

Article

Different Yet Wonderful: A Study on the Character Development of Children with Special Needs

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Abstract: In recent years, localities have adhered to the overarching goals of moral education, consistently enhancing the quality of special education, and promoting the holistic development of moral, intellectual, physical, aesthetic, and labor education, while ensuring the physical and mental well-being of children with special needs. This study focuses on the character development of children with special needs, examining three dimensions-honesty, bravery, and cooperation-through a questionnaire survey of 328 participants. The findings indicate that, although children with special needs generally demonstrate robust development of positive character traits, their performance in the domain of cooperation is significantly lower compared with typically developing peers. Furthermore, hierarchical regression analyses reveal that the developmental trajectories of these character strengths are significantly influenced by age, geographic location (urban vs. rural), parental educational attainment, and diagnostic category of disability.

Keywords: exceptional children; character; special education; moral education

1. Introduction

1.1. Research Background

In recent years, cases of behavioral difficulties among adolescents with disabilities have become increasingly frequent. Children with special needs are often subject to negative stereotypes, such as being perceived as having cognitive difficulties, developmental delays, or behavioral challenges, which can create barriers to their development and social integration. Consequently, moral education for children with special needs has received increasing attention.

Historically, China has placed great emphasis on character cultivation. During the pre-Qin period, Confucius was among the earliest scholars to focus on moral education, asserting that while humans possess innate qualities and moral dispositions, these are largely shaped by education and environmental influences. Mencius, inheriting Confucian philosophy, proposed the theory of innate goodness, maintaining that human nature is fundamentally good and that moral excellence can be achieved through deliberate cultivation, self-reflection, and practice. In contrast, Xunzi advocated the theory of innate evil, arguing that human nature requires transformation through education and effort to develop moral character. These historical perspectives highlight that the understanding and cultivation of character have long been integral to Chinese educational thought, underscoring the enduring significance of character development.

In the contemporary era of socialist modernization, with ongoing reforms in educational philosophy, society increasingly emphasizes the holistic development of children with special needs. Recent national initiatives for improving special education have underscored the importance of moral education, intrinsic educational quality, scientific assessment, respect for individual differences, and the integration of general and special

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education. The ultimate goal is to establish an educational system that ensures both standardized and high-quality development for all students, enabling children with special needs to lead fulfilling and meaningful lives.

Previous research has generally conceptualized character as a stable set of internal value judgments and behavioral patterns manifesting consistently across situations. Internationally, character development is similarly highly valued, with scholars offering diverse interpretations. Lickona defines character as the embodiment of moral values in everyday life, comprising three components: moral cognition, moral experience, and moral behavior [1]. Individuals with good character recognize what is right, are inclined to act accordingly, and consistently practice it. Within this framework, character can be understood as a stable personality trait, a cultivated virtue, and a pursuit of goodness that influences multiple dimensions of an individual's development [2].

Research on children with special needs presents nuanced findings. For example, one study surveying children with visual, physical, hearing, and learning disabilities found that these children often struggle to seek help when encountering difficulties, frequently experiencing alienation and loneliness at school, which adversely affects their academic performance and daily life development [3]. Research on the deaf population indicates that hearing impairments can hinder communication and learning, potentially leading to academic underachievement, employment challenges, and difficulties in social relationships [4]. Conversely, Rogers et al. highlighted positive traits among deaf individuals, including humor, responsibility, goal orientation, social awareness, self-regulation, and effective self-presentation [4]. Interviews with individuals with physical or mental disabilities who have achieved academic or career success further demonstrate that, despite impairments, they can accept themselves, set realistic goals, monitor progress, and demonstrate strong problem-solving skills [5]. Collectively, these findings suggest a dual perspective: while character development in children with special needs may lag behind that of typically developing peers, these children also exhibit resilience and positive traits that emerge despite adversity. This study aims to examine the current state of character development among children with special needs in the context of the new era.

1.2. Key Character Traits of Children with Special Needs

Children with special needs typically learn and live within school and community environments, where honesty, cooperation, and bravery are essential for adaptation and self-management. These traits play pivotal roles in social interaction, interpersonal relationships, and teamwork. Assessing these traits provides insight into social challenges and developmental needs, enabling the identification of obstacles and the design of targeted support strategies for holistic development [6].

