

A Comparative Study on the Music Education Curriculum Policies of Chinese and Italian Middle Schools

Xinchen Wang

Conservatorio di Musica “Arrigo Boito” di Parma, Parma, Italy
Email: wxc20000829@gmail.com

Abstract—In recent years, with the continuous advancement of basic education reform, core literacy, practical ability, and the comprehensive development of students have gradually become important directions for curriculum construction. The role of music education has therefore changed. It is no longer just about teaching students to sing, read music notation, or master basic musical theory, but it places more emphasis on students’ aesthetic experiences, emotional expression, creative abilities, and understanding of different cultures in music learning. Especially at the compulsory education stage, the music curriculum is aimed at all students, and its main purpose is not to select and cultivate a few professional music talents, but to enable students to gradually develop the ability to perceive, understand, and participate in music activities through sustained music learning, and to enrich their emotional experiences and establish a certain cultural identity in this process. This study conducts a comparative analysis of middle school music education policies between China and Italy, focusing on curriculum design, educational resource allocation, and practical implementation challenges in the two national contexts. Both countries officially recognize music as a valuable part of education, but they go about it in very different ways. China takes a top-down approach—the national curriculum standards spell out exactly what to teach and how to assess it, all in the name of keeping quality consistent across the board. Italy, on the other hand, affords schools and teachers considerable autonomy: the national framework sets broad goals, but the day-to-day decisions about what happens in the classroom are left to the educators on the ground.

Keywords—junior high school music education, curriculum policy, textbook function, classroom implementation, China-Italy comparison

I. INTRODUCTION

China and Italy share a rich musical heritage, and both countries’ national curricula affirm the importance of music education for students’ development. But when we examine how these policies are implemented in the classroom, the differences become clear.

At the compulsory education level, Chinese music teaching is shaped by national curriculum standards and

largely unified textbooks—so the content and requirements stay relatively consistent across schools. Italy’s secondary music courses, while also guided by national documents, leave much more room for teachers and schools to make their own calls. What gets taught, which materials get used, and how the class runs often vary according to local conditions and individual teacher preferences.

Given this difference, this article does not attempt to simply judge whether China or Italy is superior in terms of music education, but focuses on the relationship between the “ideal” of the curriculum and the “reality” of teaching. This article mainly examines the curriculum goals that the music education policies of the two countries have proposed, the role that teaching materials play in transforming policy requirements into teaching content, and the conditions that constrain these goals when they are translated into real classroom practice. By comparing the different paths from policy texts and textbook interpretation to classroom practice between the two countries, this study further clarifies the complex operational logic of music curriculum implementation under different educational institutional systems.

II. IDEAL INSTITUTIONAL EXPRESSION OF CURRICULUM: A COMPARATIVE STUDY OF CHINESE AND ITALIAN MUSIC CURRICULUM POLICIES

A. China: Standardized Design Guided by Core Literacy

Based on the 2022 Compulsory Education Art Curriculum Standards (hereinafter referred to as the Curriculum Standards), grades 1–9 are divided into four progressive learning stages: Stage 1 (Grades 1–2), Stage 2 (Grades 3–5), Stage 3 (Grades 6–7), and Stage 4 (Grades 8–9). In view of the differences in the junior high school system across China, which includes the “six-three system” and the “five-four system” (the former has junior high school from grades 7 to 9, and the latter from grades 6 to 9), in order to maintain the uniformity of stage division, this study does not define the grade range based on the traditional concept of “junior high school” but

focuses on the advanced characteristics of the third and fourth stages for discussion.

The curriculum standards emphasize that music learning in different stages is not disjointed but gradually deepens based on existing experience. The third stage is in an important position of connection between the past and the future. Students continue to maintain their interest in learning through listening, singing, and music activities, accumulating a relatively rich musical experience; on the other hand, they also begin to try to understand the emotions expressed in the works and their cultural background, and form preliminary understanding and judgment of music. Accordingly, learning objectives at this stage transcend passive listening and superficial participation and gradually shift toward active musical comprehension, aesthetic evaluation, and personalized artistic expression.

