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FORMING ETHICAL IDENTITY IN UNDERGRADUATE TRAINING FOR SPECIAL EDUCATORS. THE CONCEPT OF EDUCATIONAL EXPERIENCE AND ITS RELEVANCE IN EDUCATIONAL PROGRAMS FOR ADULTS WITH INTELLECTUAL DISABILITIES

INTRODUCTION

Special education as a profession requires not only professional knowledge, but also a solid ethical framework, empathy, and the ability to communicate respectfully. In this context, ethical identity is understood as an integrated set of values and professional principles that guide the actions and decisions of special educators in the complex and sensitive situations they often encounter in practice. The research uses a qualitative case study based on a narrative approach and triangulation of data obtained from semi-structured group reflections, focus groups, practice diaries, individual interviews, and analysis of digital communication of future special educators. The research includes the experiences of bachelor's degree students in special education who had the opportunity (on a voluntary basis) to participate as teaching assistants or teachers in regular educational activities for adults with intellectual disabilities, called „Come to our university!”. This educational program allows people with intellectual disabilities to actively participate in teaching in the university environment and at the same time supports the professional and ethical growth of students of special education by providing practical experience in organizing and assisting with teaching. The pilot project was launched in the spring of 2023 as a new voluntary initiative

by staff at the Department of Social Work and Special Education at the Faculty of Science, Humanities, and Education at the Technical University of Liberec for adults who, due to their health condition, have no opportunity to participate in regular forms of lifelong learning in the region. Thanks to continuous educational cycles, the program functions each semester as a sustainable form of learning tailored to the needs of people who are regularly educated; teaching takes place in two classrooms and the topics are based on previous years and the wishes of those involved, which ensures the relevance thereof.

The results show that direct experience and a safe, inclusive environment help overcome initial uncertainty, develop teaching and communication skills, and, above all, foster a deep sense of purpose and motivation in working with people with intellectual disabilities. The educational experience and tandem teaching prove to be a key component of moral growth and the formation of a professional ethical identity, which is essential for the high-quality, empathetic, and professional work of a special educator. We focus on the importance of inclusive and reflective methods in the education of future special educators and their influence on the ethical development of special education students. The profession of special educator integrates both supportive and educational functions and is inextricably linked to intensive interpersonal interaction, which requires not only professional expertise but also mature personal and ethical qualities. In relation to people with intellectual disabilities, these demands are further heightened, as quality and respectful support requires deep understanding, empathy, and a strong „ethical compass”. It is precisely the ethical identity of the special educator that becomes the cornerstone for building trust and effective cooperation. Ethical identity is an internally integrated set of values, principles, and professional standards that guides the actions and decisions of professionals. Its importance in the context of special education increases when dealing with complex situations that often affect the dignity, autonomy, and rights of people with special educational needs. Such situations require thoughtful and ethically sound approaches that go far beyond the mere application of learned methods and forms of work.

One effective tool for developing competencies and shaping professional identity is the concept of educational experience, based on the active involvement and personal experience of students. This approach is at the heart of a specific educational program of the Department of Social Work and Special Education, Faculty of Science, Humanities and Education, Technical University of Liberec, called „Come to our university!”, in which 25 adults with intellectual disabilities have been participating since March 2023. The program not only enables the development of skills and knowledge of the participants with intellectual disabilities in a safe and supportive environment, but also creates a suitable space for the professional (including ethical) growth of future special educators. In this article, we focus on the importance of ethical identity in the profession of special educators and on the concept of educational experience in the educational program for

adults with intellectual disabilities. The aim is to provide information on how the specific form of undergraduate training in the form of voluntarily chosen professional practice within the „Come to our university!” program influences the formation of the ethical identity of future special educators.

1. THE CONCEPT OF EDUCATIONAL EXPERIENCE AND ITS ROLE IN SHAPING ETHICAL IDENTITY

Special educators play both a helping and an educational professional role. The intensive interpersonal contact that is part of this profession places high demands on the professional competence of special educators and, in particular, on their personal integrity, mindfulness, ethical identity, and moral responsibility. The development of ethical identity in helping professions presupposes a cognitive process of acquiring theoretical principles and codes, i.e., a structured and rational approach to ethical decision-making, as presented, for example, by Kitchener and Anderson (2011, p. 61) or Nečasová (2001, p. 59). However, the affective aspect is equally important – the experiential and emotional component, which Jankovský (2018, p. 171) associates with psychoprophylaxis and the ability to find satisfaction in the meaningfulness of work. Full ethical competence requires a certain moral maturity, which in turn requires personal qualities (empathy, integrity, courage), the ability to self-reflect (working with prejudices, evaluating life values), and practical wisdom, which a person develops through their own experience.

Moral and ethical principles such as justice, autonomy, and responsibility only take on real meaning when an individual is confronted with real situations that evoke emotions, internal conflict, and the need for personal decision-making. It is precisely the experience of a dilemma and subsequent self-evaluation that transform abstract knowledge into a deeply rooted ethical attitude. Furthermore, current educational research increasingly emphasizes that the ability to work with emotions is a fundamental prerequisite for quality teaching. As Calandri et al. (2025) point out, a teacher’s emotional competence, including the ability to recognize and regulate their own emotions and those of others, is essential not only for improving academic performance but also for supporting students’ socio-emotional development. In the context of inclusive education, where supporting people with special educational needs requires increased sensitivity, the protective role of the educator becomes even more important. It is therefore essential to systematically develop the emotional intelligence and ethical identity of future teachers, which are the basis for building a safe environment and effectively managing ethical challenges (Calandri, et al. 2025). Practical experience, which confronts special education students with real emotional and ethical dilemmas, thus becomes a key area for the development not only of didactic, but above all moral and personal qualities – the ethical identity of future special educators. The findings of our research suggest that the theoretical assumption described above is justified by the authentic experiences of students during their practical training.

