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# Social Awareness Education for Children with Autism Spectrum Disorder Aged 5-6 Years Through Experiential Activities at Inclusive Kindergarten

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## Abstract

*This study examines the effectiveness of experiential activities in enhancing social awareness among children aged 5–6 years with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) in inclusive kindergarten settings. Grounded in social-cognitive theory, experiential learning theory, and Vygotsky's socio-cultural theory, the research explores how hands-on, interactive activities contribute to the development of emotional recognition, social engagement, and behavioral regulation. A 15-week intervention was conducted with three children diagnosed with mild ASD, integrating structured social games, storytelling, and role-playing activities. Results indicate significant improvements in emotional recognition, appropriate emotional expression, and social interaction in two of the three children, underscoring the potential of experiential activities as an effective approach to fostering social awareness. The findings highlight the importance of a supportive and interactive learning environment in promoting social inclusion and adaptive behaviors in young children with ASD.*

**Keywords:** *Experiential Learning, Autism Spectrum Disorder, Social Awareness, Inclusive Education, Early Childhood Development.*

## Introduction

Children with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) face persistent challenges in developing social awareness, which affects their ability to recognize emotions, empathize with others, and engage in meaningful social interactions (CASEL, 2020). These difficulties often result in social isolation, limited peer relationships, and reduced participation in group activities—key factors influencing cognitive and emotional development in early childhood.

Social awareness refers to the ability to recognize social cues, interpret emotional expressions, and adjust behavior according to social contexts (Hobson, 1993). However, children with ASD typically require structured and explicit guidance to develop these skills. Traditional educational approaches often rely on verbal instructions and abstract concepts, which may be difficult for children with ASD to comprehend and apply in real-life situations (Frith & Happé, 1994).

Experiential learning, which involves hands-on, interactive activities that simulate real-world social scenarios, offers a promising alternative. By engaging children in structured social games, storytelling, and artistic activities, experiential learning provides immersive opportunities to observe, practice, and internalize social behaviors in a supportive setting. This approach aligns with key principles of early childhood development, fostering curiosity, emotional expression, and adaptive social behaviors.

Despite growing interest in experiential learning for children with ASD, there remains a lack of empirical research examining its effectiveness in developing social awareness in inclusive kindergarten settings. This study aims to fill this gap by investigating the impact of experiential activities on social awareness

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development in children aged 5–6 years with ASD. Specifically, the research explores how these activities enhance emotional recognition, social interaction, and behavioral regulation—critical components of social integration and emotional well-being.

By providing evidence-based insights, this study seeks to inform educators, policymakers, and caregivers about the potential of experiential activities as a core component of early childhood education for children with ASD. The findings may contribute to the development of more effective teaching strategies, ultimately supporting greater inclusion and social participation for young children with ASD in educational settings.

*Theoretical Framework*

This study is anchored in an integrated theoretical framework that combines social-cognitive theory, experiential learning theory, and Vygotsky's socio-cultural theory, providing a solid foundation for understanding how experiential activities can foster social awareness in young children with ASD.

Social-Cognitive Theory: Bandura's (1986) social-cognitive theory emphasizes that learning occurs through observation, imitation, and interaction. Children learn social behaviors by observing role models and engaging in interactive contexts. However, children with ASD often require structured guidance to effectively internalize these social cues, making targeted interventions crucial.

Experiential Learning Theory: Kolb's (1984) model of experiential learning highlights the continuous process of learning through experience, involving four stages: concrete experience, reflective observation, abstract conceptualization, and active experimentation. In the context of this study, hands-on activities—such as social games, storytelling, and role-playing—provide practical opportunities for children with ASD to move through these stages, reinforcing social behavior through repeated practice.

Vygotsky's Socio-Cultural Theory: According to Vygotsky (1978), social interactions play a pivotal role in cognitive development. The concept of the Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD) underscores the importance of scaffolded support from more knowledgeable peers or adults. In this framework, educators and peers act as facilitators who guide children with ASD through progressively challenging social situations, thereby enhancing their social awareness and adaptive behaviors.

