

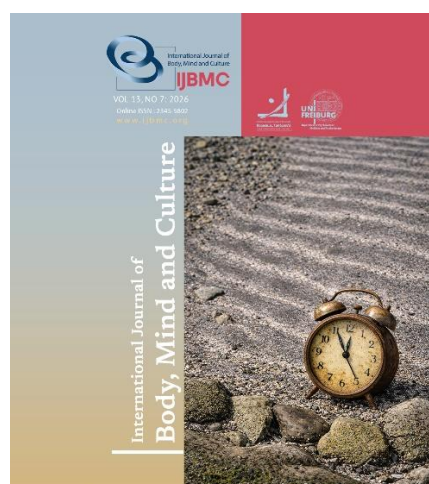
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Antecedents of Character Strengths in Children Aged 10–12: A Multi-Informant Qualitative Content Analysis

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ABSTRACT

Objective: This study aimed to identify perceived antecedents of character strengths among children aged 10–12 in Borazjan, Bushehr Province, Iran.

Methods and Materials: This exploratory qualitative study used manifest and latent qualitative content analysis. Participants included eight child–parent–teacher triads from non-profit primary schools, comprising 8 children aged 10–12, 8 parents, and 8 teachers. Participants were selected through purposeful sampling. Semi-structured interviews were conducted in the school counseling room, audio-recorded, transcribed verbatim, and analyzed using MAXQDA-2020. Data analysis included meaning-unit identification, condensation, coding, category development, and latent interpretation. Of 27 reviewed interviews, 24 were included in the final analysis after exclusion of three interviews due to insufficient parent or teacher cooperation. Seven interviews, approximately 30% of the dataset and representing children, parents, and teachers, were independently coded by two researchers. Trustworthiness was supported through triangulation, peer debriefing, member checking, an audit trail, and consensus-based coding.

Findings: Four main antecedent domains and 23 initial codes were identified: Enjoyment of Learning, Constructive Environmental Resources, Psychological Capital, and Significant Others. Enjoyment of Learning included general knowledge, successful learning, school-based strength expression, and desire to keep others happy. Constructive Environmental Resources involved learning resources, communication, competition, help-seeking, calmness, and enabling conditions. Psychological Capital reflected acceptance of differences, acceptance of mistakes, goal orientation, acceptance of failure, and encouragement. Significant Others included parents, teachers, peers, and close individuals through modeling, support, reinforcement, relational safety, and conflict repair.

Conclusion: Children's character strengths were perceived as context-sensitive capacities shaped by learning experiences, environmental resources, psychological capital, and significant relationships.

Keywords: Character Strengths, Children, Qualitative Content Analysis, Psychological Capital, Positive Youth Development.

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Introduction

Childhood is a foundational period of human development in which cognitive, emotional, social, and moral capacities are progressively organized through children's interactions with families, schools, peers, and broader sociocultural contexts. Developmental research on children aged 6 to 14 shows that this period is marked by important changes in self-concept, achievement orientation, peer relationships, and participation in social institutions such as school and community programs (Eccles, 1999). Contemporary developmental systems perspectives similarly emphasize that development emerges through dynamic and reciprocal processes between children and their social worlds, rather than through isolated individual maturation alone (Kärtner & Köster, 2024). Within these relational contexts, children gradually acquire emotion-regulation capacities, internalize social expectations, and develop patterns of coping and interpersonal engagement that shape later adjustment and functioning (Paley & Hajal, 2022). Evidence also suggests that children's social-cognitive capacities, including theory of mind and emotion understanding, are meaningfully connected with their peer relationships, underscoring the relational nature of children's socioemotional development (Johansen et al., 2024).

Within this broader developmental landscape, character strengths have become an influential framework for conceptualizing positive personality development. Peterson and Seligman (2004) defined character strengths as morally valued positive traits through which broader virtues are expressed in thoughts, feelings, and actions. In the VIA classification, 24 character strengths are organized under six broad virtues and are understood as psychological pathways through which individuals enact valued qualities such as kindness, curiosity, perseverance, fairness, hope, and self-regulation. From a positive youth development perspective, character strengths are especially relevant because positive development is not limited to preventing problems; rather, it involves identifying, building, and strengthening assets that enable children and adolescents to grow and flourish (Park, 2004). More recent work has further clarified that character strengths are positive personality traits that reflect basic identity, support beneficial outcomes for oneself and others, and

contribute to the collective good (Niemiec & Pearce, 2021).

An important conceptual issue in the present study concerns the apparent tension between viewing character strengths as relatively stable traits and viewing them as dynamic, context-dependent capacities. This tension can be resolved by distinguishing between the dispositional quality of strengths and their contextual expression. Character strengths may show trait-like consistency in how children tend to think, feel, and behave, yet their activation, expression, and refinement may vary across situations and developmental contexts. Niemiec and Pearce (2021) describe character strengths as capacities for thinking, feeling, and behaving, and they explicitly argue that these capacities can be developed and improved. They also note that strengths can be expressed in degrees and may be overused or underused depending on the situation. Therefore, in childhood, character strengths can be understood as developing dispositions whose expression is shaped by children's learning experiences, emotional regulation, relational support, and culturally embedded expectations (Park & Peterson, 2009; Park et al., 2004).

A growing body of empirical research supports the developmental and functional importance of character strengths. Among early adolescents, character strengths have been associated with life satisfaction, with evidence from Spanish adolescents aged 11 to 14 showing meaningful relations between strengths and life satisfaction (Blanca et al., 2018). School-based research also shows that several character strengths are associated with positive classroom behavior and school achievement; for example, Wagner and Ruch (2015) found that perseverance, prudence, hope, self-regulation, and social intelligence were linked to positive classroom behavior, while strengths such as love of learning, perseverance, zest, gratitude, hope, and perspective were associated with school achievement. In early adolescents, Qin et al. (2022) found that character strengths functioned as protective factors against behavioral problems. Beyond childhood and adolescence, studies with university students indicate that hope, persistence, and leadership significantly predict general and academic self-efficacy (García-Álvarez et al., 2024). A recent meta-analysis of 130 studies with a total sample of 275,007 participants

further showed that most character strengths have meaningful associations with healthy functioning, with hope and zest showing the strongest overall associations with well-being and mental health indicators (Casali & Feraco, 2025).

