Flourishing in Rural Classrooms: Empowering "Left-Behind" Children and Teachers in China through Drama Education

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Abstract

This paper examines how drama education can advance educational equity and well-being for "left-behind children" and their teachers in rural China. Drawing on the PERMA framework of positive psychology and grounded in the principles of drama education, the study investigates how creative, participatory learning environments foster engagement, resilience, and a renewed sense of meaning in schooling. Employing a mixed-methods design, this study combined pre- and post-intervention PERMA-based surveys and focus group discussions with students (n = 121), along with in-depth interviews and classroom observations involving teachers (n = 15) across three rural schools in Guangxi Province, China. Quantitative analyses revealed statistically significant gains across all five PERMA dimensions, with the largest effects in Accomplishment (Cohen's d = 0.70) as well as Relationships and Positive Emotions (Cohen's d = 0.63). Qualitative findings illuminated the mechanisms behind these changes, showing how drama pedagogy enabled emotional expression, peer empathy, and teacher–student trust. The results demonstrate that drama-based pedagogies, when culturally and contextually adapted, can serve as a sustainable approach to strengthening both student and teacher flourishing in under-resourced communities. The study concludes by framing this model within a continuous improvement perspective, emphasizing iterative cycles of reflection, adaptation, and shared learning as essential to educational transformation in rural contexts.

Introduction & Context

Across China's vast rural landscape, education remains both a lifeline and a challenge. Despite the nation's rapid economic growth and impressive strides in educational access, persistent disparities continue to affect millions of children who grow up separated from their parents due to labour migration. Recent estimates by UNICEF and the National Bureau of Statistics of China indicate that more than 41 million rural children in China are classified as "left-behind" — meaning they grow up apart from one or both migrant parents. The total number of left-behind children across all regions may approach 67 million, making it one of the largest child populations in the world living without direct parental care. While many of these children are cared for by grandparents or relatives, research has highlighted significant risks to their emotional well-being, development, and academic motivation. Scholars have increasingly described this as a "silent crisis" in rural education and social protection (Wang & Lin, 2021; Zhang et al., 2023). Educational inequities in rural China are not merely material or infrastructural—they are deeply psychosocial. While government reforms have improved physical facilities and reduced class sizes, rural schools still struggle with low student engagement, high absenteeism, and teacher burnout (Li & Huang, 2022). Many students experience a sense of alienation and purposelessness, while teachers face social isolation and limited professional growth opportunities. The result is a widening gap not only in academic achievement but in the quality of educational experience—what the OECD (2022) calls the "well-being gap" in global learning. It is within this context that arts-based and drama education approaches are emerging as transformative responses to the complex interplay between learning, emotion, and community.

The Rural Schools Drama Education Initiative, launched in collaboration with local education authorities, cultural foundations, and teacher-training institutions, represents a long-term, practice-based intervention aimed at addressing this multidimensional challenge. Since 2018, the program has reached over 100 schools across Guangxi, Guangdong, and Yunnan provinces, serving thousands of rural students and training hundreds of teachers. The initiative introduces drama education as well as drama-in-education (DiE) pedagogy—a methodology that uses improvisation, role-play, and embodied learning to promote empathy, imagination, and critical reflection in both students and teachers. Rather than treating drama as a performance art, the program positions it as a pedagogical strategy for re-humanizing classrooms, deepening engagement, and nurturing both academic and emotional growth.

Globally, research supports the transformative potential of arts-based pedagogies in advancing educational equity and well-being. Studies from UNESCO's Arts Education Monitoring Group (2021) and the OECD's Learning Compass 2030 framework (2022) highlight how arts-integrated learning fosters creativity, resilience, and belonging—skills that traditional lecture-based methods often fail to cultivate. Within China, however, arts education remains unevenly distributed and often marginalized in rural curricula. The Rural Schools Drama Education Initiative

thus fills a critical gap by integrating positive psychology—particularly Seligman's (2011) PERMA model of well-being—into a culturally responsive arts pedagogy that values both cognitive and emotional learning.

The PERMA framework—comprising Positive Emotion, Engagement, Relationships, Meaning, and Accomplishment—provides a comprehensive lens for understanding and measuring human flourishing. In education, it has been increasingly adopted as a framework for promoting not only academic success but holistic well-being (Kern et al., 2015; Norrish, 2015). However, while PERMA-based interventions have been studied extensively in Western and urban contexts, there is limited empirical research examining their implementation in rural and collectivist settings, particularly where socioeconomic stressors and emotional neglect may inhibit students' sense of agency and joy. This study responds to that gap by investigating how the PERMA framework, when combined with drama-based learning, can foster both student and teacher well-being within under-resourced rural schools.

Drama education offers a distinctive advantage in this context because it translates psychological constructs into lived experience. Through role-play and dramatic tension, students explore emotions, relationships, and moral dilemmas that parallel their real-life challenges. Teachers, meanwhile, rediscover their creative agency and reconnect with their original sense of purpose in education. This dual transformation aligns closely with the twofold aim of the initiative: to empower students' sense of belonging and intrinsic motivation, and to restore teachers' professional vitality through creative practice and shared meaning-making. In this way, drama becomes both a pedagogical tool and a social innovation—a bridge between policy and practice, between individual well-being and systemic change.

At the policy level, this work aligns with China's 14th Five-Year Plan for Education Modernization (2021–2025), which emphasizes moral education, creative learning, and emotional well-being as integral components of quality education. It also resonates with UNESCO's Education for Sustainable Development (ESD) goals, particularly Target 4.7, which calls for education that promotes sustainable lifestyles, human rights, and cultural diversity. By situating the Rural Schools Drama Education Initiative within these global and national frameworks, this study positions drama education not merely as an extracurricular enrichment but as a strategic pathway toward educational equity, social-emotional learning, and community renewal.

The empirical investigation presented in this paper draws upon both quantitative and qualitative data collected from 121 students and 15 teachers participating in the year-long drama education program. Using a mixed-methods design, the study examines how teachers' and students' experiences of well-being evolved across the five dimensions of PERMA and how drama-based pedagogy functioned as a catalyst for change. Quantitative measures assessed shifts in self-reported engagement, relationships, and accomplishment, while qualitative interviews and classroom observations captured the nuanced, affective transformations that numbers alone cannot reveal. Together, these complementary methods illuminate the interplay between systemic constraints and human flourishing in rural educational environments.

