# VOICES FROM THE IEP TABLE: SPECIAL EDUCATION TEACHERS' STORIES OF ADVOCACY IN SPECIAL EDUCATION MEETINGS

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**Abstract**

This qualitative study attempts to delve into the experiences of special education teachers as advocates within the context of the Individualized Education Program (IEP) process. Making use of extensive interviews with the educators, the study connects professional identity, collaboration, institutional support, and reflective practice to advocacy endeavours. The findings point toward a very strong professional identity and sense of moral responsibility impelling special education teachers to engage actively in the development and/or implementation of IEPs. Sharing trust between educators and the families, having shared goals, and having clear communication with families enhanced the advocacy process. However, teachers highlighted their barriers, such as administrative impositions that limit collaboration and ambiguities regarding the delineation of the responsibilities of educators and families. The results reveal how adequate human and material resources, as well as positive leadership in the school, promote and sustain the advocacy processes. Further, positive interaction in IEP meetings engenders feelings of belonging and joint responsibility with the attending teachers toward student outcomes. These findings might make their way into the growing understanding about special education advocacy by describing interpersonal and institutional conditions that support or impede the meaningful participation of teachers. The study offers implications for policy, practice, and professional development aimed at empowering educators in their advocacy roles.

**Keywords**: Teachers, IEP, Special Education, Collaboration, Communication.

## INTRODUCTION

Individualized Education Program (IEP) meetings sit at the heart of special education practice, as the formal arena for educators, administrators, specialists, and families to convene to develop and review supports for students with disabilities (Trainor, 2010). Yet, these meetings serve more than their technical and legal purpose and provide full human interaction that is shaped by their own ideologies, professional roles, power relations, and the constant goal of advocating for the students needs (Harry et al., 1999; Mahoney, 2020). This narrative inquiry looks into the lived experiences and stories of the special education teachers engaged in IEP meetings. In giving a voice to the professionals actively involved at the IEP table, the researcher aims to shine light upon how advocacy is experienced, understood, and enacted in those crucial discussions. The collected stories bring refined accounts of collaboration, conflict, hope, and constraint that often remain concealed behind checklists and institutional reports.

Through their stories, participants reveal how professional identity and value systems influence their manner of speaking for and alongside students with disabilities (Mahoney, 2020). They recall moments of bravery and conceding, while considering systemic barriers and cultural demands, offering strategies intended to guide decision-making by keeping the students foremost at heart in these processes. These voices in the research aim to enhance our understanding of advocacy, not as a fixed duty but rather as a fluid practice defined by contexts of time, space, relationships, and emotions, along with institutional realities (Connelly & Clandinin, 1990). This study enters the broader conversation on inclusive education and collaborative practice, providing insights into how schools might better foster substantive advocacy in IEP processes. Finally, in doing so, it applies narrative scholarship to comprehend and represent the nuanced nature of educators' work and to invigorate a more genuine engagement that is truly student-centered within the construct of special education planning.

Teacher advocacy is deeply rooted in educators' understanding of who they are and why they entered the profession. A strong professional identity in special education encompasses a deep commitment to inclusion, expertise in disability law and pedagogy, confidence in collaborating with parents and professionals, and a moral conviction that teachers are the primary champions of their students' rights. When educators see themselves not just as implementers of IEPs but as advocates for equitable access and meaningful participation, they are more likely to speak up for students' needs, challenge unjust practices, and navigate bureaucratic barriers (UNICEF, 2023).

This narrative study attempts to investigate and document the experiences of special education teachers with advocacy within IEP meetings. By obtaining and analyzing personal stories, the study aims to uncover what are the meanings educators attach to advocacy, what strategies they use, and the systemic or relational issues that influence their ability and efforts to advocate for students with disabilities. It is largely regarded that collaboration among diverse team members, which could include special and general educators, administrators, and families, is the heart of decision-making, which respects one another and recognizes the expertise of the parties involved as critical to genuine IEP implementation (Friend & Cook, 2017; Harry et al., 1999). However, challenges remain where role ambiguity and systemic barriers hinder their power and potential to advocate (Mitchell et al., 2012). The overall goal of this study is to provide a glimpse into the manner in which advocacy is put into practice and further enrich the notion of collaborative decision-making and inclusive practices in special education.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

### Advocacy in the Field of Special Education

Prior to special education integrating service, advocacy forms the foremost factor of being a teacher with disabilities (Trainor, 2010; Mueller & Buckley, 2014). IEP meetings may be occasions for advocating for students, however, which requires negotiating for appropriate accommodations, contesting decisions unfair to the students, and attempting to translate the family or student needs into a plan of action (Dor, 2022). Yet these actions are shaped by institutional constraints, resource limitations, and educators' professional beliefs (Boscardin et al., 2022; Motitswe, 2025). Literature demonstrates that advocacy is far from mere procedural compliance; rather, it is a deeply relational and contextual practice, founded upon the educator's sense of responsibility and ethical commitment to the students (Mueller et al., 2014).