Despite this expanding literature, important conceptual and empirical gaps remain. Recent theoretical work has cautioned that character strengths research has sometimes focused heavily on positive outcomes while giving insufficient attention to conceptual foundations, classification issues, and the contextual processes through which strengths operate (Ruch & Stahlmann, 2024). This concern is particularly relevant for research with children, because evidence that character strengths are associated with well-being, school functioning, achievement, or social adjustment does not fully explain how these strengths emerge, become meaningful, or are sustained in everyday developmental contexts. In other words, the literature has more clearly documented the correlates, outcomes, and predictive functions of character strengths than the developmental processes and contextual conditions through which they are formed and expressed in childhood (Park & Peterson, 2009; Ruch & Stahlmann, 2024; Shoshani & Schwartz, 2018).

The developmental period of ages 10 to 12 is especially important for examining these antecedents. This age range falls within late childhood and the transition toward early adolescence, a period in which children experience increasing academic demands, more complex peer relationships, and growing awareness of their own abilities, values, and social standing. Eccles (1999) emphasizes that during ages 6 to 14, children develop self-concepts and achievement orientations that can shape later developmental trajectories. Peer relationships also become increasingly central during middle childhood, with socialization in the peer context becoming a major part of children's lives between ages 6 and 12 (Hartup, 1984). The age range of 10 to 12 corresponds to early adolescence in developmental science (Backes & Bonnie, 2019). During this period, children also show meaningful socio-cognitive development; for example, cognitive empathy has been shown to increase significantly at ages 10 to 12, and such developmental changes are considered relevant to moral and social education for children (Dorris et al., 2022). Character strengths have also been studied directly in

children aged 10 to 12; Grinhauz examined associations between character strengths, psychological well-being, social desirability, and personality in 518 children aged 10–12 (Grinhauz, 2015). Similarly, Qin et al. studied 521 early adolescents aged 10–12 and found that character strengths were related to fewer behavioral problems (Qin et al., 2022). Therefore, ages 10 to 12 provide a developmentally justified window for examining how character strengths are recognized, practiced, reinforced, or constrained across home and school contexts (Grinhauz, 2015; Qin et al., 2022).

The present study was conducted in the context of primary education in Borazjan, Bushehr Province, Iran. This setting is important because character strengths are not expressed in a cultural vacuum; rather, children's moral behavior, learning motivation, respect for others, peer interaction, and relationships with adults are shaped within specific educational and sociocultural contexts. In qualitative research, making the study context explicit is essential for transparency and transferability, because readers need to understand the setting in which data were generated in order to judge the relevance of findings to other contexts (O'Brien et al., 2014; Tong et al., 2007). Therefore, situating the study in Borazjan, Bushehr Province, Iran, allows the findings to be interpreted in relation to the educational and relational environment in which children, parents, and teachers described the development of character strengths.

A multi-informant design is particularly appropriate for studying the antecedents of character strengths in children. Children can describe their own experiences of learning, motivation, emotion regulation, peer interaction, and perceived support. Parents can provide insight into family routines, parenting practices, encouragement, discipline, and moral socialization. Teachers can observe how children express strengths in classroom learning, peer relationships, rule-following, cooperation, and school-based expectations. Multi-informant approaches are valuable because children's behavior may vary across contexts, and different informants may provide distinct but complementary information about how children function in home and school environments (De Los Reyes et al., 2015). Therefore, combining the perspectives of children, parents, and teachers can provide a more context-sensitive understanding of children's character

development than relying on a single informant group (De Los Reyes et al., 2015; Kraemer et al., 2003).

In the present study, antecedents are defined as distal and proximal conditions that participants perceive as contributing to the emergence, activation, and maintenance of character strengths. Distal antecedents refer to broader developmental conditions, such as family climate, school context, cultural expectations, and access to learning resources. Proximal antecedents refer to immediate experiences and interactions, such as successful learning experiences, encouragement, emotional safety, peer comparison, adult modeling, and opportunities to practice valued behaviors. Guided by a relational-developmental perspective, this study approaches character strengths as developing through the interaction of learning experiences, environmental affordances, self-regulatory and motivational resources, and relationships with significant others. This framing allows the study to examine not only whether children show character strengths, but also under what conditions these strengths are perceived to emerge, become activated, and persist.

Research Question

What distal and proximal antecedents do children, parents, and teachers perceive as contributing to the emergence, activation, and maintenance of character strengths among children aged 10 to 12 in Borazjan, Bushehr Province, Iran?

Methods and Materials

Study Design

This study reports the qualitative phase of a larger mixed-methods project on character strengths in primary school children. The present phase used an exploratory qualitative design based on inductive qualitative content analysis, with attention to both manifest and latent content. This design was selected because the aim was to identify and interpret the perceived antecedents of character strengths in children aged 10 to 12 from the perspectives of children, parents, and teachers.

Manifest content analysis was used to identify explicit statements, recurring codes, and visible patterns in participants' narratives. Latent content analysis was used to interpret underlying meanings, implicit relationships, and broader developmental patterns

embedded in the interview data. The analysis followed the logic of qualitative content analysis, moving from interview transcripts to meaning units, condensed meaning units, initial codes, subcategories, and broader categories. This analytic procedure was guided by qualitative content analysis approaches that distinguish manifest content from latent meaning and move systematically from meaning units to codes and categories (Elo & Kyngäs, 2008; Graneheim & Lundman, 2004). Although the preliminary coding process involved initial and category-level coding, the present report uses qualitative content-analysis terminology rather than grounded-theory terminology because the aim was not to generate a formal grounded theory but to describe and interpret categories of antecedents of character strengths.

Setting and Context

The study was conducted in Borazjan, Bushehr Province, Iran, within the context of non-profit primary schools. The target educational context consisted of boys and girls in the second cycle of elementary education during the 2023–2024 academic year. In the Iranian primary education system, the second cycle of elementary education includes grades 4 to 6. This context was relevant because children's character strengths were explored in relation to school learning, classroom behavior, parent–child interactions, teacher–child relationships, peer relationships, emotional regulation, and everyday moral-social experiences.

The setting is reported explicitly to support transferability. Because the development and expression of character strengths may be shaped by educational, family, and sociocultural contexts, situating the study in non-profit primary schools in Borazjan allows readers to interpret the findings in relation to the environment in which the data were generated.

Participants and Sampling

Participants were selected through purposeful sampling. The final qualitative sample consisted of eight child–parent–teacher triads. Each triad included one child aged 10 to 12, one parent of that child, and one teacher of that child. Therefore, the final sample included 24 participants and 24 interviews: eight interviews with children, eight interviews with parents, and eight interviews with teachers.