The context of rural China thus provides both urgency and opportunity for this inquiry. Urgency, because the emotional disengagement of left-behind children and the exhaustion of rural teachers threaten the moral fabric of education; opportunity, because the arts—when grounded in evidence-based frameworks like PERMA—can reimagine what education can mean for both teachers and students. This study, therefore, is not merely about drama education as a teaching method, but about the restoration of meaning, connection, and humanity in schooling systems that have long been shaped by exam pressures and structural inequities. By bridging the domains of positive psychology, drama pedagogy, and rural education reform, this research contributes to a growing movement that sees the arts as essential infrastructure for human development. It offers a model for how interdisciplinary, practice-based approaches can respond to complex educational inequities in culturally grounded ways—turning the classroom into a living laboratory for hope, empathy, and transformation.

Theoretical Framework

1. Positive Psychology and the PERMA Framework in Education

The theoretical foundation of this study lies in the intersection of positive psychology, drama education, and educational equity. Positive psychology, pioneered by Martin Seligman (2011), represents a paradigm shift in psychological science—from emphasizing pathology and deficits to cultivating human flourishing. In education, this evolution gave rise to positive education, a field that integrates well-being science with pedagogy to foster both academic success and life satisfaction (Norrish, 2015; Seligman et al., 2009). Rather than treating well-being as peripheral to learning, positive education proposes that flourishing students learn more deeply, as they experience emotional safety, meaning, and belonging.

The PERMA model—comprising Positive Emotion, Engagement, Relationships, Meaning, and Accomplishment—offers a multidimensional framework for understanding and nurturing well-being. Each domain represents a distinct yet interdependent component of flourishing that can be intentionally cultivated through educational design:

• Positive Emotion involves joy, gratitude, hope, and interest that broaden learners' perspectives and build psychological resources (Fredrickson, 2001). In classrooms, it appears as curiosity, humor, and pride in achievement.

• Engagement refers to the immersive state of "flow" (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990) in which learners are so absorbed in an activity that time and self-consciousness recede. It predicts intrinsic motivation and persistence.

• Relationships capture the importance of connection, empathy, and trust—central to belonging and to every collaborative learning environment.

• Meaning points to the sense of purpose and connection to something larger—be it community, cultural identity, or moral values—that transforms compliance into commitment.

• Accomplishment encompasses both mastery and growth, recognizing not only performance outcomes but also self-efficacy and resilience.

In the context of rural Chinese education, the PERMA framework offers a valuable lens for addressing psychosocial inequities but also requires cultural adaptation. In collectivist societies, well-being is experienced relationally rather than individually; thus, Relationships and Meaning often form the foundation from which Positive Emotion, Engagement, and Accomplishment emerge (Tian & Zheng, 2020). For

left-behind children, whose emotional worlds are shaped by separation and loss, relational repair—through trust, empathy, and belonging—is essential. Likewise, rural teachers, who often face social isolation and limited support, rediscover purpose and vitality through re-engagement with community and meaning. Accordingly, PERMA in this study functions as a dynamic relational framework, not a static checklist. It captures how well-being is co-constructed through experience and interaction. This dynamic orientation becomes especially powerful when integrated with drama education, which transforms psychological principles into embodied learning and shared creative experience.

2. Drama Education: From Aesthetic Experience to Human Development

Drama Education offers a complementary and synergistic framework for realizing well-being in practice. Rooted in the pioneering work of Dorothy Heathcote (1984), Gavin Bolton (1998), and subsequent practitioners such as Jonothan Neelands (2009) and Joe Winston (2013), drama education positions dramatic activity as both artistic and pedagogical inquiry. It invites learners to engage cognitively, emotionally, and socially by entering imagined contexts that reflect real human dilemmas. Through this process, drama enables participants to explore identity, ethics, empathy, and agency in ways that traditional didactic instruction cannot.

Heathcote's "mantle of the expert" model empowers students to assume meaningful roles within fictional worlds, encouraging responsibility and collaborative problem-solving. Bolton (1998) framed drama as a reflective art form—an arena where emotion and cognition converge to construct understanding through tension and resolution. Likewise, Augusto Boal's (1979) Theatre of the Oppressed situates drama as a tool for social transformation, offering participants the chance to rehearse strategies for real-world change. Across these traditions, drama education is unified by the principle of learning through experience. It embodies what Vygotsky (1978) described as the imaginative reconstruction of experience, a process central to creative cognition and moral growth. By combining thinking, feeling, and doing, drama creates conditions for deep learning—learning that is embodied, affective, and transformative.

In China's rural classrooms, where pedagogy often prioritizes correctness over creativity, drama introduces a participatory and humanistic alternative. In the Chinese context, drama education has emerged unevenly but is gaining traction within both urban and rural pedagogical reform. Scholars have documented experimental and pilot programs—particularly in southwestern provinces such as Yunnan—where drama-in-education (DiE) practices have been used to enhance emotional engagement, intercultural understanding, and student voice (Sun, 2017; Zhao, 2020). By shifting the classroom dynamic, drama democratizes relationships, gives voice to students who are often marginalized, and redefines the teacher's role from authoritative instructor to collaborative facilitator. This pedagogical shift aligns with Self-Determination Theory (Deci & Ryan, 2000), which identifies autonomy, competence, and relatedness as core psychological needs that underpin intrinsic motivation and well-being. Drama naturally engages all three: learners experience autonomy through choice and improvisation, competence through expressive skill-building, and relatedness through

ensemble-based collaboration.

Moreover, drama education operationalizes each PERMA domain in the lived experience of the classroom:

- Positive Emotion through humor, imagination, and creative play.
- Engagement through the deep absorption of role and narrative.
- Relationships through ensemble trust and empathy.
- Meaning through exploring moral, cultural, or social questions.
- Accomplishment through visible progress in confidence, collaboration, and creativity.

Thus, drama serves not merely as an instructional method but as an affective ecology—a space where emotions, cognition, and relationships converge to support well-being and learning simultaneously.

3. Integrating PERMA and Drama Education: A Holistic Framework for Flourishing

When PERMA and Drama Education are integrated, they create a holistic model of flourishing that bridges psychology, pedagogy, and culture. PERMA provides the theoretical architecture of well-being; drama provides the experiential pathway through which it is enacted. Together, they transform classrooms into relational ecosystems where emotion, imagination, and learning intertwine.

