

ETHICAL REASONING OF SPECIAL EDUCATORS

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Abstract: Ethical reasoning refers to application of internalized ethical principles into real life situations which are ethically conflicting and it helps determine whether someone acts ethically in certain practical job-related situations. This research presents an insight into the ways in which special education teachers approach the resolution of certain ethically conflicting situations. 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 questionnaire distributed to respondents was designed by the authors of this research and consisted of 12 ethically problematic situations to which three answers are given and respondents were supposed to mark the answer they think is correct. The listed ethically problematic situations are taken from the book *Practical ethics for effective treatment of autism spectrum disorder* (Brodhead et al., 2018). The results obtained by this research show that special education teachers from our sample have a low sense of ethical reasoning. Gender, highest completed degree of studies, years of work service, type of employment and average monthly income did not prove to be predictors of ethical reasoning. The descriptive analysis discovered the issues that underlie the decision-making process in special education teachers. In conclusion, the importance of examining ethical behavior among special education professionals is elaborated.

Key Words: ethics, ethically conflicting situations, special education teachers, intellectual disability.

1. INTRODUCTION

Ethics is a branch of philosophy that examines concepts of right and wrong behavior and seeks to resolve questions on human morality. It is of great importance to examine ethics in all social studies and humanities (Haimes, 2002), especially in all professions related to working with people (Paola et al., 2010), which also includes special education.

Therefore, it is interesting that only two thirds of special education teachers from our region are aware that ethical code for their profession exists and from those who are aware of it, majority believes that ethical code refers to only guidelines and recommendations on how to behave in ethically conflicting situations (Arsić et al., 2023b).

Research conducted in our country (Arsić et al., 2023a) which aimed to examine ethical behavior of special education teachers and their opinion about what is ethical while working with children with developmental disabilities showed that special educators believe that more things are ethical than they really are. Therefore, authors state in their concluding remarks that it is necessary to develop a more comprehensive and clear ethical guidelines and codes for special education teachers in our country (Arsić et al., 2023a), because it can enhance the ethical reasoning of special education teachers in real-life ethically conflicting situations. Given the importance to understanding people's ethical choices, it is important to understand the ethical judgments and ethical reasoning (Sparks & Pan, 2010).

Ethical reasoning refers to application of internalized ethical principles into real life situations which are ethically conflicting (Edwards et al., 2008) and it helps determine whether someone acts ethically in certain practical job-related situations (Goethals et al., 2010).

This research presents an insight into the ways in which special education teachers approach the resolution of certain ethically conflicting situations. Bearing in mind the above, this research aimed to examine the ethical reasoning of special education teachers in certain ethically conflicting situations.

2. METHODOLOGY

2.1. 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 structure of the sample according to socio-demographic characteristics is given in Table 1.

Table 1

Socio-demographic characteristics of the respondents

Variable	Category	f	%
Gender	Female	134	93.1
	Male	10	6.9
Work experience	0-1 years	11	7.6
	1-3 years	24	6.7
	3-5 years	18	12.5
	5-10 years	28	19.4
	10-15 years	20	13.9
	15-20 years	20	13.9
	20+ years	23	16.0
The highest degree completed	Bachelor degree	52	36.1
	Masters and PhD degree	92	63.9
Sector of employment	State	104	72.2
	Private	20	13.9
	Both sectors	17	11.8
	Unemployed	3	2.1
Average monthly income	Less than 30.000 dinars	5	3.5
	30.000-40.000 dinars	5	3.5
	40.000-50.000 dinars	6	4.2
	50.000-60.000 dinars	6	4.2
	60.000-70.000 dinars	43	29.9
	70.000-100.000 dinars	50	34.7
	More than 100.000 dinars	5	3.5
Type of employment	Private office	21	14.6
	Regular school/kindergarten	22	15.3
	Special school/kindergarten	82	56.9
	Residential setting	8	5.6
	Day care centre	9	6.3
	Unemployed	2	1.4

2.2. INSTRUMENT

The questionnaire distributed to respondents was designed by the authors of this research and consisted of 12 ethically problematic situations to which three answers are given and respondents were supposed to mark the answer they think is correct. The listed ethically problematic situations are taken from the book *Practical ethics for effective treatment of autism spectrum disorder* (Brodhead et al., 2018). Of the three answers offered, only one answer is correct, while the other two answers are scored as incorrect, so the maximum score that the respondents can achieve is 12. The reliability of the instrument used was $\alpha = .80$.