The child participants included four girls and four boys. In terms of grade level, three children were

enrolled in grade 4, three children were enrolled in grade 5, and two children were enrolled in grade 6. This distribution was considered appropriate because it represented the second cycle of elementary education and corresponded to the target age range of 10 to 12 years.

Parents were included because they could describe children's social, emotional, learning-related, and moral behaviors in the family context. Teachers were included because they could describe children's character-related behaviors in the school context, including classroom participation, peer interaction, cooperation, responsibility, rule-following, and academic engagement.

Initially, 27 interviews were reviewed. Three interviews were excluded because of lack of cooperation from a parent or teacher. Consequently, 24 interviews remained and were included in the final qualitative analysis.

Table 1

Participant groups in the qualitative phase

Participant group	Number	Characteristics
Children	8	Four girls and four boys, aged 10–12; three in grade 4, three in grade 5, and two in grade 6
Parents	8	One parent for each participating child
Teachers	8	One teacher for each participating child, with at least one year of interaction with the child
Total	24	Eight child–parent–teacher triads

Data Collection

Data were collected through semi-structured, in-depth interviews with children, parents, and teachers. Separate but conceptually parallel interview guides were used for the three groups. The interview questions were designed to explore factors influencing the development, activation, and maintenance of character strengths in children aged 10 to 12.

The interviews focused on learning experiences, school experiences, interactions with parents and teachers, peer relationships, meaningful social situations, emotional regulation, responses to mistakes and failure, encouragement, internalized values, and situations in which children's strengths became more or less visible.

Examples of interview domains included enjoyment of learning, academic success and difficulty, supportive or inhibiting environmental conditions, emotional calmness, acceptance of mistakes, goal orientation, encouragement, modeling, parental support, teacher

The inclusion criteria were active school attendance of the child, the parent's ability to describe the child's social and moral behaviors, at least one year of teacher–child interaction, and willingness to share experiences. For child participation, parental consent and the child's assent were required. The exclusion criteria were withdrawal from the study, inability to complete the interview, refusal to continue participation, or insufficient cooperation from the parent or teacher connected to the child.

Data collection continued until saturation was reached. Saturation was defined as the point at which further interviews generated repeated codes rather than substantially new codes or concepts relevant to the research question. The final dataset of 24 interviews was considered sufficient because repeated review of child, parent, and teacher interviews no longer produced new codes or meanings central to the study aim (Table 1).

support, and the role of close relationships in the expression of strengths.

The interviews were conducted by a member of the research team who had no prior relationship with the participants. This was done to reduce the effect of previous familiarity on participants' responses and to support openness during the interviews. All interviews were conducted in the school counseling room, which provided a quiet, familiar, and private environment suitable for interviewing children, parents, and teachers. Each interview lasted approximately 30 to 60 minutes.

With participants' permission, interviews were audio-recorded and then transcribed verbatim. Field notes and researcher observations were documented during and after data collection to record contextual information, non-verbal cues, and preliminary analytic reflections.

For child interviews, age-appropriate language was used. Children were informed that there were no right or wrong answers, that participation was voluntary, and that they could refuse to answer any question or stop the

interview at any time. Because the study involved minors, attention was paid to privacy, comfort, and safeguarding throughout the interview process.

Data Analysis

The 24 final interviews were imported into MAXQDA-2020 for organization and analysis. The analysis combined latent and manifest qualitative content analysis. Latent content analysis was used to identify underlying meanings, interpretive patterns, and broader categories. Manifest content analysis was used to examine the explicit frequency and distribution of initial codes through visual tools such as code clouds and Shannon matrices.

The analysis proceeded in several stages. First, all transcripts were reviewed carefully. Transcription and spelling errors were corrected while preserving the meaning of participants' responses. The interviews were coded in three groups: first the child interviews, then the parent interviews, and finally the teacher interviews.

Second, each transcript was read repeatedly to obtain an overall understanding of the participant's account. The complete interview transcript was considered the unit of analysis. Within each transcript, meaning units were identified. Meaning units included words, sentences, or paragraphs related to the study aim, namely identifying perceived antecedents of character strengths in children aged 10 to 12.

Third, meaning units were condensed while preserving their central meaning. The condensed meaning units were then labeled with initial codes. In the first stage of coding, 161 initial codes were identified. After repeated review, codes with similar content were merged, resulting in 81 final initial codes.

Fourth, the final codes were compared according to similarities and differences and were grouped into subcategories and broader categories. The analysis included codes related to character strengths, antecedents of character strengths, and outcomes of character strengths. Because the present article focuses on antecedents, the relevant codes were organized into four main categories: enjoyment of learning, constructive environmental resources, psychological capital, and significant others.

Fifth, manifest content analysis was used to examine the frequency and distribution of codes across interviews. A code cloud was used to display the relative frequency of initial codes, and a Shannon matrix was

used to show the distribution of codes across the 24 interviews. These visual outputs supported the organization of the data, but the interpretation of findings was based on qualitative meaning and conceptual similarity rather than frequency alone.

Sixth, latent interpretation was used to examine the underlying meanings connecting the categories. This stage focused on how learning experiences, environmental resources, psychological capital, encouragement, emotional calmness, and relationships with significant others were perceived to contribute to the emergence, activation, and maintenance of character strengths in children.

Coding Team and Consensus Process

To enhance analytic rigor, the analysis was reviewed repeatedly by the research team. Seven interviews, approximately 30% of the dataset, were independently coded by two researchers. The double-coded material included transcripts from all three informant groups: children, parents, and teachers. This was done to examine coding consistency across different participant perspectives and data sources.

After independent coding, the researchers compared their codes, discussed differences, and resolved disagreements through consensus. During this process, overlapping codes were merged, unclear codes were redefined, and category boundaries were refined. Disagreements were treated as opportunities to clarify meanings rather than as merely technical coding errors. The coding structure was revised during analysis to improve conceptual consistency and to ensure that category labels remained grounded in participants' accounts.

MAXQDA-2020 was used to support systematic data management, retrieval of coded segments, comparison across participant groups, and visual inspection of code frequency and distribution. Analytic decisions, code revisions, and category development were documented to support transparency and dependability.

Trustworthiness

Several strategies were used to enhance credibility, dependability, confirmability, and transferability. Credibility was supported through triangulation across three informant groups: children, parents, and teachers. The child-parent-teacher triad structure allowed the researchers to compare children's self-reported

experiences with parent and teacher observations across home and school contexts.

Member checking was conducted by sharing summaries of the analysis with selected participants to examine whether the interpretations were consistent with their experiences. Peer debriefing was also used; emerging codes, categories, and interpretations were reviewed and discussed with experienced qualitative researchers.

