

THE OBSCURED CHILDHOOD: A PHILOSOPHICAL INQUIRY INTO THE FLOURISHING OF PRESCHOOL CHILDREN IN RURAL DIVORCED FAMILIES

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Abstract: The situation of preschool children in rural divorced families has been reduced to a mental-health risk issue, while their standing as growing persons with a life of their own has rarely been taken seriously. Returning to the Aristotelian-Nussbaumian tradition of eudaimonia and flourishing, this study treats young children's well-lived life not as a measurable subjective feeling but as an objective state of flourishing unfolded within relationships and institutions. Working as philosophical inquiry rather than empirical measurement, the paper addresses three questions: what existential predicaments confront young children where divorce meets the rural context, namely attachment disruption, the fluidity of self-identity, and early loneliness; how the village's natural world and acquaintance society have been overlooked as growth resources beyond the deficit frame; and how attuned responsiveness, Philosophy for Children, and local cultural life can open pathways to flourishing. The argument is that only after this group is released from the category of the problem child and recognized as a subject of flourishing can policy and educational practice become adequate to the task.

Keywords: Rural divorced families; Preschool children; Flourishing; Subjective well-being; The capability approach

1 INTRODUCTION

Over the past two decades, family structure in rural China has shifted profoundly. Continued out-migration, delayed first marriage, and rising divorce rates have together made the two-parent household no longer the default setting in which rural children are raised. A survey of more than ten thousand rural children across eleven provinces found that, among children aged zero to six, over twenty percent no longer lived with both married parents; a substantial share had entered single-parent, skipped-generation, or reconstituted family arrangements [1]. Yet academic attention has not matched this scale. Children in this position are almost uniformly treated as risk samples. Their early competencies, emotional adjustment, and behavioral problems are measured again and again, while the prior question, what a good life for such a child might actually consist in, is rarely asked. Policy language follows the same logic. Care and protection and safety-net provision are necessary, but they quietly assume the child to be someone in need of repair rather than a being capable of unfolding a life in the world.

Existing research runs along two broad tracks. The developmental-psychology track draws on attachment theory and standardized measures to examine how changes in family structure, parental relationship dynamics, and household economic conditions are associated with preschool children's adjustment [2, 3]. The education-and-sociology track attends to left-behind children, grandparent caregiving, and the availability of public services [4, 5]. Chinese longitudinal work further suggests that left-behind or single-caregiving experience during the preschool years exerts the strongest negative prediction on adults' later subjective well-being, and that the quality of parent-child and grandparent-grandchild attachment directly moderates children's current emotional state [4, 6]. Both tracks have empirical value, but they share an unexamined premise: that a young child's flourishing is a psychological state to be measured and repaired. Once this premise is in place, rural children of divorce are fixed inside a deficit-intervention frame, and their lived world, their relations with land, grandparents, and neighbors, their spontaneous questions about meaning, falls out of view. When the tags rural and divorced are stacked, researchers see risk and miss the child's own agency.

This paper attempts to close that gap philosophically. It does not compete with psychological measurement; it raises a prior question. Before we talk about helping these children, have we understood well enough what the good for a young child actually means? The argument moves along three threads: clarifying the philosophical sense of a young child's flourishing, analyzing the real predicaments produced by the intersection of divorce and the rural context, and returning to educational and caregiving practice to propose a few workable pathways. The childhood is called obscured not as a rhetorical flourish but because a group talked about only as risk has, by that very talk, its status as an end in itself covered over. The obscuring process is conceptual as well as institutional, as it can influence how resources are allocated, how different perspectives are represented, and how children's developmental experiences are understood and evaluated.

2 METHODS

This is a conceptual study in the philosophy of education, not an empirical investigation based on scales or surveys. The reason for not taking a quantitative psychological route is that the paper's prior question, how the good life for a young child ought to be understood, logically precedes the design of any measurement instrument. To use a subjective well-being scale before clarifying the concept of flourishing would be to accept, without critique, psychology's operationalization of the very thing at stake. Accordingly, the work proceeds by conceptual analysis and philosophical critique. It traces the lineage of eudaimonia and flourishing from Aristotle to the contemporary capability approach, and then brings that conceptual resource to bear on the concrete situation of rural preschool children of divorce, asking where the lens illuminates and where it falls short.