Integration of Theoretical Perspectives: By combining these three perspectives, the study highlights three core elements essential for the development of social awareness:

Emotional Recognition: Enabling children to identify and interpret emotions in themselves and others through guided, experiential activities.

Social Interaction: Promoting cooperative play and meaningful communication through structured peer and adult interactions.

Behavioral Regulation: Reinforcing appropriate social responses and reducing maladaptive behaviors through consistent, hands-on practice.

This integrated framework not only informs the design of the intervention but also guides the interpretation of its outcomes, ensuring that the study contributes robust evidence to the field of inclusive education for children with ASD.

*Research Design and Methods*

*Research Design:* This study employs a quasi-experimental design, featuring pre-test and post-test assessments to evaluate the effectiveness of experiential activities in enhancing social awareness among children with ASD. The intervention was implemented over a period of 15 weeks, during which the experimental group participated in structured experiential sessions, while a control group continued with traditional educational practices. Although the small sample size (three children in the experimental group) limits the

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generalizability of the findings, the design allows for in-depth examination of individual progress and provides preliminary evidence on the intervention's effectiveness.

*Participants:* The study involved three children aged 5–6 years diagnosed with mild Autism Spectrum Disorder. These participants were identified through teacher assessments and parental reports, following established criteria aligned with DSM-5 standards. All children continued to attend their regular inclusive kindergarten classes and were additionally involved in the experimental sessions.

*Intervention:* The intervention consisted of experiential activities designed to foster social awareness through:

Social Storytelling: Narratives illustrating various emotional scenarios to guide children in recognizing and understanding emotions.

Role-Playing Games: Simulated social situations to encourage the practice of appropriate social responses.

Collaborative Art Activities: Group-based tasks aimed at promoting cooperation, turn-taking, and emotional expression.

Each session lasted 45 minutes and was conducted twice weekly (on Tuesdays and Thursdays). An initial environmental assessment was conducted during the first week to establish baseline conditions.

*Data Collection and Measurement*

Social awareness was measured using a researcher-developed scale comprising six indicators:

Emotional recognition

Emotional expression

Social interaction

Conflict resolution

Role-based play

Prosocial behavior

Assessments were carried out at three intervals: before the intervention (baseline), mid-intervention (after 7 weeks), and post-intervention (after 15 weeks). Data were collected through direct observations, teacher feedback, and video recordings of the sessions. Each indicator was rated on a 5-point scale ranging from 1 (poor) to 5 (good), providing a comprehensive profile of the children's social competencies.

*Data Analysis:* Quantitative data were analyzed using Paired Sample T-tests (conducted in SPSS 25.0) to compare pre-test and post-test scores, with statistical significance set at $p < 0.05$. In addition to significance testing, descriptive statistics were reported to illustrate the changes in social awareness across the intervention period. Although effect size measures (e.g., Cohen's d) were not computed in the initial analysis, future research is recommended to include such measures to further clarify the magnitude of the intervention's impact. Qualitative data from teacher interviews and parental observations were also integrated to provide context and support the quantitative findings.

*Research Results*

Proposed Measures for Enhancing Social Awareness Education through Experiential Activities for Children with Autism Spectrum Disorder Aged 5-6 Years in Inclusive Kindergartens in Ho Chi Minh City

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Based on the principles of proposed measures mentioned above and from the research results on the current situation of 5-6 year old children with intellectual disabilities by teachers, managers and parents at preschools in Ho Chi Minh City, we propose some measures to educate children about social skills as follows:

**Table 1. Social Education Measures For 5-6 Year Old Children with Disabilities Through Activities at Preschools**

| Social cognitive education measures for 5-6 year old children with autism spectrum disorder through experiential activities at inclusive preschools | |
|---|---|
| Group of preparatory measures | Group of measures to develop social cognition for children with autism spectrum disorder 5-6 years old |
| □ Choosing a topic that is appropriate for the goal of social awareness education for children with autism spectrum disorder 5-6 years old<br><br>□ Building a social awareness education environment through diverse experiential activities linked to practice | □ Guide children with autism spectrum disorder 5-6 years old to conduct appropriate social cognitive activities during social interactions<br>□ Organizing feedback for children with autism spectrum disorder 5-6 years old to adjust social cognitive expression in communication interaction<br>□ Encouraging 5-6 year old children with autism spectrum disorder to actively interact with their peers to enhance social cognitive expression through inclusive classroom experiences<br>□ Regular and periodic monitoring and assessment of social cognitive abilities of 5-6 year old children with autism spectrum disorder through experiential activities in inclusive classes |

Experimenting with social cognitive education measures through experiential activities for 5-6 year old children with autism spectrum disorder in an inclusive preschool.

