

Rooting Dance Education in Primary and Secondary Schools: A Practical Examination of the Psychosomatic Value of Shanxi “Xiaohua Opera”

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Abstract

Background: In the exam-driven basic education of today, primary and secondary school students face multiple mental health challenges, including academic stress, emotional dysregulation, identity confusion, and insufficient peer interaction. Dance, as an embodied art integrating physical, emotional, cultural, and social dimensions, offers unique potential for psychosomatic well-being and is increasingly recognized in aesthetic education. Dramatherapy and dance/movement therapy (DMT)—two complementary creative arts therapies—have demonstrated effectiveness in helping children and adolescents externalize emotional distress through action-based, non-verbal methods (Mohanani & Menon, 2017; Ougrin, Carr & Lau, 2023).

Objective: This study looks at a local folk dance from Shanxi Province, “Xiaohua Opera,” and asks whether it can be used in school dance classes to help young people. The goal is to move dance education away from performance and competition toward a more inclusive, healing-focused practice.

Methods: The study used a mix of methods: reviewing past research, 60 hours of classroom observation across three schools, semi-structured interviews with 25 people (school leaders, teachers, parents, and students), case studies of 12 students, and three rounds of action research. The theories used include aesthetic education, dramatherapy, DMT, and adolescent psychology. Ethics approval and informed consent from schools and parents were obtained before data collection.

Results: Three main benefits appeared. First, the dance helped students release physical tension and manage emotions. Second, it gave them a stronger sense of cultural belonging and self-worth. Third, group dancing improved their social skills, trust, and reduced social anxiety.

Conclusion: With changes in curriculum goals, teaching materials, class formats, evaluation methods, teacher roles, and long-term planning, Xiaohua Opera can become a regular, low-cost tool for psychosomatic support in schools. A comparison with Teochew opera (Ngiew) in Thailand shows that without active efforts to engage the young generation, traditional arts fade. The lesson is clear: make it participatory, not just preserved.

Keywords: Aesthetic education in primary and secondary schools; Cultural identity; Psychosomatic regulation; Shanxi Xiaohua Opera

1. Introduction

China's basic education has improved in many ways, but exams still control most of what happens in schools. Students in primary and middle schools often feel stressed, anxious, and unsure about themselves. They sit too long, move too little, and talk less face-to-face because of digital devices and competition. Dance, as a body-based art, could help. But in practice, dance classes are still seen as something for shows and for talented students, not for everyone's mental health.

The Opinions on Comprehensively Strengthening and Improving School Aesthetic Education in the New Era (General Office of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of China & General Office of the State Council, 2020) says clearly that aesthetic education should “serve all students” and help them grow through beauty. That is not what is happening now.

Shanxi “Xiaohua Opera” is a folk dance from the border area of Shanxi and Hebei. It has bright rhythms, easy movements, fans as props, and a strong group feel. It comes from daily life and festivals, so it naturally helps people let out feelings, feel connected to their culture, and enjoy being together. Putting this dance into schools could make aesthetic education more meaningful.

There is already good research on dramatherapy for young people. Mohanan and Menon (2017) showed that dramatherapy helped an older adult move into a nursing home with less distress by using action-based methods. A recent review found that dramatherapy for children and teenagers mostly happens in schools (71%) and is more often for adolescents than younger children (Ougrin, Carr & Lau, 2023). Mohanan (2018) wrote about “therapeutic presence” and how it relates to stage presence, suggesting that drama-based action methods work beyond clinical settings. These ideas fit well with what we are trying to do: using a folk dance as a form of therapeutic presence in the classroom.

This study asks: what can Xiaohua Opera do for students' minds and bodies? And how can we actually make it part of school life?

2. Research Design and Methods

The study used several methods on purpose, to get a fuller picture.

(1) Looking at past research

I read work on aesthetic education, dramatherapy, DMT, folk dance, and adolescent mental health. The field agrees on some things: dramatherapy works through role-play and storytelling inside a safe space (Mohanani & Menon, 2017; Ougrin, Carr & Lau, 2023); DMT reduces stress through rhythmic movement (Payne, 2017); folk dance carries cultural memory (Shay, 2002); and Chinese school aesthetic education often fails to use local resources well (Wang, 2022). What is not yet solved is how to fit folk dance into everyday classes without extra burden, how to measure its effects, and—maybe most important—how to make young people actually want to do it. I also used international studies (Hanna, 2015; Koch et al., 2019) for a broader view.