Dependability was supported through documentation of the analytic process, including transcription, correction of transcripts, coding, code merging, category development, and use of MAXQDA-2020. Confirmability was enhanced through retention of coded excerpts, field notes, researcher observations, and documentation of analytic decisions.

Transferability was supported by reporting the study setting, participant groups, sampling process, and school context. Representative quotations from children, parents, and teachers were used in the Findings section to allow readers to evaluate the connection between participants' words and the researchers' interpretations.

Ethical Considerations

The study was conducted in accordance with ethical principles for research involving human participants and with additional safeguards for research involving children. Ethical approval was obtained from the Research Ethics Committee of Bushehr Province University of Medical Sciences (Approval ID: IR.BPUMS.REC.1404.257).

Before participation, parents received clear information about the purpose of the study, interview procedures, duration, confidentiality, audio-recording, voluntary participation, and the right to withdraw. Written informed consent was obtained from parents before child participation. Children received an age-appropriate explanation of the study and provided assent before being interviewed.

Participants were informed that they could withdraw from the study at any stage without any negative consequences. No invasive, medical, or high-risk procedure was used. If a serious threat to a participant's physical or psychological well-being was observed, the research process would be stopped. If emotional

difficulty or the need for immediate support emerged during the interview, the participant would be referred to the university counseling center or an appropriate support service.

Confidentiality was protected by assigning anonymous codes to participants, such as Child 1, Parent 1, and Teacher 1. Identifying information, including names of children, parents, teachers, and schools, was removed from transcripts and reports. Data were stored securely and were accessible only to the main researchers. The results were reported at the group level, and participants' identities were not disclosed. Participant selection was conducted without gender, ethnic, cultural, or religious discrimination, and inclusion and exclusion criteria were based only on scientific relevance to the study aims.

Findings and Results

The latent and manifest content analysis of 24 interviews with children, parents, and teachers identified four main categories of antecedents of character strengths in children aged 10 to 12. These categories were: Enjoyment of Learning, Constructive Environmental Resources, Psychological Capital, and Significant Others. Together, these categories included 23 initial codes related to antecedents of character strengths: Enjoyment of Learning included four codes, Constructive Environmental Resources included seven codes, Psychological Capital included five codes, and Significant Others included seven codes.

In this study, Psychological Capital refers to children's self-regulatory, motivational, acceptance-based, and resilience-related psychological resources that appeared to support the emergence and maintenance of character strengths. This category included acceptance of differences, acceptance of mistakes, goal orientation, acceptance of failure, and responsiveness to encouragement. This label was used because these codes reflected broader psychological resources rather than a single construct.

Table 2 presents the main categories, initial codes, and representative quotations related to the antecedents of character strengths.

Table 2*Main categories, initial codes, and representative quotations for antecedents of character strengths*

Main category	Initial codes	Representative quotations
Enjoyment of Learning	Having general knowledge	"Her general knowledge is very high." (Teacher 7)
	Demonstrating strengths at school	"I saw these strengths a lot in her studies, in the classroom, and during teaching." (Teacher 8)
	Good learning in lessons	"Her learning is very good in some grades." (Parent 2)
	Desire to keep others happy	"When she sees that she is making people around her happy, she becomes more excited and wants to continue." (Parent 3)
Constructive Environmental Resources	Need for resources to express strengths	"Good books, good teachers, and all of these help her strengths remain stable." (Teacher 1)
	Competition with others	"In situations where winning and ranking are important, their strengths show more." (Teacher 6)
	Role of communication in success	"Healthier relationships increase her self-confidence and help her make better decisions." (Teacher 7)
	Listening to close individuals	"She listens much more to people who are close to her and whom she loves." (Parent 1)
	Seeking help from others	"By asking questions from people of different ages without embarrassment, he can achieve great success." (Teacher 5)
	Activation of strengths under suitable conditions	"There are some hidden strengths in every person that do not appear until the person enters that environment or activity." (Parent 8)
	Role of calmness in maintaining strengths	"He usually had a calm and quiet behavior when he used his strengths." (Teacher 2)
	Acceptance of differences	"Everyone has their own opinion." (Child 3)
Psychological Capital	Acceptance of mistakes	"If I have done something, I will not deny it by saying I did not do it." (Child 3)
	Goal orientation in response to events	"She writes her small goals on a board on the refrigerator." (Parent 5)
	Acceptance of failure	"I have some weaknesses, problems, and harms too." (Child 3)
	Encouragement as a trigger for psychological resources	"Praising him, encouraging him, paying attention to him, and speaking kindly to him made him show his strengths better and more." (Teacher 4)
Significant Others	Expressing strengths in the presence of close individuals	"When he spends time with his friends, he shows this trait more." (Teacher 3)
	Parental flexibility in accepting viewpoints	"He tries to be flexible, even when something is against his belief, and tries to maintain respect." (Parent 8)
	Role of parents in expressing strengths	"In my opinion, his strengths were because of his family, especially his mother." (Teacher 5)
	Supportive behavior of close individuals	"When he has problems on the way to reaching his goals, they help him." (Teacher 1)
	Modeling from close individuals	"I learned kindness from my mother, social intelligence from my mother, and love of learning from my father." (Child 4)
	Solvable family conflicts	"I sit and talk about my problems with his father, and we try to solve our problems between ourselves." (Parent 1)
	Satisfaction with what one has	"We try to remind her: look, you have this ability, you have these things in your life, be satisfied and grateful." (Parent 5)

1. Enjoyment of Learning

The first category, Enjoyment of Learning, reflected participants' accounts of learning as a context in which children's strengths became visible, meaningful, and reinforced. Children, parents, and teachers described general knowledge, successful learning, opportunities for expression in school, and the desire to make others happy as conditions that supported the development and display of strengths.

A teacher described how the school context created opportunities for a child's strengths to become visible: "I saw these strengths a lot in her studies, in the classroom, and during teaching" (Teacher 8). Similarly, a parent emphasized the child's successful academic learning by stating, "Her learning is very good in some grades"

(Parent 2). These accounts suggest that, for some participants, learning was not only an academic process but also a setting in which children could express persistence, confidence, and love of learning.

Participants also connected learning-related experiences with social and emotional motivation. One parent stated, "When she sees that she is making people around her happy, she becomes more excited and wants to continue" (Parent 3). This account suggests that, for some children, learning and strength expression were tied to the positive emotional responses of others.