In the fourth stage, students achieve more holistic and systematic music learning. Students need to understand the thoughts, emotions, and cultural connotations of specific works and gradually form a relatively stable ability to appreciate and comment on them. At the same time, the curriculum also places greater emphasis on students' practical participation, such as singing, playing instruments, recreating, and composing short works. Through these activities, students can not only improve their musical performance abilities but also develop creative awareness, learn to listen to others and complete common tasks in cooperation. In terms of cultural understanding, the curriculum standards require students to recognize Chinese music culture and its aesthetic characteristics, enhance their identity with their own national culture, and also encourage them to be exposed to music from different countries and regions, understanding the diversity of world music culture with a more open attitude [1].

B. Italy: Teacher Autonomy in the Framework of Open Curriculum

The national curriculum for Italy's compulsory education stage, known as the "National Guidelines" (*Indicazioni Nazionali per il curricolo della Scuola dell'infanzia e del Primo ciclo di istruzione*, hereinafter referred to as the "National Guidelines"), serves as a core policy document for music education in Italian middle schools. It establishes the core position of music education within the curriculum system and provides clear value guidance and a fundamental framework for its implementation.

The "National Guidelines" provide a relatively specific description of the musical abilities' students should possess after completing three years of junior high school. This indicates that the Italian junior high school music curriculum does not limit the teaching focus to isolated skills such as singing, playing instruments, or reading musical scores. Instead, it aims for students to gradually understand the organization of music, its expressive content, and the cultural environment in which it exists, and to form their own opinions on this basis [2].

In the first two years of junior high school, teaching first emphasizes the accumulation of musical experience.

Students are required to participate in activities such as singing and playing instruments, and they will also try to independently or with peers create simple musical segments. In this process, the human voice, body movements, and musical instruments can all be ways to express musical feelings. Collective playing requires students to pay attention to other parts, be clear about their own responsibilities, and learn to cooperate with their peers. At the same time, teachers will gradually introduce basic knowledge such as musical scores, rhythms, and melodies, so that students can not only participate in musical activities but also begin to understand how music is organized.

Therefore, the focus of the first two years of learning is not just to increase the number of singing or playing, but to slowly establish a recognition of the musical language through actual participation. Initially, students rely more on auditory perception and imitation, and only later do they gradually notice the relationships between rhythm, melody, and parts, and try to understand the underlying patterns.

The curriculum standards for the third stage set higher requirements for students: not only are they expected to recognize the basic musical elements in works, but they should also, based on prior knowledge, understand the emotional connotations and expressive intentions of the works, and pay attention to the connections between music and its historical, cultural, and social contexts. This means that students' cognitive activities must go beyond the level of auditory recognition and further question the expressive logic of the works and the possible meanings carried by their sound forms. At the same time, students also gradually form aesthetic judgments based on personal feelings and understanding in this process.

The "National Guidelines" also incorporates digital tools into the scope of music learning, encouraging students to use technological tools for music production, information collection, and interdisciplinary activities. This indicates that the music curriculum is no longer limited to traditional singing, playing, or appreciation, but strives to guide students to understand and participate in music creation through diverse paths. After three years of study, students' musical practical activities gradually expand from perception and participation to higher levels such as understanding, expression, evaluation, and creation.

The above curriculum goals are closely related to Italy's long-standing musical cultural tradition, but their aim is not merely the inheritance of classical music knowledge. The guidelines emphasize critical listening, historical and cultural understanding, and interdisciplinary practice, which actually point to a more comprehensive musical literacy—students need to recognize their own national musical culture, also need to be exposed to music from different regions and genres, and through comparison and experience, form a more open aesthetic perspective.

