Theoretical Construction and Practical Mechanisms of Integrating University Aesthetic Education and Art Healing

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Abstract: Mental health issues among students are becoming more and more visible, and the traditional way of offering psychological support-mostly counseling and assessment-doesn't quite fit the educational setting anymore. Aesthetic education focuses on aesthetic appreciation and artistic literacy, while Art Healing uses creative expression to support emotional regulation and psychological integration. The two approaches have started to merge in places like universities and cultural institutions, but research on this integration is still pretty fragmented. There's not much theoretical grounding, the practical mechanisms remain vague, and the empirical evidence is scattered. This study draws on theories from aesthetic education, Art Healing and constructivist learning. Using a combination of literature integration and qualitative analysis, we looked at how this integration plays out across different contexts, both in China and internationally. Aesthetic education and Art Healing aren't just layered-they work together in a more dynamic way, driven by "creative expression - subjective construction - emotional regulation". This not only enhances aesthetic abilities, but also helps lower the stigma often tied to seeking psychological support. It points to a sustainable model for weaving aesthetic education and mental health work into something less clinical and more approachable.

Keywords: university aesthetic education; art healing; constructivist learning theory; mental health support; educational integration

1. Introduction

1.1. Student Mental Health Challenges and Structural Deficiencies in Educational Responses

In recent years, mental health issues among students have emerged as a significant challenge for the global education system. Depression and anxiety are identified as the leading mental health risk factors among young people [1]. A similar trend is observed in domestic contexts, where research indicates that the detection rate of depression among adolescents has reached 24.6%, while 18.5% of university students exhibit depressive tendencies. These figures suggest that student mental health problems are no longer isolated incidents of individual maladaptation; instead, they manifest as large-scale, routine occurrences characterized by highly complex emotional experiences [2]. Faced with this reality, current school mental health education primarily relies on professional methods such as psychological testing, individual counseling, and group guidance, which play an essential role in risk identification and crisis intervention. However, within the educational field, this highly rational and verbal support model has revealed structural limitations. On the one hand, the supply of professional services struggles to meet the continuous needs of a large student population; on the other hand, many students are reluctant to

engage with existing support systems due to concerns regarding the stigma of psychological labeling, limited emotional expression, or high barriers to entry [3].

Further research indicates that a significant portion of psychological distress among university students does not meet the criteria for medical diagnosis or clinical intervention. Instead, these students often exist in a "subclinical state" characterized by long-term emotional suppression, impaired expression, and imbalanced self-esteem. These problems are difficult to identify through conventional counseling channels because students are unlikely to seek psychological services proactively. Nevertheless, these issues continue to hinder their learning experiences and personal development [4].

Against this backdrop, it has become a practical priority for higher education to provide psychological support that integrates into daily educational contexts, possesses emotional capacity, and maintains continuity without increasing the risk of stigmatization. Research in the post-pandemic period further indicates that psychological distress in higher education is becoming increasingly hidden, chronic, and pervasive. Relying solely on crisis intervention or counseling-oriented models is no longer sufficient to meet the long-term needs of the broader student population [5, 6]. Many students, despite not meeting clinical diagnostic criteria, endure prolonged academic pressure and emotional burdens while avoiding traditional counseling services due to concerns over stigmatization or institutional thresholds [7]. This shift has prompted the education system to rethink how to introduce more flexible, de-stigmatizing, and sustainable psychological support pathways into daily teaching practices and campus culture.

1.2. Aesthetic Education and Art Healing: Separating Tradition and Opportunities for Integration

From the perspective of disciplinary history, aesthetic education and art healing were not originally distinct. In the mid-20th century, under the joint influence of depth psychology and humanistic thought, both fields shared a strong focus on emotional experience, inner expression, and personality development. However, as education and mental health systems became more professionalized and specialized at the institutional level, their practical paths gradually diverged [8]. Aesthetic education, as an essential component of the higher education system, primarily cultivates aesthetic ability, artistic literacy, and personality development. In contrast, art healing entered clinical and mental health systems, focusing on emotional repair, psychological intervention, and individual functional recovery. Since then, the two have been distinguished by their goal orientations, evaluation standards, and professional boundaries, leading to mutually vigilant disciplinary stances: the field of education generally avoids the potential "therapeutic" risks of activities, while the field of psychotherapy emphasizes the non-aesthetic attributes of artistic practice [9].