(2) Watching classes

I spent 60 hours over three months (January to March 2026) in two county primary schools and one children's art center in Shanxi. That is 20 hours per place. I watched students' postures, facial expressions, how they joined in, and how they talked with each other. I wrote down what

looked different between regular classes and dance activities. I also noted common signs of stress. All watching happened in regular classrooms, so the setting was real, not fake.

(3) Talking with people

I did semi-structured interviews with 25 people: 4 school administrators, 6 classroom teachers, 5 dance teachers, 6 parents, and 4 students (one from grades 3, 5, 7, and 9). I picked them on purpose because they were involved in dance or arts activities. Each talk lasted 25 to 40 minutes, and I recorded with permission. I asked about current dance teaching, students' feelings, what they thought of folk dance, and what got in the way. I tested the questions with two teachers first. Interviews happened in private rooms during school hours. I wrote up notes within 48 hours.

(4) Looking closely at a few students

I chose 12 students (6 from primary, 6 from middle school) who showed clear signs of psychosomatic trouble—for example, hunched backs, often anxious, or staying away from others. They took part in Xiaohua Opera rhythm exercises, group formations, and emotion-expression tasks over eight weeks. I used video and notes to track changes, then analyzed them using DMT, dramatherapy, and developmental psychology ideas.

(5) Action research cycles

I ran three cycles, each four weeks long: design → do → watch → think → redesign. First cycle: basic rhythm and body waking up. Second cycle: added emotional expression and short improvisation. Third cycle: added cultural stories and group performance. Each cycle had two 40-minute classes per week. The goal was to make a model that ordinary county schools could use.

(6) Trustworthiness of the findings

To make the study more reliable, I used the same observation and interview guides for everyone. A second person coded 20% of the video records, and we agreed 89% of the time. I also used four different sources of data (observations, interviews, cases, action research) to check each other. I went back to five participants to see if my interpretations made sense to them. Three months of work and repeated cycles also helped.

(7) What the study could not do

The study has limits. The sample is small (25 interviews, 12 case students) and only from Shanxi, so do not generalize too much. There was no control group, so I cannot say for sure that Xiaohua Opera caused the changes. I was both teacher and observer, which might have biased what I saw. Three months is not long enough to know if the benefits last. And I did not use standard psychological scales. Future studies should do better on these points.

3. Theoretical Discussion: Dramatherapy, Dance/Movement Therapy, and Why Xiaohua Opera Is Special for Young People

(1) How dramatherapy and DMT come together

Dramatherapy uses drama and theatre elements inside a therapeutic relationship. DMT uses movement to connect mind and body (Payne, 2017). One focuses on role-play and story, the other on posture and rhythm. But in real practice, they overlap a lot. Both create a safe space. Both use action more than words. Both work well for children and teenagers who cannot easily say what they feel (Ougrin, Carr & Lau, 2023).

Mohanani and Menon (2017) showed this clearly with an older adult moving into a nursing home. The key mechanisms—externalizing inner struggles in a safe space, playful expression,

bypassing verbal defenses—work just as well for teenagers in school. Mohanan (2018) later explored “therapeutic presence” and its link to stage presence, using ideas from Grotowski and Barba. He argued that drama-based action methods build therapeutic presence even outside clinics. That matters for us: when a teacher leads Xiaohua Opera with real attention and kindness, the classroom itself becomes a therapeutic space.

(2) What makes Xiaohua Opera good for young people

Xiaohua Opera sits right between dramatherapy and DMT. Unlike professional dance, which demands perfect technique and often makes students anxious, Xiaohua Opera started as a folk activity. Its movements—twisting, swaying, flicking, turning—are playful, not technical. The fans add a theatrical touch; students can “step into” a character without the pressure of acting.

This drama-infused quality is what sets Xiaohua Opera apart. Students do not need to get the steps right. They just need to be joyful, relaxed, and part of the group. In dramatherapy language, Xiaohua Opera gives a safe dramatic boundary (Mohanani & Menon, 2017). Inside that boundary, they can let out academic stress, peer conflicts, and identity worries through movement, not by talking about them. The cheerful music and open body movements create what Mohanan (2018) called therapeutic presence—a space where students feel seen, held, and allowed to express without being judged.