No new empirical data are collected. The paper draws on published Chinese and international studies of rural left-behind children, children in divorced families, and early childhood development as empirical anchors for philosophical reflection. The statistical and qualitative findings of these studies are not used to make causal claims; they are used to identify where the existing empirical frame, by virtue of its deficit-intervention presuppositions, obscures the child as a subject of flourishing. In other words, empirical evidence is not the source of the conclusions here; it is the object against which the conceptual analysis is tested and corrected. This methodological stance dictates the order of what follows: clarify the concept, analyze the predicament, and then return to educational and caregiving practice.

3 THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

3.1 From Subjective Well-Being to Flourishing

In Chinese academic discourse, the feeling of happiness has long been captured by psychological vocabulary. Subjective well-being (SWB), composed of life satisfaction, positive affect, and negative affect, has since the mid-twentieth century been the dominant operationalization in child development research. It is measurable, comparable, and suitable for cross-national comparison, but it carries a deep philosophical difficulty: it reduces a person's good life to how that person feels about it. A child experiencing challenging circumstances may report a relatively positive level of satisfaction precisely because she has adapted to her environment; similarly, a child with a highly structured schedule may have had limited opportunities to develop independent preferences, and her reported satisfaction may largely reflect adult expectations. Equating subjective feelings with well-being may therefore, from a methodological perspective, overlook the influence of environmental conditions and adaptive responses on individual well-being.

The difficulty is amplified for preschoolers. Three- to six-year-olds cannot reliably report on their life satisfaction; asking them to fill in a scale usually yields the echo of adult language rather than their own existential condition. How happy they say they are depends on who is asking, what they ate yesterday, and when they were last praised, not on a global judgment of their own lives. The Aristotelian tradition offers a different route. In the *Nicomachean Ethics*, eudaimonia is understood as the activity of the soul in accordance with complete excellence; it is not a passing mood but the shape a person's life takes over time as she actualizes the potentialities characteristic of human beings [7]. It includes objective achievement, living in a manner befitting a rational and social being, without excluding subjective satisfaction, but it never treats the latter as the whole.

Nussbaum recasts this tradition as the capability approach, on which a society should secure to each member a set of central capabilities: life, bodily integrity, emotions, practical reason, play, affiliation, and control over one's environment. Flourishing is not a feeling but the condition in which these capabilities are actually exercised in a person's life [8]. Applied to preschool children, this means that flourishing cannot be reduced to how much a child smiles. It asks a chain of more specific questions: Is the child allowed to play? Is she allowed to express fear and sadness within safe relationships? Is she treated as someone who can ask about meaning? Are her anger and disappointment received by someone? These questions do not require a scale. They require a different way of seeing.

3.2 Preschool Children as Subjects of Flourishing

To use the concept of flourishing with young children is to confront an old objection: preschoolers do not yet possess mature practical reason, so can they be subjects of flourishing? The Aristotelian tradition long treated reason as the exclusive property of adults, and children as unfinished human beings until reason was acquired. Matthews's half-century of work unsettles this picture. He records the genuinely philosophical questions three- and four-year-olds raise spontaneously, such as whether changing one's name changes who one is, where dead people go, and why a child should share something she really does not want to share. These are not childish jokes but real inquiries into identity, death, and justice [9]. Children are not incomplete adults. They live in questions of meaning in their own way.

Lipman's *Philosophy for Children* movement translated this insight into educational practice. A trained teacher can, in a kindergarten classroom, organize a community of inquiry in which five- and six-year-olds discuss the choices, fairness, and friendship of characters in a story, without being given a standard answer, but guided to listen to and question one another [10]. The shared implication is that young children are already engaged with questions of meaning. Their flourishing does not depend on some future moment when they become adult; it depends on whether the present relationships and institutions allow them to exist as questioners, players, and persons in relation. To treat preschool children as subjects of flourishing is not to romanticize them; it is to refuse to use they are still small as a reason to withhold serious regard.