In this integrated framework:

- Positive Emotion arises through creative risk-taking and the joy of co-creation.
- Engagement develops as students and teachers inhabit narrative worlds requiring focus, empathy, and problem-solving.
- Relationships deepen through shared vulnerability and collaboration.
- Meaning emerges from connecting personal and communal stories to broader social realities.
- Accomplishment becomes both individual and collective—students and teachers witnessing tangible growth in voice, confidence, and agency.

Drama education operationalizes the PERMA framework in educational settings, providing embodied pathways to each dimension of well-being:

PERMA Dimension	Drama Education Expression	Illustrative Example in Rural Context
Positive Emotion	Shared laughter, emotional expression through role play	Students experience joy and release during collaborative improvisations
Engagement	Deep focus during character creation and dramatic inquiry	Learners sustain concentration and "flow" during scene-making
Relationships	Collaborative storytelling, empathy-building, ensemble work	Students strengthen trust and peer support through co-created drama
Meaning	Exploration of moral dilemmas and social issues through narrative	Students connect classroom themes to community experiences
Accomplishment	Performing and reflecting on learning outcomes	Students recognize growth through self and peer feedback after performances

Within the Rural Schools Drama Education Initiative, each domain is intentionally designed into workshop and classroom practice. For instance, Positive Emotion might be cultivated through storytelling that celebrates local culture; Engagement through improvisation that invites multiple solutions; Relationships through collective performance-making; Meaning through dramatized inquiry into village life or intergenerational care; and Accomplishment through reflective sharing circles that affirm progress and gratitude.

This cyclical pedagogy aligns with Improvement Science and Action Research principles, creating feedback loops of observation, reflection, and adaptation. It also resonates with Fredrickson's (2001) Broaden-and-Build Theory, which posits that positive emotions expand awareness and build enduring psychological and social resources. Drama provides the embodied means for this broadening process—engaging body, mind, and heart to reframe challenges as opportunities for creative action.

Crucially, the model acknowledges teacher flourishing as parallel and interdependent with student flourishing. Teachers who engage in drama-based professional learning reconnect with creativity and purpose, rediscovering the joy of teaching as relational art. Their emotional renewal, in turn, shapes classroom climates conducive to curiosity and belonging. This reflects evidence that teacher well-being profoundly influences student outcomes and school culture (Jennings & Greenberg, 2009).

From a systemic perspective, this integrated framework operates across three levels:

- Micro level (individual):
Students and teachers cultivate self-awareness, confidence, and joy.
- Meso level (classroom):
Relationships, collaboration, and collective efficacy strengthen.
- Macro level (community):
Shared meaning and cultural pride emerge, reinforcing resilience and local identity.

4. Conceptual Synthesis

The fusion of Positive Psychology and Drama Education redefines well-being as a lived, performative, and relational process rather than a static psychological condition. It emphasizes that flourishing is enacted—not merely felt—through creative participation, dialogue, and reflection.

The Rural Schools Drama Education Initiative thus operationalizes PERMA in culturally grounded, emotionally resonant, and pedagogically sustainable ways. It demonstrates how drama education can serve as a catalyst for systemic equity and human flourishing, transforming not only how rural children learn but how teachers, communities, and policymakers envision what it means to educate for life.

This integrated theoretical foundation informed every aspect of the research design—from the structure of teacher workshops and classroom interventions to the development of instruments and interpretation of findings—positioning the study as both an empirical inquiry and a living laboratory of educational renewal.

Methodology

1. Research Design and Rationale

This study adopted a convergent mixed-methods design (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2018) to investigate the impact of the Rural Schools Drama Education Initiative on the well-being of teachers and students, as conceptualized through the PERMA framework. This approach was selected to capture both the quantifiable changes in specific well-being dimensions and the qualitative richness of participants' lived experiences. While quantitative data offered measurable indicators of change, qualitative data provided contextual insight into the emotional, social, and pedagogical transformations underpinning those outcomes.

Grounded in a pragmatic research paradigm (Tashakkori & Teddlie, 2010), this methodology prioritized methodological utility in addressing complex, real-world challenges. Within the rural Chinese educational context—where psychosocial inequities intersect with cultural and systemic dynamics—a mixed-methods strategy allowed for a more nuanced, integrative understanding of how structured interventions can foster personal and relational change.

The dual focus on teacher professional growth and student engagement reflects the program's systemic theory of change: that the flourishing of teachers serves as a catalyst for student well-being, and that both are mutually reinforced through creative, participatory pedagogy.

The study was guided by the following research questions:

1. How does participation in the Rural Schools Drama Education Initiative influence teachers' and students' well-being across the five PERMA dimensions?
2. How do teachers and students describe the changes in their engagement, relationships, and sense of meaning as a result of drama-based pedagogy?
3. What contextual and pedagogical factors facilitate—or hinder—the integration of PERMA principles into rural classroom practice?

By triangulating statistical evidence with narrative accounts, the study aimed not only to determine whether well-being improved, but to explore how and why such transformation occurred within real-world rural school settings.

2. Participants and Context

This study was conducted across three rural schools in Long'an County, Guangxi Province, China, during the 2023–2024 implementation cycle of the Rural Schools Drama Education Initiative. A total of 126 participants were included:

- Teachers (n = 15): Primarily teachers of Chinese language, moral education, and the arts, these educators completed a year-long professional development program focused on drama-based pedagogy and well-being practices.
- Students (n = 121): Primary school students aged 8 to 12 who engaged in classroom-based drama projects as well as a summer drama camp facilitated by the trained teachers.

Teacher participants were selected using purposive sampling, in collaboration with local education bureaus and the supporting foundation. The sampling aimed to ensure diversity in teaching experience (ranging from 2 to 25 years) and school types. Student participants were drawn from the teachers' existing classes, and

parental consent was obtained through established school communication channels.

The participating schools shared challenges typical of under-resourced rural Chinese settings—limited access to arts education, high teacher turnover, and large class sizes. Nonetheless, these schools also exhibited strong community cohesion and rich local cultural capital, offering a promising context in which to explore how arts-based interventions might support both academic learning and psychosocial well-being.

