

# Character Education and SEND Education – Next Steps for Research and Practice

Character education is increasingly recognised as an integral part of education that enables pupils to develop attributes and qualities that equip them to live flourishing lives. ‘Character education’ refers to approaches that are designed to cultivate good character through the habituation of virtues such as compassion, integrity, honesty, curiosity and civility. Character education theory emphasises inclusion; that is, everyone has the potential to develop their character.

In the last fifty years, the education of children with special educational needs and disabilities (SEND) has increasingly prioritised early intervention and inclusion. However, there are still gaps in both theory and practice in terms of ensuring children with SEND have access to equitable opportunities (Ainscow, 2020). In relation to character education and SEND, there are key questions research needs to address to ensure ‘caught’, ‘taught’ and ‘sought’ methods are available to all children.

This report summarises ideas presented in response to questions posed in a seminar hosted by the Jubilee Centre for Character and Virtues in June 2024 to discuss the intersections between character education and SEND education, and to establish the next steps for the field.

## ***What are the key considerations for pupils with SEND and their families around developing character?***

**Delegates suggested ideas including:**

SEND pupils, and their families, need to be genuinely invested in the development of character and see it as meaningful to their own lives. It is very important for character education to be relevant and accessible to individuals with SEND due to the challenges they may face in their daily lives and the strengths required to cope with these challenges.

SEND individuals may be excellent role models for their peers in terms of the character strengths they have cultivated as a result of their experiences.

Research should guard against a deficit model where people with SEND are perceived as less able to develop strengths of character. Practitioners and researchers should use language that is reflective of SEND people’s experiences, highlighting differences rather than disorders and emphasising the opportunities for character education to enhance education and development for SEND learners as well as for the experiences of people with SEND to enrich character education.

## ***How can research into character and SEND represent the target population?***

**Delegates suggested ideas including:**

Pupil voice is hugely significant in the area of SEND research and the avoidance of a ‘top down’ approach or attitudes that suggest people with SEND need ‘fixing’. Meaningful research would seek to ascertain how character education links to purpose in life and how SEND pupils see themselves and who they want to be. Concepts such as self-efficacy and self-determination are areas of overlap for both character and SEND studies.

Significantly, it has previously been identified that ‘...educators adopting a character-led approach to working with young people, whether engaging with them through mainstream settings or elsewhere, have reported that the Jubilee Centre’s approach gives a critical ‘voice’ to the young people in their care’ (Jubilee Centre, 2022). This feedback is very encouraging in terms of a character education paradigm providing a platform for children and young people to express their views.

There is some ongoing research in the area of character strengths and SEND. For example, [Dr Jiedi Lei's project at the University of Oxford](#) is focused on the development, piloting and validation of a standardised tool to assess strengths in autistic CYP.

The importance of consultation and collaboration with the target population cannot be emphasised enough, including fair compensation for participation in research studies.

## Character Education and SEND Education – Next Steps for Research and Practice (cont.)

### ***How may existing models and theories be helpful?***

#### **Delegates suggested ideas including:**

The breadth and depth of the SEND field should not be underestimated. Pupils with SEND are a large and heterogenous group and therefore different groups and different individuals may require bespoke approaches in both research and practice.

Approaches to research could use medical models; social models; or the four areas identified by the SEND Code of Practice (cognition and learning; communication and interaction; sensory and/or physical needs; social, emotional and mental health) to provide focus.

Research in this area may also wish to consider multi-disciplinary perspectives by drawing on and/or challenging a range of theoretical lenses and fields. For instance: Critical Disability Studies (Goodley, 2016); Decolonial research (e.g. Liasidou, 2022); Bioecological perspectives (Bronfenbrenner, 1995) and Dual Model of Access (McLinden et al, 2016).

### ***Can caught, taught and sought methods\* work for all pupils?***

*\*Methods by which character can be developed as defined by the JCCV Framework (Jubilee Centre, 2022).*

#### **Delegates suggested ideas including:**

In the case of the majority of neurodiverse individuals, virtues - including allocentric (other-focused) virtues such as compassion and empathy - can be taught; however, the methods of teaching would need to be adapted to suit the individual SEND learner and may in some cases need to be more literal and connected to a clear purpose. The value of reflective practice, role/real play, and clear examples was emphasised to ensure that pupils have a range of experiences to draw on.

It is important not to make assumptions that disempower individuals (especially for those who are pre-verbal or non-verbal) and attempts should always be made to allow an individual to create an authentic narrative about their own life in whatever way they are able to. For instance, through art or a photo-diary.

It should not be assumed that all pupils will be able to access 'caught' or 'sought' methods of learning, and cognitive development will need to be considered in some cases with resources available for modelling and scaffolding. One delegate noted that some children may need to be taught explicitly what others may learn intuitively in relation to both intrapersonal and interpersonal understanding.

### ***Next steps for research and practice:***

- Further theoretical integration of character education and SEND approaches.
- Continued teacher training in relation to character education approaches at a general level and specifically for SEND pupils.
- Practical methods of integrating character development into existing processes such as pupil passports, EHCP annual reviews and learning plans.
- Auditing and mapping available character education resources to ensure breadth and depth to allow practitioners to choose best fit approaches for individual pupils.
- Creation of new resources that account for various SEND needs and preferences.
- Consideration of suitable metrics and methods to evaluate character provision for SEND pupils.

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