Honesty is both a traditional Chinese virtue and a core value of socialist moral education. The concept encompasses "Cheng," representing sincerity, genuineness, and loyalty, and "Shi," signifying factual accuracy and truthfulness. Together, they form a complete understanding of honesty, requiring individuals to speak and act truthfully, avoid deception, and maintain consistency between words and actions [7].

Cooperation has its origins in classical Chinese texts such as *Guoyu-Jinyu III*, where it refers to acting jointly to achieve a common objective [8]. In contemporary terms, cooperation involves two or more individuals working together in coordination to accomplish shared goals.

Bravery is regarded as a positive quality manifested in the face of difficulty or danger, encompassing perseverance, responsibility, and the will to overcome challenges. It represents the moral disposition to confront misfortune courageously, act proactively, and persevere despite adversity [9,10].

By focusing on honesty, cooperation, and bravery, this study aims to evaluate key dimensions of character development in children with special needs and provide evidence to inform educational practice and intervention strategies [11].

2. Research Methods

2.1. Participants

A total of 350 parents of children with special needs were randomly invited to participate in the study through a questionnaire survey. After data collection and quality screening, 328 valid responses were obtained, yielding an effective response rate of 93.7%. The participants represented diverse demographic backgrounds in terms of geographic location (urban vs. rural), parental educational attainment, and type of special need, providing a representative sample for examining the character development of children with special needs. The children's ages ranged from age 3-12, ensuring coverage across early childhood and pre-adolescent stages, which are critical periods for character formation.

2.2. Instruments

The study employed the Preschool Children's Character Behavior Questionnaire, developed by Chen Peidong (2022), to assess key dimensions of character development in children with special needs. The questionnaire was completed by parents and collected information on four demographic factors: the child's age, place of origin, parental educational level, and type of disability. Responses were recorded on a five-point Likert scale, ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree).

The questionnaire consists of 20 items, organized into three dimensions: honesty (items 1-6), cooperation (items 7-13), and bravery (items 14-20). This structure allowed for a comprehensive assessment of positive character traits that are particularly relevant to social interaction, self-management, and adaptive functioning in children with special needs.

The psychometric properties of the instrument were rigorously evaluated. The overall internal consistency, as measured by Cronbach's α , was 0.812, indicating good reliability. For the individual dimensions, Cronbach's α values were 0.679 (honesty), 0.691 (cooperation), and 0.725 (bravery), demonstrating acceptable internal consistency for each subscale. Construct validity was also confirmed using the Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin (KMO) measure and Bartlett's test of sphericity. The KMO values were 0.666, 0.745, and 0.605 for honesty, cooperation, and bravery, respectively—all above the recommended threshold of 0.6—indicating adequate sampling adequacy and suitability for factor analysis.

Overall, the questionnaire provided a reliable and valid tool for capturing parent-reported character traits of children with special needs, enabling the study to explore the influence of demographic and disability-related factors on their character development.

3. Research Results

3.1. Descriptive Statistics of Positive Character Traits in Children with Special Needs

As shown in Table 1, children with special needs scored above 2.5 on honesty, cooperation, bravery, and the overall character assessment, indicating that their positive character traits are generally well-developed. However, in the domain of cooperation, typically developing children exhibited significantly higher scores compared with their peers with special needs.

Table 1. Comparative Analysis of Positive Character Traits between Typically Developing Children and Children with Special Needs.

	Child Type (Mean $\pm$ SD)		<i>t</i>	<i>p</i>
	Normal children (n=328)	Special children (n=328)		
Honesty	3.13 $\pm$ 0.62	3.05 $\pm$ 0.63	1.616	0.107
Cooperation	3.17 $\pm$ 0.57	3.06 $\pm$ 0.53	2.660	0.008*
Bravery	2.96 $\pm$ 0.77	3.06 $\pm$ 0.77	-1.851	0.065

Total Score	3.08±0.34	3.05±0.36	1.037	0.300
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* $p < 0.05$, ** $p < 0.01$.