For a generation that spends hours on screens and often lacks embodied social skills, this low-threshold, high-engagement format works well. No training needed. No expensive gear. No selection. It is basically a drama-based action method hiding inside local cultural heritage—therapy that does not call itself therapy.

4. What I Saw: Students’ Problems and How Little Art Education Helps

In many county schools, exams still run everything. Long hours of sitting give students hunched backs, curved spines, and tired muscles. They hardly move, so their coordination, rhythm, and sense of space do not develop well. Emotionally, stress turns into worry, irritation, and sadness. Most have no way to let those feelings out and just hold them inside. Psychologically, teenage years are when identity forms, but without stable cultural support, some students feel lost and bad about themselves. Socially, competition and online life mean less face-to-face talk, weaker teamwork, and less sense of belonging.

Meanwhile, dance education sits at the edge. Classes get squeezed out. There are not enough teachers or space. When dance does happen, it is about performances and competitions for a few talented kids. The content is copied from fixed dances, not connected to local life or culture. Dance is seen as an extra activity, not as a way to handle emotions, build character, or pass on culture.

Cai Yuanpei (1983) said to “replace religion with aesthetic education,” meaning art should help emotions, clean the heart, and perfect personality. That idea is still fresh. Dance works on body, emotion, mind, and social life all at once. Bringing dance back—from the edge to the center, from the few to everyone, from performance to daily life—is not just a reform goal. It is a real answer to what students need.

5. Theoretical Basis: DMT, Dramatherapy, and What Folk Dance Can Do in School

(1) Basic ideas from DMT

DMT says mind and body are not separate. How you stand, move, breathe, and feel all affect

each other. Pushed-down feelings show up as tight muscles, shallow breathing, or a closed body. The other direction also works: open, natural, rhythmic movements help release bad feelings, make you feel better inside, and bring back balance (Payne, 2017). DMT values non-verbal expression, which is especially useful for teenagers with complicated inner lives.

(2) Dramatherapy in schools

Dramatherapy adds the idea of a safe dramatic boundary. Students can “try on” different emotions and roles without real-life risk (Mohanani & Menon, 2017). For teenagers who are figuring out who they are, this is valuable. Mohanani (2018) also said therapeutic presence—a quality of focused, kind attention—can be built through drama-based action methods and can move beyond therapy rooms into schools. When a teacher leads Xiaohua Opera with genuine presence, noticing non-verbal cues and staying non-judgmental, the classroom becomes a therapeutic space.

(3) Adolescent psychology

Erikson (1968) said teenagers’ main job is to build an identity, including a stable sense of self and values. Cultural identity, group belonging, and positive emotions help a lot. Folk dance carries local history and collective memory, helping teenagers feel rooted. Dancing in a group builds peer trust and belonging, which supports positive personality growth.

(4) Why folk dance fits education

Folk dance comes from daily life. It is easy to join, engaging, rich in meaning, and collective. Professional dance training is for the few; folk dance is for everyone (Shay, 2002). Xiaohua Opera has light movements, clear rhythms, and simple fans. No advanced skills or special studios needed. That makes it perfect for inclusive aesthetic education.

6. Three Psychosomatic Benefits of Xiaohua Opera

(1) Physical release and emotional guidance

The main moves—twisting, swaying, flicking, turning—are not too big, have clear beats, and feel bouncy. They stretch the limbs, relax muscles, and undo the stiffness from sitting too long. From a DMT view, rhythmic movement improves breathing, lowers sympathetic nervous system activity, and helps the body shift from tension to relaxation (Koch et al., 2019).

The happy music and open body movements give a natural, wordless way to express feelings. Students do not have to perform perfectly. They can just let go of pressure, bad moods, and worries. From what I saw in class, students who regularly did these activities had more stable moods, better focus, and a more positive state of mind. That matches the emotional regulation effect I was looking for.

(2) Cultural identity and belonging

Xiaohua Opera carries Shanxi’s local culture. Its movements, music, and stories show local life, values, and spirit—hard work, cheerfulness, strength, and acceptance. Bringing it into school is not just teaching steps; it is passing on culture and building identity.

As students learn the dance, they slowly learn its history and meaning. They start to feel familiar with and proud of their local culture. A stable cultural identity helps them know themselves better, feel more self-worth, and worry less. Erikson (1968) would say cultural belonging gives important support to identity formation.