1.1. TANDEM TEACHING AND REFLECTIVE PRACTICE AS A TOOL FOR ETHICAL MATURATION AND PROFESSIONAL PROTECTION

The educational initiative „Come to our university!” is designed as a six- to seven-part cycle intended for clients of regional service providers (e.g., the Fokus organization and other centers of outpatient and day services for people with mental or multiple disabilities, social therapy workshops, local associations, homes for people with mental disabilities, sheltered housing, etc.) and also adults who participate in education with the support of family members or personal assistants. In justified cases, especially for participants requiring a high level of support, these support persons are allowed to be present during the lessons themselves. Each module contains two parallel thematic lines. Before each lesson, participants choose a topic for which they receive specific homework assignments, and based on this choice, they are divided into two groups. Both groups are led by student tandems, usually from the second or third year of the special education program at the Department of Social Work and Special Education, Faculty of Science, Humanities and Education. Each lesson lasts two hours (4:00 p.m. to 6:00 p.m.), including a 15-minute break during which participants mix between groups. The lessons were prepared within student groups: based on the teacher’s assignment, the students jointly proposed activities, discussion topics, and tasks. The prepared materials had been sent to the teacher for review and approval before the lesson took place. A department teacher was present at each lesson to supervise the implementation and provide professional supervision. The structure of the lessons combined activation methods, guided discussions, and assigned tasks, thus ensuring pedagogically well-thought-out and relevant content. This tandem model of leadership, complemented by professional supervision and regular reflection, creates a formalized environment for the development of reflective practice: students gain guided experience in organizing and leading lessons, receive ongoing feedback, and can thus systematically develop their professional competencies and ethical identity. At the same time, the model acts as a mechanism for professional protection, as it integrates supervision, planning, and evaluation of teaching materials into the process of direct work with participants.

For the effective preparation of future special educators, it is not enough to simply provide them with theoretical knowledge and practical experience. It is also important to create a structured space for their systematic processing. The model, which combines tandem teaching of special education students with their university teachers and follow-up focus consultations or supervision, represents just such a suitable space. Joint presence in the didactic field allows not only for modeling and testing of desired special education practices, but above all for sharing authentic situations „here and now”. Subsequent reflective meetings—both those held after each teaching unit and those held at the end of the semester—then serve as a platform for in-depth analyses of what actually happened

in practice during joint teaching (special education work). This is not just about didactic supervision, but also about cultivating ethical sensitivity and shaping the ethical identity of students.

Our systematic reflective approach directly responds to the challenges identified for consultation practice by Hansson and Lindblom (2025, p. 605), who also emphasize that ethical issues are deeply rooted in the very essence of the consultation process and that it is necessary to maintain constant awareness of them. Our reflective sessions with students become a space where ethical elements – present in the content of the work (and directly in the teaching content), in the setting of basic conditions, and in respecting the integrity of all participants – are explicitly named and discussed. Moreover, as Hansson and Lindblom (2025, p. 611) point out, it is also essential to consciously work with the power dynamics that are inevitably present in the consultant-consulted relationship (in our case, university teacher-university student, as well as student in the role of special educator and course participant of the „Come to our university!” program). In the role of mentor, the university teacher learns not only to pass on expertise, but above all to respond sensitively to the diverse needs of the special education student and to respect their integrity in the learning process.

1.2. MORAL GROWTH AND THE SIGNIFICANCE OF LIVED EXPERIENCE

Continuous and ethically conscious reflection can thus transform lived experience into lasting professional competence and prepare students for the complex and relationship-demanding reality of special education practice. The practical dimension of ethical maturation is all the more important because it touches on the very core of inclusion. As Singer (2024, pp. 63–64) points out, people with disabilities are often excluded not by their disability as such, but primarily by social conditions and barriers – for example, when an intellectual disability prevents them from meeting the formal requirements for admission to university. Our concept of reflective consultations, for example, specifically prepares future special educators for the current and future moral, communication, and ethical dilemmas that may arise from this situation. It teaches them how to engage in dialogue with students or experts from other fields who may be surprised by the presence of people with intellectual disabilities in a university environment, while also preparing them for sensitive conversations with the participants of the „Come to our university!” program themselves, who may ask, for example, what degree they will receive at the end of the program.

The relationally and ethically demanding reality of special education practice places high demands on the professional themselves – the special educator – particularly in terms of developing their humane approach, psychosocial competencies in the area of socialization and personalization (Jankovský 2018, p. 79), and

their ethical identity. At the same time, this exposes them to the risk of burnout, which underscores the importance of systematic professional training focused on cultivating these characteristics in a broad sense. Their systematic development should lead to greater professional resilience and strengthen the professional well-being of special educators. This resonates with the broader trend in contemporary education. As Celume and Zenasni (2024, pp. 1–3) emphasize, in the time of rapid technological progress and social change, the promotion of psychosocial competencies, including emotional intelligence, resilience, and adaptability, it is essential to prepare students to thrive in an ever-changing world. Our model of focus consultations thus not only fulfills a narrowly focused preventive function, but also represents a practical application of these modern educational principles, thereby contributing to the creation of a more inclusive educational environment.

The support-focused approach is directly in line with the findings emphasized by Raudenská and Javůrková (2011, pp. 150–154), namely that burnout prevention is fundamentally more effective than subsequent intervention. In our context, focus consultations take on the character of informal supervision, where the ability to reflect on one's own feelings and identify specific stress triggers in special education practice is cultivated in a safe environment. Students learn to analyze their special education practices while normalizing the need for support and accepting help without feeling guilty or like they have failed. Burnout prevention is therefore not only an effort to prevent physical or mental departure from the helping professions, but also part of a deeper professional self-awareness that includes accepting one's own vulnerability as a natural part of human and professional experience. Ethical maturation and personal protection thus become two sides of the same coin: the cultivation of self-reflection or self-evaluation in undergraduate training protects students from future professional exhaustion and at the same time supports their healthy professional growth so that they can become adaptable and resilient professionals.

2. AIM OF THE STUDY AND RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The main objective of the article is to examine and interpret the opinions of special education students on the influence of a specific part of their undergraduate training – specifically, their involvement in the „Come to our university!” program – on the formation of their ethical identity. In the presented qualitative research, we focused on examining and interpreting the opinions of future special educators. For this purpose, the following main research question (MRQ) was formulated: How do special education students perceive the influence of their participation in the „Come to our university!” program on the formation of their ethical identity? For a better structure of the analysis, the MRQ was subsequently divided into three sub-research questions (SRQs), which helped us focus on specific aspects of the phenomenon under investigation. The first SRQ

focused on identifying specific triggers of change due to the practical experience: Which specific experiences or situations from the program do students identify as key to their professional and ethical orientation? We focus on the process and nature of transformation itself in the second SRQ: How, according to the students, did their attitudes toward adults with intellectual disabilities change as a result of this experience? We directed the third SRQ towards the very essence of ethical identity: What specific ethical principles or professional values did students acquire or redefine for themselves thanks to the program?