Research over the past two decades has shown that this separation stems more from institutional arrangements and professional boundary management than from fundamental differences in their underlying mechanisms. The non-verbal expression, symbolic creation, and emotional externalization emphasized in art healing have been confirmed to effectively promote emotional regulation, self-awareness, and psychological integration [10,11]. Meanwhile, aesthetic education theory suggests that aesthetic experience is not merely the training of artistic skills but an experiential process that integrates perception, emotion, and meaning construction. Its core lies in promoting the generation of subjectivity and the improvement of personality through artistic activities [12]. At this level, aesthetic education and art healing demonstrate a

high degree of overlap in the underlying mechanism of "creative expression-emotional experience-subjectivity construction."

With the increasing complexity of students' mental health needs and the advancement of immersive actions in school aesthetic education, this long-term separation has revealed limitations at both the theoretical and practical levels. On the one hand, mental health education that relies solely on counseling and assessment is insufficient to meet the continuous needs of a large student population. On the other hand, if aesthetic education remains restricted to artistic training or skills evaluation, it struggles to respond to students' genuine and complex emotional experiences. In this context, introducing the proven creative expression mechanisms of art healing into aesthetic education is not an overreaching expansion of its function. Instead, it reactivates the potential for emotional cultivation and personality support within the educational context, providing a realistic basis and theoretical opportunity for the integration of the two.

2. Core Concepts and Theoretical Foundations

2.1. Art Healing: From Psychological Intervention to the Expansion of the Educational Context

Art healing originates from the intersection of art and psychology, but its connotation is not equivalent to art therapy in a clinical sense. Art therapy is defined as a form of psychotherapy that uses art as the primary means of communication, emphasizing the realization of diagnosis, intervention, and therapeutic improvement through artistic creation within professional relationships [13]. Early research clearly identified the basic characteristics of art healing as a form of professional psychotherapeutic treatment [14]. Studies show that non-verbal art media, such as painting, handicrafts, and music, play a significant role in emotional regulation and psychological integration [11,15]. However, its implementation usually relies on professional therapists, relatively enclosed safe spaces, and clear treatment goals.

In recent years, international research has begun to pay more attention to the situational differences in art intervention practices, clearly distinguishing between clinical art therapy and art practices in educational, community, and public cultural fields. The latter aims more at developmental support, emotional regulation, and social connection rather than diagnosis and efficacy evaluation [16]. This stance provides significant theoretical legitimacy for the application of art healing in educational contexts and offers a clear academic boundary to avoid the excessive medicalization of art activities. Relevant research also indicates that in non-clinical contexts, art therapy often supports individuals in achieving emotional regulation and self-understanding through mechanisms such as process participation and mindfulness awareness [17].

Under this framework, art healing places greater emphasis on the natural psychological regulation, emotional release, and self-integration functions that occur during the process of artistic creation. Although art therapy also uses artistic creation as a medium, it does not always take diagnosis and treatment as a prerequisite. Its core goal lies in promoting the awareness and regulation of individual emotions and the dynamic renewal of psychological energy through multi-sensory participation and non-verbal expression [18]. Therefore, art healing is characterized by its open, developmental, and non-diagnostic nature. Its practical form lies between art education and art therapy, distinguishing it from both skill-centered art education and effect-oriented clinical therapy [19].

Based on these conceptual definitions, recent research has gradually expanded art healing from clinical contexts to educational and public fields, regarding it as a psychological support mechanism that can be embedded in daily learning and

cultural experiences [20,21]. Previous studies within the context of colleges and universities have explored the practical paths for art healing as a developmental support mechanism, emphasizing its potential value in providing emotional support and promoting students' subjective development under a non-clinical premise [4,22]. Especially in university settings, art healing provides students with a low-stigma, highly participatory psychological support pathway through creative expression, emotional experience, and subjective regulation, which compensates for the limitations of traditional counseling in terms of coverage and emotional reach [3,4]. This shift does not weaken the professional connotation of art healing; instead, while clearly distinguishing its boundaries from clinical therapy, it expands developmental application possibilities in the educational field based on the emotional externalization and self-awareness mechanisms of non-verbal and symbolic creation [10,22-24].

