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A Survey of Teacher Ethics and Behavior in Special Education

This survey pilot study investigated the extent to which ethics may be a problem in the field of special education, the extent to which special educators believe ethics is important as a topic of teacher training, and the extent to which violations of ethics and professional standards occur in classrooms for students with exceptional needs. Results indicate that special education teachers believe ethics may be a serious problem in the profession and that ethics is an important topic for training. Ethical violations may be occurring at problematic levels in several key areas of special education service delivery. A renewed commitment by special educators and training institutions to high levels of personal and professional ethics is needed.

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ETHICS IN SPECIAL EDUCATION

In recent years in the USA the professional behavior of teachers has come under increasing scrutiny by the general public and the media. Reports of shocking violations of appropriate conduct by classroom teachers are becoming more and more common on front pages of newspapers and on the nightly news, and faculty in colleges of education frequently hear anecdotal accounts of ethical misconduct from their students and colleagues in the public schools.

Special education teachers may be more likely than other educators to experience dilemmas which require well-reasoned deliberation in order to successfully resolve the ethical question, "What ought to be done in a given set of circumstances, all things considered?" (Howe & Miramontes, 1991, p. 8). Without adequate training and knowledge about appropriate ethics and professional conduct, serious violations of behavior by special educators appear likely to occur (Howe & Miramontes, 1992). Consider, for example, the following incidents, which were recently reported in the United States:

VIOLATIONS OF PROFESSIONAL STANDARDS

- In Texas, an elementary school teacher of students with emotional and behavioral disorders refuses to let his students go to the bathroom and, instead, orders them to use a trash can he has placed in front of the class.
- A South Carolina kindergarten teacher is suspended for writing "Where are my glasses?" with a marker on the face of a five-year-old student who had forgotten to wear them to school.
- A school district implements a program of sensory integration for students with learning disabilities in which students are required to crawl to and from class, wear glasses with pinholes for light, and are required to spend one hour of the 6-hour instructional day in "integrative exercise" activities such as hopping alternately from one leg to another while closing opposing eyes (Scheuermann & Evans, 1997).

Sadly, it is unlikely that these are isolated events. Almost twenty years ago Bateman (1982) concluded, "Most of today's special educators can list in a few moments numerous serious legal and ethical dilemmas encountered almost daily" (p. 57). The experience of the first author, whose graduate students can instantly generate a substantial list of gross ethical misconduct they have observed during their current school year, suggests that this phenomenon continues today.

Despite the prevalence of reports such as these, relatively little attention has been devoted to ethics in special education either as a topic of research or of teacher education (Cobb & Horn, 1989; Howe & Miramontes, 1991). Unfortunately, the scant existing literature suggests that special educators are generally unknowledgeable about ethics and standards for professional behavior, and that violations of professional ethics are a far-too-common occurrence in our classrooms for exceptional children (Howe & Miramontes, 1992; Scheuermann & Evans, 1997).

SURVEY PILOT STUDY

The purpose of this article is to discuss the results of a survey pilot study investigating the ethics and professional behavior of special education teachers in North Central Texas. The survey addressed the following questions: (1) To what extent is ethics a problem in special education? (2) To what extent do special education teachers believe ethics is important as a topic of teacher training? (3) To

what extent do violations of ethics and professional standards occur in public schools? This article will also address the implications of the results for teacher training, practice, and future research.

METHOD

Survey Instrument

A survey was conceptualized that was intended to address teachers' global perceptions about ethics in the field of special education. Originally, the authors sought to identify a list of ethical violations based on a thorough review of the ethics literature, with the intention of asking teachers to indicate the extent to which they had observed each of the listed violations. However, it soon became clear that compiling a comprehensive record of all possible ethical violations would be a massive, if not impossible, undertaking.

Eventually the authors developed an instrument based on the Council for Exceptional Children's (CEC) *Code of Ethics for Educators of Persons with Exceptionalities* and corresponding document, *CEC Standards for Professional Practice*. The Code of Ethics, originally adopted in 1983, is a set of eight general principles guiding the professional behavior of special education teachers (see Figure 1). The *CEC Standards for Professional Practice* provides more specific guidelines in such areas as instructional responsibilities, management of behavior, support procedures, parent relationships, and advocacy (Conner, 1997; Council for Exceptional Children, 1983; 1996). Under each of these areas are statements about how special educators should apply their professional expertise to ensure the provision of quality education for persons with disabilities. For example, under the Instructional Responsibilities section is the statement: "Create safe and effective learning environments which contribute to fulfillment of individual needs, stimulation of learning, and self-concept." Most of the 28 statements in the areas listed above were incorporated into questions on the survey instrument.