2.3. STATISTICAL DATA PROCESSING

Data processing was performed in the SPSS (*Statistical Package for the Social Sciences*) program for statistical data processing. In order to determine the reliability of the used instrument, Cronbach's alpha coefficient was used. Descriptive statistics methods were used to describe respondents' responses to the instrument used. To determine the differences between respondents of different genders and respondents in relation to the highest level of education completed, the t-test for independent samples was used, while to determine the differences between respondents in terms of years of service, employment sector, type of employment, as well as the amount of monthly income, one-factor analysis of variance was used.

2.4. RESEARCH IMPLEMENTATION PROCEDURE

The questionnaire created in the *Google Questionnaires* program was distributed online, through the e-mail addresses of special education teachers, as well as in *Facebook* groups with special education teachers of various profiles. It was emphasized to the respondents that the questionnaire refers to ethical dilemmas they encountered in their work with clients, and it was also emphasized that they fill out the questionnaire voluntarily and anonymously.

3. RESULTS

Descriptive analysis on the instrument used showed that the average score by the respondents from the sample indicated low ethical reasoning ($AS = 4.75$, $SD = 1.80$, $Min = 1$, $Max = 9$). Also, there were no respondents who had a mean score of over nine points. Table 2 shows descriptive values on each individual item on the used instrument, that is, their opinion about what is the right thing to do in the mentioned ethically conflicting situations.

Table 2.
Descriptive values of respondents' responses to individual items

Item	Offered responses	f	%
1-You have been working with the child for several months. One day the mother of the child you work with brings the child to you for treatment and informs you that she is currently having money issues and asks you if she can borrow 2000 dinars from you in order to buy diapers for the child. Which of the following would be your answer to your mother?	A-You will tell the mother that you will now go to the store to buy diapers, in order to avoid the problem of giving money to the mother.	50	34.7
	B-You will tell the mother that you understand the situation she is in, and that you would like to help her, but that it is not right to lend her money, considering that you are working with her child.	66	45.8
	C-You will give mother the money, but you will emphasize to her that it is only a loan and that she should pay you back. You will ask her when it suits her to return the money to you, in order to maintain positive relations with parents and family.	28	19.4
2-Your client is a child with cerebral palsy. The child's parents have an intellectual disability. For two years now, you have been training parents on how to conduct treatment in home services with your child, but the child is not making any progress. What will you do in that situation?	A-You will tell the parents that it is necessary for their training to be more frequent and more intense, due to the lack of progress in their child so far.	81	56.3
	B- You will contact the social services, which you will inform about the fact that you consider that the parents are not fit to take care of the child and you will ask them to intervene.	40	27.8

