

Should Children Learn Music? A Critical Analysis Under China's New Education Policies

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Abstract

With the implementation of recent education reforms in China, including the “Double Reduction” policy, the structure of educational competition has undergone significant transformation. While subject-based tutoring has been restricted, competitive pressures have not diminished; rather, they have shifted into domains associated with quality-oriented education, including music learning. Drawing on the frameworks of Education involution and Cultural capital, this study examines how music education has become a new site of educational competition. The analysis combines structural, familial, and individual perspectives to explore how policy conditions, social expectations, and educational practices interact in shaping music learning. The findings suggest that music education is increasingly instrumentalised, as its intrinsic value in aesthetic development becomes intertwined with externally driven forms of evaluation and competition. Under conditions of educational involution, participation in music learning is often sustained not by intrinsic motivation, but by the need to maintain relative advantage within competitive environments. At the same time, music education functions as a form of cultural capital, contributing to processes of social differentiation and reproduction. This study highlights the tension between the intrinsic educational value of music and its instrumental role within contemporary education systems. It contributes to a broader understanding of how domains associated with holistic development are reshaped under conditions of persistent educational competition.

Keywords: music education, education involution, cultural capital, double reduction policy, educational competition

1. Introduction

Since the implementation of China's “Double Reduction” policy in 2021, which aims to alleviate excessive academic burden in compulsory education and regulate the expansion of extracurricular tutoring (Research Group of China National Children's Center, 2023), the structure of educational competition has undergone a significant transformation. While subject-based training has been strictly restricted, competition has not disappeared; rather, it has shifted into new domains associated with so-called quality-oriented education, including music, arts, and physical education. In particular, music education has gained increasing institutional and social attention, as it has gradually been incorporated into evaluation systems and broader frameworks of student assessment. (Pan Liqin & Wang Huan, 2021)

This transformation reflects a deeper structural dynamic within contemporary Chinese education, often described as Education involution. (Zhang Wen, Pan Chao, Yao Shiming, Zhu Jijia, Ling Dong, Yang Hanchun, Xu Jingsha & Mu Yan, 2024) Under conditions of limited high-quality educational resources and persistent competition for selective opportunities, families continue to intensify their investment in education even when the marginal returns of such investment decline. Although the Double Reduction policy has altered the form of

competition by restricting subject-based tutoring, it has not fundamentally changed the underlying logic of selection.

At the same time, the growing emphasis on music learning can be understood through the lens of Cultural capital, as theorised by Pierre Bourdieu. (Lu Yi, 2023) Beyond its intrinsic aesthetic value, music functions as a socially recognised form of cultural distinction that can signal refinement, discipline, and educational quality.

Against this background, an apparent tension emerges between the intrinsic educational value of music and its instrumental deployment within competitive structures. While music education has long been associated with aesthetic development, creativity, and emotional growth, its role in contemporary practice is increasingly shaped by external demands such as certification, competition, and performance evaluation.

This study therefore aims to examine how music education has become a new site of educational competition in post-Double Reduction China, and to analyse the mechanisms through which policy structures, family strategies, and individual learning experiences interact in this process. Drawing on the theoretical frameworks of education involution and cultural capital, the paper develops a multi-level analysis that connects macro-level policy constraints, meso-level family decision-making, and micro-level transformations in learning motivation.

2. Theoretical Foundation

This study draws on the concepts of Education involution and Cultural capital to explain the persistence and transformation of educational competition under recent policy changes in China. While education involution provides a structural explanation for the intensification and redistribution of competition, cultural capital theory helps to account for why music education has become a particularly salient site of such competition. In addition, the intrinsic value of music education is introduced as a normative framework against which its instrumentalization can be critically examined.

2.1 Education Involution

Education involution refers to a form of intensified competition in which individuals continue to increase their investment in education despite diminishing marginal returns, particularly under conditions of limited access to high-quality resources. (Guo Yanling, 2021) In such contexts, competition is not driven by the expectation of absolute improvement, but by the necessity of maintaining relative position within a highly stratified system.

