



## **IEPs and Inclusion: Friends or Foes?**

Do IEP's hinder inclusion for elementary school students with disabilities in the inclusive classroom setting? A comparison of the perspectives of special education and general education teachers in Illinois, USA

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## **ABSTRACT**

The main purpose of this thesis is to examine both special education and general education teacher's perspectives on IEPs in relation to inclusive practices for elementary students. More specifically, the study aims to answer the main research question: Do IEPs hinder inclusion for elementary school students with disabilities in the inclusive classroom setting? The study also contains two sub-questions: What are general education and special education teacher's general perspectives of and experiences with planning, implementation, and assessment of IEPs in relation to inclusive education? What are the challenges and positive aspects posed by IEPs regarding inclusion/ inclusive education? Participants in this study consisted of two elementary school general education teachers and two elementary school special education teachers. The participants were recruited based on purposeful and snowball sampling and have experience in their respective field ranging from 6-29 years. This qualitative thesis utilizes a Reflexive Thematic Analysis (RTA) approach, which is a method that makes it easy and theoretically flexible to identify and analyze patterns or themes in a given data set. During the semi-structured interviews, the participants were able to expand and reveal their experiences and their own perspectives on the various aspects related to IEPs and inclusion. Despite the various challenges and negative aspects that make up most of the current literature and research studies surrounding IEPs in relation to inclusion, the findings of this study showed that while these challenges are still present, there was much more evidence presented that indicated the many positive aspects of IEPs in relation to inclusion. As such, these findings suggest that IEPs do not hinder inclusion, but can be seen as one of the most important tools used to support inclusion.

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## **LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS**

AFL	Assessment for learning
EHA	Education for All Handicapped Children
FAPE	Free and appropriate public education
IDEA	Individuals with Disabilities Education Act
IDEIA	Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement Act
IEP	Individual Education Plan
ITP	Individual Transition Plan
LRE	Least Restrictive Environment
MDT	Multidisciplinary Team
NCLB	No Child Left Behind
RTA	Reflexive Thematic Analysis
ZPD	Zone of Proximal Development

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# **Chapter 1: Introduction**

## **1.1 Personal Background and Motivation**

My passion for the field of Special Education began when I started as a volunteer in a life skills class for children with autism when I was 12 years old. Each year my passion grew stronger and there was no doubt in my mind that I wanted to pursue a career in Special Education. Upon graduating college, I got my first job as a self-contained special education teacher for students in kindergarten through 3<sup>rd</sup> grade (ages 5-9) with a variety of disabilities and academic levels. As a self-contained teacher, while I was responsible for developing, implementing, and assessing IEPs like every special education teacher, I was also responsible for teaching the general education curriculum, although sometimes a modified version of it, to my students. This is because most of my students received all their academic instruction from me, as they were in my classroom for most of the school day. However, I also had some students who were pushed out into the general education setting to receive academic instruction for certain subjects. That being said, developing and implementing IEPs quickly became second nature, and I found them to be very beneficial tools when it came to ensuring my students were properly supported to be able to progress in their education. As such, I made sure all my student's IEPs contained all the relevant information about the student and that the information was as specific as possible, so that no matter who they were working with, whether it be myself, a general education teacher, a substitute teacher, etc., they would be able to receive the necessary supports required for them to be successful.

A few months into my first year of teaching, the general education teacher of one of my students came to me before school one day and said that my student was already struggling in her class, and she thought it might be best for the student to no longer attend math in her classroom. In my head, I thought "this doesn't make sense". I then asked her what was going on and if I could pop down during math today (as my paraprofessionals could watch the rest of my class for a few minutes) to see what was going on since the student had just come up to my classroom the day before and completed their math assignment all by themselves with correct answers. Later that day, I went down to her classroom and watched as my student participated during the group instruction, listened to all of the directions, and sat down at their desk to start working. However, it quickly became apparent to me that this student was not being provided

with any of the manipulatives that he was supposed to have to be able to complete this assignment. Quietly, I went up to my student and asked where their number-line and extra paper was, to which they replied, “I don’t have any in here”. I then told the teacher I would take the student back to my room to complete the task, as they often did, and that I would come talk to her after school.

Now, mind you, that at the beginning of the school year, I had taken the time to sit down with this teacher (and the other teachers who had my students in their class) and went over their IEPs with them and asked if they had all the accommodations that were listed or if they needed me to provide it for them. This particular teacher had asked me to provide her with the accommodations, so I knew that she had them since I had given them to her. When I confronted her about the student’s missing manipulatives, she said that she had forgotten about them because she doesn’t know where the students IEP is. Shocked, I told her that I would provide her with the manipulatives (yet again) and print her out another copy of the student’s IEP and highlight all the relevant information for her. Being that my student is not her only student with an IEP, I went to talk to the resource teachers about what had just happened, and they both seemed totally unphased. They told me that this was fairly common amongst the general education teachers at the school and that in their experience only a hand full of them actually paid attention to the student’s IEPs, whereas others rarely if ever looked at it. They also mentioned that some teachers would try everything in their power to not have a student with an IEP in their classroom, because they thought it was too much work.

I couldn’t understand why teachers would not use the students IEP, as stated earlier, I found IEPs to be very beneficial tools when it came to ensuring students are properly supported to be able to progress in their education, especially when they are included in the general education classroom. When I told this to the resource teachers, while they both agreed with me, one of them noted that when she previously worked as a general education teacher, she had many negative perceptions about IEPs. She noted that for many general education teachers, when they see IEPs, they automatically think negatively about the student and view the IEP as more work than it’s worth. This experience made me wonder how many students, not only of my own students or other students with IEPs at my school, but in general, are not being properly included in the general education classroom because of the ways their teachers may view IEPs in relation to inclusion.

In addressing this topic, I hope to reach out to both special education and general education teachers and find out their perspectives and experiences with IEPs in relation to the inclusion of students with disabilities in the general education classroom setting. From my extended reading and personal knowledge, it seems as though we still have a way to go when it comes to having consistent, proper implementation of IEPs in the general education setting, as well as getting all teachers on board the inclusion train. As such, through this study, I hope to change the stigma surrounding IEPs and inclusive education and show the relationship between IEPs and inclusion in a positive light.

## **1.2 Reflexivity and Positionality**

Reflexivity, according to Olmos-Vegas et al. (2023) is a “set of continuous, collaborative, and multifaceted practices through which researchers self-consciously critique, appraise, and evaluate how their subjectivity and context influence the research processes” (p. 242). In other words, reflexivity refers to the process of self-awareness and critical reflection on how the researchers background, experiences, and beliefs shape their research. When writing this thesis, I incorporated personal reflexivity, drawing on my previous experiences and motivations that could potentially influence decisions made throughout the project, interpersonal reflexivity, to understand how the relationships and dynamics surrounding the research process might impact the context, participants, and outcomes, and methodological reflexivity, critically evaluating the implications and consequences of the methodological choices made during the study (Olmos-Vegas et al., 2023).