*Experimental Process*

We conducted an experiment on 03 mild ASD children aged 5-6 for 15 weeks (from September 18 to December 29, 2023) including 1 week of environmental assessment. Children still attend the integrated preschool class, and are also impacted in the experimental class 2 sessions/week and Tuesday and Thursday, each session is 45 minutes. After 7 weeks, 3 ASD children aged 5-6 participating in the experiment will be assessed for the first time on the specific level of SA achieved according to the SA indicator table developed by the author. After 15 weeks, they will be assessed for the second time. Comparison will be conducted with the skill level surveyed before the experiment, thereby assessing the children's progress in SA.

*Evaluation Criteria and Tools*

To evaluate the effectiveness of social education measures for 5-6 year old children with autism spectrum disorder through the proposed activities in the project, we evaluated 6 social education indicators of children participating in the experiment before, during and after the experiment. Specifically:

**Table 2. Criteria For Evaluating the Results Of Children's Emotional Education Activities**

**(* 1= Poor, 2= Weak, 3= Average, 4= Fair, 5= Good)**

| No | Criteria content | Rating * | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
| 1 | Recognize emotional expressions on the faces of teachers, friends and relatives such as: happiness, sadness, surprise, fear, anger, shame | | | | | |

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| | | | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| 2 | Use appropriate facial expressions, postures, and emotions to express emotions. | | | | | |
| 3 | interaction with teachers, friends and relatives, building emotional relationships | | | | | |
| 4 | Dealing with conflicting emotions from people around you appropriately | | | | | |
| 5 | Know how to play with objects and learning tools according to role-playing, participate in themed games with friends and teachers. | | | | | |
| 6 | Children know how to share and help friends | | | | | |

Processing experimental results and analyzing experimental results: Each social intelligence content will be converted to the corresponding score, specifically: Score level: 1 = poor; 2 = weak ; 3 = average ; 4 = good ; 5 = good. If a 5-6 year old child with social intelligence has: at level 1: poor awareness, needs a lot of help; at level 2: weak awareness, children need a lot of support; at level 3: average awareness, needs regular support; at level 4: fair awareness, needs support when needed; at level 5: good awareness, no support needed. After round 1 and round 2 of the experiment, we discussed to agree on the level of social intelligence of the child, agree on the score.

We conducted Paired - Sample T-test analysis in SPSS 25.0 software with 95% confidence level, specifically:

Hypothesis Ho: there is no difference in the values of the two overall averages, that is, the difference between the two average values is 0 in the criteria of each social education activity through specific practical activities. Perform Paired – Samples T-Test

Compare the Sig. value of the t-test determined with 0.05 (significance level 5% = 0.05, confidence level 95%). If Sig. > 0.05, we accept the Ho hypothesis. That is, the average of the 2 populations is equal, there is no statistically significant difference. If Sig. < 0.05, we reject the Ho hypothesis. That is, there is a statistically significant difference between the average of the 2 populations, meaning that organizing the experiment with the method and content of activities according to the new design is more effective.