	C-You will leave the case to another colleague, or an expert of another profile, who would work with the family instead of you.	23	16
3-You work with an adolescent with ADHD. One day, you go to the store with your child and you notice that the boy puts a toy under his shirt. What do you do in that situation, or if you notice it after you leave the store?	A-You call the manager or store employee and report the incident and leave them to deal with the situation further. The child needs to learn to face the consequences of his behavior.	4	2.8
	B-You address the child directly and tell him that this behavior is unacceptable and demand that he returns the toy to the shelf.	133	92.4
	C- You require the child to report himself to the employees of the store, after which you verbally reprimand him for such behavior.	7	4.9
4-The mother brings a seventeen-year-old boy with ADHD to you for evaluation, so that you can start working with him. The boy persistently repeats that he does not want to do those "psycho tests" with you, what are you doing?	A- You explain the whole process to the child and if the child still repeats that he does not want to do it, you do not continue with the assessment.	104	72.2
	B-You immediately stop the assessment, because the child's consent takes precedence over the parent's consent.	11	7.6
	C-Since it is the parent who requested the evaluation, you proceed with the evaluation, because the child is a minor and you have the consent from the parents.	29	20.1
5-Because you work with an adult in residential care who has a severe intellectual disability. It is very difficult for you to determine what items or activities your client likes, so that you can use this as a reward when working with him. You have decided to implement a token system procedure in your work, which implies that every time he does something well, he receives a reward in the form of a token, which he can exchange for some reward. Since you don't know what the rewards might be, due to the client's limitations, you decide that the rewards will be the pillow he sleeps on in his room, the food he gets for lunch, and the personal hygiene products he uses every day.	A-This procedure is great, because those are items for which the client will be motivated for.	38	26.4
	B-This procedure should not be implemented.	74	51.4
	C-For implementation of this procedure you require a consent from the facility director.	32	22.2
6-During the last individualized educational plan (IEP) team meeting of the child you are working with, there was a visible disagreement between you and the child's mother regarding the goals that you believe are necessary for the child and what the mother believes, in the area related to the development of social skills. What will you do?	A-You will include in the IEP and implement only the goals that you consider beneficial to the child, given that you are the expert.	12	8.3
	B-Even though you don't agree with your mother, you will do as she wants.	19	13.2
	C-You will ask someone else from the team to explain to the mother why the goals you suggested are important.	113	78.5
7-With a child with whom you worked on the treatment of a certain problem, you achieved phenomenal results by implementing the intervention you designed, and at the conference you would like to write a paper about it, in order to inform your colleagues about that intervention and help them solve the same or similar behavioral problems in the children they work with. However, when you asked the parents of the child you were doing it with for permission to publish the results, they didn't seem interested.	A-You will write and present the article at the conference, because you think it is great to inform colleagues about new approaches.	10	6.9
	B- You will ask the parents for consent to publish the article, but if they do not give it to you, you will publish it without publishing personal data about the child.	84	58.3
	C- You will not publish the article	50	34.7

8-In your working life, you have only had the opportunity to work with people who have mild and moderate intellectual disabilities. A mother brings a child with autism spectrum disorder to you for treatment. What will you do?	A-You will recommend the mother to take the child for treatment by your colleague who has experience in working with children with autism spectrum disorder.	92	63.9
	B-You will suggest that the mother come in a few days, so that you have time to research a little more about the treatments and peculiarities of children with that diagnosis.	44	30.6
	C-You will refuse to work with a child, because you have no experience working with that population.	8	5.6
9-Work with a child with autism for several months. The child spoke for the first time and the parents are overjoyed. The new year has come and the child's parents buy you a very expensive watch as a gift, which they give you with the sentence "Thank you for making my child talk". What are you doing?	A-You refuse to accept such an expensive gift from the parents	104	72.2
	B-You will accept the gift, because you are aware of the significance of the child speaking to the parents	3	2.1
	C-You tell to the parents that you don't want them to buy you such expensive gifts in the future, because it's not right, but you accept the watch now.	37	25.7
10-You started working in a residential accommodation/home for people with disabilities. During the tour, the director of the centre explains to you that in case of inappropriate behavior of the user, they apply the procedure of isolating the user. He gives you the example of Marko, who is often verbally aggressive towards other users and constantly swears at them.	A-I will apply the procedure since it is in my job description and I received it as an order from my superior.	28	19.4
	B-You will explain to the director that you do not agree with their practice of isolating users in the case mentioned.	60	41.7
	C- You will ask the director to take you to the rooms where you can perform isolation, as well as to other procedures in those situations.	56	38.9
11-You have been selling Avon for months, and the mother of one of the child you work with found out about it and asked you if she could order a cream through you, because she doesn't know anyone who sells Avon, and she likes that cream very much.	A- You will sell the cream to the mother with a discounted price	20	13.9
	B- You will sell the cream to the mother for a regular price	74	51.4
	C- You will refuse to sell the cream	50	34.7
12-You started working in residential care for adults with disabilities. Fellow special education teachers introduce you and warn you about the case of thirty-two-year-old Milica, who constantly refuses to follow the rules of the home. Milica does not want to follow the rule where all users of the home must be in their rooms at 8 pm and in bed. What would you do with Milica?	A- You are discussing with your colleagues the ways in which you could convince Milica to obey the mentioned rule.	90	62.5
	B-You are telling to your colleagues from the center that you would like that rule to be changed and ignored because of Milica.	2	1.4
	C-You explain to Milica that it is important to follow the rules, which everyone else follows.	52	36.1