Positionality is a term that encompasses both an individual's worldview and the specific position they take in relation to a research task and its social and political context (Darwin Holmes, 2020). In other words, it refers to one’s awareness and understanding of their own social, cultural, and political position within a given context, and how it shapes their perspectives, biases, and knowledge. As such, positionality influences how research is conducted, its outcomes, and results (Darwin Holmes, 2020).

As previously mentioned, being a self-contained special education teacher and having students who were pushed out into the inclusive setting, I have experienced first-hand the various ways in which different teachers view IEPs in relation to inclusion. It broke my heart to watch as my students went from thriving and rapidly progressing in their education when they were in the

self-contained classroom, to starting off stronger than ever in the general education setting, and then to them no longer wanting to go to a different classroom and asking to come back or just being sent back to my classroom every time they were doing a task or assignment, only to do the assignment independently and without errors. This is often because, where I made sure my students were provided with the necessary supports, as outlined in their IEP, for every task they do, the general education teachers, more often than not, did not use the students IEP or provide them with their supports. As such, when I started thinking about writing my thesis, I immediately knew that I wanted to explore this topic, as I still did not understand how teachers viewed IEPs as a hinderance when inclusion is concerned.

From the beginning, I fully immersed myself in the data by personally managing every aspect of the data collection process, including developing the interview questions, arranging the interviews, conducting online interviews, and transcribing the recordings. I found I was able to easily engage with the participants, build a strong rapport with them, and delve into their perspectives and experiences with them before reviewing each interview multiple times after they had been transcribed. During the transcription process, I focused closely on the words that were used by the participants, as I found it to be an invaluable way of engaging with the data. Through the coding process, the compilation of relevant codes resulted in the development of potential themes and sub-themes. To structure my thoughts, I employed thematic maps and adjusted them as my understanding of the data deepened, eventually arriving at a refined mind map encompassing four key themes.

While conducting the interviews, I found that I felt I was both an outsider and an insider. First, I felt I was an outsider in the sense that I assumed the role of the interviewer, actively posing questions and leading the project, to uncover answers to my research questions. I also felt as an insider, however, in the sense that I am also a teacher, making it easy for me to be able to relate to many of the participants perspectives and experiences. Being an insider, I felt I had more compassion towards their experiences and was even able to share some of my own stories with them, which helped to establish a deeper rapport with the participants and ultimately lead to participants providing more detailed responses. I consider the academic and personal aims of this thesis to be connected and the motivation to write it revolves around uncovering the answers to the research questions, as well as helping me to gain a better understanding of the reasons for the differing perspectives on this topic. Keeping this in mind, the participants in this study confirmed

by assumptions that IEPs, if implemented correctly, are one of the biggest contributors to successful inclusion practices. I am confident that my contributions have had a positive impact by fostering curiosity, raising awareness, and expanding knowledge about how IEPs do not hinder, but are beneficial for inclusion of students with disabilities in the general education classroom setting. As such, I hope that my participants will take these insights back to their schools in hopes that it will create a ripple effect to actively address this matter.

### **1.3 Contextual Background**

The rights of individuals with disabilities, specifically rights regarding education, were virtually non-existent throughout US history until the later part of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. In fact, civil rights cases such as *Brown v. Board of Education* (1954) and its decision that school segregation is unconstitutional laid the groundwork for recognizing the rights of individuals with disabilities (Meldon, 2019). This ultimately led to the creation of federal legislations, such as the Education for All Handicapped Children Act (EAHCA) of 1975, which after several reauthorizations and amendments, would lead to the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) of 1990 (Hill & Sukbunpant, 2013). These, along with other legislations will be discussed in greater detail in the next chapter. To date, IDEA remains the most important legislation regarding special education. IDEA guarantees children with disabilities the right to a free and appropriate public education (FAPE) in the least restrictive environment (LRE). In other words, the LRE means that students with disabilities must be educated alongside their peers without disabilities to the maximum extent appropriate. Another important characteristic of IDEA was the requirement that each child receiving special education services must have an Individualized Education Plan, or IEP (Musyoka & Diane Clark, 2017). According to Hill (2010) “the development of, and compliance with, an educationally and legally sound IEP is essential to ensuring a free appropriate public education (FAPE) in the least restrictive environment (LRE) for students with disabilities” (p. 1). As such, the IEP has been identified by many as the most important document to have emerged from educational legislation in the US. Previous literature on the topic describes the IEP as perhaps the most significant document in the special education process (Hill, 2010), as well as being considered as the necessary component from which to monitor and enforce the law (Smith, 1990).

The term IEP, or Individual Education Plan, was first introduced in the USA with the passing of Public Law 94-142, also known as the Education for All Handicapped Children Act (EHA), in 1975 (Rodger, 1995). An Individual Education Plan, or IEP, which will be defined further in the next chapter, serves as the guiding document that encompasses all educational aspects specifically tailored to students with disabilities. In other words, the IEP document can be perceived as the vehicle through which students with disabilities are provided the necessary support, accommodations, and services to ensure a successful educational experience that meets their specific needs and requirements (Hill, 2010). The best practice in servicing students with disabilities in developing and implementing IEPs involves a collaborative approach by a team of professionals, also known as the IEP team (Hill, 2010). The IEP team includes the special education teacher, the general education teacher, the parents/ guardians, the student (as appropriate), the local educational agency (LEA) representative, and an individual who can interpret evaluation results. In this thesis, the roles of the special education and general education teachers will be emphasized.

In the past, special education teachers have been primarily responsible for the implementation and use of IEPs for children with disabilities, whereas most general education teachers have had little to no responsibilities in the implementation and use of IEPs. With the introduction of the LRE and under the most recent reauthorization of IDEA, however, the responsibility has shifted towards a concentration for developing IEPs to be implemented in the general education setting, thus emphasizing the accountability of both special education and general education teachers. In other words, this shift resulted in the concept of inclusive education and the creation of inclusive classroom settings. Inclusive education means that children with disabilities are educated alongside their typical developing peers in the least restrictive environment, generally referring to the general education classroom, thus making it an inclusive classroom setting. The introduction of inclusive education also resulted in new responsibilities for both special education and general education teachers with regards to the development and implementation of the IEP, as well as holding schools to a higher level of responsibility for developing and implementing valid and beneficial IEPs than in the past (Rotter, 2014). Additionally, as inclusion becomes increasingly prevalent and mandated by law, teachers are tasked with establishing inclusive classrooms that prioritize differentiated support and challenge students based on their individual needs and strengths (Mjelve et al., 2009).