*Experimental Results*

*Round 1*

Results of determining similarities in emotional recognition of 5-6 year old children with autism before the experiment

**Table 3. Survey Results of Control Group and Experimental Group on Social Work Activities**

| **Content** | **Control group/ Experimental group** | **Evaluation results** | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | | **Average** | **Std** | **P** | **Sig.** | **Alpha** |
| Identify the SA of the control group and the experimental group before organizing the experiment. | Control group | 5.83 | 3,763 | 0.840 | 0.036 | 0.05 |
| | Group experiment | 5.00 | 3.162 | | | |

Table 3 shows the results of the correlation test on specific SA abilities: correlation value P=0.840, Sig.=0.036<0.05 allowed (α=0.05, corresponding to 95% confidence level). Thus, there is a positive correlation between the control group and the experimental group, meaning there is a similarity in the typical behavioral characteristics between the children in the experimental group and the control group before organizing the experiment for SA education activities. This is a suitable condition to organize the experiment of SA education activities through the built experience.

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*Round 2*

We re-evaluated the social development indicators of children according to age. At the same time, we tested the difference in assessment results between before and after the experiment, the results are shown in the following table:

**Table 4. Results of Identifying ASD Children 5-6 Years Old After Experiment**

| ***Development indicators*** | ***Total score before and after the experiment of the experimental group*** | | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | ***bE1*** | ***aE1*** | ***bE2*** | ***aE2*** | ***bE3*** | ***aE3*** |
| Language acquisition | 1.58 | 1.79 | 1.63 | 1.77 | 1.61 | 1.70 |
| Language expression | 1.62 | 1.82 | 1.67 | 1.81 | 1.69 | 1.78 |
| Social skills | 1.70 | 1.93 | 1.52 | 1.85 | 1.59 | 1.81 |
| Awareness | 1.83 | 1.97 | 1.70 | 1.87 | 1.57 | 1.63 |
| Playing skills | 1.89 | 2.07 | 1.67 | 1.93 | 1.63 | 1.70 |
| Fine motor skills | 1.54 | 1.70 | 1.72 | 1.83 | 1.70 | 1.85 |
| Gross motor skills | 1.63 | 1.81 | 1.81 | 1.96 | 1.67 | 1.93 |
| Self-service skills | 1.67 | 1.76 | 1.61 | 1.75 | 1.57 | 1.65 |
| Shared | 1.68 | 1.86 | 1.67 | 1.75 | 1.57 | 1.65 |
| **Correlation test** | P=0.935; α=0.01, Sig.(2-tailed) = 0.001 | | P=0.555; α=0.01, Sig.(2-tailed) = 0.153 | | P=0.728; α=0.05, Sig.(2-tailed) = 0.041 | |

Table 4 shows that the average total score of the 3 children after the experiment is higher than before the experiment, specifically child T01 before the experiment is 1.68 and after the experiment is 1.86, similarly for child T02 (bE is 1.67, aE is 1.75), child 03 (bE is 1.57, aE is 1.65). At the same time, the correlation value between before and after the experiment of the 3 children is different, in which child T02 has no correlation, specifically:

Child T01 had the highest P (Pearson Correlation) = 0.935 among the 3 children, and Sig.=0.001<0.05 showing a high correlation between before and after the experiment. The average scores in each criterion after the experiment were also higher than before the experiment, proving that the observations and assessments of parents and teachers during the process of organizing emotional education showed that child T01 had made more progress in development indicators.

Similarly, children T03 had P (Pearson Correlation) = 0.728 and Sig. = 0.041 < 0.05, which had a high correlation between before and after the experiment. The average scores in each criterion after the experiment of T03 were also higher than before the experiment, proving that there was a difference in the observations and assessments of parents and teachers after organizing the experimental emotional education activities for children, children T03 had more progress in development indicators.

In particular, child T02 has P (Pearson Correlation) = 0.555 and Sig. = 0.153 > 0.05, there is no correlation between before and after the experiment. The average scores in each criterion after the experiment of T02 are higher than before the experiment, but there is not enough evidence to conclude about the difference in experimental assessment results, or the progress of child T02 needs to adjust the educational method.