A qualitative research design was chosen to achieve the research goal of understanding the formation of ethical identity and the perception of meaningfulness in the undergraduate training of special educators. The specific strategy is a case study, which allows for in-depth and comprehensive examination of a defined phenomenon in its real context. The case study in this research is the educational program called „Come to our university!” and the experiences of students in the bachelor’s program in Special Education (full-time and combined forms) who participated in it as part of their professional practice. This approach allows for a detailed analysis of the processes, interactions, and subjective meanings that special education students attribute to their participation in the program. The case study uses a narrative approach that emphasizes the stories and narratives of the participants as the primary source of knowledge. The aim is not to describe what the students did, but above all to understand how they interpret their experiences, what meaning they ascribe to them, and how these experiences can contribute to the formation of their professional and ethical identity.

2.2. RESEARCH SAMPLE

The research sample was compiled using a purposive sampling method. The criterion for inclusion in the research was active participation as a tutor or teaching assistant in the „Come to our university!” program between March 2023 and May 2025. The aim was to obtain data from respondents with varying lengths and intensities of involvement (one-time participation, participation for one semester, repeated participation in multiple semesters) in order to ensure the greatest possible diversity of perspectives. A total of 32 respondents participated in the research: 17 current students in their second and third years of full-time and part-time bachelor’s degree programs in Special Education and 15 graduates of the same degree program who participated in the „Come to our university!” program while still studying. To a certain extent, this number allows for an in-depth analysis of individual cases and, at the same time, achieves data saturation in the key topics under investigation. The conditions for participation in the research were active participation in the program, student status at the time of participation in the program, and willingness to share opinions anonymously.

2.3. DATA COLLECTION STRATEGY

Given the complexity of the phenomenon under investigation, data triangulation was used to increase the validity and reliability of the findings. The data was collected continuously over several semesters using the following methods:

- semi-structured group reflections (micro-focus groups), conducted immediately after each teaching unit of the „Come to our university!“ program, whereby the groups were formed by a natural team of university teachers – tutors, lecturers, and assistants from among students of special education (approx. 8–12 people, i.e., university teachers – department staff and their special education students) who led the teaching in the „Come to our university!“ program on that day. The aim was to capture immediate impressions, observations, and reflections on the educational situations they had just experienced.
- large focus groups, which took place at the end of each semester. Moderated discussions provided space for a deeper and more structured reflection on the entire semester, sharing key moments, and mutual enrichment of perspectives;
- practice diaries in which students systematically recorded and reflected on their experiences, dilemmas, and observations related to their interactions with people with intellectual disabilities who participated in the „Come to our university!“ program, as well as their own role as educators (teachers or teaching assistants);
- unstructured and semi-structured individual interviews with selected students and graduates, often initiated spontaneously by the respondents themselves, who expressed a need to share their thoughts and feelings more deeply, which provided a detailed insight into individual experiences of meaningfulness and the resolution of ethical dilemmas, e.g., between individual teaching blocks of the „Come to our university!“ program;
- analysis of digital communication with the data also obtained from a purpose-built group in the WhatsApp application, which served for operational communication and also became a platform for spontaneous real time sharing of experiences, photos, and reflections.

2.4. DATA ANALYSIS

The text data obtained (transcripts of interviews and audio recordings from focus groups, diary entries, and texts from online communication) was analyzed using thematic analysis according to the procedure of Braun and Clark (2021), which identifies and categorizes themes within and across files to describe the phenomenon under investigation. The six-stage process included: familiarization with the data and repeated reading and listening to the

recordings; generation of main areas and systematic processing of relevant data segments across the entire data set; grouping of related codes into potential themes; revision of categories and their verification and refinement in relation to coded extracts and the whole; defining and naming themes – categories and final definitions of the essence of each category and its significance in relation to the research objective; writing a report and presenting the analysis supported by illustrative quotations from the data (Braunová, Clarková 2021, pp. 77–101).

An artificial intelligence tool (specifically, a compilation of a large language model in the form of AI chat – Chat GPT-5, Gemini 2.5 Pro, and Claude 4.5) was used to support and streamline the analytical process. This tool served as support in structuring data, revising, and refining the formulations of emerging categories. However, key steps such as the actual coding and final interpretation of the meaning of the data remained entirely within the competence of the research authors.

2.5. ETHICAL ASPECTS OF THE RESEARCH

Throughout the research, maximum emphasis was placed on adherence to ethical principles, with their application adapted to the specific, community-based, and long-term nature of the project. The principle of informed consent was applied in this research in a procedural and dialogical manner. Due to the close and confidential cooperation within the established group, no formal written consent was collected, but emphasis was placed on verbal, repeatedly confirmed consent. Participants were informed of the intention to use their reflections for research and publication purposes at the beginning of their involvement in the „Come to our university!” program, during joint meetings, and after the end of each semester of the program. A key part of this process was a clear explanation that all the shared information and insights would be used primarily to support, develop, and raise awareness of the goals of the „Come to our university!” program, with which the respondents agreed.

Students and graduates of the bachelor’s program in special education were fully aware that their answers and discussions were being recorded. From the outset, a culture of openness and transparency was established within the group. A rule was introduced that normal activities, such as taking photographs for documentation or communicating in a shared WhatsApp group, would take place openly. At the same time, there was an explicit agreement that if anyone did not agree with the recording or its use, they had the right to make their opinion known in good time, which would be fully respected. Throughout the duration of the project, no such disagreement was expressed; on the contrary, students and graduates of special education repeatedly expressed their verbal consent to any form of promotion and publication of information arising

in connection with the „Come to our university!” educational program. They were guaranteed full anonymity and confidentiality in the publication outputs. All data was pseudonymized. To ensure anonymity, the statements of all 32 respondents are marked in the text with a gender-neutral code consisting of the letter R (respondent) and a serial number (R1, R2, ... R32). This uniform coding system protects the identity of all participants, including the minority representation of men in the sample.

The respondents' quotes also include anonymized references to educated adults with intellectual disabilities who participated in the „Come to our university!” program, which the respondents mention in connection with their own special education practice. These individuals are designated by the letter E (educated person) for simplicity and to maintain anonymity, but without a numerical supplement. The reason for this was to ensure the clarity of the text and eliminate the risk of revealing the identity of these individuals. Participation in the research was entirely voluntary, and respondents had the right to withdraw from participation at any time without giving a reason. Given the sensitivity of the topic and the work with a vulnerable group (people with intellectual disabilities), all data was handled with the utmost respect and ethical responsibility.