2.2. *University Aesthetic Education: From Aesthetic Training to Personality Construction*

Aesthetic education, also known as aesthetic appreciation education, does not aim at artistic skills themselves but rather to promote the overall development of an individual's personality through aesthetic experience [25]. In his work, Schiller proposed that aesthetic education is an important way to reconcile sensibility and rationality, leading to a free personality [26]. Modern aesthetic education theory further points out that aesthetic experience is an experiential process that integrates perception, emotion, and meaning construction. Its core lies in promoting the generation of subjectivity and the improvement of personality development through artistic activities [12,27].

In the context of higher education, aesthetic education has long been primarily implemented in the form of public art courses, emphasizing art appreciation and skills training. With the renewal of educational concepts, aesthetic education in universities has gradually shown a trend of interdisciplinary, contextualized, and experiential development, emphasizing the role of aesthetic experience in emotional regulation, value construction, and creativity cultivation. Systematic art education not only enhances students' aesthetic ability but also positively impacts their mental health, problem-solving ability, and independent thinking ability by activating the process of emotional experience and meaning construction [14,28]. Aesthetic experience itself constitutes a kind of psychological support resource with developmental significance.

However, if university aesthetic education remains merely at the level of aesthetic training or work evaluation, it is still difficult to fully respond to students' genuine and complex emotional experiences. Incorporating the creative expression, non-verbal experience, and emotional regulation mechanisms emphasized in art healing is not an external superposition of the aesthetic education function; rather, it helps to deepen its emotional cultivation and personality construction functions within the educational context. By introducing supportive art practice mechanisms within clearly defined educational boundaries, university aesthetic education can expand its developmental value in promoting students' mental health and provide new possible paths for building a more complete talent cultivation system.

2.3. *Constructivist Learning Theory: A Key theoretical fulcrum for Integration*

Constructivist learning theory emphasizes that learning is not the passive acceptance of existing knowledge but a process in which learners actively construct meaning through interaction with others, cultural symbols, and their own experiences within specific contexts [20,21]. This theory highlights subjectivity, contextuality, and

social interactivity, maintaining that cognition, emotion, and behavior form an integrated system that develops coordinately through real-world experience. This provides an important theoretical basis for understanding the intrinsic connection between experience, meaning, and personality in artistic activities.

In the field of aesthetic education, constructivist learning theory has driven the teaching paradigm to shift from a transmission model based primarily on imitation and skills training toward a learning orientation centered on student experience, exploration, and reflection. Constructivist aesthetic education guides students to generate aesthetic understanding and value judgments in artistic practice through scene creation, open-ended tasks, and peer interaction, thereby promoting the coordinated development of creative thinking, emotional experience, and personality [25]. In this process, aesthetic education no longer focuses merely on the outcome of the work but pays closer attention to the construction of subjectivity and the generation of meaning by the learner within the artistic experience.

In the practice of contemporary art healing, constructivism also constitutes an important theoretical foundation. Art healing emphasizes that through the non-verbal and symbolic medium of artistic creation, individuals can externalize their inner experiences in a safe environment and reconstruct their understanding of themselves, their emotions, and their experiences through the process of creation and reflection. The process of artistic creation is itself a process of meaning construction and cognitive reorganization, which helps individuals achieve emotional regulation, self-awareness, and psychological integration [10,11]. This mechanism does not rely on direct linguistic explanation or rational analysis but rather supports the active participation of individuals in the generation of psychological meaning through creative expression.

At the core logical level where meaning is constructed through experience, constructivist learning theory provides a common theoretical language and methodological foundation for the integration of aesthetic education and art healing. It allows creative expression in art healing to be understood within the educational field as a developmental and supportive learning process rather than a clinical treatment aimed at diagnosis and intervention. It also provides a clear theoretical basis for aesthetic education to expand its functions regarding emotional cultivation and personality construction. From a constructivist perspective, creative expression is no longer merely a means of skills training or emotional catharsis; it has become the core mechanism connecting aesthetic experience, emotional release, and the construction of subjectivity. This lays a solid theoretical foundation for the non-clinical integration of university aesthetic education and art healing.