The results of evaluating the progress of 3 children in the experimental group after applying many designed educational methods are shown in the following chart:

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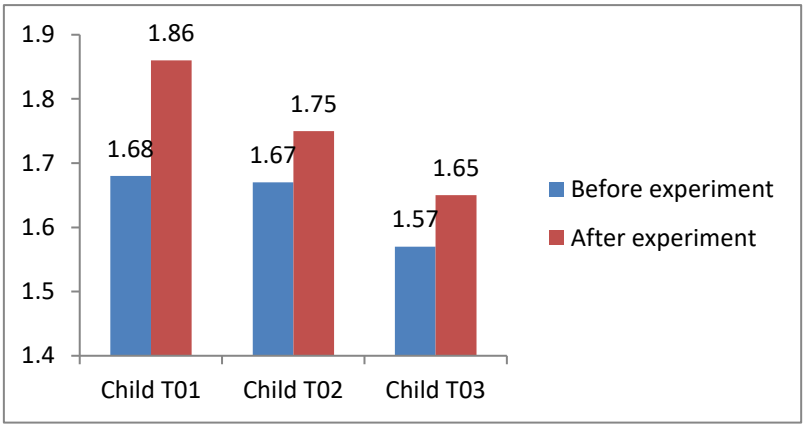
**Chart 1. Results of Identifying ASD Children Aged 5-6 Years After the Experiment**




Thus, it can be seen that the designed social education plan for 5-6 year old children with autism spectrum disorder only helps 2/3 of children improve their limitations in their typical manifestations. However, further research is needed in these cases to have more accurate conclusions.

*Post-experimental results on children's emotional indicators*

**Table 5. Results of the Experimental Survey of the Educational Activity "Children's Emotions"**

| No | Performance evaluation contents | Control group/ Experimental group | Experimental results | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | | | Average | Std | Sig. |
| 1 | Pay attention to recognize other people's emotional expressions. | Control group | 2.83 | 0.753 | 0.025 |
| | | Experimental group | 3.50 | 0.548 | |
| 2 | Recognize basic emotional states during social interactions | Control group | 2.83 | 0.753 | 0.025 |
| | | Experimental group | 3.50 | 0.548 | |
| 3 | Express appropriate basic emotional states in social interaction and communication | Control group | 2.83 | 0.753 | 0.041 |
| | | Experimental group | 3.83 | 0.753 | |
| 4 | Accept emotional differences, express appropriate emotional responses in social interactions | Control group | 2.67 | 0.817 | 0.296 |
| | | Experimental group | 3.17 | 0.408 | |
| 5 | Express emotions appropriate to objects, toys, roles, and play situations | Control group | 3.00 | 0.632 | |
| | | Experimental group | 3.67 | 0.516 | |
| 6 | Know how to coordinate expressive behaviors in life situations | Control group | 3.33 | 0.817 | 0.025 |
| | | Experimental group | 3.50 | 0.548 | |

aC: Control group after the experiment; aE: Experimental group after the experiment; Assessment content 1: Pay attention to observe to recognize other people's emotional expressions; Assessment content 2:

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Recognize basic emotional states in social interactions ; Assessment content 3: Express appropriate basic emotional states in social interactions and communication ; Assessment content 4: Accept emotional differences, express appropriate emotional responses in social interactions ; Assessment content 5: Express emotions appropriate to objects, toys, roles and play situations ; Assessment content 6: Know how to coordinate expressive behaviors in life situations .

Tables 4 and 5 show the ability to meet the experimental purpose, with progress in social skills in 5-6 year old children with autism spectrum disorder during the process of organizing experiential educational activities for children to identify emotions, form emotions, identify emotional behaviors of happiness, sadness, anxiety, anger, and apply emotional behaviors, specifically:

*" Pay attention to recognize other people's emotional expressions "* has a mean score of 2.83 for the control group and 3.50 for the experimental group, higher than the control group. At the same time, the difference test value Sig.= 0.025 < 0.05. Through interviews with some children after the experimental activity, we found that children recognized expressions of happiness, sadness, anxiety..., " *I am very happy when the teacher praises me"* (bE2, bE3). Thus, this indicator is assessed as having a statistically significant difference in the mean value between the control group and the experimental group, the experimental children scored higher than the control group, which has a scientific basis. It proves that with the content and method of organizing educational activities through experiential activities as built, it has helped 5 - 6 year old children with autism in the experimental group recognize happiness, sadness, or anxiety.