3. Intervention Design

The Rural Schools Drama Education Initiative comprised three interrelated components, designed to foster systemic transformation at the levels of teacher development, classroom practice, and community engagement.

(a) Teacher Professional Development

A year-long blended learning program combined intensive in-person workshops with ongoing online coaching, reflective journaling, and peer learning. Teachers participated in three multi-day workshops (each lasting 2–3 days), where they were introduced to core drama education techniques—including role-play, image theatre, and teacher-in-role—as well as strategies for integrating the PERMA framework into classroom practice.

Crucially, teachers first experienced drama as learners, reflecting on their own engagement, emotional responses, and pedagogical beliefs. This immersive approach aimed to strengthen teacher identity, foster empathy, and promote professional renewal before the methods were applied in student contexts.

(b) Classroom Implementation

Following their training, teachers co-designed and facilitated 3–4 drama-based learning units per semester, aligned with the national curriculum and adapted to local contexts. These units integrated content from moral education, Chinese language, and arts, exploring themes such as traditional folktales, environmental stewardship, and intergenerational care.

Each unit incorporated opportunities for collaborative creation, emotional expression, and student reflection, explicitly guided by the five dimensions of the PERMA model. Drama activities emphasized process over product, fostering student voice, engagement, and peer connection.

(c) Community Sharing

At the end of each term, schools hosted culminating events—including performances, exhibitions, and open classrooms—inviting parents, caregivers, and local leaders to witness students' learning journeys. These events not only celebrated student creativity but also reinforced community pride and linked drama education to broader narratives of rural revitalization and cultural heritage. This multi-layered intervention was conceptualized as both a capacity-building strategy and a process of relational renewal. By engaging teachers as reflective practitioners, students as co-creators, and communities as partners, the initiative sought to simultaneously enhance teacher well-being, student engagement, and collective flourishing within rural educational ecosystems.

4. Quantitative Data Collection and Measures

Quantitative data were collected at two time points—pre-intervention (T1) and post-intervention (T2)—through self-report surveys administered to student participants. The aim was to assess changes in student well-being and engagement following participation in the Rural Schools Drama Education Initiative.

(a) Student Well-Being and Engagement Survey

A developmentally appropriate version of the PERMA-based well-being survey was designed for students aged 8 to 12. The instrument incorporated visual Likert response formats (e.g., smiley face scales) to ensure accessibility for younger learners in rural contexts.

The student well-being survey consisted of 15 items, each mapped to one of the five PERMA domains. Age-appropriate phrasing and visual Likert formats (e.g., smiley scales) were used to ensure accessibility for younger learners. The item distribution across domains is as follows:

Positive Emotion
1. I often feel happy and satisfied in learning or activities.
2. I discover small things that make me happy every day.
3. Even when facing difficulties, I can find things to be grateful for.

Engagement
4. I completely immerse myself in learning activities.
5. I enjoy challenging my abilities and trying new things.
6. I feel time flies when I am doing interesting things.

Relationships
7. I have friends I can trust and rely on.
8. I feel harmonious relationships with family, teachers, or peers.
9. When I need help, I can find someone to talk to or seek support.

Meaning
10. I feel my learning activities are important for my future.
11. What I do makes me feel valuable.
12. I hope to contribute to others or society through my efforts.

Accomplishment
13. I often achieve my goals and feel proud of myself.
14. I feel I have made progress in my learning.
15. I can recognize my growth and achievements in different areas.

(b) Instrument Development and Adaptation

The instrument was adapted through a **translation–back translation** process to ensure linguistic accuracy and conceptual fidelity. It was pilot-tested with a small group of rural students to assess clarity, age appropriateness, and usability. Feedback informed minor adjustments to wording and visual layout.

(c) Reliability and Validity

- Cronbach's alpha coefficients at both T1 and T2 exceeded .80 across all major subscales, indicating strong internal consistency.
- Exploratory factor analysis confirmed the expected five-factor PERMA structure.

(d) Data Entry and Screening

Survey responses were entered by the supporting foundation's data team and

screened for missing data, outliers, and assumptions of normality. The data were deemed suitable for subsequent statistical analysis following standard preprocessing procedures.

5. Qualitative Data Collection

To complement and deepen the quantitative findings, qualitative data were collected from multiple sources to capture the lived experiences, emotional responses, and relational dynamics associated with the Rural Schools Drama Education Initiative. Three primary methods were employed: semi-structured interviews, student focus groups, and field observations.

(a) Semi-Structured Interviews with Teachers

Fifteen teachers participated in in-depth semi-structured interviews, selected purposively to reflect diversity in age, gender, teaching experience, and level of program participation. Interviews explored teachers' emotional experiences during and after the intervention, observed shifts in classroom relationships, and perceptions of teaching and learning through drama-based methods.

- Duration: Each interview lasted approximately 45 to 60 minutes.
- Language: All interviews were conducted in Mandarin, then transcribed and translated into English for analysis.
- Focus: Questions addressed teacher identity, student engagement, challenges in implementation, and perceived impacts on personal and professional well-being.

(b) Focus Group Discussions with Students

Two focus group discussions were conducted with a total of 16 students (8 per group), aged 8 to 12, selected to represent a range of engagement levels and class participation.

- Duration: Each session lasted approximately 45 minutes.
- Facilitation: Discussions were conducted in a child-friendly format, with facilitation to encourage open sharing.
- Topics: Students discussed their experiences with drama activities, classroom relationships, feelings of confidence or anxiety, and moments they felt proud or connected.

(c) Field Observations

The researcher conducted non-participant field observations during:

- Teacher training workshops
- In-class drama lessons and summer camp

Observational focus included indicators such as emotional climate, student engagement, collaboration, and teacher facilitation styles. Observers recorded detailed field notes, which were later coded and analyzed alongside interview transcripts to enable triangulation of data across sources.

(d) Data Analysis

All qualitative data were analyzed using thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Transcripts and field notes were coded inductively and deductively, guided by the PERMA framework and emergent themes from the data. Coding was performed in multiple rounds to identify patterns related to:

- Emotional expression and well-being
- Shifts in peer and teacher–student relationships
- Meaning-making and reflective learning

- Pedagogical transformation

Data triangulation across interviews, focus groups, and observations strengthened the trustworthiness of findings and allowed for rich, multi-perspective insight into how drama education affected well-being and relational dynamics in the rural school context.