### Collaboration and Professional Roles at the IEP Table

IEP meetings are effective when all team members—the special and general educators, administrators, and family members- collaborate with one another (Arndt & Liles, 2010; Alkhushayban, 2020). Collaboration includes decision-sharing, mutual respect, and acknowledgment of each member's expertise (Saborío-Taylor et al., 2024). Yet, persistent challenges reported include general educators who feel relegated to the sidelines rather than being seen as full participants (Fish, 2008) and, similarly, special educators, whose expertise seems dismissed, with administrators either consciously or unconsciously pressuring them into the acceptance of their own agendas (Pazey & Cole, 2013). Principals and assistant principals find themselves caught in challenging roles as they advocate for the interests of individual students while ensuring compliance with district policies that impose resource-based constraints (Cobb, 2016). These dynamics clearly illustrate policy-driven processes clashing with student-centered planning.

While IEPs see all members as equal collaborators, practices are often plagued by power imbalance (Harry et al., 1999). There may be instances of administrative dominance with little voice given to the parents and selective appreciation of the teacher's insights (Mueller, 2014; Kurth & Foley, 2014). A deeper knowledge reveals that genuine student-centered planning forces one to go beyond checklist procedural compliance into respect for spaces with pluralistic viewpoints and especially those closest to the student (Saborío-Taylor et al., 2024). Therefore, advocacy

means that at times, power structures have to be navigated, and sometimes, even challenged for the greatest student good in keeping with decision making centered on their strengths and best needs.

### Narrative Perspectives and Educators' Sensemaking

Narrative inquiry serves as a potent instrument to enter the lived realities of educators and understand how they make meaning and interpret their role as advocates (Connelly & Clandinin, 1990; Goodley, 2011). In the storytelling, wax and wane narratives have the effect of granting educators moments and recollections of empowerment, frustration, and moral conflicts; none of which can be captured by statistics or policy reports (Mahoney, 2020). Recent studies indicate that educators' narratives may draw insights into professional identity while lately emphasizing systemic barriers and fostering reflective practice (Jala, 2025; DeMatthews et al., 2021). By centering these stories, researchers can better understand the human dimensions of advocacy that shape the quality and outcomes of IEP meetings.

### Gaps Addressed by the Present Study

While previous investigations have documented procedural challenges in IEPs, relational tensions, and systemic obstacles, relatively few have delved into the direct stories of educators' advocacy (Fish, 2008; Mueller & Buckley, 2014). Much of the prior literature has focused on parents' experiences, legal interpretations, or quantitative analysis of IEP outcomes. Hence, this study sets out to fill this gap by putting the voices of special education teachers at the forefront, considering how they understand, experience, and enact advocacy within the everyday realities of IEP meetings.