When it comes to lending money to the mother of a client they work with, 45.8% of respondents would not lend money. When it comes to the training of the client's parents, which proved to be ineffective, the largest number of respondents (56.3%) believe that the training should be of greater intensity. When it comes to witnessing a theft by a client, 92.4% would require the client to return the stolen item. In case of rejection of the assessment by the client, 72.2% of respondents would explain the process to the respondent again. When it comes to choosing a reward for the client in the form of food, necessary items for sleep and personal hygiene, 51.4% of respondents do not think that such a procedure should be implemented. In a situation where there are disagreements with the client's mother regarding the treatment plan, 78.5% of respondents would ask one of their colleagues to explain to the mother the importance of the goals that they consider adequate. 58.3% of respondents would publish a paper at a conference that does not include personal data about the respondent without parental consent, while 63.9% of respondents would recommend a colleague if they were to receive a client with a condition with which they have no experience. 72.2% of the respondents would not accept an expensive gift from the parents of the child they work with, while 41.7% disagree with the application of the isolation procedure in case of swearing by the respondents. If they were to sell Avon, 51.4% of the respondents would sell the cream to the mother of the client they work with at the regular price. 62.5% of the respondents believe that they should consult with their colleagues about the ways in which they can make the person with intellectual disability who refuses to sleep at 8 PM do it.

In order to determine the differences between the respondents based on gender and highest obtained degree, the t-test for independent samples was performed. The results of the t-test for independent samples show that the differences in the ethical reasoning of special education teachers in relation to gender are not statistically significant ($t = -1.94$, $df = 16.83$, $p = .07$), nor in relation to the highest completed degree of study ($t = 1.16$, $df = 142$, $p = .25$).

In order to determine the differences in the ethical reasoning of respondents who differ in terms of years of service, employment sector, type of employment, as well as the amount of monthly income, a one-factor analysis of variance was used. The results of the one-factor analysis of variance indicate that the differences in the ethical reasoning of special education teachers in relation to the years of service are not statistically significant ($F = .95$, $df1 = 6$, $df2 = 137$, $p = .46$), nor in relation to the employment sector ($F = .85$, $df1 = 3$, $df2 = 140$, $p = .47$), then neither in relation to the average monthly income ($F = 1.45$, $df1 = 7$, $df2 = 136$, $p = .19$), nor in relation to the type of their employment ($F = .84$, $df1 = 5$, $df2 = 138$, $p = .53$).

4. DISCUSSION

Bearing in mind that this part of the questionnaire consisted of 12 items with three answers each, of which only one was correct and that the maximum score the respondents could achieve is 12, the average value ($AS = 4.75$) indicates a lack of knowledge of how to adequately solve ethically problematic issues. situations that special education teachers from the sample may encounter during their work.

Research conducted in our country showed that sociodemographic variables such as gender, educational level, type of employment or monthly income amount of special education teachers are not predictors of ethical opinion or ethical behavior (Arsić et al., 2023a). Therefore, the results obtained in our research where the respondents did not differ based on socio-demographic variables are not surprising. Previous research conducted in our region (Arsić et al., 2023a) that examined ethical behavior of special education teachers showed that teachers who are employed in the public sector exhibit more ethical behaviors than those who are employed in the private sector, however this was not the case for ethical reasoning that we examined in our research.

Descriptive analysis of the answers in the first item which refers to giving a loan to the mother of a child with whom special education teachers work, it is worrying that more than half (54.2%) the respondent pointed out that she would lend money to the child's mother. When it comes to selling the cream to the client's mother, only 34.7% of respondents point out that they would not do that. Any relationship with a client that brings benefits to either party that are beyond the agreed upon (i.e. providing treatment services to the child of the said mother) is considered a multiple relationship (Turner et al., 2016), which is not considered ethical behavior in any profession (Brodhead & Higbee, 2012; O'Leary et al., 2017; Rosenberg & Schwartz, 2019; Sandoz et al., 2022).