(3) Social connection and personality growth

Xiaohua Opera is highly collective. It needs formation changes, eye contact, and group

coordination. This creates a natural non-verbal social space. When dancing together, students watch and adjust to each other. That breaks down interpersonal walls and builds cooperation and trust.

The friendly, easy atmosphere reduces social anxiety and loneliness. When a group finishes a dance together, they feel achievement and belonging. That makes them more friendly, open, optimistic, and cooperative. The communication skills and emotional habits they learn can carry over into daily study and life, helping social development and healthy personality growth.

7. Keeping Young People Interested: A Comparison with Teochew Opera in Thailand

(1) What Thailand's Teochew opera (Ngiew) teaches us

Teochew opera, called ngiew in Thai, used to be very popular in Thailand. Professional troupes even performed for the royal family. Now the audience is mostly elderly Thai Chinese. Sometimes there are more actors on stage than people watching (China Daily, 2024). Only about 30 troupes remain. The pandemic made things worse, cutting yearly performances from 300 to fewer than 100 (People's Daily, 2022).

Why? Audiences are aging and no young people replace them. Digital entertainment pulls kids away. Performance skills are not passed down. Young people see Teochew opera as old-fashioned and irrelevant. An 81-year-old founder of the Thai-Chinese Dramatic Arts Institute is trying to translate operas into Thai and start a school in Bangkok (China Daily, 2024). That is admirable, but it focuses on preservation as a spectacle, not participation—not making the art a lived, embodied practice for young people.

This matters for Xiaohua Opera. If we present it as a cultural relic to be admired from a distance, it will fade the same way.

(2) Six strategies to make Xiaohua Opera appealing to young people

From my action research cycles and classroom observations, here is what works:

First, keep the door wide open. No dance experience, no expensive costumes, no tryouts. Tell students and parents clearly: joining is what counts, not how well you perform. Xiaohua Opera's folk origins already make it accessible; just do not add barriers.

Second, lead with the therapeutic feel, not cultural duty. Students get interested when they feel less stressed, in a better mood, and having fun together—not when told “this is your heritage.” In my classes, students who were indifferent at first got engaged after experiencing the joyful, tension-releasing effect. Teachers should start with embodied experience, not historical lectures.

Third, use drama-based action methods. The fans, the group formations, the playful gestures—these can become improvisation games where students make up their own short sequences or “tell a story” through dance. That turns imitation into creation, which teenagers love. Mohanan's (2018) therapeutic presence also means the teacher's attitude—playful, attentive, non-judgmental—is as important as the steps.

Fourth, let students lead. In my action research, students who learned the moves first were asked to lead small groups. Peer teaching boosted engagement a lot. Students took more risks and showed more emotion with peers than with me alone. Schools could have “Xiaohua Opera student ambassadors” for break-time activities.

Fifth, use digital platforms the right way. Digital tools cannot replace moving together, but short videos, student-made content, and online sharing of group performances can extend the fun. The rule: digital as supplement, not substitute.

Sixth, make performances celebratory, not competitive. A yearly Xiaohua Opera Culture Day, school assemblies where each class shows a short dance, inter-school “sharing festivals” (not competitions)—these give a sense of achievement without the anxiety. When it is about sharing, not ranking, reluctant students join in.

(3) What this means for both countries

The contrast between Xiaohua Opera’s potential and Teochew opera’s decline shows a simple truth: traditional arts survive not by being preserved but by being re-embedded in young people’s daily lives. What makes Xiaohua Opera different from Teochew opera in Thailand is not artistic quality but format: it is school-based, low-threshold, and therapeutic, not a professional stage tradition. For Teochew opera to survive, it may need a similar shift—from spectacle to participation, from stage to classroom, from relic to lived practice. And for Xiaohua Opera, the Thai lesson is a warning: without deliberate strategies to engage the young, even the richest heritage will fade.

8. Making It Happen: Practical Pathways for Schools

(1) Change course goals: from performance to mind-body education

Old dance courses were about fragments, performances, and competition. An inclusive dance curriculum needs three kinds of goals:

- Physical: better posture, coordination, exercise habits, less fatigue, stronger body.
- Emotional/mental: help students recognize, express, and manage feelings, release stress, accept themselves—so dance becomes a daily emotion tool.
- Cultural/social: deeper understanding of local culture, cultural identity, better communication, group belonging.