Recent philosophy of education has given this position systematic support. D'Olimpio and de Ruyter defines flourishing as a relatively unimpeded, freely chosen, developmentally progressive activity that satisfactorily realizes, in the existence-tasks specific to the human genus, a person's natural capabilities as a rational, social, moral, and emotional being [11]. D'Olimpio and de Ruyter emphasize that flourishing is not a static endpoint but a lifelong practice, and that early education's task is not to instill adult-defined success in advance but to lay the groundwork for this practice, protecting curiosity, cultivating trustworthy relationships, and letting children make choices within safe boundaries [11]. Brought to rural preschool children of divorce, the conclusion is direct. To judge how well they are doing, one cannot ask only whether they are good or not fussy. One has to ask whether their capabilities, namely play, attachment, expression, and questioning, are actually being activated.

3.3 Introducing the Flourishing Lens

Before turning the theoretical lens to rural preschool children of divorce, it is worth seeing how this group has been obscured in existing narratives. On one side, the countryside has long been imagined as a natural and wholesome raising space, as if children growing up in soil and fields were by definition all right. On the other side, divorce has been framed by urban middle-class discourse as an event requiring psychological counseling, legal advice, and renegotiated co-parenting. When the two presuppositions meet, rural divorced families fall into a double blind spot. They are treated neither as objects of the refined psychological services expected in urban families nor as growing persons worthy of serious attention within the rural community itself. They appear in statistical reports but rarely on the philosophical table.

This obscuring has methodological consequences. To look at these children only through risk scales is to see anxiety, withdrawal, and aggressive behavior, while the conversation with a grandparent by the fire pit, the solitary wander on the hillside, the repeated imagining of an absent father or mother are all reduced to symptoms to be intervened upon. More subtly, risk discourse shapes the self-understanding of those it describes. A child who hears herself called a problem child again and sooner or later organizes her behavior around that identity. The obscured childhood of this paper names this way of seeing itself. To reintroduce the flourishing lens is not to deny real hardship, since divorce does wound and rural resources are thin, but to insist that hardship be acknowledged without being equated with the whole of these children's lives.

A clarification is needed. To speak of obscurity is not to claim that rural children of divorce face no different situation from other children. Attachment disruption, economic pressure, and social stigma are real, and any romanticization would be a second injury. The position here is that acknowledging hardship and recognizing the child as a subject of flourishing are not in tension. A child growing up in poverty and through family breakdown can still be a person who is seriously playing, seriously asking, and seriously engaging with the world. To see that side does not make the hardship smaller. It makes clear what the work is actually for, not to repair her from some abnormal to some normal, but to secure for her, whatever the circumstances, the dignity and space to unfold herself.

4 EXISTENTIAL PREDICAMENTS AT THE INTERSECTION OF DIVORCE AND THE RURAL CONTEXT

4.1 Attachment Disruption and the Rebuilding of Security

For three- to six-year-olds, parental divorce is first of all not an event to be understood but a sequence of concrete losses. A familiar face disappears from the dinner table. A bed no longer appears on waking. The question tonight with Daddy or Mummy becomes the new normal. Developmental psychology has long observed that preschool children, cognitively egocentric, tend to understand divorce as a consequence of their own wrongdoing, and respond with regression, sleep disturbance, and hypervigilance about separation [2, 6]. Philosophically, the root of this reaction is not the psychological mechanism itself but the shaking of the child's existential trust that relations are stable. She has only just begun to stand on the world, and the rope she was standing on, namely the shared presence of her parents, has been pulled away. This kind of existential unease is not repaired by a few conversations.

The rural context complicates the situation. When one parent migrates for work or enters a reconstituted family, the actual caregiver is often a grandparent. Grandparent caregiving provides emotional buffering and the transmission of local knowledge, but it also frequently means the caregiver's own health strain, gaps in educational philosophy, and economic tightness. When a five-year-old wakes at night and beside her is a grandmother whose hearing is already declining, she cannot be immediately answered by a tired father or mother on the phone. This structural delay in response is not a failure of any particular household; it is the direct consequence of a thin rural support network. The emotional capacity that matters in the flourishing sense, namely the freedom to be afraid, to depend, to repair within relationships, is quietly depleted in these delays. The issue is not whether someone is present, but whether the person present can give a felt response at the specific moment the child needs it.