3.2. Analysis of Positive Character Traits in Children with Special Needs by Age

An analysis of variance was conducted to examine age-related differences in honesty, cooperation, and bravery among children with special needs. As presented in Table 2, significant age-related differences were observed across all dimensions of positive character traits, including honesty, cooperation, bravery, and the overall score. Specifically, children aged 6-8 and 9-11 scored significantly higher than those aged 3-5 in each individual dimension. Regarding the total score of positive character traits, children aged 9-11 outperformed those aged 6-8, while children aged 6-8 scored higher than the 3-5 age group. These results suggest that the development of positive character traits in children with special needs progresses steadily with age.

Table 2. Age-Related Differences in Positive Character Traits of Children with Special Needs.

	Age (Mean ± SD)			F-test		Multiple Comparisons (Post Hoc)
	A:3-5 (n=85)	B:6-8 (n=126)	C:9-11 (n=117)	F	P	
Honesty	2.85±0.35	3.67±0.42	3.49±0.34	4.853	0.008**	C>A B>A
Bravery	3.39±0.45	3.47±0.53	3.47±0.40	9.908	0.000**	B>A C>A
Cooperation	3.58±0.37	3.68±0.40	3.61±0.36	6.559	0.002**	B>A C>A
Total Score	2.85±0.25	3.04±0.29	3.22±0.42	21.208	0.000**	C>B>A.

* $p < 0.05$, ** $p < 0.01$.

3.3. Analysis of Positive Character Traits in Children with Special Needs by Urban-Rural Region

Table 3. presents the variations in positive character traits among children with special needs across urban and rural regions.

Table 3. Differences in Positive Character Traits of Children with Special Needs by Urban-Rural Region.

	Urban-Rural Region (Mean ± SD)		t	p
	Urban(n=170)	Rural(n=158)		
Honesty	2.97±0.46	3.07±0.49	-1.935	0.054
Cooperation	3.08±0.27	2.87±0.29	6.674	0.000**
Bravery	3.09±0.45	3.09±0.44	-0.081	0.935
Total Score	3.04±0.21	3.01±0.20	1.772	0.111

* $p < 0.05$, ** $p < 0.01$.

An independent samples t-test was conducted to compare the positive character trait scores of children with special needs from urban and rural areas. The results indicated that children from urban areas scored significantly higher in the dimension of cooperation compared with their rural counterparts.

3.4. Analysis of Positive Character Traits in Children with Special Needs by Parental Educational Level

An analysis of variance was conducted to examine differences in honesty, cooperation, and bravery among children with special needs based on parental educational level. As shown in Table 4, significant differences associated with parental education were observed in the cooperation dimension and the overall score of positive character traits. Specifically, children whose parents held a bachelor's degree scored significantly higher in both cooperation and overall positive character traits compared with children whose parents had an associate degree or a high school education or lower.

Table 4. Differences in Positive Character Traits of Children with Special Needs by Parental Educational Level.

	Parental Educational Level (Mean± SD)			F-test		Multiple Comparisons (Post Hoc)
	A: High School or Below (n = 66)	B: Associate Degree (n = 66)	C: Bachelor's Degree (n = 196)	F	P	
Honesty	3.12±0.62	2.94±0.68	3.07±0.61	1.014	0.387	
Cooperation	2.99±0.50	2.95±0.52	3.20±0.57	4.085	0.007**	C>A C>B
Bravery	2.92±0.61	3.00±0.57	3.16±0.64	2.387	0.069	
Total Score	3.01±0.31	2.97±0.30	3.15±0.42	4.006	0.009**	C>B C>A

* $p<0.05$, ** $p<0.01$.

3.5. Analysis of Positive Character Traits in Children with Special Needs by Disability Type

An analysis of variance was conducted to examine differences in honesty, cooperation, and bravery among children with special needs based on disability type. As shown in Table 5, children with physical disabilities scored significantly higher than their peers with other types of disabilities in both the cooperation dimension and the overall positive character trait score.

Table 5. Differences in Positive Character Traits of Children with Special Needs by Disability Type.