Since the IEP contains all the relevant information about a student, it theoretically should be considered as a beneficial tool when it comes to the inclusion of a student with disabilities in the general education classroom. However, much of the recent literature and research surrounding IEPs and inclusion has been portrayed in a negative light, especially when coming from the perspectives of general and special education teachers. Further insight as to the various challenges and negative aspects, as well as some positive aspects of IEPs in relation to inclusion will be provided in chapter two.

## **1.4 Research Aims and Questions**

This study aims to answer the research questions: Do IEP's hinder inclusion for elementary school students with disabilities in the inclusive classroom setting?

Sub-questions include:

- What are general education and special education teachers' general perspectives of and experiences with planning, implementation, and assessment of IEPs in relation to inclusive education?
- What are the challenges and positive aspects posed by IEPs regarding inclusion/ inclusive education?

### **1.4.1 Defining the Participants**

In this thesis, the general education teachers are defined by their role as primary teachers in a school providing formal and informal instruction to all students, including students with disabilities, in the general education classroom setting. Additionally, special education teachers are defined by their role as primary teachers in a school providing instruction and/or additional support for students with disabilities in a range of settings, including the special education classroom and/or the general education classroom.

## **1.5 Thesis Outline**

This thesis is divided into five chapters, including an introduction and conclusion. Chapter 1 is the introduction to the study, which provides basic personal and contextual background information and motivation for the study, the research aims and questions, and a section on reflexivity and positionality. Chapter 2 is the literature review and begins with

discussing the history and origin of IEPs, including relevant educational legislations in the US. This section then goes on to define IEPs, of which includes the contents of the IEP, and is followed by a description of the IEP process and IEP team members and their roles. Next, various definitions of inclusion/ inclusive education will be provided. Additionally, this section also includes relevant theory related to IEPs and inclusion. This chapter concludes with a discussion of challenges/ negative aspects and positive aspects of IEPs in relation to inclusion.

Chapter 3 explains the methodology used in this thesis, including the sampling method, interview design, data collection method, data analysis techniques, the methodological quality, and the ethical issues of this study. Chapter 4 contains the primary findings and results of the interviews within the four themes developed through the interviews. Lastly, Chapter 5 discusses the results and limitations of the study and ends with an overall conclusion of the thesis. Implications for practice and future research are also presented at the end.



## **Chapter 2: Literature Review**

### **2.1. IEP History and Origin**

For much of the United States history to well into the 20<sup>th</sup> century, individuals with special needs were not treated as equal members of society. For children, this meant not being able to interact with their typically developing peers in school or extracurricular activities. While organizations advocating for equal rights for individuals with disabilities date back to the 1800's, it wasn't until the late 1900's that treatment and perceptions of individuals with disabilities began to change. The Civil Rights movement in the United States in the 1950's and 1960's was also the start of educational changes for students with disabilities. More specifically, the landmark case *Brown v. Board of Education* (1954) is seen as the catalyst that spurred litigation for the educational rights of children with disabilities (Hill, 2010). The *Brown v. Board of Education* case (1954) challenged the segregation of individuals by race, to which it was determined that separating children by race in different schools, without similar resources, was not equal (Hill & Sukbunpant, 2013). The ruling of this case sparked a movement lead by parents of children with disabilities, who began asking why the principles of equal access to education did not apply to their children. As a result, the US Congress passed more than 50 pieces of legislation between the 1960s to 1990 in support of rights for individuals with disabilities (Meldon, 2019).

Until 1975, children with special needs were often unable to access free and appropriate public education in the USA. Many children with disabilities were not allowed to attend school at all depending on the severity of their disability, because children with more severe disabilities were deemed by many to be “uneducable”. Those who were allowed to attend school however, attended special schools and were not allowed to attend the same schools as their typically developing peers. In fact, in 1974, the estimates of children with disabilities being excluded from public school systems were around one million students (Smith, 2013; Karger & Hitchcock, 2003; 20 U.S.C. § 1400 (c)(2)(C)). This made the passing of Education of All Handicapped Children Act (Public Law 94-142), also known as EHA, in 1975 a legislative milestone in the history of education of students with disabilities as it provided the opportunity for students with disabilities to be integrated into public schools near their family homes (Musyoka & Diane Clark, 2017).

The EHA guarantees each child with a disability in every state and locality across the country to a free, appropriate public education (FAPE) in the least restrictive environment (LRE) (U.S. Department of Education, 2023). More specifically the LRE means that students with disabilities must be educated alongside their peers without disabilities to the maximum extent appropriate. According to the U.S. Department of Education (2023), the four main purposes of EHA were: “to assure that all children with disabilities have available to them a free, appropriate public education which emphasizes special education and related services designed to meet their unique needs; to assure that the rights of children with disabilities and their parents are protected; to assist states and localities to provide for the education of all children with disabilities; and, to assess and assure the effectiveness of efforts to educate all children with disabilities.” The passage of this law also introduced the term individual education plan, or IEP. PL 94-142 requires that every student with a disability must go through an evaluation process to determine if they qualify for special education services, which for those that do qualify, results in the development of an IEP (Goddard, 1997).

This significant legislation, EHA, established six enduring principles that shaped special education practice today (Hill, 2010; Gargiulo, 2003). Due to the reauthorization of EHA in 1990 which effectively changed the laws name to the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) (Musyoka & Diane Clark, 2017), these six principles thus became known as the “six pillars” of IDEA, which are outlined by Hulett (2009, as cited in Alotaibi, 2017; Ardekani, 2012; Hill 2010). The first pillar is FAPE, or a free appropriate public education, which is based upon a “zero reject” philosophy in which all children, despite the extent of the disability, cannot be denied the right to an education (Hill, 2010). The second pillar is the least restrictive environment, or LRE, which requires that students with disabilities must be educated alongside their peers without disabilities to the maximum extent appropriate. The IEP, or individual education plan, is the third pillar. An IEP, which will be discussed in greater detail later, is a document, created for every student with disability, that outlines the plan and procedure for how special education services will be provided, as well as those responsible for these services and resources allocated (Hill, 2010). The fourth pillar is procedural due process, or procedural safeguards, which is the requirement that affords the student and parents safeguards pertaining to the student’s education (Hill, 2010). This law contains several vital safeguards including the right to confidentiality of and access to educational records; the right to an unprejudiced hearing

in the event of a disagreement concerning educational plans and to an impartial, legal representative; the right to receive an advanced, written notification (in native language) of changes to educational classification or placement; and the right to appeal (Alotaibi, 2017; Hill, 2010). Nondiscriminatory assessment is the fifth pillar, which refers to the process for evaluating a student's eligibility to receive special education services. This requirement states that the student must be evaluated by a multidisciplinary team (MDT) using assessments that are neither racially, culturally, nor linguistically biased (Hill, 2010). The sixth and final pillar is parental participation, emphasizes meaningful parental involvement and requires parents to participate in the decision-making process that affects the child's education (Hill, 2010).