In the context of contemporary China, educational competition has long been concentrated in exam-oriented domains. (Zhang Shijie & Gao Xiaodong, 2021) However, following the implementation of the Double Reduction policy, the restriction of subject-based training has not eliminated competitive pressures; rather, it has reshaped their expression. As opportunities for differentiation within traditional academic pathways become constrained, families are compelled to seek alternative domains in which competitive advantage can be maintained. From the perspective of education involution, this shift does not represent a reduction in competition, but a redistribution of competitive practices into new areas, including those associated with quality-oriented education such as music.

2.2 Cultural Capital and Music Education

The shift of competition into music education can be further understood through the framework of Cultural capital, as developed by Pierre Bourdieu. (Bourdieu, P., 1986) Bourdieu instrumentalizes cultural capital in embodied, objectified, and instrumentalization forms, all of which are relevant to music education. Musical skills and dispositions constitute embodied capital, instruments and learning resources represent objectified capital, and examination certificates and competition awards function as instrumentalization capital.

Within this framework, participation in music education extends beyond the cultivation of artistic competence. It also serves as a strategy through which families accumulate symbolic resources that may be converted into educational and social advantage. (Barbara B, Julien L & David S., 2025) In competitive educational environments, such resources contribute to processes of social differentiation and reproduction. (Davies S & Rizk J., 2018) The growing emphasis on examinations, certifications, and measurable achievements in music learning can therefore be understood not merely as pedagogical choices, but as manifestations of broader strategies of cultural capital accumulation.

2.3 The Intrinsic Value of Music Education

While the above frameworks explain the instrumentalization of music learning, it is also necessary to consider the intrinsic educational value of music. Music education has traditionally been associated with aesthetic development, emotional expression, and creative engagement. (Madrussan, E., 2025) These dimensions position music not only as a skill-based domain, but as a form of aesthetic education that contributes to broader processes of personal and cultural formation.

The contrast between these intrinsic values and the instrumental uses of music education forms a central tension

in this study. When music learning becomes primarily oriented toward external indicators such as certification and competition outcomes, its educational function may be redefined in ways that prioritise measurable achievement over aesthetic experience. This tension provides a critical perspective for analysing how music education is transformed under conditions of educational competition.

3. Transformation of Music Learning Under Educational Involution

3.1 Normative Foundations of Music Education

From the perspective of music education, learning music has traditionally been understood not merely as the acquisition of technical skills, but as a form of aesthetic and holistic development. Music education is commonly associated with the cultivation of aesthetic sensitivity, emotional expression, and creative engagement, which together contribute to broader processes of personal formation. (Carrillo C., Viladot L. & Pérez-Moreno J., 2017) In this sense, music functions as a domain of learning that extends beyond measurable academic outcomes and supports the development of non-cognitive capacities such as self-regulation, imagination, and interpersonal awareness. (Blasco J.S. & Calatrava C., 2020)

Within educational discourse, these functions position music as a central component of aesthetic education. (Koelsch S., 2015) Rather than serving as an auxiliary supplement to academic subjects, music education is often conceptualised as an integral part of fostering well-rounded individuals, particularly in contexts where educational reform emphasises holistic development. In the Chinese context, this orientation is reflected in policy frameworks that promote balanced development across multiple domains, including moral, intellectual, physical, and aesthetic dimensions.

Importantly, the value of music education in this framework lies in its process rather than in externally measurable outcomes. Engagement with music—through listening, performance, and creative exploration—provides opportunities for students to experience meaning, emotion, and cultural expression in ways that differ fundamentally from standardised forms of assessment. (Wang Bailu, 2024) From this perspective, music learning is not primarily oriented towards certification, competition, or instrumental achievement, but towards the cultivation of aesthetic experience and personal growth.

This understanding provides a normative baseline for the present study. By clarifying what music education is intended to achieve, it becomes possible to examine how, under conditions of educational competition, these aims may be reinterpreted or displaced. In particular, the contrast between intrinsic educational value and externally driven forms of achievement offers a critical lens for analysing the transformation of music learning in contemporary contexts.