C. The Concentrated Manifestation of System Logic: Two Paths of Class Hour Setting

China's approach: The "Compulsory Education Curriculum Program (2022 Edition)" establishes the basic

class hour framework for art courses at the national level, stipulating that they account for 9%–11% of the total class hours over nine years [3], and grants localities the flexibility to adjust within this proportional range. In the specific implementation, different regions show differentiated characteristics based on the distribution of educational resources. Taking Jiangxi Province as an example, its capital city Nanchang explicitly required that junior high school music classes should be offered once per week for the spring semester of 2025 [4]; Jingdezhen City, on the other hand, proposed in an official reply that junior high school music classes be arranged twice per week. In terms of the total number of class hours, Jingdezhen's arrangement has approached or reached the upper limit of 11% stipulated by the state [5]. This difference indicates that under the national rigid framework, there is still considerable variation in the actual implementation efforts of local education departments regarding the aesthetic education curriculum.

Italian Path: According to official information from the Italian Ministry of Education and the timetables of various schools, the music curriculum for middle school follows a fixed dual structure: namely, General Music (*Musica*) and Instrumental Music (*Strumento Musicale*).

General Music classes are mandatory for all students, with two fixed hours per week, covering basic music theory, music appreciation, and singing. Instrumental Music classes are only for students selected for the “Music Pathway,” which adds three additional hours per week on top of the General Music classes, usually held after school. The content includes individual instrumental lessons, sight-reading, ear training, and ensemble practice.

With respect to school autonomy, the interministerial decree on the music pathway in middle schools, Decree D.M. 176/2022, and its annex, the National Guidelines for Instrumental Music Teaching, serve as a reference framework for individual school curriculum planning [6].

In this context, the status of this attachment is comparable to that of the “National Curriculum Guidelines” of 2012, which is an open text that requires the teacher community to independently complete the specific design of content, methods, organization, and evaluation while adhering to the national education objectives.

III. RESOURCE SUPPORT IN POLICIES

A. China

From the perspective of the curriculum implementation mechanism, music education in the compulsory education stage in China is based on a three-level curriculum management framework at the national, local, and school-based levels. The national curriculum standards specify basic educational goals, curriculum content, and academic requirements, while local and school-based curricula play a complementary and supplementary role on the basis of the national curriculum.

China implements a three-level curriculum management system in compulsory education. The national curriculum plan and curriculum standards define basic educational goals, curriculum content, and academic

requirements for all students, ensuring the achievement of the “minimum standard”. On this premise, schools are granted a certain degree of autonomy, allowing them to expand and supplement the national curriculum based on their own conditions and educational characteristics. Taking Shanghai as an example, its “Management Measures for Art Work in Primary and Middle Schools” further refines the requirements, stipulating that primary and middle schools should strengthen the construction of student art societies mainly focused on “four groups and one team” (choir, dance troupe, drama and opera, fine arts societies, and Chinese and Western orchestras), and regard it as an important way to enhance students’ artistic practice abilities [7].

Given China’s vast territory, different regions possess rich local artistic and folk cultural resources. Many places integrate local folk songs, operas, and other resources into music education, forming a distinctive pattern of “one school, one product; one county, one melody”. For example, Siyuan Experimental School in Tongdao Dong Autonomous County, Hunan Province, has developed a school-based curriculum called “Dong Music”, which takes the Dong flute as a starting point to build a teaching system of “cognition-practice-innovation”. Students can not only understand the cultural background of the Dong flute but also handpick, make, and play the Dong flute themselves [8].

Article 11 of the “Regulations for School Art Education Work” (Ministry of Education Order No. 13) explicitly stipulates that schools should make full use of social art educational resources to supplement and improve the content of art education activities. This regulation facilitates schools in introducing external professional resources, such as: cultural centers, art departments of universities, intangible cultural heritage protection centers, and other institutions, to expand the resource boundaries and forms of music and art education [9].

B. Italy

On December 20, 2017, the President of the Italian Council of Ministers issued the first formal Decree of the President of the Council of Ministers (DPCM) approving the “Three-Year Plan for the Arts”, which was published on March 1, 2018, in the Official Gazette (G.U. n. 50). The plan is explicitly aimed at all schools from kindergarten through upper secondary education, i.e., the first and second cycles of education [10]. In May 2025, the Italian Ministry of Education released the proposal for the 2026–2028 “Three-Year Art Plan” and initiated a public consultation process. As of the completion of this text, the 2026–2028 “Three-Year Art Plan” is still in the official process and has not been officially promulgated and implemented. Before its formal approval and release, the previous valid cycle (the plan approved in 2021) is still being implemented, although its original cycle may have entered the final stages or overlapped with the transition between old and new. Therefore, this article focuses on the implementation framework for the 2020–2022 cycle. This plan mainly establishes its relevance to middle school music teaching through three aspects.