Further, the quality of parental relationships following changes in family structure may play an important role in children's adjustment. International comparative research consistently suggests that children's adjustment is influenced not only by changes in family structure, but also by parents' ability to maintain constructive communication, cooperation, and supportive interactions afterward. In the rural acquaintance society, such cooperation is hard to achieve, because extended-family networks take sides, disputes over bride price and child support drag on, and reconstituted families are sensitive terrain. The child is forced to take sides between two adults. Her longing for her

father may be overwritten by her mother's resentment; her attachment to her mother may be contaminated by the judgments of her father's family. The capability approach lists emotions not dominated by fear and anxiety as a central capability [8]. In this ongoing relational tension, that capability has no soil in which to grow from the start.

4.2 The Fluidity of Self-Identity

The preschool years are when children begin to organize their experience around the question who am I. In an intact family, the child assembles a relatively stable self-image through the complementary mirrors of mother's eyes and father's eyes. Divorce shatters this mirror system. The child may be described in her father's village as the one who went with Mum, and in her mother's new household as from your father's side. Between kinship terms, holiday visits, and surname affiliation, she becomes a mobile person who has repeatedly to explain herself. Existential philosophy is familiar with this condition: a person's basic security in the world rests in part on the narrative continuity of who she is, and such continuity fractures most easily where family structure breaks. A five-year-old cannot use the phrase identity, but she is already expressing the crack through repeated questions, such as whose family am I anyway.

The rural acquaintance society amplifies this fluidity. In an urban community, a child can hide family breakdown by changing schools or moving. In a village, divorce is a public event watched by everyone. The neighbor's line that this is the kid from the divorced family will recur throughout her growing up. Such watching is not always malicious, since the defining feature of the village is that there is no truly private space, but for a child forming a sense of self, to be persistently identified as so-and-so's divorced kid means her self-image is composed first of other people's gossip, not of her own choices. The Kantian tradition links self-understanding to moral responsibility: a person can be responsible for her life only on condition that she has a sufficiently clear grasp of who she is [12]. When a five-year-old is repeatedly exposed to others' appraisals of her family, her not-yet-formed self-identity is pre-empted by those appraisals.

What educators and caregivers can do is not to deny the divorce but to help the child reorganize an acceptable narrative around the facts. This means neither papering things over, since Mummy and Daddy still love you usually lands as empty words, nor transmitting adult moral grudges, since your father is no good plunges the child into shame about her own origins. The better move is to place the family breakdown within a larger story: people separate, and separation does not mean you are unworthy of love; you have two homes, and both hold a place in you; you can miss Daddy and Mummy at the same time, and that is not a contradiction. This narrative work is essentially philosophical. It helps a child practice understanding her own life in her own language.

4.3 Loneliness and the Early Stirrings of Meaning

The loneliness of rural preschool children in divorced families is of a different kind from that of urban children. Urban loneliness happens in crowded classrooms, surrounded by people with whom no real conversation takes place. Rural loneliness happens in open space: there is plenty of room, but no one to talk to as an equal. Fieldwork repeatedly records how this group is treated differently by peers because of family background, and how the resulting withdrawal and self-enclosure follow [4, 13]. Nietzsche reminds us that loneliness is not necessarily an evil; it can be the occasion on which a person learns to be with herself and withdraws from dependence on external praise [14]. But this judgment has a precondition: the person must already have developed sufficient inner resources to bear it. For a five-year-old who has not yet developed such resources, loneliness is first of all a weight to be borne with, not an aesthetic state to be transcended.

This means caregivers cannot stay hands-off on the grounds that she is fine playing by herself. The philosophical questions that arise spontaneously in the child's solitude, such as why Daddy does not come back, whether she is really their biological child, and what happens after death, need to be taken seriously rather than dismissed with don't talk nonsense. Matthews records many such conversations: when an adult is willing to squat down and discuss death, absence, and fairness with a five-year-old in the same serious tone, the child does not become fragile. She gains the security of being understood [9]. The point is not that adults must supply answers, since adults often cannot either. The point is that the adult must be willing to treat the question as a real question.

