher). These insights suggest that the Aesthetic Education Assistance Project has served as a crucial bridge for local teachers’ academic and professional advancement.

## **4.2. Translation of Appeals into Specific Mobilization Strategies**

#### *4.2.1 Theme 1: Institutional Mobilization*

Across all interviews, institutional mobilization was mentioned repeatedly and was seen as a basic condition for launching and sustaining the project. Participants did not see the project’s institutional framework as a distant, abstract set of policies. Instead, they experienced it as tangible, practical arrangements that directly influenced their decisions to participate and their actions in the program. These concrete arrangements primarily took the form of financial subsidies for volunteers and policy guidance for local schools.

### a) Financial Support

When discussing their initial motivation to join the project, many college student volunteers referred to financial support. One volunteer stated clearly that the subsidy played a key role in the decision: “When the college introduced the project, it made it clear that we would receive a monthly subsidy. That was why I finally decided not to withdraw my application” (CS-11, college student volunteer). Another volunteer added from a practical perspective, “Without subsidies, many students would find it hard to stay, especially in places with difficult living conditions” (CS-7, college student volunteer).

College teachers focused more on whether funding could be used effectively for teaching. One college teacher pointed out that project funding came with clear rules on its use, which gave them confidence in planning teaching activities: “With special funding in place, we are brave enough to plan courses and activities. Otherwise, many ideas would remain only ideas” (LT1-1, college teacher). This expectation for stable funding reflects the importance of institutional mobilization in local practice.

At the same time, some college student volunteers expressed concerns that if funding became the only reason for participation, the project might be seen as a paid task. As one volunteer suggested, subsidies could help volunteers stay for a period of time, but they did not automatically ensure teaching quality. In this context, incentive mechanisms began to play a supplementary role.

Unlike basic financial support, incentive mechanisms did not directly affect whether volunteers joined the project. Instead, they influenced how volunteers approached their teaching. One college student volunteer explained that evaluation and recognition encouraged greater commitment: “Because there was a chance to be recognized and rewarded, I put more effort into teaching and prepared each lesson more carefully. This felt different from just receiving a subsidy” (CS-10, college student volunteer). In this account, incentives were not material compensation but a form of recognition that strengthened responsibility and professional awareness.

### b) Policy Guidance

In the interviews, policy guidance was mentioned by many participants. However, its role in practice was fragmented. Policy documents did offer general direction for the Aesthetic Education Assistance Project, but they did not provide clear and ongoing guidance for everyday teaching and collaboration. As a result, many participants felt uncertain when carrying out their work.

From the perspective of college teachers, policies mainly worked as broad frameworks. Several college teachers explained that policy documents clearly stated overall goals. These included developing a distinctive aesthetic education focus for each local school and providing teacher training and specialized courses for underdeveloped areas (CT-1, college teacher). However, these goals often stayed at a general level. One college teacher noted that policies defined what should be done, but rarely explained how to design concrete activities or how to work with local schools in practice (CT-1, college teacher). Another college teacher added that policies did not clarify how college teachers should enter classrooms or coordinate teaching with local teachers (CT-2, college teacher).

College student volunteers and local teachers experienced these limitations more directly. Many college student volunteers said that before entering local schools, they did not receive clear explanations of policy goals or teaching expectations. One volunteer recalled that the only training they received focused on safety issues, such as fire prevention, with no guidance on aesthetic education or classroom teaching (CS-15, college student volunteer). Another volunteer explained that the training was brief and did not introduce local schools or students' learning backgrounds, which made them feel uncertain when teaching began (CS-5, college student volunteer).

Local teachers reported similar experiences. Several teachers said that although they knew the project was supported by government policy, policy requirements were rarely discussed during daily collaboration. One teacher explained that while documents emphasized developing school-based aesthetic education projects, there was little explanation of how these ideas should connect with existing curricula. As a result, teachers and college student volunteers often relied on trial and adjustment in practice (LT2-5, local teacher). Another local teacher noted that policies functioned more as background references than as practical guides for classroom teaching (LT1-2, local teacher).

#### *4.2.2 Theme 2: Mobilization for Practice*

During the implementation of the Aesthetic Education Assistance Project, mobilization did not occur only through formal institutional arrangements. Instead, it developed gradually through shared practice. Many participants noted that what truly sustained the project was not a single organizational design, but the relationships formed through concrete activities, daily collaboration, and emotional interaction.