### Conceptual Framework

In this study, narrative inquiry is invoked (Connelly & Clandinin, 1990), which holds that teachers' stories are both data and processes of meaning-making shaped by context, culture, and personal identity. Advocacy is then framed as a relational dynamic practice, grounded in the professional identity of educators and the realities of institutions, through perspectives on power and identity (Harry et al., 1999; Goodley, 2011). The conceptual diagram 1 titled "Advocacy Dynamics Around the IEP Table" supports this framework visually by translating abstract theories into a concrete representation. The rings surrounding the conceptual diagram-Systemic Forces and Relational Ties-depict the policy pressures and collaboration challenges of interest within the literature (Boscardin et al., 2022; Pazey & Cole, 2013), while the inside circles-Identity Anchor and Emotional & Moral Center-reflect the personal and ethical dimensions emphasized by narrative inquiry (Connelly & Clandinin, 1990; Mueller, 2014). In conjunction, the conceptual framework and Graph 1 deserve a holistic examination of advocacy as both a structural and personal process, thereby justifying the study's focus on the lived narratives of educators in IEP settings.
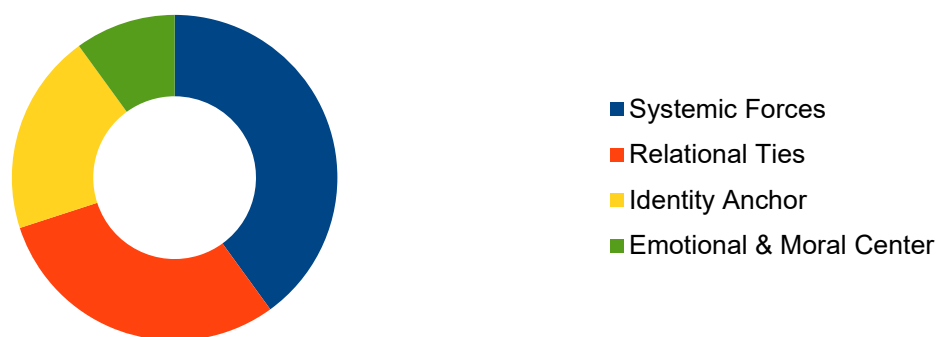
*Diagram* 1: Advocacy Dynamics Around the IEP Table



Diagram 1 offers to how educators experience advocacy within the complex world of IEP meetings. Each slice of the chart represents a distinguished face from the influence of educational policies and systemic pressures to the strength of relationships and collaboration among team members. It also captures the deeply personal elements that educators bring to the table, their values, identities, and moral convictions. By laying out these proportions, the diagram doesn't just show data; it tells a story. A story of how advocacy unfolds in layers: shaped by institutions, guided by professional relationships, and anchored in the personal beliefs of those who speak up for their students. When alongside the

conceptual diagram observed, this graph helps paint a fuller picture of advocacy not just as a structure or strategy, but as a living, breathing practice rooted in real human experience.

### Synthesis and Link to the Study Purpose

The extant literature suggests that, while advocacy may be a universal ideal, its enactment in IEP meetings is complex and context-dependent. Collaboration may be hindered by role ambiguity and inherent power dynamics; procedural compliance oftentimes may take precedence over student-centered planning; and, ironically, educators' perspectives have largely remained understudied. The purpose of this study is to explore the narratives of special education teachers to further understand how advocacy is actually alive and sensed around the IEP table, thereby providing new avenues relevant to both the practice and scholarship of inclusive education.

### Research Questions

The study is driven by the following questions:

1.      In what ways do special education teachers describe the experiences of advocacy during IEP meetings?
2.      What have educators found to be the key advocacy strategies and practices in IEP contexts that best serve students with disabilities?
3.      What are the challenges and supports that educators identify as having an impact on their capacity to advocate effectively during IEP meetings?
4.      How do educators interpret their professional identities as advocates within the IEP process?

These questions are deliberately kept open-ended to enable participants' stories and meaning-making processes to emerge organically.

### Limitations

As with all narrative research, several limitations should be acknowledged:

1-      Scope and Transferability: The findings are based on the lived realities of a relatively small, purposive sample of educationalists and might not be generalizable to other school contexts.
2-      Subjectivity of Data: Data comprise self-reported counter-narratives that might have been colored by factors such as memory, situational context, or the participants' willingness to share sensitive experiences.
3-      Interpretation of Data by Researchers: Analysis hinges upon the interpretation of participants' stories by the researcher, which can introduce some bias despite attempts to practice reflexivity and transparency.
4-      Context-situated Factors: Such advocacy practices are usually somewhat in line with situational directives imposed by local school-based policies, district cultures, and interpersonal relationships, all of which can be somewhat divergent across settings.

## METHODOLOGY

### Research Design

Narrative research design permeates into the background, weaving tales of personal accounts of individuals in IEP meetings. Narrative inquiry best suits capturing life experience in all of its complexity, helping educators and school leaders to articulate, ponder, and find meaning in their advocacies within special education contexts. With the emphasis on participants' voices, this study design also serves to enable the understanding of how advocacy develops and takes shape within real-world IEP processes (Allam et al., 2021).

### Participants

The participants involved in this study are those individuals who have direct and recent experience with attending IEP meetings in a K–12 public school setting. Purposeful sampling was used to recruit those educators who would be able to detail their experiences and perspectives of advocacy at the IEP table. The sample consisted of approximately 6 participants who encompass diverse perspectives across grade levels and school contexts ( See Table 1).