Loneliness cannot be eliminated, and should not be. It is an existential experience every human being has to learn to live with. But for young children, loneliness must first be accompanied before it can be transformed. Accompaniment does not mean constant intervention, since the child needs time alone and needs to digest emotion in play, but rather that when she finally asks the question that really matters, someone is willing to stop and listen. For rural preschool children of divorce, such a person may be the kindergarten teacher, a grandparent, an older cousin home from the village school, or a children's social worker who makes regular visits. The practical implication of the flourishing lens here is direct: do not wait until behavioral problems appear before intervening. Be present when the child starts asking the big questions.

5 THE VILLAGE AS AN UNDERRATED GROWTH RESOURCE

5.1 Nature as a Silent Educator

To treat the countryside only as a space of depleted resources is a characteristically urban view. Ecological psychology and children's geography consistently find that natural settings offer young children attention restoration, emotion regulation, and creative play in ways the built urban environment cannot replace. For rural preschool children of divorce,

fields, woods, ponds, dogs, cattle, and chickens form a non-judgmental companion world. It does not ask why your father is not home. It allows the child to convert intense emotion into bodily movement, such as running, observing, and building. A child who might be diagnosed as emotionally dysregulated in the city often finds her emotion finding an outlet in chasing a butterfly across a field or rolling down a hillside. The Aristotelian view of our original experience of the world as the soil of virtue has a concrete foothold in these rural young children.

This is not a romanticization of rural nature. Nature also means hardship, farmwork pressure, and real danger, and leaving a young child alone on a hillside is not a defensible practice. The capability approach offers a more precise frame here: nature becomes a resource for flourishing on condition that the child has genuine choice and protected exploratory space within it, rather than being pulled early into production labor as an auxiliary worker [8]. A five-year-old who is expected all day to care for younger siblings or herd cattle is not held in nature's embrace; she is in premature labor. Chen et al.'s study of inclusive zero-to-three childcare in Guangxi shows that when policy genuinely takes family choice, community support, and the child's own play rights seriously, the rural environment can be converted into valuable growth capital [5]. The distance between the two states is exactly what policy and practice must close.

From a phenomenological angle, nature matters for young children also because it offers a different kind of time experience. Urban children's time is chopped up by schedules, screens, and pickup routines. Rural children's time follows sunrise and sunset, the growth of crops, the turn of seasons. This slow, rhythmic temporal experience is itself part of emotional education. When a child squats on a ridge and watches ants move for forty minutes, what she is practicing is not an abstract skill called attention but a virtue of patient being-with another world. For a child who has lived through family breakdown, this time, undisturbed by adult talk, is especially precious. She does not have to explain why she is unhappy, does not have to meet anyone's expectations; she only has to be present as a body, meeting earth, wind, and animals.

5.2 The Acquaintance Society as an Extended Family

The Chinese village has never been a collection of isolated households. It is a moral community woven from kin, neighbors, and the families of schoolmates. For the urban middle class, the worst fear after divorce is gossip about the child. For resource-poor rural areas, the acquaintance society is at the same time a safety net, such as an extra bowl of rice from a neighbor, a teacher's hand held a little longer, or a word of caution from the village clinic. These are real forms of support before formal welfare institutions arrive. Tadesse et al.'s interviews with rural left-behind children in China find that the multiple attachments formed with grandparents, teachers, and neighbors play an irreplaceable buffering role during parental absence [3]. When a child is bullied at school, the teacher's line I will walk you home today is not mere comfort. It is a reconfirmation that the world is trustworthy.

The problem is that this safety net is unstable. As young people increasingly move away, population changes may gradually reduce opportunities for traditional forms of mutual support. Changes in family structure may also influence kinship networks, with relatives who might otherwise provide support developing different perspectives and taking on additional responsibilities. The flourishing lens therefore highlights the value of strengthening community-based support for rural children's well-being. Rather than relying solely on informal assistance, traditional neighborhood networks can be further developed into more systematic forms of community care, including home-visit systems in kindergartens, village-level children's officers, neighborhood support arrangements, and collective holiday activities for children. These approaches provide feasible pathways for strengthening and organizing informal support. MacIntyre reminds us that a stable moral life depends on a community in which members can support and guide one another [15]. When family-based support becomes limited, community-based support can play a complementary role.