3.2 Structural Drivers of the Instrumentalisation of Music Learning

The transformation of music learning from an aesthetic practice into a competitive resource cannot be understood solely at the level of individual choice. Rather, it is shaped by structural conditions embedded within the contemporary education system. In particular, the persistence of selective evaluation mechanisms, combined with policy-induced shifts in educational provision, creates the conditions under which music education becomes susceptible to instrumentalisation. (Nadarajam, D., 2022)

From the perspective of Education involution, the key driver of this transformation lies in the continuity of competitive selection. Although recent policy reforms have restricted subject-based tutoring and sought to reduce students' academic burden, they have not fundamentally altered the scarcity of high-quality educational opportunities or the importance of relative differentiation within the system. (Moreno-Salto I & Robertson S L., 2021) As a result, competition is not eliminated but reconfigured. When traditional academic pathways for distinction are constrained, new domains emerge as alternative arenas for competition. Music education, particularly in contexts where it is linked to evaluation frameworks or perceived as contributing to comprehensive quality, becomes one such domain.

At the policy level, this process is further reinforced by the expanding institutional visibility of music education. The inclusion of music within broader educational evaluation frameworks, as well as its association with holistic development, increases its perceived relevance for student assessment. (Zhu Xiao & Huang Naixing, 2019) While the original intention of such reforms is to promote balanced development, their implementation may generate unintended consequences. In competitive environments, any domain that is formally recognised within evaluation systems can be reinterpreted as a potential source of advantage. Consequently, music learning may be repositioned from a developmental activity to a strategic resource within educational competition.

This structural dynamic is closely linked to the logic of Cultural capital. Cultural practices can acquire value not only for their intrinsic qualities but also for their role in social differentiation. In this context, music education functions as a form of capital that can be accumulated, displayed, and potentially converted into educational advantage. (LAREAU A & WEININGER E B., 2023) The increasing emphasis on examinations, certifications,

and measurable achievements within music learning reflects this process of institutionalisation. What might otherwise be an open-ended aesthetic activity becomes structured around recognisable and comparable forms of achievement.

The interaction between policy structures and cultural capital dynamics creates a feedback loop that reinforces instrumentalisation. As music education becomes more widely perceived as valuable within competitive frameworks, participation expands. This, in turn, raises the threshold of differentiation, prompting further investment from families seeking to maintain relative advantage. In this way, the logic of education involution is extended into domains that were not originally central to academic competition. Music learning is thus transformed not because of its inherent characteristics, but because of the structural conditions that redefine its function within the education system.

3.3 Family and Individual Responses to Competitive Pressures

The structural conditions outlined above are translated into concrete practices through the responses of families and individuals. In competitive educational environments, decisions about music learning are shaped not only by personal preference, but also by perceptions of risk, social expectations, and the strategic pursuit of advantage.

At the family level, engagement in music education can be understood as a form of risk management under conditions of uncertainty. In contexts where pathways to educational success are perceived as increasingly competitive and unpredictable, families may seek to expand their children's skill sets in order to maintain flexibility and avoid potential disadvantage (Saltmarsh & McPherson, A., 2022). Music learning, particularly when associated with recognised forms of assessment such as graded examinations or competition awards, is often viewed as a relatively legitimate and socially valued option within this strategy. From the perspective of Education involution, such behaviour reflects a broader pattern in which participation becomes necessary not because of guaranteed returns, but because withdrawal carries perceived risks of falling behind.

This dynamic is further reinforced by the logic of Cultural capital. As cultural practices become markers of distinction, families may interpret participation in music education as an indicator of both educational commitment and social status. (Kim, T., 2023) In this context, decisions about music learning are influenced not only by individual interest, but also by processes of social comparison and collective behaviour. When music education becomes widely adopted within peer groups, non-participation may be perceived as a disadvantage, thereby encouraging further expansion of participation. This process contributes to the normalisation of music learning as a near-expected component of children's educational trajectories.