### Data Collection

Data collection consisted of in depth, semi-structured interviews that purposefully sought detailed narrative accounts of participants' experiences. Interview sessions with participants lasted for 45-60 minutes and were audio recorded with the consent of the participants. Open-ended questions prompted participants to share: Anecdotes of IEP meetings during which the participant felt that he or she either did or struggled to advocate for a student; Reflections upon their role as an advocate and their identity as such; and Barriers and supports perceived relative to effective advocacy during the IEP process.Follow up interviews were sometimes carried out to deepen or clarify emerging themes. Field notes were taken after each interview, recording some contextual details, researcher reflections, and preliminary analytic insights.

## Data Analysis

Interviews were transcribed verbatim and analyzed with an approach called thematic narrative analysis. The analysis entailed:

1. Immersion and coding: Simply reading and re-reading transcripts and cutting them into narrative segments pertaining to experiences with advocacy, professional identity, collaboration, and systemic factors.
2. Within-case analysis: Writing detailed narrative profiles for each participant to get to know the unique shape and content of their advocacy stories.
3. Cross-case analysis: Searching for common themes, narrative patterns, or points of departure crossing stories of participants.

Events and actions were noted as much as the way in which these stories were told (their structure, tone, and sense-making).

## Trustworthiness

To enhance trustworthiness:

1- Member checking was employed, whereby participants were asked to review and comment on the summaries of their narratives and preliminary themes.
2- Researcher reflexivity was engaged in through journaling and peer debriefing to characterize and manage any potential biases.
3- Thick description was offered as rich contextual detail so that readers would truly grasp the very specific contexts in which the advocacy practices occurred.

## Ethical Considerations

Ethical approval was gained from the participants as purposeful sampling who we have experience with, who then received an informed consent form stating the purpose of the study, voluntary participation, and management of confidentiality and anonymity (for instance, use of pseudonyms). A summary of the six participants in this study is presented in Table 1, listing their roles ranging from special education teacher and inclusion specialist to IEP coordinator and behavior support coordinator. They hold from 6 to 13 years of experience and work in different school settings. Different priorities for advocacy are held by each participant, such as ensuring inclusion in general classrooms, collaboration between general and special education, trauma-informed accommodations, parental empowerment, and system-level equity, and access.

Table 1 Participants' Roles, Experience, School Contexts, and Advocacy Focus in Special Education

| Participant | Role | Years of Experience | School Context | Advocacy Focus |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Participant 1 | Special Education Teacher | 8 | Elementary | Ensuring inclusion in general classrooms |
| Participant 2 | Special Education Teacher | 7 | Middle School | Bridging general/special ed collaboration |
| Participant 3 | Behavioral Support Coordinator | 10 | High School | Advocating for trauma-informed accommodations |
| Participant 4 | Special Education Teacher | 6 | Middle School | Parental engagement and empowerment |
| Participant 5 | Special Education Teacher | 11 | Middle School | System-level equity and access |
| Participant 6 | Special Education Teacher | 13 | Middle School | System-level equity and access |

## RESULTS

This study attempted to observe special education teachers' experience and engagement in advocacy during IEP meetings. The study consisted of ten in-depth interviews with educators and distilled four themes: (1) A Sense of Belonging and a Desire to Achieve Success in the IEP; (2) Utilize Varied Means and Tools; (3) Redefine Collaboration Through Relationships; and (4) Professional Identity as an Advocate.

**Research Question 1: How do special education teachers describe their experiences during IEP meetings?**
**Theme 1: A Sense of Belonging and a Desire to Achieve Success in the IEP**

Teachers in this study often described how participation in IEP meetings created a sense of professional belonging and further committed them to the success of the student. Instead of perceiving the IEP process as a required bureaucratic procedure, many perceived it as a therapeutic intervention entwined with their instructional practice that had personal meaning and ethics attached to it. This sense of ownership, therefore, created a stronger investment among educators to see the IEP become real academic and developmental gains for the students with disabilities.

Participant 1 portrayed this feeling of personal responsibility, stating: "Every day I implement the IEP, I feel compelled to achieve success and help the student improve and sustain their academic experience. I also share my IEP with my fellow teachers so they can provide me with feedback, which I can use in the future."