The plan's nine clear measures (misure) provide schools with actionable guidelines for applying for national funding. For example, measure f is specifically intended for "strengthening practical and historical critical abilities related to music, art, and cultural heritage". Schools can use this funding to conduct music workshops, purchase instruments, or organize music activities, such as the IC "Vito Intini" school, which received funding to organize a cultural heritage education project for middle school students [11]; the "Palermolab" project in Palermo guides students to explore local traditional music and poetry through music workshops [12].

Building a collaborative network within and outside of schools. The plan encourages schools to establish partnerships with higher art and music education institutions (AFAM), universities, museums, cultural institutions, and other members of the "coordination system". This facilitates the smooth entry of external professional resources into junior high music classrooms. For example, the Campania region's "Simaxis: Music and History" project, supported by the funding and framework of the "Three-Year Art Plan", organizes rehearsals for junior high orchestras and collaborates with local historians and musicians to present public performances, with the final practice results recorded in a studio. It also promotes the "school-cultural institution collaboration" model, integrating instrumental music learning with local cultural heritage education [13].

Linking to the "Music Pathway" specialized courses. The "Three-Year Plan for the Arts" is a key implementation instrument of the 2017 educational legislation, while the decree D.M. 176/2022, which regulates the "Music Pathway" in junior high schools, is a specific document issued under this legislative framework. It provides a macro policy environment and resource support for the courses in the music direction [10].

The "National Guidelines" and the "Three-Year Plan for Arts" together constitute the complete ecosystem of Italian school music education: the "National Guidelines" serve as the foundation and guiding framework, ensuring that the core values and direction of music education remain consistent; the "Three-Year Plan for the Arts" acts as the enabling instrument, providing resources and policy support that allow the music education philosophy rooted in the "National Guidelines" to truly take shape and take root in schools across the country. In addition, according to these two documents, each school can also flexibly formulate its own "Three-Year Educational Plan" (PTOF).

IV. CONCLUSION

The middle school music curriculum policies of China and Italy reflect different institutional orientations. China mainly relies on national curriculum standards to make relatively clear provisions on curriculum objectives, core competencies, teaching content, and class hour arrangements, forming a relatively comprehensive set of curriculum norms. Italy, on the other hand, determines the basic direction through the "National Guidelines", while the specific curriculum content and teaching methods are largely determined by schools and teachers according to

local circumstances. These two models are based on different educational traditions and management systems and have encountered their respective problems in the implementation process. For China, how to adapt the relatively unified curriculum requirements to the diverse conditions of different regions, schools, and students remains a key challenge in curriculum implementation. Although Italy gives schools and teachers a greater degree of autonomy, the lack of relatively stable implementation guarantees may lead to significant differences in the quality of music education across schools, and educational equity is also vulnerable to disparities in school resources and teacher capacity.

Comparing the curriculum policies of the two countries is not simply about determining which model is superior, but about examining whether the goals proposed in the curriculum documents can be achieved. This depends not only on the goals themselves, but also on institutional arrangements, school conditions, teacher quality, and whether teaching resources can work effectively together. The future curriculum reform in China can provide more room for adjustment for local governments, schools, and teachers, while maintaining the normative role of national curriculum standards, allowing for appropriate flexibility in basic requirements and specific teaching. While respecting the autonomy of schools and the professional judgment of teachers, Italy needs to establish necessary curriculum implementation standards and quality assurance measures to avoid the actual effectiveness of music education being overly dependent on the resource conditions of individual schools or the personal investment of teachers. Although the two countries face different problems, the core issue that reform needs to address remains common: how to narrow the gap between policy goals and classroom reality, and how to truly integrate music education into students' learning experiences.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The author declares no conflict of interest.

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