The acquaintance society also means something else for young children: a daily network of being seen. In an urban household, only the parents may know that a child is ill or off form. In the village, the neighbor met at the market, the old men playing chess at the entrance, the shopkeeper's wife can all see at a glance that this kid is not herself today. Diffuse attention like this is often criticized in a modernizing frame as a lack of privacy, but for a child in a household going through upheaval it means her condition will not be sealed inside an already overburdened caregiver. The trouble is that such attention has long remained spontaneous, without a responsible subject, since everyone glances and no one is truly in charge. The next step is to convert diffuse concern into explicit, scheduled, recorded child protection.

6 EDUCATIONAL AND CAREGIVING PATHWAYS TO FLOURISHING

6.1 Attuned Responsiveness as a Foundational Capacity

Of all conceivable interventions, the first is not curriculum and not subsidy. It is predictable emotional responsiveness. A young child's basic trust in the world is built on repeated experiences: someone comes over when I am afraid; someone hears when I express; someone does not immediately ask me to be brave when I am sad. This sounds like common sense, but it repeatedly fails in the situation of rural preschool children of divorce. The phone calls of absent parents are unreliable. The stamina and patience of grandparents are limited. A kindergarten teacher facing dozens of children cannot offer a one-to-one stable relationship. The capability approach treats such responsiveness as the precondition for the development of the child's own emotional capacity [8]. Without it, every later cognitive investment, every curriculum design, is discounted. A child perpetually on alert is using her brain to cope with threat, not to learn.

In practice, three things follow. First, in kindergartens and village children's centers, designate a fixed seen-by-an-adult person. This need not be a psychology expert, but she should have basic training in child attachment and trauma response, and know how not to be provoked or to rush to stop a child's emotional outburst. Second, institutionalize video calls with parents who are temporarily away, and encourage parents to keep adult matters separate from parent-child communication while maintaining respectful and supportive communication about family members. Third, recognize the labor and limits of grandparent caregivers, and support them through regular home visits and respite services rather than assuming they have nothing else to do anyway. None of these three steps requires advanced theory. Each requires real implementation at the rural grassroots.

Responsiveness is a foundational capacity rather than simple goodwill because of its developmental primacy. Developmental neuroscience converges on the view that children who repeatedly experience predictable responsiveness early in life have a stress-system calibration that settles in a healthier range. Conversely, children raised in unpredictably unresponsive environments develop a high-arousal defensive pattern that helps them survive in the short run but long-term impairs learning, peer relations, and immune function. For rural preschool children of divorce, emphasis on attuned responsiveness is not a sentimental add-on. It is an early investment grounded in developmental science. A child who has been reliably responded to in the first years carries an internal secure base to which she can retreat when she later meets setbacks at home or school. Once that base is not built in the early years, the cost of rebuilding it later is tenfold.

6.2 Philosophical Inquiry as a Practice of Meaning-Making

Placing philosophical inquiry in the preschool years sounds extravagant, but it is precisely what this group needs. When a five-year-old repeatedly asks whether she is surplus to requirements and why Mummy and Daddy do not want her anymore, she is already doing philosophy. She is asking about belonging, justice, and the ground of her own existence. Lipman's community of inquiry shows that trained teachers can organize such dialogue in the kindergarten, not giving a standard answer, but using prompts such as what do you think and who else sees it differently to guide children to listen to one another [10]. For rural preschool children of divorce, this dialogue offers a space in which she is treated with seriousness. Her confusion about divorce need not be suppressed or moralized. It can be opened up in public.

Rural kindergartens have distinctive conditions for such work. Class sizes are small; the teacher-child relationship is close; the teacher often knows each child's household. The village's natural world and festivals are themselves rich philosophical material, such as why we offer sacrifices to ancestors, whether crops will die and grow again, and where Grandma went when she died. Converting these everyday experiences into dialogue material is closer to the child's life world than importing abstract topics from urban picture books. D'Olimpio and de Ruyter remind us that education in the service of flourishing is not about instilling the adult's worldview in the child; it is about training her to ask, together with others, what the good life is [11]. For rural teachers, this means becoming a person who is willing to ask, not mastering a philosophical script, but maintaining seriousness about the child's questions in everyday conversation.