Additionally, this reauthorization of EHA, now known as IDEA, in 1990 also introduced several new amendments to the legislation. One of the notable amendments was the change in the language of the law, for example, the use of the term 'disability' as opposed to 'handicapped' (Francisco et al., 2020; Yell et al., 1998). This reauthorization also added traumatic brain injury and autism to the list of disability categories and mandated that an individual transition plan (ITP) must be developed as a part of a student's IEP, no later than the first IEP to be in effect when the student turns 16, to help the student transition to post-secondary life (U.S. Department of Education, 2023).

The 1997 reauthorization of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act introduced the concept of access to the general curriculum by stating that the education of students with disabilities could be made more effective by "having high expectations for such children and ensuring their access in the general curriculum to the maximum extent possible" (Karger, 2004; 20 U.S.C. §1400(c)(5)(A)). This reauthorization and clarification of laws resulted in three important changes to the preexisting legislation: (1) students with disabilities had access to general education curriculum; (2) students with disabilities were to be involved with general education curriculum; and (3) students with disabilities were to make progress in the general education curriculum (Smith, 2013; 20 U.S. C § 1401 (3), 34 C.F. R. § 300.7). Additionally, IDEA '97 (20 U.S.C. § 1414) included five new requirements for IEPs: (1) *present levels of educational performance*, including how the student's disability impacts his or her involvement and progress in the general curriculum (2) *annual goals*, including benchmarks or short-term objectives that enable the student to be involved in and progress in the general curriculum, (3) the special education and related services and supplementary aids and services to be provided to

or on behalf of the student, as well as *program modifications or supports* for school personnel that will enable the child to be involved in and progress in the general curriculum (4) an of the extent, if any, to which the student will *not participate in the general education class*, and (5) the necessary modifications in administration to enable the student to take part in *state and district-wide assessments*, and if the student will not participate, the IEP must explain why such assessments are not appropriate and how the student will be assessed (20 U.S.C. § 1414(d)(1)(A)(i); 34 C.F.R. § 300.347(a)(5)). Together, these five statements present a comprehensive picture of the student's prospective plan for access, involvement, and progress in the general curriculum (Karger, 2004). The required components of the IEP will be discussed in further detail in the next section.

In 2001, the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB) was enacted. The purpose of this act is to ensure that all children have fair, equal, and significant opportunity to obtain a high-quality education (20 U.S.C. §§ 6301 *et seq*). According to Hill (2010), a primary goal of NCLB is to close the achievement gap between high and low performing children, specifically that between minority and nonminority students and disadvantaged students and their more advantaged peers. The NCLB requires states to be accountable to and for all the children they are responsible for education, which includes ensuring that all public-school students are educated in safe classrooms with highly qualified teachers where they can achieve desired learning outcomes (Hill, 2010). Additionally, as a standards-based reform initiative, NCLB mandates accountability for educators working with students with disabilities through the development of an IEP (Hill, 2010). Therefore, it can be noted that NCLB comprehensively solidifies academic achievement (e.g., proficiency and graduation) for all students and accountability for all schools in all districts by requiring districts and states to report educational outcomes for each group of students (Hill, 2010).

IDEA was amended yet again in 2004 and remains the most recent revision of special education law (Smith, 2013). These amendments, commonly known as the Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement Act (IDEIA) 2004, were developed in response to the No Child Left Behind Act (2001). Congress's goal in passing IDEIA (2004) was to align IDEA with NCLB, thereby increasing accountability for improving student performance (Hill, 2010; Yell et al., 2006). Moreover, these new amendments were also made to address academic achievement of students with disabilities and accountability within the special education program (Hill, 2010).

This includes changes in the IEP process, such as making it easier for IEP teams to navigate, reducing paperwork and meetings, and increasing accountability of IEP team members. This federal legislation alignment of NCLB and IDEA 2004 was described by Hulett (2009) as the mark of a “confluence of the two largest pieces of federal education legislation in the history of the nation, melding the broad accountability of the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 (NCLB) with the singular focus on children with disabilities of IDEA” (as cited in Hill, 2010, p. 25).

## **2.2 Definition of IEP**

As previously mentioned, the term IEP, or Individual Education Plan, was first introduced in the USA with the passing of Public Law 94-142 in 1975 (Rodger, 1995). According to Rotter (2014), the IEP has been referred to as the heart of providing a free appropriate public education. Additionally, the IEP is the cornerstone of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement Act (IDEIA) of 2004, as no other document holds greater significance in ensuring the effectiveness and adherence in program designin, implementation, monitoring and enforcement of this legislation (Rotter, 2014). That being said, an IEP is a document written in collaboration with student’s teachers, parents, and other relevant personnel, that describes the special education and related services provided for a student with a disability that is individualized to meet the specific needs of that student. IEPs represent the foundation of the educational program of students with disabilities and ideally should serve as a tool to help teachers provide effective instruction (Karger, 2004). Lee-Tarver (2006) describes the IEP as a process and a product. As a process, it is a collaboration between teachers, administrators, and parents in determining goals and objectives. Additionally, it reflects the dynamic process involved in developing, reviewing, and revising the educational program in order to best serve the child with disabilities (Lee-Tarver, 2006). As a product (document), Lee-Tarver (2006) states that the IEP serves as a roadmap for teachers and parents to determine improvements in the child's functioning within academic, social, and/or adaptive areas. As well, this document is an indication of the child's present level of performance, short- and long-term goals and objectives, additional services and supports for the child within the regular education environment and criteria for determining progress (Lee-Tarver, 2006).

### **2.2.1 Central Elements in an IEP**

No two IEPs are the same, as every IEP is individualized to the student for whom it was written, hence why they are called an *individual* education plan. Be that as it may, IDEA (1997) lists eight essential components that must be included in every IEP.

First, IEPs must include statements detailing the students present levels of performance for both academic and functional performance. According to Gorn (1999), the purpose of these statements is to describe the problems that interfere with the student's education so that annual goals can be developed. In essence, these statements are the starting points or baselines by which teams develop and measure the success of the IEP (Dragow et al., 2001). Furthermore, IDEA (1997; 2004) states there must be a direct relationship between these statements and the other components of the IEP. This information may be derived from classroom tests and assignments, observations from teachers, related service personnel and parents, and, if applicable, results from evaluation assessments (McCausland, 2005). Most importantly, this section must also include how the student's disability impacts their involvement and progress in the general curriculum.