3. PERCEPTION OF THE PROGRAM'S INFLUENCE ON THE FORMATION OF ETHICAL IDENTITY – ANALYSIS OF KEY THEMES FROM RESPONDENTS' STATEMENTS

This chapter presents important research findings and answers the main research question: How do special education students perceive the impact of their participation in the „Come to our university!” program on the formation of their ethical identity? An analysis of the narrative statements of students and graduates (R1–R32) showed that undergraduate practice in a real-world context not only develops their didactic and communication skills, but above all shapes their ethical identity and sense of the meaningfulness of their studies and future work.

The thematic analysis revealed three key, interrelated categories that map this formative process (an overview of the categories, supplemented with more detailed codes, is shown in Table 1 below):

- Transformation triggers – identification of specific important experiences in situations that respondents perceived as turning points.
- Transformation of professional perspective – description of a shift in attitudes and perceptions of one's own role towards adults with intellectual disabilities.
- Anchoring ethical principles in practice – concretization of newly acquired or redefined professional values.

Table 1: Overview of identified categories and codes in relation to RQ

MRQ	How do special education students perceive the influence of their participation in the „Come to our university!” program on the formation of their ethical identity?		
SRQ	SRQ1: <i>Which specific experiences or situations from the program do students identify as key to their professional and ethical orientation?</i>	SRQ2: <i>How do students say their attitudes toward adults with intellectual disabilities have changed as a result of this experience?</i>	SRQ3: <i>What specific ethical principles or professional values did students acquire or redefine for themselves thanks to the program?</i>
Category	Triggers of transformation at turning points	Most important aspects of attitude change	Internalized professional values
Codes	Overcoming distance through informal interaction	Creating a safe and inclusive environment	Anchoring responsibility in systematic preparation and reflection
	Feeling of acceptance and motivation	From compassion to partnership	Confronting ethical dilemmas and growing professional sensitivity
	Adaptation and self-reflection	Collegial support as a catalyst for growth	Discovering meaning and authenticity in one’s professional role
	Ethical professional growth	Developing professional resilience and ethical awareness	Recognition of the systemic value of inclusion and solidarity

3.1. TRIGGERS OF TRANSFORMATION AT TURNING POINTS

The analysis focuses on identifying specific moments that respondents identified as turning points and which initiated the process of professional and personal transformation. These critical moments, referred to as triggers of transformation, consist of a transition from initial uncertainty to a transformative experience of meaningful interaction, which is the response to SRQ1.

Entering practice represented a major professional challenge for students, as they found themselves in a new role with a target group that was virtually unknown to them. The initial phase was characterized by a strong sense of uncertainty. Establishing contact with the world of adult clients with different needs was perceived as a significant departure from the students’ comfort zone. However, this initial state of dissonance became a catalyst for intensive learning and formative experiences. Student R29 reflected: *I wanted to try what it was like to stand in front of a group of adults and educate them. This practice made that possible.* Another respondent openly shared her concerns: *I haven’t worked with this target group before, and I honestly don’t know what these people need and how natural I can be in this situation* (R11). The key mechanism for overcoming the initial distance proved to be the active and deliberate establishment of relationships that went beyond formal didactic boundaries (R1, R17, R21, R25). Informal interactions, which represented the first breakthrough

experiences, played a crucial role here. Specific moments, such as accompanying participants (who commuted en masse from another city) from the train station to the university, provided an opportunity to *establish closer relationships and get to know each other a little outside of class* (R28). This process effectively humanized and softened the professional relationship and removed barriers on both sides. The transformative nature of the experience was particularly evident in the realization of the value of authentic interaction. Students were *pleasantly surprised* (R30) by the spontaneous development of communication skills with regard to the specific needs of participants. Reflection on this stage led to a fundamental understanding that quality education does not lie in technical precision, but in creating an atmosphere in which *someone gets involved in the group, others prefer to work alone, but each way has its value, everyone can feel safe and important* (R30).

Another transformative moment was the acceptance of the students by the target group, which quickly replaced the initial fears. The students described: *At first, I was worried, I was coming into the unknown... But I was pleasantly surprised at how friendly and open they were in accepting me. And that was in the very first lesson!* (R9). This experience of positive acceptance became a strong impulse for their motivation and openness to further work (R16, R22). The gradually built trust was directly reflected in the success of the didactic activity (R18). Positive feedback from participants not only confirmed the comprehensibility of the content, but also signaled a deeper internal shift – the realization that *it is important to teach clearly, slowly, and patiently – while giving students (E) space to think and form their own opinions* (R30). The satisfaction of the participants and their obvious anticipation of further meetings indicated the formation of a stable and functional relationship: *I already remember which student (E) I can afford to be with. Relationships and a pleasant atmosphere are developing between us* (R31).

Building relationships did not always go smoothly, which led to further formative turning points that required constant reflection and adaptation. It was necessary for students to also learn to respect autonomy as part of their practice. It was crucial to understand the need to give participants freedom, which was reflected in the adoption of a strategy of *giving them a free hand so that the story comes purely from their heads* (R31). At the same time, they realized that it was *important to be flexible in teaching, to adapt to the current mood of the group and individual needs* (R31). This practice allowed students to train their *ability to improvise and immediately reflect on unforeseen situations* (R3). However, the process of building relationships was not always linear and required constant reflection and adaptation on the part of the students. Interpersonal differences between participants were clearly evident in their interactions. It was precisely these moments that provided students with a valuable, albeit challenging, lesson in responding sensitively to different needs and boundaries. It was also necessary to actively moderate group dynamics and gently correct overly dominant

behavior (e.g., E with Asperger's syndrome or E with severe hearing impairment) so that others would not lose their space (R28). The key task thus became the constant search for a balance that would support the involvement of all. This formative experience was not limited to interaction with clients, but also led to deeper self-reflection on our own teaching practices. In retrospect, the students concluded that, given the great heterogeneity of the people being educated, some activities needed to be prepared in different levels of difficulty. Sometimes their requirements were *too demanding* (R7) and the application of the prepared tasks required improvisation. The success of the whole process depended on *the ability to create a very open and safe atmosphere* (R28).