A common misunderstanding needs to be cleared. Preschool philosophy does not mean having three- and four-year-olds read Plato. It means lingering longer on the questions they are already asking. When a child asks whether she is surplus, the adult's easiest move is denial, such as of course not we all love you, and then a quick change of topic. The philosophical response is: why do you think that? Tell me about it. That one follow-up, simple as it seems, lifts the child from the position of someone to be comforted to the position of someone who can think about her own situation. Teacher training therefore centers not on classic texts but on this capacity to linger: not rushing to soothe, not rushing to reason, not rushing to pull the conversation back to a planned track. For rural teachers carrying heavy caregiving loads, this capacity requires sustained professional support, not one-off lectures.

6.3 Local Cultural Life as a Source of Belonging

A child's answer to who am I is inseparable from her confirmation of cultural location. The fluidity that rural preschool children of divorce experience around surname and holiday visits can in part be addressed by reactivating local cultural life, including ancestor veneration, temple fairs, village-school festivals, and the family stories grandparents tell. These practices help the child find her place on a scale larger than the small household. MacIntyre reminds us that virtue is not a quality of isolated individuals but is formed within specific traditions and communities [15]. A child who has lost a stable structure in her original family needs, more than most, a narrative container larger than the household in which to place herself. When she knows she is the third generation of this village, that the old locust tree was climbed by her grandfather as a boy, her grasp of her own position no longer depends on whether her parents are still together.

Two dangers need to be guarded against along this path. The first is to essentialize local culture as conservative custom that represses divorced mothers and their children. That would simply install shame in the child, for example the cold stares directed at a single mother's child in clan gatherings. This is the part of culture that needs critique, not the part to be inherited intact. The second is to reduce cultural activity to formalist performance with no relation to the child's real life. The sound approach is to let the child participate in the cultural practices actually happening in the village, such as making zongzi with her grandmother, putting up spring couplets with her grandfather, or listening to the old man tell stories about the old tree. Culture becomes tangible, participatory daily life, not a noun on an exhibition board. Flourishing is not given as charity. It grows on one's own land, within one's own culture.

For children who have lived through family breakdown, cultural participation has a further philosophical significance. It releases the child from the too-narrow self-understanding of the kid from a broken family and makes her aware that she is at the same time the bearer of a larger story. When she follows her grandfather up the mountain on the Qingming grave visit, she belongs to a current of time that includes ancestors already gone and descendants not yet born. When she watches the village opera with other children at the stage entrance, she belongs to this village. This sense of belonging does not deny the pain in her family. It gives that pain a width in which it can be placed. The narrative self of which MacIntyre speaks finds its most concrete form in local cultural life: a person does not live in isolation. She is told in stories, rituals, and intergenerational relations [15].

7 CONCLUSION AND IMPLICATIONS

This study has reconsidered the situation of rural preschool children of divorce from the vantage point of flourishing. Against the existing literature that fixes this group inside a risk frame, the argument is that a young child's flourishing cannot be equated with a measurable subjective feeling; it must be understood as a state unfolded within relationships, culture, and institutions. The intersection of divorce and the rural context does produce attachment disruption, fluid self-identity, and early loneliness. These predicaments are not, however, an impenetrable fate. The village's natural world, its acquaintance society, and its local culture are themselves underused growth resources. To release this group from the label of the problem child is the conceptual precondition for all policy and educational practice that follows.

Three practical implications follow. The first is attuned emotional responsiveness as the bedrock of care. The second is developmentally appropriate philosophical dialogue in kindergartens, rooted in the child's own life experience. The third is to provide, through institutionalized community support and engaged cultural participation, a belonging container larger than the original household. It must be acknowledged that this study is philosophical. It does not itself conduct empirical fieldwork on the real conditions of rural preschool children. Flourishing, though it has an objective dimension, inevitably involves subjective experience. Future research can work within the conceptual framework proposed here, combining subjective well-being scales, developmental assessment, and qualitative interviews to examine more closely the actual states of rural preschool children of divorce across regions and caregiving structures. Only when philosophical conceptual work and sociological empirical work correct each other can we truly see those childhoods long obscured by risk discourse, not abstracting them from their predicaments, but recognizing, within those very predicaments, their dignity as subjects of flourishing.

COMPETING INTERESTS

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