A statement of measurable annual goals, including objectives/benchmarks, is the second central element that must be included in the IEP. The goals may address academic and/ or functional needs and are designed to (a) meet the child's needs that result from the child's disability to enable the child to be involved in and make progress in the general education curriculum; and (b) meet each of the child's other educational needs that result from the child's disability (20 U.S.C. §1414 (d)(1)(A)(ii)). In other words, goals should reflect the IEP team's decision about what is important to the student's education and should be established based on the direct correlation of the student's present level of performance and unique needs (Kowalski et al., 2009). The goals must be measurable and reasonable for the student to achieve in a year and must also be linked to grade-level/ state and national standards (Kowalski et al., 2009). Additionally, these goals, including the objectives/ benchmarks, should detail strategies to address needs that emanate from a disability, thus enabling participation and progress in the general education curriculum (Dragow et al., 2001).

The third element that must be included are statements that detail the special education and related services and supplementary aids and services to be provided to the student (Dragow et al., 2001), as well as the program modifications or supports for school personnel that will be provided for the student (20 U.S.C. §1414 (d)(1)(A)(iii)). These aids and services may include

accommodations for daily work, accommodations within the environment, use of different teaching methods/ strategies, etc. These supplementary aids and services are provided for the student to be able to properly advance towards achieving the annual goals, be involved and progress in the general curriculum, and be educated and participate in extracurricular and other non-academic activities with nondisabled children to the maximum extent possible (Huefner, 2000; 20 U.S.C. §1414 (d)(1)(A)(iii)). In other words, these aids and services are meant to facilitate integration with nondisabled children across settings, thereby going beyond the services necessary to enable the child to benefit from special education (Huefner, 2000).

The next required element is an explanation that indicates the extent, if any, to which the student will not participate with nondisabled students in the general education class. Often referred to as adverse effects, this section usually also includes a description of the effect of the student's disability on involvement and progress in the general education curriculum and the functional implications of the student's skills. This information is then used to determine the most appropriate placement for the student. Typically, 3 placement options are considered and must list any potential harmful effect either on the student or the quality of services needed (reason for rejection) for each placement considered, even the one that is chosen.

The fifth central element discusses the student's degree of participation in state- and district-wide assessments of student achievement. This includes listing any accommodations and/or modifications in the administration of the assessments that are required for the student to participate in these assessments. If it is decided that the student will not participate in a particular state- or district-wide assessment of student achievement, or part of a particular assessment, a statement explaining why that assessment or part of that assessment is not appropriate for the student and how the student will be assessed instead (20 U.S.C. §1414 (d)(1)(A)(v)(II)).

The sixth required element describes the projected date to begin implementing the services and modifications listed in the IEP, as well as the anticipated duration, frequency and location for each service and modification.

Although this is only the seventh required element, it is the final central element that is required for all IEPs. This element includes statements regarding how the student's progress towards the annual goals will be measured and how parents will be informed on a regular basis about their student's progress towards the annual goals and if their progress is enough for them to be able to meet their goals.

The eighth required element under IDEA '97 entails statements detailing transition service needs. Transition services are required for students 16 and older to help the student transition to post-secondary life. They may also be identified for students beginning at age 14, if deemed appropriate, but these services must be outlined in the student's IEP no later than the first IEP to be in effect when the student turns 16 (U.S. Department of Education, 2023)

Transition services should be outcome based and include the development of employment and other adult living objectives, instruction, and community experiences (deFur, 2003). The services should also be based on the student's interests and preferences, which are best articulated by having the student present at the meeting (deFur, 2003). For students aged 14, transition service needs focus on the student's courses of study (i.e., participating in advanced-placement courses or a vocational education program) (Drasgow et al., 2001; 20 U.S.C. §1414 (d)(1)(A)(vii)(I)). According to (Huefner, 2000), by the time the student is 14, the courses that the student is enrolled in should be aligned with postschool outcomes that the IEP team will seek for the student. As such, this requires the IEP team to focus earlier on the student's courses of study so that they will mesh with the transition services to be developed for the student no later than the age of 16 (Huefner, 2000). Beginning at age 16, a statement of needed transition services for the student becomes a requirement and includes a description of comprehensive transition services, as well as interagency responsibilities and/ or any needed linkages. Lastly, beginning at least one year one year prior to the age of majority in the student's state, transition services should outline a clear procedure for transferring educational rights to the student (deFur, 2003).

### **2.3 The IEP Process**

The IEP process is a set of procedures outlined in IDEA that govern how school districts determine the special education services that an eligible student with disabilities will receive (Drasgow et al., 2001; Gorn, 1999). When discussing the IEP process, it is first important to note that the IEP process is set forth within the bigger framework of the special education process, and more specifically it is considered as the heart of the special education process. Figure 1 (below) displays the 10 steps of the special education process under IDEA, of which steps 5-9 pertain specifically to the IEP process:



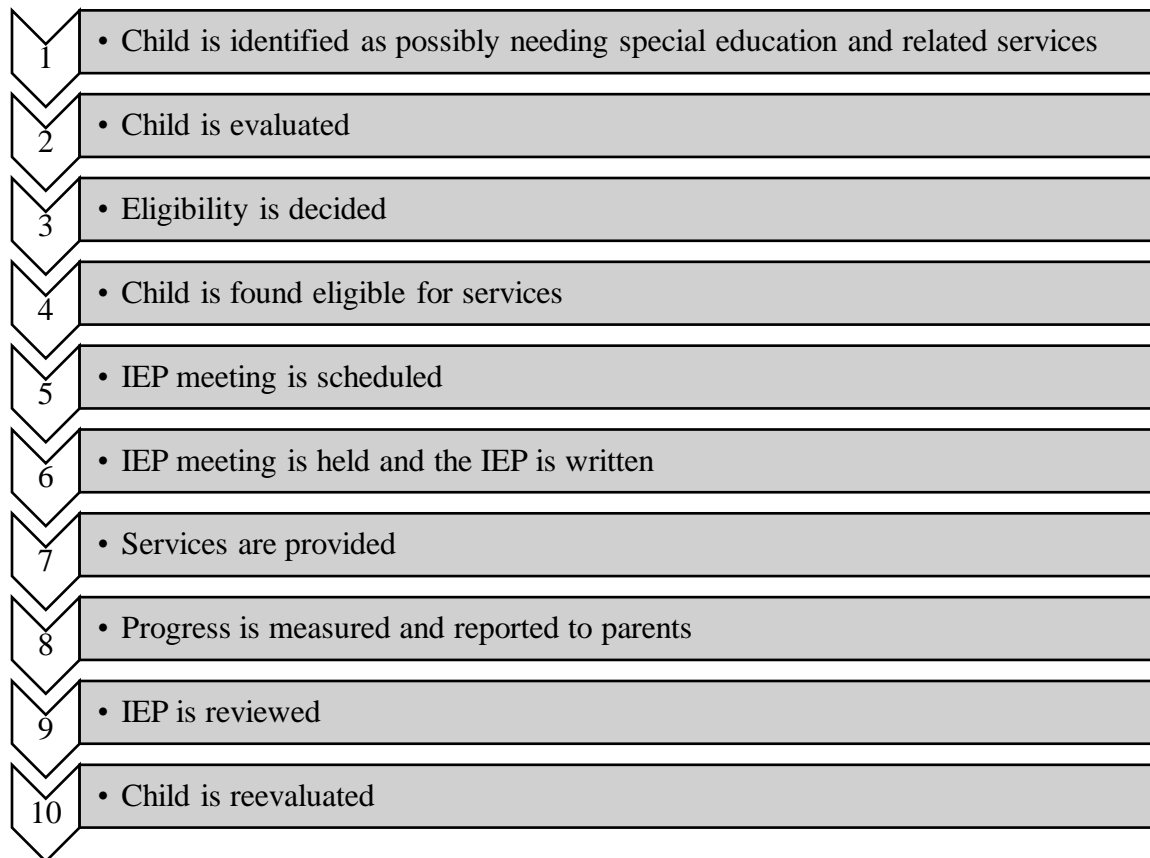


Figure 1. The 10 Steps of the Special Education Process (IDEA)  
 (Adapted from Ardekani, 2012; U.S. Department of Education, 2019)

In this process, steps 1-4 are referred to as the referral and evaluation process. When a student is suspected of having a disability, they are usually referred to the school’s multidisciplinary team (MDT). The MDT typically consists of a school administrator, a special education teacher, a general education teacher and the school psychologist (Drasgow et al., 2001). The MDT has a function that is separate from that of the IEP team, in that it organizes the assortment of educationally relevant information regarding the student that has been referred. Based on this information, the team must decide first whether the student has a disability listed under IDEA, second whether the student requires special education and related services, and third they must determine the student’s educational needs (Drasgow et al., 2001). According to (Drasgow et al. (2001), “this evaluation creates the baseline by which the IEP team assesses educational progress. Without such a baseline, the IEP team cannot show that a student has received educational benefit” (p. 361).

Once the MDT has determined that the student is eligible for special education services, the IEP team takes over. The IEP team, which will be discussed in detail in the next section, is responsible for developing the IEP based on the student's needs, as well as to determine the student's placement (steps 5-6). To develop the IEP, the team must determine the instructional implications of the results from the evaluation conducted by the MDT and use them to develop the goals, benchmarks/objectives, and educational services. The evaluation results are also used in the writing of the student's present level of performance, as discussed in the previous section. After the IEP team has written the IEP, an IEP meeting must be held. IEP meetings must include all IEP team members, including the student's parents and if appropriate, the student themselves. A notification of conference is sent home to parents, usually two weeks before the suggested meeting date, to inform them of the meeting and make sure the date and time works for them. At the meeting, the team will go over each section of the IEP and make any necessary adjustments. Placement is also determined during the IEP meetings. The most important consideration in placement determination is where the student can receive an appropriate education based on their individual educational needs (Drasgow et al., 2001), while also ensuring they are in the LRE. Upon determination of student placement and the completion of the IEP meeting, the IEP goes into effect and is valid for one year as IDEA mandates that IEPs are reviewed and revised annually. During that year, the IEP team will carry-out steps 7-8 of the process, which include the implementation and progress monitoring of the IEP. IEP team members will provide the appropriate services to the student and work towards meeting each of the IEP benchmarks/objectives and ultimately each goal. The IEP benchmarks/objectives will be assessed during the evaluation periods outlined in the IEP, which is typically 3 or 4 times per IEP year (i.e., each quarter or trimester), and these progress reports will be sent home to the student's parents to provide an update as to their student's progress.

As stated above, the IEP must be reviewed and revised annually, which is also step 9 (and 10, if applicable) in the process. Congress implemented this requirement to ensure that school districts would treat the IEP as a work in progress that is constantly changing and evolving in accordance with a student's educational needs (Drasgow et al., 2001). At this time, the IEP team must evaluate the student's progress towards their IEP goals over the last year and determine whether they have met each goal or not and figure out either what the next goal(s) should be or

how to revise a current goal. The IEP team must also update the students present levels of performance and any other areas of the IEP to ensure the information is accurate and up to date. If it is just an annual review, the process repeats only using steps 5-9. However, if it is a re-eval, which occurs every 3 years, then step 10 is also included in the process.

## 2.4 IEP Team Members and Roles

As stated above, the IEP team is responsible for developing and implementing student's IEPs. There are many different people involved in the writing and implementation of IEPs. Each individual person plays an important and distinct role but come together to create a cohesive team. The legislation identifies certain people who must be involved in designing a child's IEP, and who must work together to as a team to write the IEP (McCausland, 2005). Figure 2 (below) provides an overview of the IEP team members:

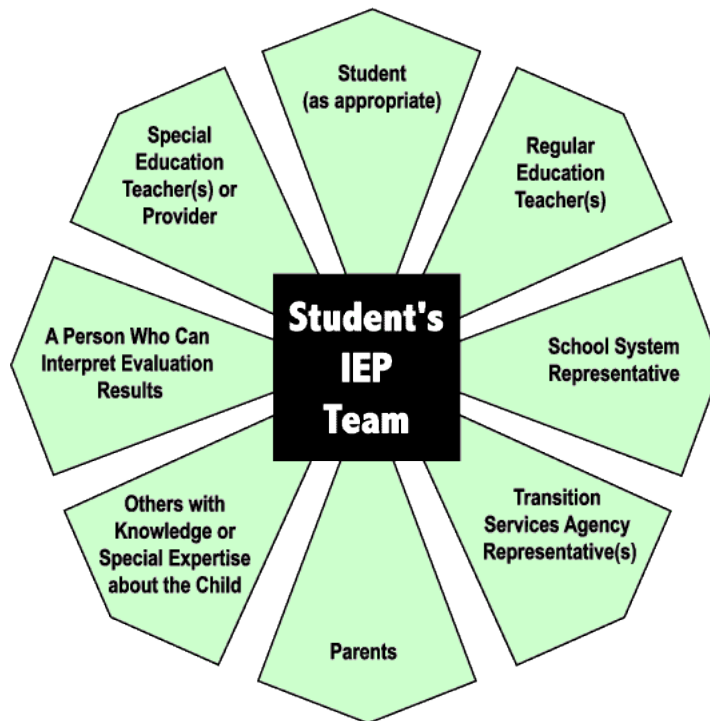


Figure 2. Student's IEP Team  
(U.S. Department of Education, 2019)

The *special education teacher* plays the primary role when it comes to IEPs. They normally serve as the student's case manager, meaning they are the person responsible for coordinating the collaborative process in developing, writing, and introducing and evaluating the IEP (BCSSA, 2009). The special education teacher also has the primary responsibility for implementing the IEP. Additionally, they may be tasked with creating and/ or providing accommodations and modifications as well as general support and information for other teachers.