*" Recognizing basic emotional states during social interactions "* has a mean score of 2.83 for the control group and 3.50 for the experimental group, higher than the control group. At the same time, the difference test value Sig.= 0.025 < 0.05. Thus, this indicator is assessed as having a statistically significant difference in the mean value between the control group and the experimental group. The children in the experimental group scored higher than the control group, which is scientifically based. It proves that the educational activities as designed have helped children apply knowledge in activities to demonstrate appropriate behaviors during communication.

*" Expressing appropriate basic emotional states in social interaction and communication "* has a mean score of 2.83 for the control group and 3.83 for the experimental group, higher than the control group. At the same time, the difference test value Sig.=0.041 <0.05. This shows that the indicator is assessed as having a statistically significant difference in the mean value between the control group and the experimental group, and children in the experimental group. This proves that the educational activities as designed meet the requirements to help children in the experimental group improve their ability to interact during communication.

*"Accepting emotional differences, expressing appropriate emotional responses in social interactions"* has a mean score of 2.67 for the control group and 3.17 for the experimental group, higher than the control group. At the same time, the difference test value Sig.= 0.296 > 0.05. We asked some children after the experimental activity: If someone (a stranger) gave you a gift, what would you do? Many children did not answer (bE3). Thus, this indicator has not been assessed as having a statistically significant difference in the mean value between the control group and the experimental group. Although children in the experimental group scored higher than the control group, the educational activity has not helped children in the experimental group know how to perform appropriate behaviors with others.

*" Expressing emotions appropriate to objects, toys, roles and play situations "* has a mean score of 3.00 for the control group and 3.67 for the experimental group, higher than the control group. At the same time, the difference test value Sig.= 0.012 < 0.05. Thus, this indicator is assessed as having a statistically significant difference in the mean value between the control group and the experimental group. Children in the experimental group scored higher than the control group, which is scientifically based. It proves that the educational activities as designed have helped children know how to play with objects and learning tools according to roles, and participate in games based on themes with friends and teachers.

*" Knowing how to coordinate expressive behaviors in life situations "* has a mean score of 3.33 for the control group and 3.50 for the experimental group, higher than the control group. At the same time, the difference test

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value Sig.=0.025 > 0.05. This shows that this indicator is considered to have a statistically significant difference in the mean value between the control group and the experimental group, and children in the experimental group scored higher than the control group. This shows that educational activities as designed need more time to help children in the experimental group form the habit of sharing and helping others.

In summary, after organizing the experiment of the activity "Children's Emotions" in the control group and the experimental group, the comparison results confirmed that the social education activity for 5-6 year old children with autism through experiential activities to help 5-6 year old children with autism identify emotions, form emotions, empathy, and share difficulties with friends and relatives has achieved a number of the proposed criteria and brought practical values in the activity. In which the Sig value = 0.013 < 0.05 (assumed Ho value) proves that there is a difference between the experimental group before and after conducting the activities. However, in the evaluation of experimental results based on the ESDM scale, only 2/3 of children met the requirements. It can be seen that, although this activity can be effectively applied in practice, more in-depth research is needed to contribute to the formation and development of social skills for 5-6 year old children with autism spectrum disorder in inclusive preschools.

## Conclusion

The findings of this study indicate that experiential activities can significantly enhance social awareness in children aged 5–6 years with ASD within inclusive educational settings. Specifically, improvements were observed in emotional recognition, appropriate emotional expression, and social interaction for most participants. Although individual variability was evident—with one child not showing a statistically significant change—the overall trend supports the effectiveness of structured, hands-on interventions.

These results underscore the importance of incorporating experiential learning strategies into early childhood education for children with ASD, as such approaches promote social inclusion and adaptive behavior. However, the study's limitations, including the small sample size and variability in individual responses, suggest that further research with larger cohorts and refined intervention protocols is needed. Future studies should consider integrating effect size measures and exploring personalized intervention strategies to optimize outcomes for every child.

In summary, this research provides preliminary evidence that experiential activities are a promising tool for improving social awareness and fostering meaningful social interactions in children with ASD, thereby contributing to the advancement of inclusive education practices.

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