This quotation-style text reflects the participants' proactive stance, wanting to see students improve but also remaining open to professional feedback. Having shared the IEP with other teachers is a kind of collaborative approach to seek continuous improvement and sharing of ideas rather than working in isolation.

Similarly, Participant 3 emphasized the importance of precise implementation for positive learner outcomes: "Certainly, the precise implementation of the educational program will help me achieve continuous success for learners."Here, precision in execution is portrayed not as a technical detail, but as a strategic approach to fostering consistent academic gains. This emphasis on fidelity of implementation reinforces the idea that successful IEP outcomes are directly tied to the quality and intentionality of teacher practice.

Apart from implementation, collaboration and regular feedback were seen as very critical in the development process. Some teachers opined that meetings must be more frequent and opportunities for reflection must be continuous, for there can be dialogue to consider a diversity of student needs for better learning outcomes.

Participant 3 stated, "I think we need more meetings to understand different viewpoints of students."

Participant 5 elaborated: "I see that we are making great progress in the IEP, but I argue that we, as teachers, need to participate in meetings on a continuous and regular basis so that we can accept different opinions, which in turn will help us improve learning outcomes."

These reflections point toward an increasingly mature design of the interface of IEP meetings, not just in terms of planning but more in the direction of professional learning and community building. More regular contact would seem to imply that educators value IEP as a cooperative and iterative practice in which divergent viewpoints can be melded together into a more concrete, holistic, and responsive plan for each student.

In summary, these insights attest to the fact that a culture of collaboration, mutual feedback, and continuous dialogue greatly enriches teachers' feelings of purpose and efficacy in the implementation of IEPs. When teachers feel supported, acknowledged, and in shared decision-making roles, the IEP process becomes a vehicle for student growth and professional fulfillment.

**Research Question 2: What strategies and practices do educators use to advocate for students with disabilities in IEP contexts?**

**Theme 2: Utilizing Various Means and Tools**

Participants expressed a sense of great satisfaction regarding the availability of resources and tools to carry out their advocacy for the IEP process. Many of the educators stressed that continual access to these resources, be they material or human, was essential for the successful implementation of the individualized education programs. In their view, providing such support not only facilitated the procedural aspects but also conveyed to the schools that special education was worthy of consideration and respect.

Participant 3 expressed this opinion strongly: "I think I am lucky to be in a school that has all the human resources, from a psychologist to financial resources."

This reflection highlights the significance of comprehensive resource availability, especially in the realm of access to specialists such as school psychologists, in laying the groundwork for advocacy. Their inclusion within the school setting strengthens the collaborative process, providing invaluable expert knowledge to IEP decisions.

Along with that, Participant 4 stressed the importance of basic yet necessary materials to support the logistical side of executing the IEP: "We have the necessary papers, printer, projector, computer, and pens to take notes during the implementation of the IEP."

Though they seem mundane, all of these materials were said to give power to the preparations that teachers make; documentation of events, as well as an active stance on IEP meetings and follow-ups. This infrastructure presented the participants with an added assurance that they would be able to handle their responsibilities well.

On the other hand, a few participants referred to institutional support beyond material resources, which they felt sustained their advocacy efforts. There was physical infrastructure, professional staff, and a school climate for inclusion and collaboration.

Participant 6 went into more detail on this aspect of support: "The potential and resources are available in the school. We have a distinguished government school building. We have tables and chairs for the students. We also have a psychologist, social worker, and a wonderful administrative staff."

The above statement shows how advocacy may be strengthened by not just physical and professional resources but also by a general institutional culture that espouses student welfare and program fidelity. The mention of "wonderful administrative staff" points to leadership attitudes and cohesion of the team as a very important factor, as well, in creating an effective IEP environment.

Combined, the above reflections show that human capital and physical and institutional infrastructure provide teachers with stronger opportunities to advocate for students with disabilities. Beyond logistics, resources empower educators to meaningfully engage in the IEP process and confidently pursue student-centered outcomes.

**Research Question 3: What challenges and supports do educators identify as influencing their ability to advocate effectively during IEP meetings?**

**Theme 3: Redefining Collaboration Through Relationships**

With reference to collaboration in the IEP process, it shared the characterization of being something more than a technicality. Participants described it as a balanced effort in the spirit of trust, common goals, and mutual respect. What participants described as successful collaboration underlines the dimension of feeling like a genuine partnership as opposed to merely performing set roles in accordance with rules and regulations.