6. Data Analysis Procedures

(a) Quantitative Analysis

Pre- and post-intervention survey data from students were analyzed using descriptive statistics, paired-sample t-tests, and Cohen's d to assess changes across the five PERMA dimensions.
Significant improvements were found in:

- Accomplishment (d = 0.70)
- Relationships and Positive Emotion (d = 0.63)

These represent medium-to-large effects (Cohen, 1988). Correlational analyses also explored links between PERMA scores and student engagement.

(b) Qualitative Analysis

Interview transcripts, student focus groups, and field notes were analyzed using thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006).
A hybrid coding approach was applied:

- Deductive codes based on PERMA
- Inductive codes to capture emergent themes (e.g., rediscovering voice, shared vulnerability, emotional craftsmanship)

Themes were examined across data sources to identify patterns in well-being and pedagogical change.

(c) Data Integration

Quantitative and qualitative data were integrated at the interpretation stage using a joint display matrix. For example, statistical gains in Engagement were illustrated by teacher narratives describing increased student participation and creativity. Convergent and divergent patterns enriched overall interpretation.

7. Trustworthiness, Ethics, and Researcher Positionality

To ensure rigor across both quantitative and qualitative components, the study employed multiple strategies aligned with best practices in mixed-methods research.
Reliability in the quantitative strand was supported through pilot testing and psychometric verification of student survey instruments. In the qualitative strand, credibility was enhanced through member checking, where participants reviewed summaries of their interviews for accuracy. Dependability was established through regular peer debriefings among the research team, and transferability through detailed descriptions of the rural school context and pedagogical practices.
The integration of qualitative and quantitative findings further strengthened interpretive validity by cross-verifying patterns across data types (Greene, 2007).
Ethical approval was obtained from local education authorities. All participants were informed of the study's purpose, confidentiality procedures, and their right to voluntary participation. For minors, both parental consent and child assent were secured. Pseudonyms were used throughout all reporting, and participating

teachers received anonymized feedback summaries to support professional reflection without evaluative pressure.

The study upheld the principle of beneficence, ensuring that all research activities contributed positively to participants' well-being. Drama workshops emphasized psychological safety, voluntary participation, and sensitivity to emotionally charged topics such as family separation—particularly relevant for left-behind children.

The lead researcher, an experienced drama educator and instructional leader, maintained a reflexive stance throughout the study. While sharing the creative and pedagogical values of participants, the researcher was attentive to potential power dynamics between external facilitator and local teacher. Field notes and reflexive memos documented moments of empathy, resistance, and transformation—recognizing the research process itself as a relational act of co-learning and meaning-making.

8. Summary

This mixed-methods design provided a robust and holistic framework for examining both the measurable impacts and the lived experiences associated with the Rural Schools Drama Education Initiative.

Quantitative findings demonstrated significant improvements in student well-being, particularly in Accomplishment, Positive Emotion, and Relationships. Meanwhile, qualitative insights illuminated the emotional dynamics, pedagogical transformations, and cultural meanings behind these shifts—revealing how drama education fostered connection, creativity, and personal growth in rural classrooms.

By combining empirical rigor with interpretive depth, the study advances a model of educational research that is both evidence-based and human-centered—bridging the scientific and artistic dimensions of learning, well-being, and systemic change.

Results and Discussion
Overview of Findings

The pre–post PERMA survey results revealed statistically significant improvements across multiple dimensions of student well-being. The most pronounced gains were observed in:

- Accomplishment (Cohen's d = 0.70)
- Relationships and Positive Emotion (Cohen's d = 0.63)

These represent medium-to-large effect sizes, indicating meaningful growth in students' sense of progress, connection, and emotional positivity. Additional gains were noted in:

- Meaning (d = 0.48)
- Engagement (d = 0.41)

Overall, composite well-being scores increased by 11.2% from baseline to post-intervention.

These quantitative trends were supported by qualitative evidence gathered from teacher interviews, student focus groups, and classroom observations. Participants consistently described the drama process as:

- "Bringing life back to learning"
- "Making the classroom warmer"
- "Helping us see each other differently"

Teachers reported renewed professional confidence, increased empathy toward students, and stronger peer collaboration. Students expressed joy, emotional safety, and pride in co-creating performances and narratives that reflected their lives and communities.

Together, these findings suggest that the Rural Schools Drama Education Initiative not only improved measurable well-being but also reshaped the relational and cultural fabric of participating schools. The following sections unpack these outcomes through the lens of the PERMA framework, examining how drama pedagogy operationalized each domain of well-being in rural educational settings.

PERMA Domain	Effect Size (Cohen's d)	Quantitative Result	Qualitative Insights
Positive Emotion	0.63	Statistically significant increase (p < .01)	Laughter, joy, and emotional safety re-entered the classroom; teachers and students reconnected through play and humor.
Engagement	0.41	Moderate increase (p < .05)	Students showed deep focus and creative ownership; teachers experienced professional flow.
Relationships	0.63	Statistically significant increase (p < .01)	Trust and empathy rebuilt in classrooms; marginalized students found voice and visibility; stronger teacher communities emerged.
Meaning	0.48	Statistically significant increase (p < .05)	Drama linked personal and cultural narratives to school learning; enhanced relevance and moral engagement.
Accomplishment	0.7	Highest effect size, large increase (p < .01)	Pride in collaborative success; shift from performance metrics to intrinsic growth; increased confidence and self-efficacy.

1. Positive Emotion: Rediscovering Joy and Emotional Expression

One of the most immediate and visible transformations observed was the revitalization of joy within classrooms. Teachers consistently noted that laughter, play, and curiosity—often suppressed in exam-oriented settings—began to reclaim space in their daily instruction.

Quantitative data supported these observations: the Positive Emotion subscale showed a statistically significant improvement (p < .01), indicating increased feelings of happiness, optimism, and emotional well-being among students.

As one primary school teacher expressed:

"At first, I was nervous to act or play games with my students. But when I joined in, they laughed so hard—they said, 'Teacher, you can be funny too!' That laughter changed everything. It broke the wall between us."

This anecdote illustrates how affective warmth became a pedagogical

resource rather than a distraction. In many cases, laughter acted as a disarming force, reducing hierarchical boundaries and fostering mutual openness between students and teachers.