When asked about the behavior of the respondents after two years of training the parents of the clients they work with without results, the largest number of respondents (56.3%) pointed out that they believe that the training of parents should be more intensive. Ethical behavior in the work of special education teachers and persons working with the population of persons with some kind of disability is considered to be decision-making based on the obtained data (Baumes et al., 2020; Contreras et al., 2021; Sellers et al., 2016). Implementing parent training for two years, which does not produce results, is ethically problematic, which implies that insisting on increasing the intensity of parent training is not adequate. If visible results do not exist after two years, you should not continue with the same training, but it should have been modified a long time ago. Bearing in mind that almost a third of the respondents pointed out that they would contact the social service in that situation, it indicates that they do not see that the potential problem is in their implementation of parent training, but rather believe that the problem lies in the incompetence of the parents (Brodhead, 2015; Butter et al., 2003; Connors et al., 2019; Maich et al., 2016).

When asked how the respondents from the sample would react in a situation where they noticed that a child, they work with is stealing from a store, almost all respondents (92.4%) answered that at that moment they would turn to the child with an order to return the toy to the shelf. This is an item from the domain of ethical reasoning to which the largest number of respondents answered adequately, i.e. in accordance with research that indicates that when working with children, it is most effective to deal with the consequences that occur immediately after the behavior, as opposed to the consequences that come after the passage of a certain time (Austin & Tiger, 2015; Ghaemmaghami et al., 2016; Lerman et al., 2015; Mangiapanello & Hemmes, 2015; Odum, 2011; Reed & Martens, 2011).

To the question related to the situation in which a seventeen-year-old subject with ADHD refuses to be assessed by a special education teacher, only 7.6% of respondents answered that they would stop the implementation of the assessment at that moment. It is important to point out that it is the client whose consent to a certain intervention is most important and that before any assessment or treatment is carried out, there must be the client's consent (Baumes et al., 2020; Klingele, 2010; Little, 2011), if legally he is able to give it. The same applies in situations where there is a disagreement with the mother about the goals that should be included in her child's treatment plan. Namely, only 13.2% of respondents pointed out that they would include those goals that the mother wants. It is important to keep in mind that no procedure can be carried out without the consent of the parents, even if the professional personally believes that the goals the parent insists on are not a priority for the child (Nelson & Simek, 2020; Wilson et al., 2020).

When it comes to the application of treatment rewards related to a sleeping pillow, food and personal hygiene products, the answers of the respondents were divided. 51.4% of respondents pointed out that these items should not

be used for rewards, while 49.6% of respondents believed that they should. It is worrying because 26.4% of the respondents pointed out that they consider this type of reward excellent, because taking away items that are essential and necessary for everyday life for the purpose of rewarding a person is considered unethical, and in some cases even illegal (Bland et al., 2018; Mangiapanello & Hemmes, 2015; Raiff, 2022; Richards, 2018). As a consequence of punishment, which implies the deprivation of necessary food, sleep and elementary hygiene products, learned helplessness is highlighted, which is manifested by the passivity of the person with disabilities (Maier & Seligman, 2016), then deteriorated relations with the person who implements such a form of punishment or reward, an increase in the manifestation behavioral problems and the like (Kirk & Wakefield, 2018; Leaf et al., 2022; Scott & Bennett, 2012). Also, research shows that it is more effective to use rewarding versus punishing as the primary approach in working with people with different types of intellectual and developmental disabilities (Hineline & Rosales-Ruiz, 2013; Kelly & Barnes-Holmes, 2015; Mohammed & Handiso, 2018).

When asked about presenting work at a conference on the results of an intervention that was carried out with a child without parental consent, 25.7% of respondents had done so in the past, 79.2% believed that it was ethically correct, and only a little more than a third of respondents (34.7%) pointed out that they will not publish the work without parental consent, 6.9% of the respondents pointed out that they will present the work independently of the consent of the parents, while 58.3% of the respondents pointed out that they will present data on the results of the intervention carried out with the child without presenting personal data about the child. It is important to point out that the achievements of the child during the implemented intervention are considered personal data (Trump et al., 2018), as well as that the Code of Professional Ethics of Special Education Professionals (Society of Special Education Professionals of Serbia, 2017) considers disclosing confidential information about clients as a violation of the Code of Ethics. Therefore, these results are worrisome, considering that disclosing personal information about people with whom special education teachers work is considered a serious violation of the code of ethics (Bottema-Beutel & Crowley, 2021; Phu & Byrne, 2018; Turner et al., 2016). However, some authors point out that members of certain cultures do not consider it a big problem and that they often disclose confidential information about clients on social networks (O'Leary et al., 2017) due to the absence of criminal prosecution of the person who commits such offenses (Luczaj et al., 2020). Therefore, we believe that the consequences for such forms of violation of the code of ethics in our environment should be tightened.