Participant 2 explains: "We've built a working rhythm so even when we disagree, there's space to find sufficient ground."

The commentary provides a glimpse of the potential long-term collaborative partnership to support open dialogue and productive conflict resolution, both necessary for meaningful IEP planning. The term "working rhythm" emphasizes the recognition that trust and familiarity between stakeholders allow them to negotiate effectively in the face of disagreements.

Not every participant viewed collaboration in such a sufficuent light. Many identified several relational and structural barriers from the IEP table that limited their ability to effectively advocate for students with disabilities. A common theme from the discussions was that participants' sense of holistic planning was hindered by general education teachers' apathy towards the IEP process, and by administrators focusing on compliance rather than individualized advocacy for inclusion services.

Participant's 2 stated, "There's a lot of talk about collaboration, but sometimes it feels like general education teachers and school administrators are waiting for us to make decisions about the IEP for our students. Therefore, it is recommended that these members are included in the IEP meeting so they can understand their importance."

This quote demonstrates the gap between the theoretical framework of collaboration and the lived experiences of many educators who work within a system that makes decisions, rendering IEP meetings mere formalities rather than opportunities for authentic advocacy and dialogue.

Even with these challenges, a majority of the participants identified prominent, and often, relational and leadership factors that, in their case, optimized advocacy. The participants indicated that their relationships with colleagues, families, and especially school leaders proved to be critical sources of empowerment. Participants highlighted the necessity of being part of a group where they were appreciated, where their opinions mattered, and where they received collaborative support. In particular, mentorship from more experienced peers and trust centered collaborations with families were recurrently mentioned as sustaining forces amidst institutional hurdles.

These findings indicate that although there are systemic limitations and the absence of general education teachers and school administrators' opinions about supporting the inclusive classrooms, these limitations can be countered by collaborative advocacy together with strong interpersonal relations and a positive school climate. Teachers who are situated in environments characterized by trust, communication, and shared responsibility are more willing to work collaboratively and advocate on a sustained basis for the educators.

**Research Question 4: How do educators make sense of their professional identities as advocates within the IEP process?**

**Theme 4: Professional Identity as a Catalyst for Advocacy**

For a number of participants, their professional identity as special education teachers transcended a job title. Instead, it was a steadfast commitment that defined their practices and advocacy efforts throughout each day. Their identity was connected to a strong moral and ethical sense of obligation toward their students with disabilities. Participants framed their roles as advocates, protectors, and facilitators, noting an unwavering commitment to the IEP process as a reflection of a deep rooted value regarding individualized support.

Participant 5 reflected upon this aspect of the role, articulating, "I am primarily a special education teacher, and I feel it is my moral duty to implement and follow up on the individualized educational program with great precision. Therefore, belonging to the field of special education makes me strive to be vigilant at all times and help my colleagues achieve the goals of the individual educational program."

This quote encapsulates one of the key benefits associated with having a strong professional identity, intrinsic motivation. For this individual, the concepts of vigilance and collaboration, while expected in any profession, were moral imperatives, transforming the individual in this context. Many others resonated with this view, as they considered themselves as key stakeholders in the IEP process, often going above and beyond the bare minimum of their roles to safeguard the rights and needs of students.

On the other hand, the strong sense of belonging experienced by some educators was counterbalanced by an absence of clear definitions of roles as to how certain educators were meant to function within their schools. Several participants were particularly concerned with the lack of widely defined roles and responsibilities, as bespoke boundaries created an inability for them to advocate, resulting in a state of professional frustration or conflict. This was particularly common in scenarios where special education teachers felt their contributions were ignored and their roles were out of sync with the understanding of their peers or principals.

To this, Participant 2 added a sophisticated note on authority and collaboration: "It is something I should tackle, being a special education teacher, meaning I have authoritative powers to intervene, but at the same time, should be able to maintain my defined limits. In my case, I am only able to deal with the learners with disabilities and engage with other education or teaching colleagues beyond, only when the situation calls for it."

This quote brings to light a dual tension consisting of a struggle for professional power and recognition on one hand and role avoidance of regulatory boundaries on the other. This emphasis on professional discretion and respecting boundaries brings to light a known phenomenon: advocacy within IEP meeting frameworks has been found to rely not only on the individual's will but also on organizational clarity, regard, and collaboration.