These findings align with Fredrickson's (2001) Broaden-and-Build Theory, which posits that positive emotions broaden attention and thinking while building enduring psychological resources. In the drama classroom, emotional expression is not peripheral but central to learning humor, tension, and empathy become vehicles for meaning-making.

For students, positive emotion was closely tied to psychological safety. One 11-year-old shared: "Drama is the only time I'm not afraid to be wrong." This sentiment underscores how emotional freedom creates the conditions for cognitive risk-taking—a critical factor in creative and collaborative learning. In rural contexts where fear of failure often dominates classroom culture, the reintroduction of joy and play served as a pedagogical act of liberation, reconnecting learning with curiosity, confidence, and intrinsic motivation.

2. Engagement: Deep Participation and Flow in Learning

Engagement scores showed moderate but consistent gains across participating schools (Cohen's d = 0.41). Qualitative data suggested these gains were driven by heightened student participation, focus, and a sense of creative agency. Unlike traditional instruction, drama activities required physical, emotional, and intellectual investment, encouraging students to co-construct knowledge rather than passively receive it.

Observation notes documented recurring moments of deep absorption akin to Csikszentmihalyi's (1990) concept of flow:

"During the group improvisation, students lost all sense of the clock. They negotiated roles, built props out of paper, and kept rehearsing even after the bell rang."

Notably, teachers also reported entering states of professional flow, particularly while designing original lessons or facilitating performances. This reciprocal engagement suggests that student and teacher motivation are co-regulated: when educators experience enthusiasm and creative ownership, students mirror that energy through sustained focus and curiosity.

Drama's experiential nature allowed students to merge cognition and emotion, translating abstract concepts into embodied understanding. For example, in one middle school, students explored fairness by dramatizing a local folktale about resource sharing during a drought. This embodied inquiry deepened comprehension and moral reasoning, surpassing what could be achieved through textbook discussion alone.

Thus, engagement in this context extended beyond attention or compliance. It became a relational and ethical commitment—anchored in shared curiosity, imaginative problem-solving, and a sense of co-ownership in the learning process.

3. Relationships: Rebuilding Trust and Community

Relationships emerged as the strongest and most consistent area of growth across all participating schools. Quantitative data showed substantial gains in this domain (Cohen's d = 0.63), and qualitative evidence overwhelmingly supported

these findings, revealing renewed trust, empathy, and mutual respect between teachers and students.

The ensemble nature of drama education inherently fosters collaboration and interdependence. Teachers observed that previously withdrawn students began speaking with confidence, while those labeled as "disruptive" found meaningful roles within group activities.

One teacher reflected:

"The boy who never raised his hand became our director. Everyone listened to him because he had ideas. His classmates started calling him by name instead of nickname. It was like watching him grow new roots."

Such accounts illustrate drama's potential to restructure classroom dynamics, giving marginalized students visibility, voice, and belonging. These relational shifts align with Self-Determination Theory (Deci & Ryan, 2000), which identifies relatedness as a core psychological need underpinning motivation and well-being.

Importantly, the initiative also strengthened teacher communities. Many educators described the professional workshops as rare spaces of authentic connection, contrasting with the performative collegiality of traditional training environments. One teacher wrote:

"We cried together, laughed together, and realized we all carry the same fatigue. Drama gave us permission to feel again."

These collective experiences suggest that the program served as a form of relational repair, addressing not only student disengagement but also the emotional isolation of rural teachers. When trust is rebuilt, and relationships are rehumanized, classrooms begin to function as ecosystems of mutual care—a critical condition for educational flourishing in under-resourced contexts.

4. Meaning: Connecting Learning to Life and Culture

The Meaning domain showed statistically significant improvement (p < .05), supported by compelling qualitative evidence. Participants consistently described drama as a bridge between academic content and lived experience, enabling both students and teachers to connect personal emotions, cultural narratives, and broader social themes.

Teachers frequently referred to drama as both a "mirror and a window"—a mirror reflecting their own values and struggles, and a window into students' emotional worlds. In one lesson sequence, students dramatized the experience of migrant parents returning home for Spring Festival. The activity prompted spontaneous storytelling and emotional disclosures, many of which had never surfaced in class before.

One student shared:

"When I played the father, I realized how hard it must be to leave home to earn money. I used to feel angry, but now I understand more."

This moment of cognitive empathy, rooted in cultural storytelling, exemplifies what Bruner (1996) called "learning with meaning"—where knowledge is not only understood but internalized as morally and emotionally significant.

For teachers, meaning emerged through a rediscovery of educational purpose:

"I used to think my job was to teach content. Now I see it is to help children become whole."

These reflections reveal how drama education repositioned both teachers and students as active meaning-makers, not passive transmitters or recipients of information. In rural Chinese schools—where curricula can feel disconnected from local realities—this re-linking of curriculum, community, and identity restored a sense of dignity and relevance to the act of teaching and learning.

5. Accomplishment: Growth, Mastery, and Confidence

Accomplishment recorded the highest effect size among the five PERMA domains (Cohen's d = 0.70), reflecting substantial gains in students' and teachers' sense of achievement, mastery, and self-efficacy. Notably, this sense of accomplishment was grounded not in external validation, but in intrinsic progress and shared success.

Students expressed pride not only in final performances, but in the process— overcoming stage fright, memorizing lines, and resolving group conflicts. For many, collaborative accomplishment replaced individual competition as the core metric of success. As one student shared: "When I stood on stage, I wasn't scared anymore. I thought, 'We did this together.'"

Teachers also redefined what it meant to succeed. Rather than focusing on test scores or administrative approval, they found fulfillment in student engagement and joy. One teacher reflected: "For the first time in years, I felt proud not because of scores but because my students were happy to learn."

These findings resonate with Bandura's (1997) theory of self-efficacy, which emphasizes that belief in one's ability to make a difference is a powerful motivator. In the drama classroom, incremental mastery was consistently visible: each rehearsal, gesture, and improvisation offered immediate feedback and a tangible sense of progress.

By reframing success as growth rather than perfection, the initiative nurtured a form of resilient accomplishment—learning that values effort, adaptability, and co-creation as much as outcomes.