At the individual level, these family strategies and social expectations shape the meaning and experience of music learning. Under conditions where participation is externally motivated, the orientation of learning may shift from intrinsic engagement to outcome-driven performance. Educational research often distinguishes between intrinsic motivation, associated with interest and enjoyment, and extrinsic motivation, associated with external rewards and evaluation. (Drahmann, M., Merk, S., Cramer, C., et al., 2019) In contexts of competitive pressure, music learning may become increasingly aligned with the latter, as students focus on measurable achievements such as examination results, certifications, and competition outcomes.

This shift in motivation is accompanied by changes in learning practices and experiences. Rather than engaging in exploratory or expressive forms of musical activity, students may prioritise repetitive practice aimed at meeting predefined assessment criteria. While such practices can lead to the development of technical proficiency, they may also narrow the scope of musical engagement by emphasising standardisation and performance outcomes. As a result, the experiential and expressive dimensions of music learning risk being overshadowed by its evaluative functions.

Taken together, these family and individual responses illustrate how structural pressures are internalised and reproduced through everyday educational practices. The instrumentalisation of music learning is therefore not solely imposed from above, but actively sustained through the interaction between systemic constraints, social expectations, and individual adaptation.

3.4 Consequences and Emerging Contradictions

The dynamics discussed above give rise to a central tension in contemporary music education. While music learning is traditionally associated with aesthetic development and personal growth, it is increasingly shaped by external pressures related to evaluation and competition. As a result, its role is redefined within a framework that prioritises measurable outcomes and comparative performance. From the perspective of Education involution, this shift reflects the extension of competitive practices into new domains, where participation is driven less by intrinsic motivation than by the need to maintain relative advantage. At the same time, through the lens of Cultural capital, music education becomes embedded in processes of social differentiation, as its outcomes are increasingly formalised and recognised within evaluative systems. The result is not the disappearance of music's educational value, but its reconfiguration. Intrinsic and instrumental logics coexist, often in tension, reshaping

both the meaning and experience of music learning. In this sense, music education becomes a particularly revealing site through which broader contradictions between development and competition in contemporary education can be understood.

4. Conclusion and Implications

The analysis presented in this study suggests that the transformation of music education under recent policy reforms is not characterised by a reduction of educational competition, but by its reconfiguration. While the “Double Reduction” policy has successfully limited the expansion of subject-based tutoring, it has not fundamentally altered the structural conditions that sustain competitive pressure. Instead, these pressures have been redirected into domains associated with quality-oriented education, among which music has become a particularly prominent site.

By drawing on the frameworks of Education involution and Cultural capital, this study has shown how music learning is gradually incorporated into processes of differentiation and competition. At the structural level, the persistence of selective evaluation systems creates conditions in which new forms of distinction become necessary. At the level of family and individual practice, these conditions are translated into strategies of participation, accumulation, and adaptation. As a result, music education is not simply expanded, but transformed in its function, as its intrinsic educational value becomes intertwined with externally driven forms of achievement.

This transformation highlights a broader contradiction within contemporary education. On the one hand, policy discourse emphasises holistic development and the cultivation of aesthetic and creative capacities. On the other hand, the logic of competition encourages the conversion of such domains into measurable and comparable forms of performance. Music education thus becomes a site in which these competing logics coexist, revealing the limits of reform efforts that focus on reducing specific practices without addressing underlying structural dynamics.

These findings carry several implications for understanding the role of music education within current educational contexts. At the policy level, they point to the importance of aligning evaluation systems with the intended aims of aesthetic education, so that participation in music is not primarily interpreted through its contribution to competitive differentiation. At the institutional level, they suggest the need to consider how curricular and extracurricular practices shape the ways in which music learning is experienced, particularly in relation to the balance between expressive engagement and performance-oriented assessment. At the level of family and individual practice, they highlight how educational choices are shaped by broader social expectations and uncertainties, rather than by purely individual preferences.

In conclusion, this study does not seek to determine whether children should or should not learn music. Instead, it demonstrates how the meaning and function of music learning are reshaped under conditions of educational competition. In doing so, it contributes to a more nuanced understanding of how domains traditionally associated with personal development are transformed within contemporary educational systems, and how the tension between intrinsic value and instrumental logic continues to shape educational practice.

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