Regardless if a student is in a general education classroom, a *general education teacher* must be present at the IEP meeting. If the student is in the general education classroom for any amount of time, it is that teacher that is a member of the IEP team. Depending on the student, the general education teacher may spend more time working with the student than the special education teacher, making their input extremely valuable. They are able to provide information about the student in relation to their performance in the general education setting, including how they are doing with the general curriculum, their behaviors, and any specific supports they may need. General education teachers are not responsible for working on students IEP goals, but they are responsible for providing students with the appropriate accommodation and modifications that are outlined on their IEP.

*Parents* also play an important role in the IEP. A parent can be the student's biological parent, a surrogate parent, or their legal guardian such as a grandparent, aunt/ uncle, etc. Since they know the student better than anyone, each IEP contains a spot for parent input, which allows them to provide unique insights about the student's strengths, needs, and areas of interest (McCausland, 2005), as well as any questions and/or concerns they might have. They may also provide IEP team members with suggestions for goals that they would like for their student, whether they be academic, social, or functional. Parents are given a copy of the IEP to look over before the IEP meeting to address any immediate concerns they may have before the meeting. At the meeting, parents are also given another opportunity to provide any further information they find relevant about the student and ask questions about anything related to the IEP. Additionally, if it is an initial IEP or a re-eval, parents are responsible for providing an overview/ history about the student's health, which includes information about the student's background, their birth, and any medical conditions they may have.

*Student's* involvement in their IEP and at IEP meetings are very dependent on the student themselves as well as the students age. Students below the age of 14 are typically not involved in

the creation of their IEP nor are they in attendance at the IEP meetings. Be that as it may, if appropriate, involving students in the creation of their own IEP allows them to provide input into their own education (McCausland, 2005) and what they want to achieve. Beginning at age 14, however, the student becomes a very important part of the IEP team because of the implementation of transition considerations (Drasgow et al., 2001). As discussed earlier, transition plans are created to help students transition into life after they have finished school. If transition services are being implemented, then an additional team member, known as a *transition services representative*, must also be present at the meeting. This person is responsible for helping plan any required transition services and should also be in a position to commit the resources of their agency to pay for or provide the services (McCausland, 2005).

Another IEP team member is referred to either as the *LEA (local educational agency representative)*, or the school system representative. This person is a representative of the school or school district and is commonly the assistant special education director for the school district or similar. The LEA must be knowledgeable about the general curriculum and the resources available in the district (Huefner, 2000). Additionally, the LEA is responsible for providing and supervising the provision of the special education program and ensuring that the services specified in the IEP are provided (Drasgow et al., 2001). The LEA usually leads the IEP meetings as well and makes sure everything is in order from a legal standpoint.

The *school psychologist* is one individual that is a part of almost every IEP team, especially when it is an initial IEP or a re-eval, as they also serve as the *person who can interpret evaluation results*. In most cases, they are responsible for carrying out all the academic and functional evaluations/ assessments when a student is referred for special education services or when they are up for a re-evaluation. As such, they also serve as the person responsible interpreting the results and informing the rest of the team what the results indicate.

Depending on the student and their needs, *other individuals* may also be on the IEP team. This includes any related services personnel, such as the school social worker, occupational therapist, physical therapist, speech-language pathologist, etc. These individuals are responsible for writing and implementing IEP goals pertaining to the required service and must attend the IEP meetings as well. Parents may also invite outside personnel to attend the IEP meetings as they deem necessary.

## 2.5 Defining Inclusion

Over the past decades, laws and legislations pertaining to special education in the United States have focused on providing students with disabilities the same rights and access to educational experiences as their non-disabled peers. However, the term “inclusion” wasn’t used in the special education context until the Salamanca Statement in 1994. Instead, the term integration was used. Thus, to best understand the term inclusion and its importance, it is first necessary to discuss the development of inclusion as a shift from the concept of integration.

Before the Salamanca Statement, from the 1960s, integration was the dominant way to describe the policy development within the field of special education (Hausstätter & Jahnukainen, 2014). Integration was a process established as a response to the segregated school system in the US in the 1950s and 1960s, with a goal to integrate children with special needs into the ordinary school system (Hausstätter & Jahnukainen, 2014). When first introduced, it was, first and foremost, an attempt to restructure the educational system, which demanded that all children had the rights to schooling and education, that all children had the rights to receive education in the local schools, and that there would be total recognition of the special education system (Vislie, 2003). In general, integration can be summed up as attempts to place children from special schools into ordinary schools, where the training was to help them up to existing mainstream curriculum (Reindal, 2016).

As previously mentioned, the term inclusion wasn’t introduced until the Salamanca Statement was presented in 1994, wherein it was explicitly stated that the integration of children with disabilities could be possible through inclusive schools (Francisco et al., 2020; Rodriguez & Garro-Gil, 2015; UNESCO, 1994). The purpose of the Salamanca Statement was to further the objective of Education for All, to ensure every individual has access and opportunities to education, by considering the essential policy changes necessary to promote the concept of inclusive education, specifically enabling schools to cater to all children, especially those with special educational needs (UNESCO, 1994). According to the Salamanca Statement (UNESCO, 1994), the underlying principle of inclusive schools is that all children, whenever feasible, should learn together regardless of any challenges of differences they may have. Additionally, inclusive schools must acknowledge and address the diverse needs of their students, accommodating different learning styles and rates, while ensuring high-quality education to all through appropriate curricula, organizational structures, teaching strategies, use of resources, and

community partnerships (UNESCO, 1994). As such, the significance of these schools extends beyond their capability of providing quality education to all children; their establishment represents a crucial step towards helping to change discriminatory attitudes, fostering welcoming communities, and building an inclusive society that embraces diversity (UNESCO, 1994). Circling back, it is important to recognize that the use of this term, inclusion, or inclusive education, meant a step beyond the concept of integration (Rodriguez & Garro-Gil, 2015). However, despite the amount of research that has been done about inclusion, it is important to note there is no universally accepted definition of inclusion; thus, this term holds different meanings to different individuals (Cara, 2013; Fuchs & Fuchs, 1994).