6. Cross-Domain Synergies: The Ecology of Flourishing

While each PERMA domain was analyzed independently, participants experienced them as interconnected and mutually reinforcing. Positive Emotion sparked Engagement; Engagement deepened Relationships; Relationships gave rise to Meaning; and Meaning sustained Accomplishment. This cyclical dynamic reflects Fredrickson's (2004) broaden-and-build theory and affirms a view of well-being as an ecological system rather than a linear checklist.

Quantitatively, intercorrelations among PERMA domains (r = 0.52–0.78, p < .01) confirmed their interdependence. Qualitatively, participants rarely spoke of "joy," "connection," or "achievement" in isolation. Instead, stories unfolded in sequences of transformation: laughter led to trust, trust led to insight, and insight led to confidence.

A teacher shared this chain succinctly:
"We started the class laughing about silly gestures. Then, when a quiet girl shared her story, everyone listened deeply. Later, that same girl volunteered to lead the next scene. I realized joy opened the door to courage."

Such reflections illustrate that flourishing is a process, not an outcome. Drama education created conditions for this process by engaging emotion, cognition, and relationships simultaneously—mirroring the integrated nature of human well-being.

7. Contextual Factors and Challenges

While overall outcomes were positive, the study also identified several contextual challenges that shaped implementation and sustainability.

Structural Constraints

Many rural schools faced rigid schedules and limited administrative flexibility, making it difficult to integrate drama regularly. Leadership support emerged as a critical enabler: schools where principals engaged with the initiative— through training or attendance at performances—reported stronger program continuity.

Cultural Adaptation

Some teachers initially perceived drama as "too playful" or "non-academic." Over time, however, observing student engagement and emotional growth helped shift these attitudes. This underscores the need for culturally sensitive introduction of innovation, balancing respect for prevailing norms with gradual exposure to alternative pedagogies.

Emotional Labor

Engaging deeply through drama demanded emotional vulnerability, especially from teachers. Some described moments of exhaustion, while others experienced personal catharsis:
"When I cried during the role-play about a student's loneliness, I realized I was releasing my own feelings of being unseen."

These accounts highlight both the healing potential and the emotional demands of arts-based practice. Future scaling efforts should include structured reflection and peer support mechanisms to sustain teacher well-being.

8. Discussion: Drama Education as Positive Education in Action

The findings demonstrate that drama education operationalizes positive psychology principles in real-world classroom settings. It transforms PERMA from an abstract model into lived pedagogy—a process in which well-being is performed, experienced, and co-created.

In doing so, the initiative aligns with and extends global movements in positive education (Seligman et al., 2009; Norrish, 2015), not by emphasizing individual cognition alone, but by grounding flourishing in collective, artistic, and relational experience. The aesthetic, embodied, and social dimensions of drama uniquely activate all five PERMA domains—often simultaneously—a synergy rarely achieved through cognitive or behavioral interventions.

Moreover, the study advances a broader vision of educational equity through well-being. For left-behind children, drama offered a space of recognition, joy, and belonging. For teachers, it restored professional vitality and creative agency. These ripple effects suggest that well-being is both a pedagogical

strategy and a moral imperative—a foundation for transforming schools into humanizing spaces of care, connection, and purpose.

9. Summary of Contributions

(a) Empirical Contribution

Demonstrates that a culturally adapted, arts-based intervention can significantly improve multiple dimensions of student well-being, with large effect sizes in Accomplishment and Relationships.

(b) Theoretical Contribution

Proposes an integrated model linking PERMA and drama pedagogy, offering a relational and experiential framework for flourishing.

(c) Practical Contribution

Offers a replicable model for embedding well-being science into classroom practice through creative, teacher-led methods.

(d) Equity Contribution

Highlights how drama education can act as an emotionally restorative and socially empowering practice in marginalized rural contexts.

10. Concluding Reflection

This study affirms that education and well-being are inseparable. When learning is embodied, relational, and meaningful, both students and teachers flourish—not only as individuals, but as part of resilient, emotionally connected communities. The Rural Schools Drama Education Initiative exemplifies how drama can serve as positive education in action—transforming classrooms into spaces where emotion, imagination, and purpose converge to nurture human potential.

Conclusion and Implications

1. Reframing Well-Being and Learning in Rural Education

This study demonstrates that drama education can serve as a catalyst for holistic well-being and pedagogical renewal in rural schools. By integrating the PERMA framework from positive psychology with the participatory and relational methods of drama education, the Rural Schools Drama Education Initiative cultivated measurable improvements in teachers' and students' flourishing—particularly in Accomplishment, Relationships, and Positive Emotions.

Beyond quantitative gains, the initiative reshaped classroom culture: teachers rediscovered joy and meaning in teaching, students developed confidence and empathy, and communities experienced renewed pride in their local schools. These outcomes underscore that well-being and learning are mutually reinforcing—that emotional and relational development are not luxuries but preconditions for cognitive engagement and educational equity.

In doing so, this research challenges the traditional separation between academic achievement and emotional growth that continues to dominate educational discourse in many parts of China and the world. It argues that a sustainable path to equity lies not in remediation or standardization, but in re-humanizing education—making classrooms places where every learner can feel seen, heard, and valued.

2. Theoretical Implications: Integrating Positive Psychology and Drama Education

The study's findings contribute to the theoretical advancement of positive education by demonstrating how the PERMA model can be enacted through creative, embodied practice. While PERMA provides a robust conceptual map for flourishing, its implementation often remains cognitive and individualistic. Drama education transforms this framework into relational, embodied, and communal experience.

In the drama classroom:
- Positive Emotion is not a mood to be measured but an affective energy generated through collective imagination.
- Engagement is not compliance but flow—sustained absorption in meaningful action.
- Relationships are not incidental but foundational, as collaboration and empathy drive every dramatic process.
- Meaning is discovered through shared stories that connect personal experience with cultural and moral questions.
- Accomplishment emerges from the courage to create, fail, and grow together.

This alignment affirms that flourishing is performative and participatory, not merely psychological. It also extends Seligman's (2011) model into intercultural and arts-based education contexts, revealing its adaptability beyond Western individualistic frameworks.

Moreover, this synthesis offers a systemic view of well-being that aligns with emerging ecological models of education (Bronfenbrenner, 1979; Roffey, 2012). Rather than treating well-being as an individual attribute, it situates flourishing within interdependent relationships among teachers, students, and communities. Drama education, as a collaborative art form, provides the structural and emotional architecture for this ecology to thrive.