	Disability Type of Children with Special Needs (Mean ± SD)				F-test		Multiple Comparisons (Post Hoc)
	A: Intellectual Disability (n=66)	B: Physical Disability (n=66)	C: Mental Disability (n=107)	D: Other (n=89)	F	P	
Honesty	3.10±0.65	3.16±0.61	2.95±0.65	2.95±0.56	2.452	0.063	
Cooperation	2.86±0.39	3.53±0.51	2.92±0.43	2.90±0.50	41.72	0.000**	B>A B>C B>D
Bravery	3.05±0.56	3.20±0.66	2.98±0.63	3.01±0.49	2.223	0.085	
Total Score	3.00±0.28	3.30±0.40	2.95±0.32	2.95±0.29	22.21	0.000**	B>A B>C B>D

* $p<0.05$, ** $p<0.01$.

4. Discussion

The development of positive character traits in children with special needs is a gradual process in which personality, values, and behavioral characteristics are cultivated over time. Character development not only influences personal life but also has profound implications for social interaction, learning, and future work performance. Positive character traits manifest in diverse ways among children with special needs. Building on previous research, this study focused on honesty, bravery, and cooperation to examine the current status of character development in this population.

4.1. Current Status of Positive Character Traits in Children with Special Needs

Each child is a unique individual, and all children, regardless of special needs, may encounter challenges related to self-awareness and self-confidence. The findings indicate that, overall, children with special needs exhibit comparable levels of positive character

traits to typically developing peers. However, they scored significantly lower in the dimension of cooperation. This discrepancy may be attributed to multiple factors. On one hand, children with special needs often experience language or communication difficulties, delayed cognitive development, or limited social skills, which can impede effective interaction and coordination with others. On the other hand, challenges in emotional regulation or attentional control may restrict the development of cooperative abilities by limiting self-regulation skills.

4.2. Age-Related Differences in Positive Character Traits

According to Kohlberg's theory of moral development, children's moral reasoning evolves from lower to higher cognitive forms with age, while Piaget (a pioneering Swiss developmental psychologist) emphasized that moral development unfolds alongside cognitive growth, moving from heteronomy to autonomy and from objective to subjective responsibility.[12]. As children with special needs grow older, accumulated life and social experiences enhance their maturity, self-awareness, and capacity for character formation. Furthermore, the implementation of inclusive education exposes older children to broader social environments and diverse influences, promoting richer and more nuanced character development. Consequently, positive character traits in children with special needs tend to strengthen progressively with age.

4.3. Urban-Rural Differences in Positive Character Traits

Economic and educational disparities between urban and rural areas can significantly influence character development. Rural regions often face limited educational resources and fewer specialized programs for cultivating positive character traits in children with special needs. Cultural differences also play a role: urban environments are typically more diverse and open, providing greater opportunities to develop cooperation skills, whereas rural areas may offer fewer social interaction opportunities, limiting cooperative ability. Additionally, variations in parental educational philosophy and practices exist; rural families may emphasize traditional values and independence, while urban families often focus on teamwork and social skills. These factors likely contribute to the observed lower cooperation scores among children with special needs in rural areas compared with their urban peers.

4.4. Differences in Positive Character Traits by Parental Educational Level

Parental education exerts a significant influence on the development of positive character traits. Highly educated parents generally possess broader knowledge, advanced emotional intelligence, and deeper understanding of child development, enabling them to adopt positive parenting practices, establish supportive parent-child relationships, and better respond to the behaviors, emotions, and developmental needs of children with special needs. Moreover, parents with higher education levels often reside in more advantaged social environments, enjoy higher social status, and have access to more resources, providing children with greater opportunities and platforms conducive to character development.

4.5. Differences in Positive Character Traits by Disability Type

Children with physical disabilities scored higher in cooperation and bravery compared with children with other types of disabilities. This may be attributed to the unique challenges and adversities they face, which foster stronger coping skills and a positive mindset. Confronting physiological limitations requires greater courage and resilience in daily life, prompting these children to cultivate self-awareness and self-esteem. By reinforcing positive self-recognition and a sense of self-worth, they are better equipped to handle difficulties, resulting in enhanced development of cooperative and brave character traits.