The change was also reflected in personal development: *During the lessons, I got to know myself, I observed my reactions and how spontaneous and creative I can be* (R9). The practice thus went beyond the mere fulfillment of didactic goals and became an opportunity (R5) to *fully realize my reserves in working with people and get a chance to work on myself* (R28), which is the essence of real transformation. Surprising was the finding of R21 that although it was education for adults with disabilities, *in the end, it seemed like the most natural thing in the world to me*. The illustrated sequence of events – initial uncertainty, rapid acceptance, and the need to adapt – creates an important starting point for developing trust and a safe environment that supports further ethical and professional growth. Turning point experiences included observing clients' progress and experiencing feelings of unconditional acceptance (R1, R15, R17, R22). Respondent R4 stated that he watched with satisfaction as one of the participants (E) began to express himself, since, unlike his childhood experiences at school, he did not have to fear humiliation. This shift in understanding the role of the educator reflects a modern approach to social inclusion, where the ability to reflect on the importance of dignified and respectful behavior is a key indicator of the shift from *normalization* to the goal of full social participation. The initial confusion thus turned into an experience of valuable interaction, where education became a natural consequence of mutual respect and trust.

3.2. THE MOST IMPORTANT ASPECTS OF THE CHANGE IN ATTITUDES

Through qualitative analysis of the respondents' statements, we further identify four key codes that represent the most important aspects of the change in attitudes. These codes capture the process of redefining the professional role of students – from uncertainty to awareness of the deeper ethical dimensions of their future profession, thereby responding to SRQ2.

Special education students valued a safe and inclusive environment as a platform for authentic learning, a space that supports not only educational but also societal inclusion: *I really liked that the students (E) had a choice, that they could decide where to go and what to do. It was clear that they enjoyed the lessons,*

and that gave me energy and motivation. Their sincere and genuine enthusiasm and curiosity inspired me to create other activities that they might enjoy. I appreciate that I was able to be part of a program that is not necessarily just about performance, but also about people and their needs. Without judgment, without barriers (R9). The atmosphere of trust was further reflected in a feeling of safety and unconditional acceptance, which evoked strong emotional reactions: When Mr. (E) talked about how moved he was and how much he loved us all here, I felt enormous satisfaction and joy from the time I spent here with them (R1). I enjoyed the atmosphere of trust and respect, and thanks to it, I always looked forward to our next meeting! The students form an amazing group, and everyone finds their place there (R9). I was thrilled with today's class again. The students (E) worked together beautifully throughout the entire class. I would also like to highlight the idea of sitting in a semicircle. I really liked this classroom layout, and I think it contributed to making today's class so enjoyable (R31).

This practice was very unusual and a completely new experience for me. It's not that I haven't met individuals with intellectual disabilities before. However, I have never had the opportunity to educate an adult with this special need. To be honest, I expected it to be unpleasant, as I have had some negative experiences with this target group. In the end, however, everything went smoothly (R29). Changes came with each new experience – the inner attitudes of future special educators shifted from compassion to partnership. They also observed changes in their self-perception. I really enjoyed working with (E) and felt good about the fact that we were able to create a pleasant atmosphere. For example, the mirror activity on the topic of self-esteem, where everyone had to say something nice about themselves, was personally challenging for me, as I realized that this type of self-reflection is also a challenge for me. At the same time, it motivated me to think about how to assign such tasks sensitively and how important it is to create a safe environment where people can open up (R30). The process of practicing teaching skills culminated in the realization that, despite initial uncertainty, the experience was valuable. As R26 adds, working with these clients is enriching and completely different from working with children, and we enjoyed it more than we expected (R31). Most of them said they enjoyed the activities and were glad they could be part of it. Some even stood in front of the whole group at the blackboard and spoke in front of the others. That really pleased me – for many of them, it's a big step and overcoming their shyness (R32).

The change in the respondents' professional attitudes is also inextricably linked to the positive experience of teamwork. Although they entered the practice with uncertainty and fears about working with a target group that was new to many of them, collegial support became a key factor in overcoming these fears (R10, R19, R25). The safe and respectful environment within the team enabled them to gradually break down communication barriers and gain confidence. R 27 stated: *I was extremely pleased that they felt comfortable here. Although the topic (depression) was very challenging, I felt that we managed to approach*

it sensitively and create a space where everyone could express themselves freely. It was great to see that even those who have difficulty communicating found a way to share their feelings, albeit in their own specific way (R27). Gradually, E calmed down, stopped crying, gave a thumbs up, and smiled to show that everything was okay (R27). The dynamics of roles and the need for good organization of time, teaching topics, and methods proved to be a good training experience in tandem teaching. The alternation and intertwining of teaching positions not only provided special education students with practical enrichment in didactic skills (R3, R16, R24), but also presented new challenges in the area of planning and overall educational management: *Working in pairs and with multiple mentors was enriching, but it also motivated me to better organize my time and activities (R2).* The experience also shows how a supportive collegial environment can be a catalyst for overcoming internal barriers and for deeper professional and personal growth.

Part of professional development was also confronting the high job demands. Respondent R27 openly describes feelings of exhaustion and fatigue after an intense day with students who require a higher level of support. Final reflection proved to be an important tool for coping with this burden and for further professional growth (R2, R4, R8, R17, R23). It was here that the team received *valuable feedback (R31)* from the teachers present, which helped them identify areas for improvement, such as how to distribute work more effectively or respond to specific student behaviors. Although the teaching was exhausting, a sense of meaningfulness prevailed. One respondent's internal motivation and professional determination were evident in the fact that *despite her fatigue, she felt good about today's experience (R27)* and was ready to immediately start preparing for the next meeting. This ability to find satisfaction even in demanding work and to actively use reflection is a sign of growing professional resilience and burnout prevention (R14). Another significant moment was the experience of supporting self-expression and self-advocacy among people with intellectual disabilities who participated in the „Come to our university!” program and developing their maximum potential in the area of autonomy and self-determination: *It was great to watch and be there as (E) began to express himself because he didn't have to fear the humiliation he experienced as a child at school (R4).* This aspect emphasizes not only the professional but also the ethical dimension of work, where the rights and independence of people with special needs are strengthened.

