

GENERAL KNOWLEDGE OF SPECIAL EDUCATION TEACHERS ABOUT THE CODE OF ETHICS

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Abstract: Ethics is a branch of philosophy that deals with human beliefs and values. It is a broader concept that includes distinguishing good from bad and is applied in everyday and professional calling and decisions. The code of ethics and personal ethics of the special educator should influence the professional decisions that will be made and which are in the best interest of the child. The goal of this research is to examine the knowledge of special education teachers about what the code of ethics of their profession. Our results related to the general knowledge of special education teachers about the existence of the code, indicate the need to include in the curriculum of the Faculty subjects related to ethics and ethical behavior. A third of respondents do not know that the professional code of ethics exists, which indicates shortcomings in the education of special education teachers. The majority of respondents (68.8%) believe that the code of ethics is a set of rules that should be followed in a certain profession, while the largest number of respondents (37.5%) believe that the code of ethics should refer only to certain guidelines and recommendations on how to behave in ethically conflicting situations. The results of our research indicate the need for greater knowledge of the code of ethics and an understanding of its role. The results of our research also raise the question of the adequacy of decision-making in working with vulnerable people that are guided by subjective value systems, as well as how such behavior affects the children they work with.

Key Words: Professional ethics, ethical code, special educators, special education.

1. INTRODUCTION

Ethics is a branch of philosophy that deals with human beliefs and values. It is a broader concept that includes distinguishing good from bad and is applied in everyday and professional calling and decisions (Gülcan, 2015). Warnik and Silverman emphasize the importance of ethics in education and discuss how teaching staff face most of the ethical dilemmas as do people from other professions. These authors also highlight the problem of insufficient attention given to ethics in education (Warnick & Silverman, 2011). Also, other authors warn about the lack of research dealing with the problems of ethics in special education and emphasize the importance of studying ethics in educational institutions (Paul et al., 2022).

The code of ethics and personal ethics of the special educator should influence the professional decisions that will be made and which are in the best interest of the child (Bon & Bigbee, 2011). According to Campbell (Campbell, 2001), the code of ethics should provide a framework that would guide professionals on how to act, while Joseph and Ephron (Joseph & Ephron, 1993) emphasize that teachers should develop their own code of ethics to adhere to in order to be prepared for the many situations they will find themselves in.

This research provides an insight into what percentage of special education teachers are aware of the existence of the code of ethics of the profession, which therefore implies whether they take it into account when working with clients or not.

Bearing in mind the above, the goal of this research is to examine the knowledge of special education teachers about what the code of ethics of their profession.

2. METHODOLOGY

a. SAMPLE

The sample included 144 respondents who are graduate special education teachers of various profiles, who work on the territory of the Republic of Serbia in different types of institutions. The sample consisted of 93.1% of female respondents ($N = 134$) and 6.9% male ($N = 10$), out of which 26.8% ($N = 53$) have less than five years of work experience, 6-15 years of work experience was present in 33.3% of the sample ($N = 48$), while 29.9% ($N = 43$) has over 16 years of work experience. 36.1% of the respondents ($N = 52$) have obtained bachelor degree, while 63.9% of the respondents ($N = 92$) have masters or doctorate degree. 72.2% of the respondents work in a state sector ($N = 104$), 13.9% ($N = 20$) work in a private sector, 11.8% work parallel in both sectors ($N = 17$) and only 2.1% of the respondents are currently unemployed ($N = 3$). 11.2% make less than 50.000 dinars per month ($N = 16$), 68.8% make between 50.000 and 100.000 dinars a month ($N = 99$), while only 3.5% of the respondents ($N = 5$) have an average monthly income that is above 100.000 dinars.

b. INSTRUMENT

The questionnaire distributed to respondents refers to general knowledge about the code of ethics and it consists of three questions. The first question refers to whether the respondents are familiar with the existence of the code of ethics of the special education profession. The second question refers to whether the respondents know what the ethical code is, and the third to whether the respondents know what the ethical code should include.

The second and third questions have several answers, from which respondents should choose the one they think is correct, that is, correct, while the first question was offered a dichotomous answer (yes or no).