3. Methodological Implications: Mixed Methods for Complex Realities

Methodologically, the study demonstrates the power of mixed-methods inquiry for capturing the complexity of educational well-being. Quantitative data provided empirical rigor and comparability, while qualitative narratives revealed the emotional depth and contextual nuance of human experience. The convergence of these strands produced a multi-dimensional portrait of change, illuminating how numerical improvement intertwines with stories of vulnerability, trust, and rediscovery.

This approach exemplifies what Bamberger (2012) describes as "methodological pluralism"—the deliberate use of multiple forms of knowing to do justice to the complexity of social interventions. In the context of arts-based education, where transformation is both affective and relational, such pluralism is not optional but essential.

The study also underscores the importance of participatory and reflective research. Teachers were not merely subjects but co-researchers who documented their own growth through journals and dialogue. This participatory ethos resonates with both Improvement Science (Bryk et al., 2017) and Action Research traditions, reinforcing the idea that sustainable

educational improvement arises from cycles of reflection and adaptation rather than external prescription.

4. Practical Implications for Teachers and Schools

At the practical level, this study provides a replicable model for embedding well-being within classroom practice—not as an add-on, but as an intrinsic part of teaching and learning. Several key implications emerge:

(a) Teacher Professional Development as Emotional Reawakening:

Traditional training often focuses on techniques or assessment. In contrast, drama-based professional learning engages the whole teacher—head, heart, and body. Teachers who experience creative flow and emotional connection in training are more likely to foster similar states in their students.

(b) Well-Being Through Pedagogy, Not Programs:

Schools frequently treat well-being as a separate curriculum or checklist. The findings suggest that integrating PERMA principles through everyday pedagogy—storytelling, reflection, collaboration—can be far more effective and sustainable.

(c) Community and Cultural Relevance:

By drawing on local stories, traditions, and moral values, drama reconnects education to the lifeworld of rural children. This culturally grounded approach enhances engagement and ensures that well-being is not imported but rooted in place and identity.

(d) From Classroom to Ecosystem:

As teachers flourish, the positive ripple effects extend outward—to students, colleagues, and even families. Several schools reported increased parent participation in performances and community discussions. Such systemic contagion highlights the potential for drama-based well-being approaches to transform school culture as a whole.

5. Implications for Educational Policy and Equity

The Rural Schools Drama Education Initiative offers actionable insights for policymakers seeking to address inequities in China's rural education system and beyond.

(a) Equity Through Well-Being:

Policy discourse often equates equity with access to resources or test performance. This study reframes equity as access to flourishing—the right of every child and teacher to experience joy, belonging, and purpose in learning. Embedding well-being into educational policy would thus move beyond remediation toward human development.

(b) Recognition of the Arts as a Core Equity Strategy:

Drama education, often marginalized in curriculum design, should be recognized as a strategic vehicle for addressing emotional, social, and cognitive disparities. Its capacity to cultivate empathy, communication, and resilience makes it indispensable for twenty-first-century education.

(c) Supporting Teacher Well-Being as a Policy Priority:

The evidence that teacher flourishing directly influences student outcomes calls for systemic investment in teacher support structures. Policies should encourage creative pedagogies, collaborative reflection, and professional autonomy rather

than compliance-based accountability.

(d) Scaling Through Partnership:

The success of this initiative depended on collaboration between NGOs, local education bureaus, and universities. Policymakers can foster sustainable impact by institutionalizing such multi-sector partnerships, providing frameworks for scaling without losing local authenticity.

In essence, the findings advocate a shift from education as performance to education as flourishing—from standardized outcomes to meaningful human growth.

6. Limitations and Future Research

While the study yielded compelling results, several limitations warrant acknowledgment.

(a) Sample Size and Generalizability:

The sample (n = 121) provided adequate statistical power for medium effects but limits generalization across all rural regions of China. Future studies should employ larger and more diverse samples across provinces to confirm the robustness of findings.

(b) Longitudinal Impact:

The current design captured short-term gains over one academic year. Future longitudinal research should examine the sustainability of well-being improvements and track whether positive effects persist or evolve over multiple years.

(c) Measurement Sensitivity:

Although the PERMA-Profiler provided reliable results, it may not fully capture culturally specific dimensions of well-being in Chinese rural contexts—such as filial responsibility, community belonging, or moral virtue. Developing context-sensitive well-being instruments represents an important next step.

(d) Researcher Positionality:

As a practitioner-researcher, the author's dual role may have introduced subtle biases in data interpretation. Future studies could strengthen validity through external evaluation teams or participatory co-analysis involving teachers themselves.

(e) Causal Inference:

While mixed-methods convergence supports the inference of meaningful change, the quasi-experimental design without random assignment limits causal claims. Future research might employ matched comparison groups or cluster-randomized trials to examine causal pathways between drama education, engagement, and well-being.

7. Directions for Future Research

Building on the current findings, three promising directions emerge:

(a) Teacher Flourishing and School Leadership:

Investigate how teacher well-being interacts with leadership practices. Can principals trained in arts-based facilitation sustain a culture of flourishing school-wide?

(b) Neuroscience of Engagement:

Explore how embodied learning through drama influences cognitive and

affective processes, potentially using physiological measures (e.g., heart rate variability, EEG) to capture real-time engagement and emotional regulation.

(c) Cross-Cultural Comparative Studies:

Comparative research across different cultural and socio-economic contexts could illuminate universal and culturally specific mechanisms of flourishing through drama education. Such studies would also contribute to global dialogue on positive education and arts-based learning.

8. Concluding Reflection: Education as a Living Art

At its heart, this study reaffirms that education is a moral and aesthetic endeavor—an art of cultivating human beings, not merely producing results. In the classrooms of rural China, where scarcity and standardization often prevail, drama became a medium of renewal. It reawakened laughter where silence had settled, community where isolation had grown, and meaning where routine had replaced wonder.

Through the lens of PERMA and Drama Education, well-being was not treated as a peripheral outcome but as the essence of learning itself. Teachers and students discovered that to learn is to connect—to self, to others, and to life.

The Rural Schools Drama Education Initiative stands as both a case study and a call to action: to place human flourishing at the center of education policy and practice. When classrooms become spaces of empathy, creativity, and purpose, education transcends survival—it becomes a collective act of becoming more fully human.

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