Teachers also referred to general knowledge as a visible sign of children's learning-related strengths. One teacher stated, "Her general knowledge is very high" (Teacher 7). Across these interviews, participants

described enjoyment of learning as an antecedent that could create opportunities for children to practice and display character strengths such as perseverance, confidence, responsibility, and love of learning.

2. Constructive Environmental Resources

The second category, Constructive Environmental Resources, referred to environmental conditions that participants perceived as enabling, supporting, or activating children's character strengths. These conditions included adequate resources, supportive communication, constructive competition, help-seeking opportunities, calmness, and situations that allowed latent strengths to become visible.

Participants repeatedly emphasized that children needed appropriate resources and opportunities to express their strengths. A teacher noted, "Good books, good teachers, and all of these help her strengths remain stable" (Teacher 1). A parent similarly explained that when a child is interested in an activity but the family cannot provide the necessary resources, the child's progress may be limited: "If the family cannot provide it, the child cannot progress in that area" (Parent 7). These accounts suggest that strengths were perceived as partly dependent on access to educational and developmental opportunities.

Competition was also described as a condition that could activate strengths. One teacher explained, "In situations where winning and ranking are important, their strengths show more" (Teacher 6). A parent similarly stated, "He really likes to be at the top of the leaderboard" (Parent 5). These examples indicate that competitive contexts were sometimes perceived as activating effort, motivation, and persistence.

Social relationships and communication were another environmental resource. A teacher stated, "Healthier relationships increase her self-confidence and help her make better decisions" (Teacher 7). Participants also described the importance of listening to trusted people. A parent explained, "She listens much more to people who are close to her and whom she loves" (Parent 1). In addition, seeking help from others appeared as a resource that supported success. One teacher noted, "By asking questions from people of different ages without embarrassment, he can achieve great success" (Teacher 5).

Several participants described character strengths as capacities that become visible only under suitable

conditions. A parent explained, "There are some hidden strengths in every person that do not appear until the person enters that environment or activity" (Parent 8). This quotation shows that participants did not always view strengths as constantly visible traits; rather, they described them as capacities that may require appropriate contexts to be activated.

Calmness was also described as an environmental and emotional condition that helped strengths remain visible. A teacher stated, "He usually had a calm and quiet behavior when he used his strengths" (Teacher 2). In contrast, another teacher described how emotional disturbance could obscure strengths: "Anger, hatred, and dissatisfaction become so dominant in his mood that he ignores his strengths, and that part of his strengths does not appear" (Teacher 4). These accounts suggest that calm and emotionally safe conditions were perceived as important for sustaining the expression of character strengths.

3. Psychological Capital

The third category, Psychological Capital, captured children's internal psychological resources that participants perceived as supporting the expression and maintenance of character strengths. This category included acceptance of differences, acceptance of mistakes, goal orientation, acceptance of failure, and encouragement as a trigger for psychological resources.

Children's acceptance of differences appeared in statements about recognizing that people have different abilities and opinions. One child stated, "Everyone has their own opinion" (Child 3). Another child explained that abilities may differ across individuals: "Maybe one of your friends has focused only on football and is very good at it, but you have learned more sports" (Child 5). These statements suggest that acceptance of differences was linked to perspective-taking and flexible social understanding.

Acceptance of mistakes was another psychological resource. One child stated, "If I have done something, I will not deny it by saying I did not do it" (Child 3). A teacher also described a child who corrected his behavior after making a mistake: "Later, he would come and apologize and try to make the other person feel better by talking" (Teacher 5). These accounts suggest that acknowledging mistakes was perceived as a condition for moral growth and responsible behavior.

Goal orientation was described by both parents and teachers. A parent stated, “She writes her small goals on a board on the refrigerator” (Parent 5). A teacher explained, “He can manage time and planning better, revise his goals based on experience, and choose a more desirable goal” (Teacher 6). These statements indicate that goal-directedness was perceived as helping children maintain effort and organize their behavior.

Participants also referred to acceptance of failure and recognition of limitations. One child said, “I have some weaknesses, problems, and harms too” (Child 3). Another child directly acknowledged failure by saying, “I really lost” (Child 7). Such statements suggest that accepting failure was interpreted as part of children’s resilience and psychological flexibility.

Although encouragement came from others, participants often described it as a trigger that activated internal psychological resources such as confidence, persistence, and motivation. For this reason, encouragement was retained in the category of Psychological Capital as a proximal trigger of children’s self-regulatory and motivational resources. A child stated, “When I study well and do well on my exams, they buy me a gift and say good things to me” (Child 2). A teacher similarly explained, “Praising him, encouraging him, paying attention to him, and speaking kindly to him made him show his strengths better and more” (Teacher 4). These accounts show that encouragement was not merely described as an interpersonal behavior; it was also described as a condition that helped children mobilize their own strengths.

4. Significant Others

The fourth category, Significant Others, referred to the role of parents, teachers, close peers, and trusted individuals in shaping, activating, modeling, supporting, or constraining children’s character strengths. In this category, participants described several mechanisms: trusted relational contexts, parental flexibility, parental influence, supportive behavior, modeling, repair of family conflicts, and encouragement of satisfaction and gratitude.

Some children and teachers described strengths as more visible in the presence of trusted people. A teacher stated, “When he spends time with his friends, he shows this trait more” (Teacher 3). A child similarly explained, “I feel more comfortable in my family; I can be more like myself there” (Child 7). These accounts suggest that

trusted relationships provided a psychologically safe context for strength expression.

Parental flexibility was also described as a relational condition that supported strengths. One parent stated, “He tries to be flexible, even when something is against his belief, and tries to maintain respect” (Parent 8). Another parent noted the difference between children’s and parents’ perspectives: “Our parents’ thoughts, opinions, and overall views are very different from ours” (Parent 2). These accounts suggest that flexibility in family interactions may create space for children’s viewpoints and strengths to be expressed.

Parents were described as having a dual role: they could either support or inhibit strengths. A teacher described the positive role of family by stating, “In my opinion, his strengths were because of his family, especially his mother” (Teacher 5). However, a divergent case showed that family interactions could also suppress strengths. Another teacher stated, “Because of reasons in the family, these strengths had been completely put down” (Teacher 4). This negative case indicates that significant others were not always described as supportive; in some cases, family responses were perceived as constraining the child’s strengths.

Supportive behavior from close individuals was another mechanism. A teacher stated, “When he has problems on the way to reaching his goals, they help him” (Teacher 1). A parent described practical and emotional involvement by saying, “Sometimes I come home tired from work, but when he says, ‘Play with me,’ I see myself at his age and play with him” (Parent 8). These examples suggest that emotional and practical support helped children maintain motivation and express positive qualities.