These reflections collectively reveal the importance of a well formulated professional role when it comes to the meaningful participation of special education teachers within IEP meetings. When teachers have clarity about their professional role and receive validation from the rest of the educational team, they tend to engage in informed, confident, and student-focused advocacy. In contrast, uncertainty, coupled with a lack of validation, has been found to diminish their professional power, putting the teachers and the students they try to support in a collectively disadvantaged position.

## DISCUSSION

This study's results indicate that special education teachers understand themselves as primary advocates in the IEP (Individualized Education Program) process. Professional identity, collaborative participation, and institutional resources shaped their capacity to advocate for students with disabilities and to develop individualized plans. These findings align with and extend the existing literature on teacher advocacy, agency, and special education collaboration. The participants framed advocacy for students as a defining characteristic for special educators, in opposition to an optional role, embodying a sense of deep professional and moral obligation. This reinforces Mahoney (2020) and Trainor's (2010) positions that advocacy arises as a result of teachers' internalized beliefs and ethical responsibilities in a marked inclusive education. In this study, educators such as Participant 5 regarded their responsibilities as requiring attentive watch, deep accountability, and moral obligation, underscoring that a strong professional identity supports advocacy.

Nevertheless, some learners noted the session lacked clear definitions of roles, a point noted by Mitchell et al. (2012) Special educators have low job effectiveness and confidence if expectations are not clearly articulated. If roles are accurately assigned and properly supported by the administration, the teacher is able to galvanize advocacy and compel action during IEP meetings.

Collaboration emerged as a central theme with the perception that IEPs are not merely procedures to be completed but are fundamentally relational and dialogic. Participants illustrated the importance of structured collaboration based on trust and the relevance of formal and informal collaboration toward a sense of collective responsibility for the achievement of the learners. This aligns with Friend and Cook's (2017) collaborative consultation model which focuses on the collaboration within the school by stressing shared decisions, communication as hallmarks of effective special education planning.

Despite that, the study also uncovered the collaborative conflicts and limits. As Participant 9 pointed out, some IEP meetings came off as scripted and some IEPs are planned for participants as noted by Fitzgerald and Watkins (2006)

who argued that collaborative IEPs that lack true collaboration are fundamentally flawed. Teachers want more meetings that matter and more metacognitive discussions in strategy sessions, which suggests that collaboration in schools is more constructive when it is built into the organizational culture rather than limited to a formal annual review schedule.

Having human and material resources was repeatedly recognized as an important facilitator for efficient advocacy. Teachers employed in better-resourced schools and supported by psychologists, social workers, and administrative staff showed greater confidence and effectiveness in IEP implementation. This aligns with Avramidis and Norwich (2002) who highlighted the success of inclusive education hinges not only on teacher's attitudes and knowledge but on institutional support and resources as well.

Moreover, the presence of basic tools (e.g. printers, computers, and other documentation materials) was deemed necessary for the proper implementation of IEPs. This supports Billingsley (2004) who correlated burnout and attrition in special education with insufficient resources and systemic support, underscoring the need for structural investment in inclusive practices.

A final theme was the teacher's commitment toward student achievement as well as self-improvement through reflection and feedback. Teachers identified as Participant 1 and Participant 5 underscored the need to not only receive IEPs but also implementation feedback from peers and improve on it. This practice is continuous learning, which resonates with Schön's (1983) reflective practitioner theory and also with Wenger's (1998) theory of communities of practice, where learning is a participatory event within discourse and problem-solving.

## Limitations and Future Research

This research presents valuable findings, but it was confined to a small group of educators within defined school contexts. Further research could broaden the scope to encompass administrators, family members, and general educators, which would provide a comprehensive perspective on the IEP ecosystem. Other longitudinal narrative studies could investigate the shifts in advocacy identities over time and through policies.

## CONCLUSION

This study underscores that special education teachers act as advocates driven by a strong professional identity and a moral duty to centre students' needs. Effective advocacy emerges when teachers build trust with families and communicate openly during IEP meetings. At the same time, unclear roles and administrative constraints often limit genuine collaboration, and access to resources and supportive leadership determines whether teachers can translate intentions into action. The narratives also reveal that respectful interactions around the IEP table foster a sense of belonging for all participants. Taken together, these findings suggest that policymakers and school leaders should prioritise professional development, clear role definitions, and equitable resource allocation to enable educators to champion the rights and aspirations of students with disabilities.

## Acknowledgment

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