In a situation where a special education teacher establishes work with a client with a condition with which he has no previous experience, the largest number of respondents (63.9%) pointed out that he would provide the client's parents a recommendation for another specialist with more experience, which research shows is ethically correct (Brodhead et al., 2018; Contreras et al., 2021; Holland & Slowiak, 2021).

When asked about accepting an expensive gift from the parents of a child they work with, 72.2% of respondents indicated that they would refuse to accept the gift, while 27.8% indicated that they would accept it. Although the majority of respondents pointed out that they would not accept such a gift from their parents, it is certainly a worrying fact that more than a quarter of the respondents would accept the gift. Although codes of ethics for special education professionals in most countries state that accepting gifts from clients is prohibited (Turner et al., 2016; Rosenberg & Schwartz, 2019; Witts et al., 2020), some authors emphasize that accepting gifts should be individually prescribed for each country in individual codes of ethics, as it should be culturally determined (Brodhead, 2019; Olsen & Kelly, 2020). Regardless, it is important to highlight the importance of the refusal of gifts by clients (Beirne & Sadavoy, 2021), as it can consequently lead to the development of multiple relationships at work.

On the question related to the application of the procedure of isolating a person with ID as a consequence for swearing, more than half of the respondents indicated that they would carry out the specified procedure, while 41.7% indicated that they would not. Regardless of the degree of disability, it is necessary to respect the dignity of persons with disabilities (Beirne & Sadavoy, 2021; Kelly et al., 2021), regardless of the degree of impairment (Olive, 2022; Reid et al., 2018), which does not include the application isolation procedures in the given situation. When choosing the procedure that individuals working with people with disability will apply, it is important to point out that it is necessary to apply the procedure that is the least restrictive and aversive for the individual (Deochand et al., 2020; Giangreco et al., 2021; Menendez et al., 2017), which is not the case with the isolation procedure.

When asked about the thirty-two-year-old Milica who refuses to sleep at twenty o'clock, only two respondents pointed out that the said rule must be changed, that is, 98.6% of the respondents pointed out that they would make some effort so that Milica obeys the given rule. This result is in accordance with Munyi's research (Munyi, 2012), in which it was found that people with disabilities, regardless of age, are perceived as children throughout their lives, which is especially prevalent when it comes to their parents (Rogers, 2010). However, this is contrary to the principles of normalization which imply that all persons, regardless of the degree of disability, must be allowed to participate in activities that are acceptable for their age (Brown & Smith, 2012; Emerson, 2012; Fulcher, 2018), such as are the choice of music (Hinckson et al., 2013) or activities with which they would complete their free time (Carulla et al., 2011; Darcy & Dowse, 2013; Kagohara, 2011; Taylor Gomez, 2012), and thus the independent choice of time when the person with ID will go to sleep or even the lack of insistence by the staff to go to bed at 8 p.m.

5. CONCLUSION

The average score of four out of 12 indicates that special education teachers from our sample have a low sense of ethical reasoning in ethically conflicting situations they might encounter during their working life. Gender, highest completed degree of studies, years of work service, type of employment and average monthly income did not prove to be predictors of ethical reasoning.

Within the specialized domain of special education, a meticulous examination of decision-making processes among educators is imperative, particularly with an unwavering focus on ethical considerations and adherence to established ethical principles. The intricacies of ethical decision-making within the purview of special education necessitate a systematic approach to educate and empower educators, equipping them with the requisite skills to navigate complex scenarios with ethical acumen. The pedagogical imperative lies in the cultivation of a nuanced understanding of the ethical dimensions inherent in decision-making processes.

As scholars' endeavour to contribute to the extant literature, it is incumbent upon them to accentuate the ethical underpinnings of decision-making among special education teachers. The impact of ethical considerations on the lives of individuals under the care of special education professionals underscores the gravity of this scholarly pursuit. Hence, a fervent recommendation is extended to future researchers to undertake a more profound exploration of the ethical nuances inherent in decision-making processes, thereby enhancing the scholarly discourse and ultimately fostering a heightened ethical consciousness within the realm of special education.

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