The survey is divided into five sections. Section I consists of four questions to determine teachers' opinions about the extent to which they believe ethics is a problem in special education, and the perceived importance of ethics as a topic of preservice and inservice teacher training. In this section, ethics is defined for respondents as "decisions and actions based on a professional judgement of what is right and wrong." In Section II, respondents are asked to indicate the extent to which they had personally experienced or observed specified instances of unethical behavior during the preceding 12 months and during their entire

FIGURE 1

CEC Code of Ethics for Educators of Persons with Exceptionalities

We declare the following principles to be the Code of Ethics for educators of persons with exceptionalities. Members of the special education profession are responsible for upholding and advancing these principles. Members of The Council for Exceptional Children agree to judge and be judged by them in accordance with the spirit and provisions of this Code.

- A. Special education professionals are committed to developing the highest educational and quality of life potential of individuals with exceptionalities.
- B. Special education professionals promote and maintain a high level of competence and integrity in practicing their profession.
- C. Special education professionals engage in professional activities which benefit individuals with exceptionalities, their families, other colleagues, students, or research subjects.
- D. Special education professionals exercise objective professional judgment in the practice of their profession.
- E. Special education professionals strive to advance their knowledge and skills regarding the education of individuals with exceptionalities.
- F. Special education professionals work within the standards and policies of their profession.
- G. Special education professionals seek to uphold and improve where necessary the laws, regulations, and policies governing the delivery of special education and related services and the practice of their profession.
- H. Special education professionals do not condone or participate in unethical or illegal acts, nor violate professional standards adopted by the Delegate Assembly of CEC.

Originally adopted by the Delegate Assembly of The Council for Exceptional Children in April 1983.

educational career. They are directed to respond on a scale ranging from Never (“You have experienced or observed NO instances of unethical behavior during the time indicated”), to Very Frequently (“You have experienced numerous or ongoing – approximately 25 or more – instances of unethical behavior during the time indicated”). Section III addresses teachers’ training and background in ethics, while Section IV contains questions about demographic information. Finally, Section V provides an opportunity for respondents to write any additional comments about ethics in special education.

Procedure

The survey instrument was field-tested by being administered to graduate students who were currently special education teachers, and special education faculty at the University of North Texas. After finalizing the format and content of the instrument, surveys were mailed to 417 special education teachers selected from school districts representing urban, suburban, and rural settings within the Dallas/Fort Worth metropolitan area. Participants from the large, urban district were randomly selected, while all special education teachers in the suburban and rural districts were included in the survey.

One hundred fifty-one surveys were returned (36%). Ninety percent of the respondents were female, and the overall average number of years of special education teaching experience was slightly less than 10 years. A large number of respondents reported their primary teaching setting to be in traditional self-contained (37%) or resource (22%) classrooms, while less than one percent of respondents said their primary assignment was in inclusion settings. Fifty-five percent of the teachers responding identified their students’ primary category of exceptionality as Learning Disabilities (Specific L.D.), and other high-incidence categories were also predominantly represented among the survey respondents (Mental Retardation, 11%; Seriously Emotionally Disturbed/Behavioral Disorders, 7%).

RESULTS

Opinions about ethics

Special educators appear to recognize that ethical problems exist within their teaching field and that ethics is an important component of teacher training. On the survey question addressing the extent to which ethics is a problem in the field of special education, the overall mean rating was 2.48 (where “1” indicates that ethics

is not a problem at all, and "5" indicates an extremely serious problem). Although this score might suggest that teachers generally view ethics as only a slight to moderate problem, it is important to note that a total of 42% of respondents indicated that ethics is a moderate, serious, or extremely serious problem in special education. Interestingly, teachers perceive that ethics is less of a problem at their own schools (where the overall mean rating was 2.20) than in the field at large.