3.3. INTERNALIZED PROFESSIONAL VALUES

This chapter focuses on answering sub-research question SRQ 3. Through an analysis of the reflective methods used, it reveals how theoretical knowledge about the ethics of special education work has been transformed into authentically experienced and internalized professional values. Through four identified codes, we observe the process in which students move from an abstract

understanding of concepts such as *partnership* or *responsibility* to their practical embodiment in specific situations of pedagogical practice.

The anchoring of professional responsibility was reflected in careful and systematic preparation for individual lessons. Respondent R26 describes how her team actively communicated, divided tasks, and searched for the necessary information, with preparation being perceived as a source of joyful anticipation. This proactive approach was subsequently reflected in the interaction itself, where students consciously created a safe and collaborative environment. The key was *patience*, which respondent R20 said she had to actively learn, for example, when repeatedly explaining assignments to some participants. The effort to *provide space* (R19) demonstrates the desired respect for the individuality of the participants. This ethically grounded approach ultimately resulted in the establishment of strong and trusting relationships, which the respondents reflect on in the emotional conclusion of the practice. The sense of satisfaction felt by the entire team stemmed not only from the success of the program, but above all from the knowledge that the clients looked forward to the meetings and that mutual trust had been built (R11, R18, R26). Regular team reflections then served as a tool for continuous professional growth and strengthened the sense of collective responsibility for the quality of the program. *At the end of each lesson, we did a reflection together with the mentors, where we evaluated what went well, what we could improve next time, and what we needed to work on. This was very beneficial for me because we got immediate feedback and then we knew what to improve next time and what to work on if necessary* (R32).

The students also reflected on their professional motivation and the ethical dilemmas that arose in their daily practice: *I knew I had to do more, I wanted to, but I wasn't sure if it was enough. It led me to new questions about what else could be beneficial for these people* (R20). *I am still struggling with the dilemma of how much space to give to whom in order for it to be fair* (R12). *Another powerful moment came from E with Down syndrome. He chose a card for sharing his feelings (on the topic of Emotions) on which someone is pushing their hands away and said that he sometimes feels lonely, but at the same time he sometimes wants that loneliness. At first, his answer didn't make complete sense to me, but I could see that he himself was happy with his choice. And that was the main thing* (R27). These reflections testify to the growing responsibility and awareness of the ethical complexity of their role – the role of a special educator. *I was fascinated by their determination and enthusiasm for learning. They wanted to learn something new... and the students looked forward to all the lessons* (R26). Experiential learning (R2, R3, R8, R15) became the basis for understanding the theoretical content of professional training, as one of the respondents admitted, *that working with this individual was very demanding and mentally exhausting* (R29).

I really enjoy being a part of it (R21) and the inner meaning of supporting people who, in our regional context, do not have many opportunities to build

on their basic or foundational education. Students and graduates of special education often commented on the meaning and value of their experience from the „Come to our university!” program, which significantly influenced their professional orientation and personal outlook on life: *The time spent with the participants (E) clarified my new direction in life, showed me that there are real and important things in the world, that there is no need to rush, to deal with trivialities, that it is enough to give a piece of yourself and everything will come back many times over, that this makes sense. It's not a cliché, it's reality, more real than the hurried lives we lead. I was searching for myself, and I found myself. Thank you for the opportunity to be a part of this. It was a truly meaningful way to spend my time after a long time (R14). This internship was very beneficial for me and was my first experience working with adults, which led me to realize that working with adults could be fulfilling for me in the future (R32).*

The „Come to our university!” event is particularly significant in that it offers people with intellectual disabilities the opportunity to learn in a way that respects their needs and abilities. Education plays a key role in supporting their personal development, self-confidence, and the sense of purpose. At the same time, however, the social dimension of the event cannot be overlooked. The opportunity to meet in a safe and stimulating environment is important not only for individuals with intellectual disabilities, but for all people with special needs in general – the social group provides them with stability, a sense of belonging, and helps them overcome loneliness. The event was also beneficial for caregivers (whose presence is ensured during lessons if necessary – the authors’ note), who were able to share experiences, gain new information, and reassure themselves that they are not alone in caring for their loved ones (R29). The feeling of belonging was evident both in moments when caregivers shared their *fear and helplessness* with relief and found understanding for the systemic difficulties they face (R27), and in the gradual realization that the program can also be a source of their own well-being. This is illustrated by the case of mothers who receive recognition here and admit that they attend the meetings primarily because they *bring them joy and relaxation*. Their experiences also confirm that the greatest benefit of such an initiative lies in creating an environment that is *a safe and supportive place for all involved*, where everyone can find what they are looking for (R8, R18, R27).

4. DISCUSSION

The results of the narrative analysis show that undergraduate practice in the „Come to our university!” program represents much more than *just* the acquisition of teaching skills for special education students. The experience of the program becomes a transformative process that shapes their professional identity, ethical identity, and intrinsic motivation to advocate for the equality of people with special needs. The discussion focuses on interpreting key findings in three

main areas (categories) that can shape the ethical identity of future special education teachers: the shift from theoretical knowledge to reflective practice, the importance of a safe learning environment, and the role of practice in finding professional meaning.

4.1. FROM ACADEMIC THEORY TO REFLECTIVE PRACTICE: THE TRANSFORMATIVE POWER OF AUTHENTIC ENCOUNTERS

One of the most striking findings is how practice enables special education students to bridge the gap between theoretical knowledge and complex reality. *We prepared activities and tasks for clients for each lesson, which was a very nice pedagogical experience during which we could all move forward* (R26). This process, in which the initial uncertainties of the worker are transformed into professional self-confidence through direct action, illustrates the principle of attitude formation as described by Vágnerová (2004, p. 189). Personal experience fills in the missing knowledge that forms the rational component of an attitude and at the same time strengthens its emotional component, thereby overcoming the original ambivalence and uncertainty. Students who describe the need to *improvise and reflect immediately* (R23, R16) essentially embody the concept of *reflection in action* (Schon, 2008). As reflected in R30: *...the activity was more challenging than we expected – most students needed a lot of time to think, and some were unable to say anything without support. Nevertheless, we managed to create a calmer and more open atmosphere in which several students expressed themselves nicely and sincerely*. These turning points act as catalysts for professional transformation – it is not just a matter of applying pre-learned procedures, but a dynamic process in which students learn to respond to unique situations that cannot be fully predicted. This ability is a sign of the transition from the role of a novice student to that of a competent professional.