Many interviewees first mentioned collective activities organized around specific tasks. These activities usually involved local teachers, college student volunteers, and local students. They included rehearsals and school performances. Such activities created opportunities for different groups to work together in the same space. One parent explained that when local teachers and college student volunteers prepared performances with children, the process went beyond completing tasks. It allowed students to see how adults cooperated, which helped them understand the value of collaboration (P-3, parent).

For college student volunteers, these practical activities were also an important way to enter the school environment. Several volunteers said that they felt isolated when they first arrived in underdeveloped areas. Frequent rehearsals gave them opportunities to build connections with local teachers. One volunteer described a Children's Day performance, where they played a piano duet with a local mentor teacher. Daily rehearsals helped them develop mutual understanding and trust (CS-2, college student volunteer).

Relationships built through practice directly influenced classroom teaching. Several local teachers noted that frequent communication with college student volunteers made them feel more supported in teaching. One teacher explained that when classroom problems occurred, they discussed them in time, which made lessons run more smoothly (LT1-3, local teacher). In this context, teaching was no longer a one-way process. It became a continuous process of adjustment and negotiation.

The effects of practice-based mobilization were also noticed outside the classroom. Many parents said that they did not clearly understand the Aesthetic Education Assistance Project itself. One parent stated that the school had never formally introduced the project to parents, and that their contact with the school was limited to picking up and dropping off children (P-1, parent). Another parent said that they initially thought the new music teacher was an intern teacher and only later realized that the teacher was a college student volunteer in the project (P-4, parent).

Despite limited knowledge of the project, parents generally evaluated the classroom teaching of college student volunteers positively. Several parents said that their children talked about new changes in music lessons at home. One parent noted that teachers from Guangzhou used teaching methods and digital resources, such as the Kodály approach and TikTok short videos, to attract students' attention (P-2, parent). These responses suggest that even when the project identity was unclear, changes in classroom practice were directly felt by parents.

School leadership also influenced mobilization. Several college student volunteers said that principals' support in daily living arrangements made them feel valued. One volunteer recalled that the principal actively checked their accommodation and meals, which helped them feel at ease in an unfamiliar environment (CS-16, college student volunteer). Another volunteer described being invited to a local mentor teacher's home for dinner, where informal conversations helped them adapt more quickly to local life (CS-13, college student volunteer). These actions were not part of formal policy, but they played an important role in stabilizing participation.

Emotional connections gradually became more visible in this process. Many college student volunteers said that students' responses strongly influenced them. One volunteer explained that seeing children smile in music class gave them a strong sense of value and achievement (CS-10, college student volunteer). Another volunteer noted that students greeting them on campus made them feel needed, which increased their willingness to invest in teaching (CS-3, college student volunteer).

## **5. Discussion**

This study used the Aesthetic Education Assistance Project in the mountainous areas of northern Guangdong as a case. It focused on the expectations of different actors and how the project moved forward in practice. The findings showed that project implementation did not rely only on pre-designed institutional arrangements. Instead, it developed gradually through the participation of multiple actors and continuous adjustment. Different actors understood project goals in different ways. These differences were not systematically discussed through formal mechanisms. Instead, they were temporarily managed through everyday teaching and project operation. For this reason, it is necessary to understand how these differences shaped project implementation from a practice perspective, and how mobilization emerged in specific contexts. The following discussion examines the findings by focusing on stakeholder expectations and the practice-based formation of mobilization.

### **5.1. Diversity and Differentiation of Stakeholder Expectations**

This study found that different actors held different expectations toward the Aesthetic Education Assistance Project. Local teachers focused more on improving teaching

resources and their own professional development. Parents mainly cared about their children's learning experiences. College student volunteers viewed the project as an opportunity to gain teaching experience and explore future career paths. The coexistence of these diverse expectations echoes the discussion by Riddell and Niño-Zarazúa (2016), who noted that participants in education assistance projects often engage based on their own positions and needs.

In practice in the mountainous areas of northern Guangdong, different actors joined the Aesthetic Education Assistance Project with their own expectations, but these differences were not systematically discussed. Parents had limited knowledge of the overall project. College student volunteers had unclear understandings of policy goals. Local teachers relied more on personal experience to guide teaching. The findings showed that these differences in understanding did not lead to open conflict. Instead, they were gradually managed through temporary adjustments in daily teaching and project operation, which allowed the project to continue. As Honig and Hatch (2004) argued, alignment between policy and practice is not fixed at the beginning of a project but is formed gradually through practice. In this study, the project was sustained through ongoing adjustment, even though full alignment among actors was never achieved.