Modeling was also central to this category. One child explicitly connected strengths with family role models: “I learned kindness from my mother, social intelligence from my mother, and love of learning from my father” (Child 4). A parent similarly noted that the child reflected qualities seen in the family: “The same honesty and things that I have, she has many of them too” (Parent 7). These quotations show that participants perceived strengths as learned through observation and everyday interaction with close individuals.

Participants also described the importance of resolving family conflicts. A parent stated, “I sit and talk about my problems with his father, and we try to solve

our problems between ourselves so that you do not get hurt" (Parent 1). A child also described family conflict as something that could be repaired over time: "After a few weeks, it becomes okay again, but it happens a lot" (Child 1). These accounts suggest that the presence of conflict did not necessarily prevent strength development when conflict was perceived as solvable or repairable.

Finally, significant others were described as shaping children's satisfaction with what they had. A parent stated, "We try to remind her: look, you have this ability, you have these things in your life, be satisfied and grateful" (Parent 5). A child similarly connected awareness of personal strengths with gratitude: "I thank God that I am a happy person. Many people are sad or depressed. I am very happy that I am happy, persistent, and enthusiastic" (Child 8). These accounts indicate that close individuals may help children interpret their strengths through satisfaction, gratitude, and positive self-understanding.

Overall, the findings suggest that participants perceived the antecedents of character strengths as arising from the interaction of learning experiences, environmental resources, psychological capital, and significant relationships. Enjoyment of Learning reflected the role of general knowledge, successful learning, school-based opportunities, and children's desire to keep others happy. Constructive Environmental Resources captured the importance of resources, communication, competition, calmness, help-seeking, and enabling conditions. Psychological Capital referred to children's acceptance-based, self-regulatory, motivational, and resilience-related resources. Significant Others described the mechanisms through which parents, teachers, peers, and close individuals modeled, supported, reinforced, or sometimes constrained children's strengths.

The findings also indicate that character strengths were not described by participants as isolated internal qualities. Rather, they were described as capacities whose expression depended on conditions such as meaningful learning, supportive environments, emotional calmness, encouragement, trusted relationships, and opportunities to practice strengths in everyday home and school contexts.

Discussion and Conclusion

This study explored the perceived antecedents of character strengths in children aged 10 to 12 through interviews with children, parents, and teachers in non-profit primary schools in Borazjan, Bushehr Province, Iran. The findings suggested four interrelated domains: Enjoyment of Learning, Constructive Environmental Resources, Psychological Capital, and Significant Others. Rather than treating these domains as fixed or universal causal factors, the present study interprets them as context-bound conditions and processes through which participants perceived character strengths to emerge, become activated, and be maintained in everyday home and school contexts.

A central contribution of the findings is the distinction between character strengths as relatively stable dispositions and their context-sensitive expression. The participants did not describe strengths as isolated internal traits that appear automatically across all situations. Instead, children's strengths were described as more visible when children experienced meaningful learning, supportive environmental conditions, psychological readiness, encouragement, and trusted relationships. This interpretation is consistent with the view that character strengths can be understood as positive capacities for thinking, feeling, and behaving that may be developed and improved through practice, context, and intentional support (Niemiec & Pearce, 2021). It is also consistent with positive youth development perspectives, which emphasize that children's strengths develop through interactions between individual assets and supportive developmental contexts (Park, 2004).

Enjoyment of Learning

The first domain, Enjoyment of Learning, was perceived by participants as a condition that supported children's motivation, confidence, and willingness to express strengths. Children, parents, and teachers described learning-related experiences such as having general knowledge, learning well in lessons, demonstrating strengths at school, and wanting to make others happy. These accounts suggest that learning may function as a meaningful context in which children recognize their abilities and practice strengths such as perseverance, confidence, responsibility, and love of learning.

This finding aligns with [Weber and Harzer \(2022\)](#), who showed that enjoyment of learning, school satisfaction, academic self-efficacy, and character strengths are meaningfully related in the context of positive schooling. However, the present findings should not be interpreted as showing that enjoyment of learning directly causes character strengths. Rather, participants perceived enjoyable and successful learning experiences as contexts that made children's strengths more visible and meaningful. For example, when children experienced progress in learning or had opportunities to express their knowledge in the classroom, parents and teachers described them as more motivated, more confident, and more willing to use their abilities.

The findings also showed that learning was not only cognitive or academic. Some children connected learning and effort with the desire to make others happy. This suggests that, in this sample, learning was partly embedded in relational and emotional meanings. Therefore, enjoyment of learning may be interpreted as both an educational and motivational antecedent: it provided opportunities for children to practice strengths while also strengthening their sense of competence and social value. This interpretation is consistent with the idea that positive educational settings can support both learning and well-being when they create opportunities for engagement, success, and meaningful participation ([Lottman et al., 2017](#); [Weber & Harzer, 2022](#)).

Constructive Environmental Resources

The second domain, Constructive Environmental Resources, referred to conditions that participants perceived as enabling or constraining the expression of character strengths. These included access to educational resources, supportive school structures, constructive competition, communication, opportunities for help-seeking, calmness, and suitable situations in which strengths could become visible. Participants' accounts suggested that strengths may remain hidden or weakly expressed when environmental conditions do not allow children to practice or display them.

This interpretation is consistent with the broader view that strengths are not expressed in a vacuum but are shaped by available opportunities and social contexts. In the present study, resources such as good books, good teachers, learning opportunities, and emotionally safe environments were described as helping children maintain or express strengths.

Constructive competition was also described by some participants as a setting that activated effort and perseverance. However, this should be interpreted carefully. Competition may support motivation for some children, but in other contexts it may also create pressure or anxiety. Therefore, the finding is best understood as participants' perception that structured and supportive forms of competition may activate strengths when they occur in emotionally safe and developmentally appropriate settings.

The data also highlighted the importance of calmness and emotional safety. Participants described children's strengths as more visible when children were calm and less visible when anger, dissatisfaction, or emotional distress dominated. This finding supports the interpretation that environmental resources include not only material or educational resources but also emotional conditions. In this sense, constructive environments may operate as "activation contexts" for character strengths: they do not create strengths alone, but they may provide conditions under which strengths can be practiced, recognized, and reinforced. This interpretation is compatible with culturally grounded and school-based approaches to strengthening character, which emphasize the role of structured educational environments in supporting students' strengths and well-being ([Hassaniraad et al., 2020](#); [Lottman et al., 2017](#)).