Authentic encounters with people with intellectual disabilities thus create a bridge between academic knowledge and practical wisdom. The profession of special education teacher combines support and educational activities and is based on intensive interpersonal interaction. It is a job that requires not only good professional knowledge, but also developed personality traits (such as empathy, patience, and the ability to self-reflect) and high ethical standards. It is learning in action that provides space for the integration of these dimensions of professionalism. At the same time, the experience of tandem teaching (co-teaching) encourages students not only to improvise pedagogically, but also to develop organizational and communication skills that are essential in the practice of helping professions (Kargerová, Vallin, et al., 2022, pp. 232–244). However, this model of cooperation goes far beyond the preparation of future professionals and contributes to the professional development of all teachers involved by creating an environment for collaborative learning based on collegial

support and experience sharing within the university community. Part of this process is also taking on different roles, where, according to Švec (2009, p. 29), the positions of teachers-experts and inquisitive students naturally intertwine in teaching. Practice thus becomes a laboratory where not only knowledge is tested, but above all the ability to act, cooperate, and reflect. The transformative power of these encounters lies precisely in their authenticity—they are not simulations or controlled exercises, but real situations requiring immediate response, ethical decision-making, and human presence. It is in these moments that abstract pedagogical theories are transformed into lived professional practice.

4.2. A SAFE ENVIRONMENT AS AN INCUBATOR FOR PROFESSIONAL IDENTITY: CHANGING ATTITUDES IN A DIALOGICAL SPACE

The analysis of the respondents' statements consistently shows that the key factor for the success of the practice is an atmosphere of safety and acceptance. In an environment described as a space *without judgment and barriers*, the students were not only able to express themselves freely, but above all to observe the authentic development of the program participants. Active cultivation was essential to the formation of this atmosphere; for example, regular mutual appreciation became the norm, which gradually transformed ordinary teaching into a safe environment where both the educators and the students felt comfortable. This process fully resonates with C. Rogers' (2020, pp. 114–118) person-centered approach, which argues that growth is only possible in conditions of unconditional acceptance and empathy. Particularly significant was the finding that participation in the program helped its participants (E) *feel more mature, responsible, and confident, ... which confirmed to me how important and meaningful our joint efforts were* (R31). The interest of all participants in continuing the program represented *the strongest evidence that the Come to Our College! event not only makes sense but also has an impact on the lives of participants* (R31), which led to an understanding of *how important empathy, patience, and above all the ability to work with your heart are in this work* (R31). *At the end, we said goodbye to the students and explained to them that unfortunately we would not be continuing next semester. Each of them came to say goodbye to us personally. Some were very moved and cried. One of the students came to hug us about three times and didn't want to go home at all* (R32).

The focus on human awareness and the professional focus on a safe environment brought benefits on two levels. On the first level, it allowed the participants with special needs to develop self-advocacy and find the courage to express themselves. Supporting autonomy led to increased self-confidence, which is the central goal of modern special education focused on empowerment (Wehmeyer, 2004, pp. 22–29). Furthermore, the students' reflected experience confirms how strongly such an environment can redress lifelong injustices and

give a person with a misdiagnosis from childhood a chance to show their true potential. This shift from the traditional deficit model to a participatory paradigm represents a fundamental transformation of the professional identity of future special educators. Students cease to perceive clients as passive objects of intervention and begin to co-create a space for mutual growth with them. This redefinition of the professional role does not take place through theoretical lectures, but through the lived experience of equal dialogue. On a second level, the safe environment provided space for the professional growth of the special education students themselves. It allowed them to experiment, make mistakes, and, above all, face real ethical dilemmas without the paralyzing fear of evaluation. An example is the confrontation with the difficult topic of death. Initial fears of discussion were transformed into a sense of relief and professional pride thanks to team support and the open sharing of emotions by all participants, including assistants (R7, R12, R27).

The development of ethical competence did not take place on a theoretical level, but was experienced in real interactions. It manifested itself in micro situations, such as sensitively guiding a client through their own thoughts with the aim of strengthening their autonomy (R5, R24, R27), or showing respect for the client's different experience without imposing a different point of view on them. In these moments, there was a shift from an ethical problem to an ethical action, as described by Aadland and Matulayová (2011, p. 56), where the narrative process can bring awareness of the unknown. The relational quality of the dialogical space thus proved to be not only a means but also an end of professional education. Although the primary goal of the practice was a didactic and developmental program, according to the respondents, its most valuable result was the relationship itself. Its formation was a natural and unobtrusive consequence of the created environment. The intense positive feedback from clients at the end of the practice, expressions of deep gratitude and surprise at the impact achieved, confirmed that authentic learning and ethical growth require an environment based on trust, respect, and the courage to simply be present for others.

4.3. SELF-TRANSCENDENCE AND FINDING MEANING: FROM TECHNIQUE TO AUTHENTIC RELATIONSHIP

Perhaps the deepest dimension of this experience is its impact on the personal and professional direction of special education students. The statement by student R14, who talks about finding a *new direction in life* and *real and meaningful time*, is almost a textbook example of finding meaning through self-transcendence in Frankl's conception (2023, pp. 18–19). According to him, meaning lies precisely in transcending oneself, that is, in finding fulfillment that can stem, for example, from a profound encounter with another person. At a time when people in the helping professions face high levels of burnout, it appears that such formative experiences can serve as a preventive factor. They enable students to anchor

their career choice in personal conviction and a sense of meaning, which can make them more resilient to possible future difficulties. This experience confirms that the motivation for special education work is not primarily about technique or methodology, but about the ability to establish relationships and be part of something positive that transcends the individual. How such a relationship and safe environment are created in concrete terms is described in detail by the experience of a respondent for whom the conscious and targeted building of a partnership approach, starting with seemingly minor details such as the layout of the space, was fundamental to her practice. For example, she often used circle seating with the clear intention that *no one was in the foreground or background, which promotes a sense of trust and equality* (R27), thereby creating a truly safe space where mistakes are understood as a natural part of the learning process. Training in the skill of creating conditions for the growth of others can thus become a source of self-fulfillment and meaning for the helping professional.