When asked about the importance of ethics as a subject of special education teacher training, more than 70% of the teachers responded that ethics is a very important or extremely important topic for training at both the preservice and inservice levels. The overall mean of these questions was 3.86 (teacher training programs) and 3.58 (inservice training/staff development workshops), where a rating of 1 indicates "not at all important" and 5 means "extremely important".

Observations/Experiences

This study's primary purpose was to investigate the extent to which ethical violations occur within special education. Questions were designed to determine how often special educators have personally observed or experienced instances of behavior they consider to be unethical in the areas of instructional responsibilities, management of behavior, support procedures, parent relationships, and advocacy. On this section of the survey respondents circled ratings on a 5-point Likert-like scale to indicate how often they have observed ethical violations during the past 12 months and during their educational careers. Guidelines were provided which defined specific frequencies for each rating. For example, a rating of 2 (seldom) was defined as, "You have experienced or observed very few (approximately 1-5) instances of unethical behavior during the time indicated." A rating of 3 (occasionally) and 4 (often) corresponded to approximately 6-10 and 11-24 instances of unethical behavior, respectively. A rating of 5 (very frequently) indicates that ethical violations are numerous or ongoing (25 or more were observed).

Overall mean scores ranged from 2.67 in the area of instructional responsibilities to 1.82 in the area of parent relationships. These scores fall within a range suggesting that special educators observe instances of ethical violations at relatively low rates (they observe or experience them seldom to occasionally). However, further analyses may indicate that more serious problems exist in several key areas. Table 1 lists the 10 highest rated questions and their mean scores. Six of these questions involve instructional responsibilities, the area many would consider to be the most important function of special education service provision. Questions in which at least 25% of respondents reported observing or

TABLE 1

Top 10 Problem Areas: Rank Order of Questions

Survey Question:	Mean:
1. Failure to maintain class size and case loads which are conducive to meeting the individual instructional needs of individuals with exceptionalities.	3.24
2. Failure to create effective learning environments which contribute to the fulfillment of students' needs, stimulation of learning, and self-concept.	2.96
3. Failure to identify and use instructional methods and curricula that are appropriate to professional practice and effective in meeting the individual needs of persons with exceptionalities.	2.94
4. Failure to provide adequate instruction and supervision to support professionals, before they are required to perform services for which they have not been prepared previously.	2.88
5. Failure to participate in the selection and use of appropriate instructional materials, equipment, supplies, and other resources needed in the effective practice of the profession.	2.79
6. Failure to actively seek to improve government and/or legislative provisions for the education of persons with exceptionalities.	2.59
7. Failure to work cooperatively with and encourage other professionals to improve the provision of special education and related services to persons with exceptionalities.	2.53
8. Failure to use assessment instruments and procedures that do not discriminate against persons with exceptionalities on the basis of race, color, creed, sex, national origin, age, or exceptionality.	2.53
9. Failure to monitor for inappropriate placements in special education and/or intervene at appropriate levels to correct the condition when such inappropriate placements exist.	2.37
10. Failure to base grading, promotion, graduation, and/or movement out of the program on the individual goals and objectives for individuals with exceptionalities.	2.35

experiencing unethical practices either “often” or “very frequently” include the following teaching activities: maintaining an adequate class size or case load (46%), providing adequate instruction and supervision for support personnel (32%), creating effective learning environments (30%), seeking to improve government and legislative provisions for persons with exceptionalities (29%), and identifying and using appropriate and effective instructional methods and curricula (29%) or materials (25%).

Ethics Training

Responses on this section of the survey indicate that ethics is discussed very infrequently during undergraduate or graduate training in special education, and even less often during inservice or staff development workshops. Most respondents reported that they have little knowledge of the CEC *Code of Ethics and Standards for Professional Practice* in Special Education. Not surprisingly, few respondents reported that they use these documents as a guide to their teaching practices.

DISCUSSION

The results of this study support earlier conclusions that ethical violations in the practice of special education may be occurring at serious, and potentially harmful, rates (Bateman, 1982; Howe and Miramontes, 1991). However, this survey extends previous research by specifying several critically important areas of special education service delivery in which unethical behavior may be especially prevalent. These results also confirm that although ethics is widely considered to be an important topic of discussion and training in special education, it receives very little attention from teacher educators and researchers (Cobb & Horn, 1989; Stephens, 1985). Finally, the survey results add to the ethics literature by providing a voice for those currently teaching in special education classrooms; that is, the important conclusion that many special educators themselves view ethics and conduct as a significant problem within their profession.