Psychological Capital

The third domain was labeled Psychological Capital to maintain conceptual consistency across the manuscript. In this study, Psychological Capital refers to children's self-regulatory, motivational, acceptance-based, and resilience-related psychological resources. This category included acceptance of differences, acceptance of mistakes, goal orientation, acceptance of failure, and encouragement as a trigger for psychological resources. The label Psychological Capital was selected because these codes collectively reflected internal psychological resources that may help children regulate behavior, sustain motivation, respond constructively to mistakes and failure, and mobilize strengths in everyday situations.

The findings suggest that participants perceived these psychological resources as supporting the expression and maintenance of character strengths. For example, children who acknowledged mistakes, accepted

differences, set goals, or recognized failure were described as better able to continue effort, regulate reactions, and act responsibly. This interpretation is consistent with Zhu et al. (2021), who found that psychological capital in children was associated with fewer emotional and behavioral problems and more positive social behavior. However, the present study does not claim that psychological capital directly produces character strengths. Rather, the findings suggest that participants perceived psychological capital as an internal resource that may help children activate and sustain strengths in challenging or socially meaningful situations.

The placement of encouragement within Psychological Capital requires clarification. Encouragement clearly originates from significant others, such as parents and teachers. However, in participants' accounts, encouragement was often described not only as an external relational behavior but also as a proximal trigger that activated children's confidence, motivation, persistence, and willingness to express strengths. For this reason, encouragement was interpreted as a bridge between Significant Others and Psychological Capital. It was retained in Psychological Capital because the data emphasized how encouragement helped children mobilize internal resources. At the same time, the overlap indicates that the four categories should not be understood as fully separate compartments; rather, they interact dynamically.

This interpretation also helps avoid overextending the concept of Psychological Capital. The findings do not justify describing Psychological Capital as the sole "engine" of character. Instead, Psychological Capital appears to be one part of a broader developmental system. Children's acceptance, goal orientation, and response to encouragement may support the expression of strengths, but these resources were described in connection with learning experiences, relational support, and environmental conditions.

Significant Others

The fourth domain, Significant Others, captured the perceived role of parents, teachers, peers, and close individuals in shaping the expression and meaning of children's character strengths. Participants did not describe significant others only as general sources of support. Rather, they described several mechanisms

through which significant others appeared to matter: modeling, emotional support, practical support, reinforcement, psychological safety, parental flexibility, and the repair or management of family conflict.

Modeling was particularly visible in children's accounts. Some children explicitly described learning kindness, social intelligence, or love of learning from parents. This supports the interpretation that strengths may be learned and practiced through observation of close adults. This interpretation is consistent with Bandura's social learning theory, which emphasizes that children acquire behaviors partly through observation, modeling, and reinforcement (Bandura & Walters, 1977). In the present study, modeling did not appear as a formal teaching process; rather, it was embedded in ordinary family and school interactions.

The findings also suggested that trusted relationships provided a psychologically safe context for expressing strengths. Children and teachers described strengths as more visible when children were with close friends or family members. This may indicate that children are more willing to show qualities such as kindness, humor, perseverance, or honesty when they feel accepted and emotionally secure. Parents and teachers also contributed through encouragement, attention, and practical support, which participants perceived as helping children continue toward goals or express positive behaviors.

Importantly, the findings also included a negative or divergent case. Parents and family contexts were not always described as supportive. One teacher's account suggested that some family responses could suppress or "put down" a child's strengths. This negative case is important because it prevents an overly idealized interpretation of family influence. Significant others may support, model, and reinforce character strengths, but they may also constrain or inhibit them when relationships involve criticism, conflict, lack of emotional safety, or limited recognition of the child's abilities. Thus, Significant Others should be understood as a relational domain with both enabling and inhibiting potential.

Antecedent Conditions, Activation Processes, and Maintenance Mechanisms

The findings can be organized into three interpretive levels: antecedent conditions, activation processes, and maintenance mechanisms. Antecedent conditions refer to broader contexts that participants perceived as

shaping children's opportunities to develop or express strengths. In this study, these included school context, family climate, access to educational resources, supportive relationships, and sociocultural expectations around learning, respect, and moral behavior.

Activation processes refer to more immediate situations in which strengths became visible. Examples included successful learning experiences, constructive competition, encouragement, calm emotional states, opportunities to help others, trusted relationships, and situations that allowed children to demonstrate ability or responsibility. These processes help explain why strengths may not appear consistently across all contexts. A child may have a strength, but it may become visible only when the situation provides emotional safety, encouragement, or an opportunity for expression.

Maintenance mechanisms refer to processes that participants perceived as helping strengths persist over time. These included repeated practice, goal-setting, parental and teacher support, modeling by close adults, reinforcement, recognition, emotional regulation, and children's growing ability to accept mistakes and failure. In this sense, character strengths were described not simply as personal attributes but as capacities maintained through repeated interaction between the child and the environment.

Proposed Conceptual Model

Based on the findings, a context-bound conceptual model is proposed. This model should be interpreted as an exploratory model grounded in participants' accounts, not as a tested causal model.

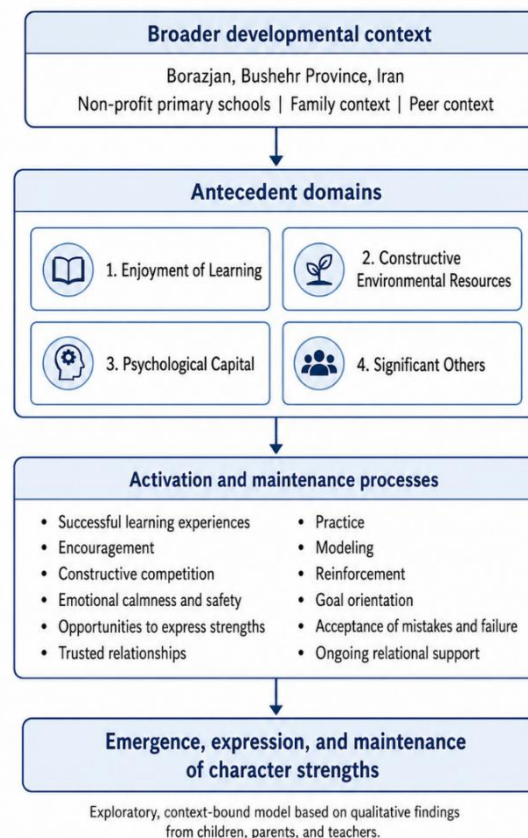


Figure 1

Proposed context-bound model of antecedents of character strengths

As shown in Figure 1, the proposed model suggests that character strengths in children aged 10 to 12 may be understood as developing through interaction among learning experiences, environmental resources,

psychological capital, and significant relationships. Enjoyment of Learning appears to provide opportunities for children to experience competence, successful learning, and meaningful participation. Constructive

Environmental Resources appear to provide material, social, and emotional conditions that support the expression of strengths. Psychological Capital reflects children's self-regulatory, motivational, acceptance-based, and resilience-related resources. Significant Others appear to contribute through modeling, support, reinforcement, encouragement, and relational safety. Together, these domains may contribute to the emergence, activation, expression, and maintenance of character strengths in everyday contexts.