4.4. LIMITATIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS FOR FURTHER RESEARCH

We are aware of the limitations of the presented analysis. This is a qualitative study with a small number of participants from one specific program implemented at one faculty. Although theoretical data saturation was achieved, the specific conditions of the program (a small group, long duration, a high level of support) may not be easily replicable in other institutions, which limits the generalizability of the findings to other educational contexts. Another limitation is the time perspective – the data capture the immediate students' reflections after completing the program, not the long-term impact on their professional practice. Respondents' statements are based on self-reflection, which may be influenced by an effort to present themselves in a positive light. Methodologically, the study is based on a qualitative paradigm with a deliberate selection of respondents, which corresponds to its objectives but makes statistical generalization impossible. Although our study is limited by the factors mentioned hereinabove, its results underscore the irreplaceable importance of authentic experiences in shaping a truly mature and ethically grounded professional identity for special educators.

Several directions are possible for further research. It would be beneficial to conduct longitudinal monitoring of program graduates in their further professional careers and to determine whether they have maintained a high level of motivation and ethical sensitivity even after a longer period of practice, and how this early formative experience is reflected in their professional conduct. Comparative studies could then compare the impact of this type of intensive, relationship-oriented special education practice with other forms of practical training (e.g., shorter or more observational) and identify the specific mechanisms by which attitudes are transformed. For a complete picture, it is also essential

to examine the experiences and impacts of the program from the perspective of the individuals with intellectual disabilities educated in our program and their perception of mutual interaction with students. This aspect has been the subject of several previous studies. Last but not least, it would be beneficial to map the critical moments in the process of forming an ethical identity and to examine the factors that facilitate or, conversely, hinder this process.

CONCLUSION

The present study examined how special education students perceive the influence of their participation in the „Come to our university!” program on the formation of their ethical identity. The analysis of qualitative data obtained from the reflections of 32 respondents provided findings corresponding to the three research questions.

Answer to RQ1: Students most often identified informal interactions, situations requiring authentic solutions to ethical dilemmas, and moments of shared joy that disrupted the traditional asymmetrical relationship between the future special education teacher and the program participant as key moments in shaping their ethical identity. These micro-situations proved to be more significant for ethical development than the formal teaching structure. The respondents particularly emphasized situations in which they had to respond immediately to unexpected circumstances, adapt communication to individual needs, or resolve ethically sensitive dilemmas in real time. It was precisely in these moments that ethical principles were internalized through lived experience.

Response to RQ2: The experience with the program led to a change in attitudes – from initial uncertainty, embarrassment, or a protective approach, the students moved towards perceiving adults with intellectual disabilities as equal partners and sources of inspiration. This shift was the basis for redefining their professional role towards a participatory paradigm. The respondents reflected that the program enabled them to overcome their initial stereotypes and learn to perceive participants as active subjects of their own education. As Vágnerová (2004, p. 189) explains, negative attitudes towards people with disabilities often arise as a result of a lack of direct experience – the program systematically filled this gap through long-term authentic interaction.

Response to RQ3: The students learned and put into practice key ethical principles – a partnership approach, respect for autonomy, and responsibility for creating an inclusive and safe environment. These principles became not just theoretical concepts for them, but a lived reality. The formation of ethical identity was reflected in an understanding of the reciprocity of the educational process, with students reflecting on their own professional growth as the result of mutual enrichment. The respondents described a shift from perceiving the special educator as an expert providing assistance to understanding their role as a facilitator of shared learning and growth.

The findings confirm theoretical assumptions about the power of experiential education in undergraduate training. In the context of this study, it appears that direct, collaborative, and long-term contact with the target group is a more effective tool for shaping ethical identity than purely theoretical teaching of ethics. In response to the main research question (MRQ), how special education students perceive the influence of their participation in the „Come to our university!” program on the formation of their ethical identity, it can be stated that the students perceive the influence of their participation in the program as essential for the formation of ethical identity through three interrelated mechanisms: internalization of ethical principles in authentic situations requiring immediate ethical decision-making, transformation of attitudes from protectiveness to the perception of equal partnership, and practical anchoring of the values of respect, autonomy, and reciprocity in one’s own professional identity. The program has become an environment where ethics is not only studied but, above all, lived. Well-designed and reflective special educational practice in an inclusive environment shapes not only professional competencies but, above all, ethically sensitive personalities with clear value orientation and internal motivation for the helping profession.

PRACTICAL IMPLICATIONS

The results suggest that faculties training special educators should systematically include similar long-term programs based on authentic interaction with the target group in their study plans. The key elements of such programs should be:

- sufficient time allocation to allow for relationship development;
- reflection as an integral part of the experience;
- the creation of a safe environment for experimenting with the professional role;
- a combination of structured activities and space for spontaneous interaction.

Investing in creating practical experiences for students in this way can serve not only as a tool for developing professional identity, but also as a preventive factor against future burnout syndrome.

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Forming ethical identity in undergraduate training for special educators. The concept of educational experience and its relevance in educational programs for adults with intellectual disabilities

Summary

Aim: The aim of the study was to examine and interpret the opinions of special education students on the influence of a specific part of their undergraduate

training – specifically, their involvement in the „Come to our university!” program – on the formation of their ethical identity.

Methods: The research uses a qualitative case study based on a narrative approach, focusing on the experiences of 32 respondents (students and graduates) participating in the „Come to our university!” program. The data was collected using multiple methods, including practice diaries, semi-structured group reflections (micro-focus groups), large focus groups, unstructured and semi-structured individual interviews, and analyses of digital communication. The data was analyzed using the thematic analysis with coding to identify the mechanisms of ethical identity formation. The robustness of the findings was ensured by systematic triangulation of these data sources.

Results: The thematic analysis revealed three stages in the process of shaping ethical identity. The first stage involved the students overcoming initial uncertainty through informal interactions and the experience of unconditional acceptance. The second stage consisted of a shift from a stance of compassion to viewing adults with intellectual disabilities as partners, reinforced by the social environment and the support of the team. The third stage involved the formation of ethical principles such as responsibility, respect for autonomy, and partnership, developed through confronting real ethical dilemmas.

Conclusions: Participation in the program was deemed crucial by the students for the shaping of their ethical identity. The results suggest that faculties training special educators should systematically include similar long-term programs based on authentic interaction with the target group in their study plans. The key elements of such programs should be: sufficient time allocation to allow for relationship development; reflection as an integral part of the experience; the creation of a safe environment for experimenting with the professional role; a combination of structured activities and space for spontaneous interaction.

Keywords: adults with intellectual disabilities, attitudes, educational experience, educational program, ethical identity, professional values, special educators, tandem teaching, undergraduate training.