This shifts dance from expert training to universal art education, and from outcome to process.

(2) Build a grade-by-grade curriculum

Because students at different ages have different needs, the curriculum should go step by step:

- Grades 1–3: game-like rhythm, clapping, stomping, simple fan games. Focus on body awakening and fun imitation.
- Grades 4–6: add emotional expression and short sequences (10–15 minutes) for daily release, calm-down, and communication.
- Grades 7–9: cultural understanding and creative expression. Include history, meanings, local stories. Simple choreography and group dance to move from imitation to self-expression.

(3) A low-threshold, everyday class model

To solve the problems of limited space, time, and teachers, try this lightweight model:

- Use regular classrooms. Mostly standing and upper-body moves.
- Combine one weekly 40-minute class with 3–5-minute break-time activities.
- A simple routine: body wake-up → feel the rhythm → main learning → share and relax.
- A supportive atmosphere: no negative criticism, no comparing people, only positive words to keep the space psychologically safe.

(4) Non-competitive, growth-oriented evaluation

To avoid adding more pressure, stop scores and ranks. Instead:

- Record participation (attendance and attitude).
- Ask students to describe their body and heart feelings.
- Keep a “Dance Growth Portfolio” that tracks long-term changes in physical, emotional, and

social areas.

(5) Change what teachers do: from skill coach to therapeutic facilitator

Teachers should shift from teaching techniques to supporting mind-body development:

- Watch carefully: spot quiet, still, or sad students and offer gentle help.
- Build therapeutic presence: following Mohanan (2018), pay focused, kind attention to non-verbal cues. Make a safe space where emotions are welcome, not seen as problems.
- Lead softly: use encouraging words, not corrections that shame.
- Connect home and school: share videos and growth notes with parents so they understand and help.

(6) Make long-term plans, not one-off events

To avoid being a short project, put these in place:

- Put folk dance in the school's annual plan.
- Start open dance groups that anyone can join, no skill needed.
- Hold a school-wide Xiaohua Opera Culture Day about sharing, not competing.
- Mix with other subjects: Chinese, music, moral education.
- Train homeroom teachers in basic rhythm guidance so dance becomes part of daily management.

These pathways move dance from “festival decoration” to a real part of campus life.

9. Ethics

Because the study involved minors (ages 6–15), I got ethics approval from the School of Music, South China Normal University (approval no. SCNU-MUSIC-2025-014). Before collecting data, I got informed consent from the two participating county primary schools and from the legal guardians of all students. I also got assent from the students themselves, using language they could understand. Everyone knew they could stop at any time with no consequences. All data was anonymized. No identifying information appears here. The dance activities were part of regular PE or arts classes, not extra stress.

10. Conclusion

This study asked what psychosomatic value Xiaohua Opera could have in primary and secondary schools. The answer from the data: three clear benefits—physical release and emotional regulation, cultural identity and belonging, and social connection through group dance. Those findings come directly from what I saw and heard in the field (Sections III, V, VI). Students' mood, self-confidence, and cooperation did improve after they took part.

The theory I used—dramatherapy (Mohanani & Menon, 2017; Mohanan, 2018), DMT (Payne, 2017), and adolescent psychology (Erikson, 1968)—helps explain why. Xiaohua Opera gives a safe dramatic boundary where students can act out academic stress and identity worries through playful movement instead of words. The idea of therapeutic presence (Mohanani, 2018) also shows how a teacher's attentive, kind facilitation turns an ordinary classroom into a therapeutic space.

The limits I listed in Section I(VII)—small sample, no control group, possible observer bias, no long-term follow-up, no standardized scales—mean these results are preliminary, not final. Future studies should do better.

On the practical side, Section VII gives six pathways schools can actually use. Schools that try

them can expect better student mental health and also a revival of local culture.

Finally, the comparison with Teochew opera in Thailand (Section VI) is both a warning and a chance. If we present Xiaohua Opera as a relic to be preserved, it will die out. If we embed it in school life as a therapeutic, participatory, drama-infused practice—joyful, easy to join, and immediately good for you—it can thrive. For Thailand's Teochew opera, the lesson goes the other way too: re-imagining traditional performance as an embodied therapeutic practice in schools might be a path to survival. As aesthetic education reform continues, local folk dances in China, Thailand, and elsewhere can use their cultural energy to support young people's whole development—and make dance a normal, daily, lively part of school life.

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