Because the study was conducted in non-profit primary schools in Borazjan, Bushehr Province, Iran, the model presented in Figure 1 should be interpreted in relation to this educational and sociocultural setting. The findings may be transferable to similar contexts, but they should not be assumed to apply universally without further research in other regions, school types, and cultural environments.

Conclusion

The findings of this qualitative study suggest that children's character strengths are perceived by children, parents, and teachers as developing through interactions among learning experiences, environmental resources, Psychological Capital, and significant relationships. The four identified domains—Enjoyment of Learning, Constructive Environmental Resources, Psychological Capital, and Significant Others—were not interpreted as independent or fixed causes. Rather, they appeared as interrelated conditions and processes that participants associated with the emergence, activation, expression, and maintenance of character strengths in children aged 10 to 12.

The findings also help clarify the relationship between trait-like stability and contextual development. Character strengths may be understood as relatively stable positive dispositions, but their expression and development appear to be shaped by everyday contexts, including school experiences, family relationships, teacher support, peer interactions, emotional safety, encouragement, and opportunities for practice. Therefore, the present study does not deny the trait-like nature of character strengths; instead, it emphasizes that their expression and development are context-sensitive.

The proposed model presented in Figure 1 may inform strength-based educational and family practices by highlighting the importance of meaningful learning, supportive environments, Psychological Capital, and

relational scaffolding. However, because the study was exploratory and context-bound, the model should be considered a preliminary interpretive framework that requires further testing and refinement.

Limitations

This study has several limitations. First, the sample was purposive, small, and geographically restricted to non-profit primary schools in Borazjan, Bushehr Province, Iran. Therefore, the findings should be interpreted in relation to this specific educational and sociocultural context and should not be generalized statistically to all children aged 10 to 12.

Second, the study relied on interview data from children, parents, and teachers. Although triangulation across these three groups strengthened the analysis, the data remain based on participants' perceptions and may be influenced by recall bias, selective reporting, and social desirability. Children may have described themselves in socially desirable ways, and parents or teachers may have emphasized behaviors they considered educationally or morally valued.

Third, interviewer influence is possible. Although interviews were conducted by a researcher without a prior relationship with participants, the presence of an adult interviewer may have influenced how children described their strengths, mistakes, family relationships, or school experiences. Future studies should further strengthen reflexivity by providing more detailed reporting on interviewer assumptions, positionality, and how these were managed during data collection and analysis.

Fourth, because the interviews were conducted in Persian and the manuscript is written in English, translation may have affected the presentation of participants' meanings. Some culturally specific expressions related to respect, family expectations, morality, or gratitude may not be fully captured in English translation. Future reports should describe translation and back-translation procedures in more detail.

Fifth, although the study used child-parent-teacher triads, each group included only eight participants. This design allowed complementary perspectives, but it may not capture the full diversity of children's experiences across different school types, socioeconomic backgrounds, family structures, or cultural settings.

Sixth, the study was cross-sectional. It captured participants' perceptions at one point in time and therefore cannot show how antecedents of character strengths change across development. Longitudinal designs are needed to examine whether the identified antecedents predict later changes in children's character strengths.

Finally, triangulation helped compare child, parent, and teacher perspectives, but future studies should report more explicitly how triangulation changed category development, resolved disagreements, or modified interpretations. Including observational data from classrooms or family settings could also strengthen future research.

Suggestions for Future Research and Practice

Future research should examine the proposed model presented in Figure 1 in larger and more diverse samples. A particularly useful next step would be a longitudinal school-based study following students from grade 4 to grade 6. Such a study could combine child interviews, parent interviews, teacher ratings, classroom observations, and standardized measures of character strengths, well-being, and social behavior. This design would allow researchers to examine how learning experiences, environmental resources, Psychological Capital, and significant relationships interact over time.

Future studies should also compare different educational contexts, such as public and non-profit schools, urban and rural schools, and schools from different cultural regions. Such comparisons would help determine which antecedents are context-specific and which may be more broadly relevant to children's character development.

Mixed-methods research could further test the proposed model by combining qualitative findings with quantitative measures. For example, researchers could examine whether enjoyment of learning, perceived teacher support, parental encouragement, emotional regulation, goal orientation, and Psychological Capital predict changes in specific character strengths such as perseverance, kindness, fairness, and self-regulation.

Practically, the findings suggest that interventions aimed at cultivating character strengths should not focus only on the child as an individual. Programs may be more useful if they also strengthen the learning environment, increase opportunities for meaningful participation, support emotional regulation, involve parents and

teachers, and create relational contexts in which children feel safe to express and practice strengths.

Schools could incorporate activities that increase enjoyment of learning, constructive cooperation, reflective goal-setting, acceptance of mistakes, and recognition of strengths. Parents and teachers could be trained to use encouragement, modeling, autonomy-supportive communication, and emotionally safe feedback. Because significant others may either support or inhibit strengths, family and teacher involvement should be considered a central component of strength-based programs for late childhood.

Future intervention research could test a structured school-based program for grades 4–6 that integrates character strengths education, Psychological Capital-building activities, goal-setting, parent-teacher collaboration, and classroom activities designed to practice strengths in real situations. Such a design would provide a stronger basis for evaluating whether the antecedents identified in this qualitative study can be used to support children's character development over time.

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Declaration of Interest

The authors of this article declared no conflict of interest.

Ethical Considerations

The study protocol adhered to the principles outlined in the Helsinki Declaration, which provides guidelines for ethical research involving human participants. Ethical considerations in this study were that participation was entirely optional.

Transparency of Data

In accordance with the principles of transparency and open research, we declare that all data and materials used in this study are available upon request.

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Authors' Contributions

All authors equally contribute to this study.

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