A closer look suggests that this lack of full alignment was closely related to differences in career expectations. For local teachers, needs extended beyond material support to include professional development opportunities and social recognition (Szelei et al., 2020). At the same time, college student volunteers, as a potential future teaching workforce, expressed career goals different from those of established teachers. They hoped to build teaching experience and strengthen their future competitiveness through participation. Previous studies have highlighted the positive role of college student volunteers in education projects, such as building peer relationships and supporting learning (Maker Castro & Cohen, 2021). However, much of this research has focused on volunteer characteristics and teaching outcomes, with limited attention to volunteers' positions and career expectations within education assistance projects.

## **5.2. The Formation of Mobilization Strategies**

The findings showed that mobilization in the Aesthetic Education Assistance Project rarely operated through clearly separated categories. Instead, it functioned more like a chain. Institutional arrangements created an entry point. Practice built relationships. Relationships then helped retain participants. Many key arrangements emerged gradually through doing the work, rather than being fully designed at the beginning.

Financial support and policy documents first made collaboration possible. Funding allowed colleges and local schools to start the project and encouraged college student volunteers to stay. Policy documents also set basic boundaries for cooperation and reduced fragmented actions. Cao (2024) noted that institutionalized documents provide a foundation for rules and resource sharing in local education collaboration networks. However, institutions alone rarely ensure long-term participation. Manca and Delfino (2021) emphasized that sustained collaboration depends more on flexible local practices than on institutional design alone.

When institutional guidance could not be translated into classroom details, teaching practice took on a coordinating role. Classroom teaching, rehearsals, and performance

preparation brought local teachers, college student volunteers, and students together in daily work. Many participants noted that cooperation was rarely clearly planned at the project's start. Instead, it developed through repeated collaboration. This practice-based formation of cooperation aligns with Goldstein and Butler (2010) finding that collaborative capacity grows through ongoing practice. In the northern Guangdong case, cooperative relationships did not rely on complete institutional design. They became stable through shared teaching tasks.

In education settings, when formal policies lack clear operational paths, daily teaching often connects different actors. Coburn (2004) argued that teaching practice is not only a site of policy implementation but also a space for local adjustment of policy goals. In this study, classroom teaching played a similar role. College student volunteers and local teachers adjusted teaching methods and discussed classroom issues as they arose. Through this process, relatively stable cooperation formed and allowed the project to continue under uncertain conditions.

Ongoing shared practice also created emotional and trust-based foundations for cooperation. Even when rules were unclear and goals were not fully aligned, repeated teaching and activity preparation helped participants build basic trust. Bryson et al. (2015) showed that in the absence of clear rules, joint action itself can sustain collaboration. In this study, trust built through daily practice enabled different actors to remain involved despite uncertainty.

As practice continued, relationships and emotions increasingly shaped whether the project could last. For college student volunteers in unfamiliar environments, a sense of security often depended on whether the project addressed practical needs such as housing, food, and transportation. Many volunteers said that principals' support with living arrangements strengthened their sense of belonging and commitment. This finding aligns with Cann et al. (2021), who showed that school leaders with strong emotional support skills can improve teacher well-being and satisfaction. Similarly, Gómez-Leal et al. (2022) found that emotionally intelligent leadership builds trust and a positive climate, which can indirectly support student outcomes.

## 6. Conclusion

This study examined an Aesthetic Education Assistance Project in the mountainous areas of northern Guangdong. It analyzed the expectations of different actors and how the project was advanced in practice. The findings showed that participants did not share a unified understanding of the project. Local teachers, parents, colleges, and college student volunteers focused on different priorities. However, the project was still able to proceed.

The findings indicated that the project did not rely entirely on clear institutional design. Financial support and policy documents provided basic conditions, but they did not directly guide frontline teaching. In practice, classroom teaching, rehearsals, and everyday collaboration became key ways to connect different actors. Many cooperative relationships were not planned at the beginning of the project. Instead, they gradually formed through working together.

The study also found that when actors' goals were not fully aligned, the project did not stop. These differences were often managed through temporary adjustments in daily

teaching. This allowed the project to move forward. This process highlights the important role of practice in coordinating differences.

Based on these findings, future Aesthetic Education Assistance Projects should pay more attention to supporting frontline practice, rather than focusing only on institutional arrangements. Strengthening communication mechanisms can also help different actors better understand project goals. This study provides practical insights into how education assistance projects operate in underdeveloped areas and offers a basis for future research.

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

Ethics approval was granted by the Universiti Malaya Research Ethics Committee (UMREC) under reference number UM.TNC2/UMREC\_2887. Informed consent was obtained from all individual participants included in the study.

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### **Conflict of Interest**

The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

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