In addition to the questionnaire described above, a socio-demographic questionnaire was used to collect additional information about the respondents, which are related to the gender of the respondents, years of service, the highest completed degree, sector of employment, as well as the average monthly income of the respondents.

c. STATISTICAL DATA PROCESSING

Data processing was performed in the SPSS (*Statistical Package for the Social Sciences*) program for statistical data processing. Descriptive statistics methods were used to describe participants' responses on the used instrument.

3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Looking at Table 1, we can determine that two-thirds of the respondents know that there is a code of ethics for the special education professionals, while one-third of the respondents do not know that the code exists. The majority of respondents (68.8%) believe that the code of ethics is a set of rules that should be followed in a certain profession, while the largest number of respondents (37.5%) believe that the code of ethics should refer only to certain guidelines and recommendations on how to behave in ethically conflicting situations.

Table 1.
Descriptive values of individual items

Question	Responses	f	%
Is there a code of ethics for the special education profession?	Yes	94	65.3
	No	50	34.7
What is a code of ethics??	A set of rules that should be followed in a certain profession	99	68.8
	Recommendations for rules that should be followed in a certain profession	22	15.3
	Code of the Government of the Republic of Serbia on conduct in a certain profession	19	13.2
	An agreement with a client or an institution where someone works about the rules that should be followed when working in a certain profession	4	2.8

What should the ethical code of a particular profession include?	Concrete ethically problematic situations and solutions, what should be done in those situations	42	29.2
	Guidelines and recommendations for dealing with certain ethically problematic situations	54	37.5
	General framework on ethical behavior and conduct in a certain profession	48	33.3

The worrying data is that a third of respondents do not know that the professional code of ethics exists, which indicates shortcomings in the education of special education teachers. Within the Faculty of Medicine and the Faculty of Dentistry, ethics is a mandatory subject within the studies, while the curriculum of the Faculty of Special Education and Rehabilitation does not include any subject within the basic and master's studies that relates to the ethics of the profession.

Our results related to the general knowledge of special education teachers about the existence of the code, as well as the data highlighted in the report *Forgotten Children of Serbia* (Disability Rights International, 2021), indicate the need to include in the curriculum of the Faculty subjects related to ethics and ethical behavior, which are pointed out as a necessity by other authors (Gurtu, 2019; Warnick & Silverman, 2011).

When it comes to the descriptive analysis of the obtained results related to what the code of ethics is, the majority of respondents believe that the code of ethics is a set of rules that should be respected, which is actually the ethical code of a certain profession (Aydin, 2006). However, when asked what the code of ethics should include, the majority of respondents point out that they think it should include only guidelines and recommendations for dealing with certain ethically conflicting situations, as opposed to specific situations and rules about what should be done in those situations. Bearing in mind that the code of ethics includes specific rules on how a person from a certain profession should act in ethically conflicting situations (Bakhtiari & Azimifar, 2013), it is important to determine why respondents from our sample have the stated discrepancy in their answers.

The research of Belinova and associates (Belinova et al., 2017) which studied the ethical principles respected by people in the field of education in their work indicated that the respondents are mostly guided by their personal feelings, and not by the respect of the code of ethics, when solving ethically conflicting situations. This may be one of the reasons why respondents from our sample do not want the code of ethics to give specific rules of behavior, but only recommendations based on which they can independently decide what to do in certain situations.

4. CONCLUSION

The results of our research indicate the need for greater knowledge of the code of ethics and an understanding of its role. The code of ethics is not given enough importance, which leads to subjective interpretations and acting in accordance with personal beliefs. Also, a significant part of the sample of special educators does not show an understanding of the essence of the code of ethics and the principles it contains. It is important to point out the necessity of teaching ethics as part of higher education, especially for professions that deal with people from vulnerable categories, such as people with intellectual disabilities.

In the concluding remarks, we make a recommendation for further research that would answer the following questions;

1. How do special educators resolve ethically conflicting situations?
2. What are the ethically problematic situations that special educators encounter?
3. What are the attitudes of special educators towards the procedures used in teaching children with intellectual disabilities that are potentially ethically problematic?

The results of our research also raise the question of the adequacy of decision-making in working with vulnerable people that are guided by subjective value systems, as well as how such behavior affects the children they work with. It is important to emphasize that the interest of the child must be a priority and that special education as a profession must maintain a standard that will enable this without exception.

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