3. Analysis of Practical Pathways for Integrating Aesthetic Education and Art Healing

3.1. Integrated Curriculum Practices in Universities

In recent years, many universities in China have consciously integrated the supportive concepts and practices of Art Healing into their public aesthetic education curriculum systems. This integration promotes a shift in aesthetic education from a primary focus on aesthetic appreciation and skills training to a comprehensive approach that encompasses emotional experience, psychological support, and the development of subjectivity. Such practices typically do not aim for clinical therapy; instead, they embed the core mechanisms of creative expression, emotional awareness, and process-oriented art activities into the curriculum structure to form a low-stigmatization, developmentally oriented integration model. At the level of university curriculum, existing research has begun to focus on the systematic integration of Art Healing within the public aesthetic education system. In the context

of local universities, previous studies have attempted to incorporate these concepts into teaching reforms and have verified positive feedback regarding emotional support and aesthetic experience through specific curriculum practices [29].

The explorations represented by Tongji University have significant typicality. Its University Aesthetic Education course has expanded beyond the original framework of art appreciation to include modules such as painting healing, drama healing, and music meditation. Through immersive art experiences and guided reflection, the course helps students achieve emotional release, self-awareness, and interpersonal resonance. Related qualitative research and course feedback indicate that students participating in these activities exhibit positive changes in anxiety levels, self-acceptance, and social connection. Furthermore, students generally perceive the course experience as supportive growth rather than psychological intervention. This orientation is believed to help weaken common labeling and avoidance tendencies in campus mental health education, which is consistent with professional judgments on promoting the integration of Art Healing into school aesthetic education systems to expand non-stigmatized psychological support paths [23].

Similar paths are reflected in the curriculum and project practices of many other local universities. For instance, Changsha University has collaborated with its Psychological Health Education Center to offer art experience courses through Open Aesthetic Education Classes, introducing activities such as painting and plant-themed creations into the classroom. These activities emphasize the enhancement of emotional resilience and aesthetic perception through artistic practice. Hebei University of Water Resources and Electric Engineering relies on its Heartwarming Craft Workshop series to use handicraft creation as a convergence point between public aesthetic education and psychological support, providing students with a stable space for emotional expression and stress adjustment. Such courses usually do not set psychological diagnosis or quantitative treatment goals. Instead, they guide students toward emotional regulation and self-understanding through continuous artistic practice and aesthetic experience. The operational logic of these programs is closer to educational support than psychological intervention.

From the perspective of course structure, the practices of these universities generally demonstrate a consistent orientation. Regarding goal setting, emotional experience, self-awareness, and aesthetic understanding are incorporated into a unified developmental framework rather than being limited to skill or knowledge acquisition. In terms of teaching organization, emphasis is placed on open creation, process reflection, and peer interaction, while the singular evaluation of the final artistic product is de-emphasized. Regarding institutional affiliation, these courses are typically incorporated into public aesthetic education or general education systems rather than psychotherapy systems, thereby maintaining their educational attributes and universal accessibility.

Overall, these integrated practices demonstrate that embedding Art Healing mechanisms into aesthetic education courses does not weaken aesthetic goals; on the contrary, it helps activate the functions of emotional cultivation and personality support. This approach provides a practical basis for constructing a non-therapeutic, developmental, and replicable integrated model of aesthetic education and Art Healing at the university level. It also provides important empirical support for the theoretical exploration of how Art Healing can be effectively implemented within the educational field.

3.2. Integrated Practices in Cultural Institutions

As important carriers of public culture and social aesthetic education, art galleries and museums demonstrate unique advantages in integrating aesthetic education and Art Healing, distinct from university classrooms and professional psychological institutions. Their non-medical nature, open spaces, and aesthetic atmosphere make art-related activities more easily understood by the public as cultural experiences and emotional participation rather than psychological interventions or treatment processes. This approach helps reduce the potential labeling pressure associated with mental health issues from the perspective of the field structure. In this context, the key mechanisms of Art Healing often occur naturally through aesthetic experiences and creative participation, providing a flexible practical path for emotional awareness and psychological adjustment.