5. Conclusions and Recommendations

"Several plum branches in the corner bloom alone in the cold." Children with special needs face unique challenges-whether physical disabilities, intellectual impairments, or social withdrawal-but these challenges do not preclude them from leading meaningful lives. Through perseverance, honesty, and cooperation, they can realize their potential. The findings of this study indicate that, in some dimensions of positive character traits, children with special needs perform comparably to typically developing peers, demonstrating that their character development can be equally remarkable. However, in certain dimensions, children with special needs scored significantly lower, underscoring the continuing importance of targeted moral and character education. Given that these children often develop more slowly in perception, language, cognition, and social skills, they are at greater risk of peer isolation, low self-confidence, and internalization of negative labels, which can constrain moral perception, understanding, and role modeling. Therefore, character education must account for individual characteristics, tailoring strategies and assessment criteria according to age, type, and severity of disability to achieve optimal educational outcomes, restore confidence, and encourage active learning.

5.1. Social Level: Ensuring Equal Opportunities for All

Efforts in special education should emphasize the development of moral and character education while strengthening support mechanisms for children with special needs. The ultimate goal is to promote self-respect, self-confidence, self-reliance, and continuous personal development.

1) Institutional Support

Governments should clearly define responsibilities for the moral development of children with special needs, strengthen planning and institutional guarantees, and integrate departmental functions to provide comprehensive policy and financial support. Programs should prioritize children with special needs, complementing universal initiatives with targeted interventions to address developmental gaps.

2) Targeted Interventions

Given that positive character trait development is influenced by age, urban-rural disparities, family structure, and parental education, region-specific strategies are necessary. Special education reforms should be scientifically evaluated and implemented according to local economic and demographic conditions, setting differentiated moral education goals to support the development of positive traits across various ages and disability types.

3) Resource Sharing

Despite economic progress, inequalities in special education persist due to regional, urban-rural, school, and family disparities. Investments should be increased to promote equitable access to educational resources, equipment, and technologies. Adhering to principles of "universal coverage, zero rejection," children with disabilities must have equal access to moral education, ensuring inclusive and high-quality development.

4) Respect for Individual Differences

Recognizing each child's unique physical and psychological development is essential. Special attention should be given to children from single-parent or left-behind families and those with economic disadvantages. Financial support should be increased while improving community services and creating environments conducive to growth, ensuring individualized education and fostering mutual respect in inclusive settings.

5.2. School Level: Nurturing Character through Education

Schools are primary environments for character development among children with special needs. Effective character education requires both structured instruction and the gradual internalization of ethical values.

1) Character Instruction

Schools should integrate resources and develop individualized character education plans based on each child's needs, setting graded teaching objectives. Adequate support-including specialized teachers, assistive tools, and adaptive technologies-is essential. A nurturing and inclusive learning environment fosters respect, acceptance, and active participation while encouraging collaboration with parents to support holistic development.

2) Character-Friendly Environment

Character education should permeate school activities and management, creating a supportive campus climate. Teachers and peers should provide emotional support, encourage independence, confidence, and proactive behavior, and cultivate social skills such as communication, emotional regulation, and interpersonal interaction.

3) Teacher Competence

Teachers play a pivotal role as educators and role models. Special education teachers must demonstrate high moral standards, respect each child's uniqueness, and maintain patience and empathy. They should continuously update professional knowledge, develop strong communication skills, and demonstrate responsibility to ensure optimal educational outcomes for children with special needs.

5.3. Family Level: The Foundational Environment for Character Development

The family is the earliest and most influential environment for shaping character. Parental understanding, encouragement, support, and modeling are critical in guiding children to form positive traits, express emotions, and develop healthy emotional regulation.

Families should establish clear rules and values to encourage behaviors such as honesty, tolerance, and responsibility. Close, supportive, and respectful relationships promote effective communication and emotional bonding. Parents should model positive traits through their own behavior and provide consistent feedback and encouragement, fostering confidence, independence, and resilience in children with special needs.

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