These results are particularly disturbing because of their potentially negative impact on students with exceptionalities, their families, and society. If, for example, as reported above, 30% of special educators believe that the most basic and foundational standards of the profession (i.e., to provide effective learning environments for students with disabilities, and to use appropriate and effective instructional methods and curricula) are violated on an ongoing or very frequent basis, we must question whether or not we are succeeding in upholding and advancing *any* of the larger, overarching principles governing our field.

IMPLICATIONS FOR PROFESSIONAL PRACTICE

On a grander, and perhaps more speculative, scale, these results could also force us to confront questions about whether special education has ceased to make progress toward attaining its goals of excellence in the provision of services for persons with exceptional needs. Perhaps it is not too far-fetched to wonder if any profession has reached a stage of ethical stagnation if almost 50% of its practitioners report that professional conduct is even a moderate problem, let alone a moderate to extremely serious problem as we observed above. In fact, partly as a result of the widespread extent of ethical problems, some researchers have questioned whether special education can even be considered a profession (Birch & Reynolds, 1982; Heller & Ridenhour, 1983). Evaluated against 16 criteria defining a "true" profession, Birch and Reynolds (1982) concluded that special education has so far achieved only the status of a "semi-profession."

Such self-criticism is certainly not new to the field, nor necessarily unconstructive. Special education has long recognized the need for developing ethical and professional standards as a means of addressing minimal levels of teaching competence and as a stepping stone toward attaining universal excellence. The Council for Exceptional Children has responded positively to these criticisms by creating a rigorous Code of Ethics and Standards for Professional Practice (Council for Exceptional Children, 1983), and, more recently, by developing a common core of knowledge and skills for beginning special educators (Swan & Sirvis, 1992) and international standards for special education teacher preparation and certification (Council for Exceptional Children, 1996). Unfortunately, the results of this survey support the conclusion that few special educators are aware of these tools or use them on a regular basis to guide or improve their practice (Cobb & Horn, 1989).

Despite the rather gloomy picture painted by the above conclusions, the implications of these results are not without hope. But before widespread positive changes can occur, leaders in the field of special education must acknowledge the potentially devastating impact of simply ignoring the issue of professional ethics. In 1985, Stephens prophesied what appears to be happening within special education throughout much of the United States as we near the new millennium (Kauffman, 1999): "The absence of vigorous attention to [ethical] violations contributes to a lowered public confidence, to extensive criticism among special educators, and to a lack of respect from other professionals with whom we share responsibilities" (p. 187).

What is needed now in special education is a renewed commitment to high levels of personal behavior and professional ethics (Stephens, 1985). Teacher training institutions can play a pivotal role in this process by devoting more attention toward ensuring that beginning and inservice teachers have a thorough understanding of the many complex issues surrounding ethics and professional behavior, including knowledge of legal responsibilities (Bateman, 1982) and the special educator's role as a collaborative member in a community of teachers (Gable, Arllen, & Cook, 1993).

LIMITATIONS OF THE STUDY

There are several limitations of this survey pilot study which must be addressed. First, potential respondents were randomly sampled only in the large, urban school district used in the study. Respondents to the survey constitute a non-representative sampling of special education teachers because not all persons who received a survey replied. Second, because of the relatively low response rate, these results should only be considered speculative, and need further investigation before the results can be fully accredited. It is also important to remember that ratings on the survey reflect self-report data, and those teachers who responded may have been more motivated, or different in other significant ways, than typical special educators (see Borg & Gall, 1989, for a discussion of this issue).

Finally, these results are limited to a single metropolitan area within the United States. Overall, they should be thought of as preliminary and requiring further investigation. More extensive studies should be conducted which investigate this topic from a national and international perspective. It would be very interesting, for example, to compare the results of this survey with one investigating the ethics and professional behavior of special educators in Ireland.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, it is appropriate to characterize ethics and professional behavior in special education as disturbing, problematic, and exceedingly complex. Barbara Bateman (1982) summarized the ethical challenge for special educators by saying, "All the special educator must do is be true to self, handicapped children and their parents, the law, the school board, and the profession simultaneously"(p. 67). With a renewed commitment to addressing the issue of professionalism and ethics in special education, this challenge can become an opportunity.

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