The "Beyond Words-Art and Healing" project launched by the Wuhan Art Museum serves as a representative example. This project combines exhibition narratives with public education activities to guide participants in expressing their emotions through color, painting, and physical perception in a non-clinical environment. The project emphasizes that Art Healing is neither skills training nor equivalent to psychotherapy. Instead, it provides individuals with a channel for expressing emotions "beyond words," enabling participants to naturally enter a process of self-awareness and the externalization of emotions through aesthetic experiences. Results from relevant research and interviews show that a majority of participants felt a subjective relief from tension and anxiety after the activities, demonstrating a stronger willingness to express emotions and an increased sense of social connection. These observations are consistent with empirical findings in museum-based intervention studies, which indicate that structured art activities in museum settings are associated with significant improvements in mental health, suggesting that participation in art activities in non-clinical cultural settings can produce measurable supportive effects [24]. Furthermore, studies on Art Healing activities in art museums have pointed out that participants reported an improvement in their emotional state, alongside an enhanced sense of social belonging and self-identity [19].

Beyond large art museums, various regional cultural venues are also exploring pathways to integrate aesthetic education and Art Healing through ongoing art activities. For example, in some urban public cultural spaces, projects centered on handicrafts, natural material creations, and thematic art experiences have been systematically incorporated into public education and social services. These practices typically do not set psychological diagnostic or quantitative treatment goals; rather, they guide the public to achieve emotional regulation and self-understanding through continuous artistic participation. Such practices indicate that when art activities are situated within a public cultural context rather than a therapeutic framework, they are more conducive to activating functions of emotional cultivation and social connection. This provides a practical reference for constructing a non-therapeutic integrated model of aesthetic education and Art Healing for a wider audience.

3.3. Special Populations and Long-Term Practice Evidence

In the field of special populations, long-term Art Healing and aesthetic education practices conducted by various universities and social institutions have provided important supplementary evidence for the sustained effects of integrating aesthetic education and Art Healing. The "Artistic Star Companionship" project implemented by Shandong University, targeting children with autism, has been continuously integrating Art Healing and aesthetic education for seven years. Research shows that participating

children exhibited a synergistic improvement trend in emotional expression, cognitive abilities, and social interaction, and these changes showed a certain degree of stability and continuity [26]. This case demonstrates that, within a non-clinical and developmental framework, integrating the mechanisms of Art Healing into aesthetic education practices does not limit its impact to short-term emotional adjustment but has potential value in supporting long-term personal development, providing important empirical evidence for the sustainability of the integrated model of aesthetic education and Art Healing.

4. Mechanism Discussion: How Integration Works

Comprehensive literature and case analyses indicate that the psychological support provided by art intervention in educational and public spaces is not achieved through direct problem-oriented or explicit intervention. Instead, it operates through mechanisms such as non-verbal expression, meaning construction, and social interaction, which promote individual emotional adjustment and psychological resilience within daily experiences [6]. A comprehensive analysis of university courses, cultural venues, and long-term practical cases reveals that the integration of aesthetic education and Art Healing is not driven by a single factor. Rather, it achieves its educational and psychological support effects through the coordinated operation of multiple mechanisms.

Artistic creation engages an individual's emotional experience non-verbally, providing a relatively safe and low-stress channel for expression. Forms such as painting, music, and drama can bypass rational language and self-censorship mechanisms, allowing individuals to externalize emotions without being directly labeled as problematic. This reduces the risk of psychological defense and stigmatization. Such characteristics are particularly important in university classrooms and public cultural spaces, as they allow art activities to be more easily perceived as aesthetic experiences rather than psychological interventions [10].

During creative practice, individuals not only express emotions but also reorganize their experiences. The process of creating, reviewing, and reflecting on works prompts participants to reinterpret their own experiences and form new cognitive perspectives through communication with others. This process of generating meaning through experience is highly consistent with the emphasis on experience as education. Aesthetic experience itself constitutes a unified process of cognition, emotion, and meaning generation, which gradually develops subjectivity through continuous participation [12].

Furthermore, artistic activities are often embedded in specific social contexts. Whether through collaborative creation in university classrooms or collective experiences in art galleries and public cultural spaces, the sharing of experiences and interactive processes strengthens emotional connections between people. Research indicates that such collective artistic practices can enhance an individual's perception of social support, strengthen a sense of belonging and participation, and have a positive impact on alleviating loneliness and anxiety [19].

These mechanisms are not independent but are interwoven within specific practices. Non-verbal expression opens emotional channels, meaning construction deepens the subject's understanding, and social interaction strengthens the sense of connection. Together, these elements constitute the internal logic through which the integration of aesthetic education and Art Healing functions effectively.

5. Discussion and Prospects

Although existing research and practice have revealed the positive value of integrating aesthetic education and Art Healing at various levels, this field remains

in a transitional stage of exploration and structural development. On the one hand, most empirical studies have focused on case studies or small-to-medium-sized samples. Systematic longitudinal research and cross-context comparisons remain limited, and the stability, adaptation boundaries, and underlying mechanisms of the long-term effects of this integrated model have not been fully verified. On the other hand, many existing theoretical frameworks draw heavily from international models and may not fully address the complexities of the domestic cultural context, the specific educational structures of universities, or the diverse developmental needs of students. Consequently, the construction of localized theories requires further deepening.

Future research should advance systematic exploration on several fronts. First, through longitudinal tracking and multi-field comparative studies, research should examine the sustained effects and differences in the integration of aesthetic education and Art Healing across various populations, academic backgrounds, and educational contexts. Second, by synthesizing traditional aesthetic education values, local cultural and psychological characteristics, and higher education practices, a locally adapted theoretical framework and evaluation tools should be developed to avoid the simple transplantation of clinical models. Third, at the practical level, it is necessary to improve interdisciplinary collaboration and training mechanisms among art teachers, counselors, and mental health professionals. This ensures that integrated practices maintain their educational attributes and non-therapeutic stance while possessing the necessary professional support and institutional guarantees.

From a policy perspective, the education system has recently placed student mental health and aesthetic education development in a position of coordinated advancement. National initiatives such as the notice regarding the school aesthetic education immersion action emphasize educating and nurturing individuals through aesthetics, highlighting the fundamental role of aesthetic education in emotional cultivation and personality development. Furthermore, strategic plans for strengthening student mental health work between 2023 and 2025 provide a general policy direction and institutional space for exploring the integration of aesthetic education and Art Healing in universities. While no specific national policy has been issued exclusively for the integration of Art Healing into the aesthetic education system, related practices rely on existing frameworks for aesthetic education and mental health. These efforts are currently in an exploratory and pilot stage, and there is a need for unified curriculum standards, teacher training mechanisms, and systematic evaluation systems. Guided by current policy goals, Art Healing is expected to move toward more standardized and systematic development, forming a practical paradigm with broader promotional value [30].

Simultaneously, future practice should expand the application of Art Healing within universities, gradually moving from independent projects into daily learning and campus culture. By respecting different professional backgrounds and campus characteristics, the mechanisms of creative expression and emotional awareness can be integrated into classroom teaching, campus activities, and student community support systems. In professional fields such as medicine, which emphasize humanistic care and empathy, promoting emotional awareness can create an intrinsic synergy between aesthetic education, Art Healing, and professional training.

Against this backdrop, Art Healing should be regarded as a flexible mechanism system rather than a fixed method. It should form a dynamic coupling with the educational structures, professional goals, and cultural characteristics of universities while maintaining its educational attributes and non-therapeutic stance. In conclusion, the integration of aesthetic education and Art Healing does not blur the

boundaries between education and treatment. Instead, from a constructivist perspective, it activates emotional experiences, meaning construction, and social connection through creative expression, achieving a synergistic path for aesthetic development and psychological support. This model offers a developmentally oriented and culturally resilient approach to supporting the complex and diverse psychological needs of contemporary university students.

6. Conclusion

In conclusion, the integration of aesthetic education and Art Healing represents a significant shift in the higher education landscape, moving toward a model that prioritizes emotional cultivation and the development of subjectivity. By embedding mechanisms of creative expression and social interaction into the curriculum and cultural activities, this approach provides a low-stigmatization and developmental pathway for psychological support. This model does not weaken the aesthetic goals of education but instead activates its potential for personality construction and emotional resilience. Moving forward, the development of localized theoretical frameworks and the standardization of curriculum standards will be essential for transforming exploratory practices into a systematic paradigm with broader promotional value. Ultimately, this integrated approach offers a culturally resilient and accessible strategy to address the diverse psychological needs of contemporary university students, ensuring a synergistic path for their aesthetic growth and psychological well-being.

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