According to Vislie (2003), inclusion is defined as a process, rather than a state, by which a school attempts to respond to all pupils as individuals. Similarly, another definition states that inclusion reflects initiatives to develop ordinary schools to meet the diversity of student's needs and thus change the school system (Reindal, 2016; Vislie, 2003). Wang (2009) also provides a similar, yet more descriptive definition of inclusion, which states that inclusion involves the reorganization of ordinary schools, in such a way that every mainstream school can accommodate every student regardless of their disabilities, making it certain that each learner belongs to a single community. These proposed definitions of inclusion are a direct contrast to integration, in that they all emphasize the need for school systems to adapt to the students, instead of requiring students to adapt to the existing system.

While not explicitly stated in the current laws and legislations, the terms "inclusion" or "inclusive education" are most often used today to refer to this notion of ensuring all students have access to the general education curriculum and equal opportunity to be educated alongside their peers in the general education classroom setting. In other words, the terms "inclusion" or "inclusive education" are often used to indicate consideration of the least restrictive environment (LRE) for students with disabilities (Tanner et al., 1996). When defined in terms of the LRE, inclusion is primarily defined as being a placement, in that the LRE can be referred to as the setting or placement closest to the general education classroom to the maximum extent appropriate where the student can make satisfactory educational progress (Hill & Sukbunpant, 2013). By this, it is also important to note that the LRE can manifest across a continuum within the school setting that includes, ranging from least to most restrictive, a) full-time general education classroom, b) general education classroom with the special education teacher

providing consultation or instruction/related services in the general education classroom (i.e. “push-in”) , c) resource room where the student is “pulled-out” for specialized instruction for part, but not the majority of the day, or d) separate classroom where services are provided by a special educator (i.e. self-contained classroom) (Hill & Sukbunpant, 2013). Here, although inclusion is primarily defined as being a placement (i.e., the general education classroom, etc.), it is also being defined as concept, in that it implies the need for students with disabilities to be educated alongside their peers without disabilities to the maximum extent appropriate. In relation to this, one of the fundamental principles of inclusion education is that all children should have the opportunity to learn together (Cara, 2013). This is supported by Yatvin (1995, as cited in Tanner et al., 1996), who stated that all children learn best in regular classrooms when there are flexible organizational and instructional patterns in place and human and material supports for those with special needs.

Lastly, one of the most complete definitions of inclusion is provided by The National Center in Educational Restructuring and Inclusion (NCERI, 1995), who defined inclusion as:

the provision of services to students with disabilities, including those with severe impairments, in the neighborhood school, in age-appropriate general education classes with the necessary support services and supplementary aids (for the child and the teacher) both to assure the child’s success—academic, behavioral, and social—and to prepare the child to participate as a full and contributing member of the society. (p. 3)

This definition, according to Shyman (2015), can be seen as comprehensive in the sense that it emphasises the quality and placement of educational services, as well as includes a school-wide perspective.

## **2.6. Vygotsky’s Socio-cultural Theory in relation to IEPs and Inclusion**

Vygotsky’s Socio-cultural theory, also referred to as the theory of learning and development, is one of the most influential contributors to the modern understanding of how we learn. In addition, this theory can also be viewed in relation to various aspects of IEPs, including planning, implementation, and evaluation, as well as to inclusion. Vygotsky’s socio-cultural theory argues that learning is a social process and emphasizes the importance of the role of social



interactions and culture in promoting cognitive development. According to Vygotsky (1978), learning and development are two separate processes whose relationship can be described by determining two developmental levels. This first level, known as the actual developmental level, implies that learning should be matched with the child's actual developmental level, or the level of development that has been established as a result of already completed developmental cycles (Vygotsky, 1978). A central part of Vygotsky's theory is known as the zone of proximal development (ZPD), which is also considered to be the second developmental level. The zone of proximal development can be defined by Vygotsky (1978), as "the distance between the actual developmental level as determined by independent problem solving and the level of potential development as determined through problem solving under adult guidance or in collaboration with more capable peers" (p. 86). In other words, it is the space between what a child can do independently and what they can potentially do with support and thus, is used to determine what a child is capable of learning (Smagorinsky, 2018). Therefore, Vygotsky (1978), concludes that learning and development are two separate processes that do not coincide, but rather the developmental process lags behind the learning process, which in turn results in the zone of proximal development.

According to Kao, (2014), Vygotsky expressed that a child's development is rooted in their interactions with others, in that the presence of a more knowledgeable person to assist the learner in performing a task independently is necessary for learning to occur. Likewise, Vygotsky (1978), stated that the creation of the ZPD is an essential feature of learning, in that learning awakens many internal developmental processes that can only occur in an environment where the child is interacting with others and collaborates with their peers. In other words, the concept revolves around the notion that individuals achieve optimal learning outcomes when they are engaged in collaborative efforts with others. Joint collaboration, particularly with more skilled or knowledgeable individuals, facilitates learners in acquiring and internalizing new concepts, psychological tools, and skills (Shabani et al., 2010). The learning, once internalized, then results to development (Vouhelainen, 2014; Vygotsky, 1978). As such, when interpreted as the school environment, this theory highlights the significance of the teacher's role and the value of peer support as crucial elements in fostering supportive interactions that facilitate the learning processes (Vouhelainen, 2014).

Furthermore, teaching strategies like scaffolding, which refers to the support provided by teachers to learners when they are operating within their ZPD that enables them to progress to the next phase of their learning journey, and cooperative learning, as discussed above, connect Vygotsky's theory to teacher's assessment practices, specifically regarding assessment for learning (AFL) (Sardareh & Saad, 2012). Based on Vygotsky's theory, Sardareh & Saad (2012) explain that assessment for learning (AFL) is an interactive process in which teachers and peers collaborate to support learners in using their zone of proximal development (ZPD) to progress to the next stage of their learning. Additionally, within the AFL process, teachers and learners engage in discussions about learning intentions and explore strategies to enhance teaching and learning effectiveness, and ultimately achieve success (Sardareh & Saad, 2012). Therefore, it can be noted that AFL, based on Vygotsky's theory, ultimately enhances student's learning and facilitates their overall learning development, and as such, teachers should create appropriate learning environments for students that helps them to improve their learning and learning capabilities (Sardareh & Saad, 2012).

Based on this theory, it can also be implied that the ZPD is employed within the framework of IEP implementation, in that instructional planning is based on students' current level of achievement (Ismail & Majid, 2020). Furthermore, Vouhelainen (2014) explains that IEPs act as a guide to determine where the zone of proximal development is, in that it outlines the where the student is and where they can be. In other words, in an IEP, the student's actual developmental level is thoroughly assessed, taking into account their abilities, weaknesses, and the support resources available to them. This comprehensive evaluation forms the foundation for creating individualized goals that align with the student's zone of proximal development. The IEP are strategically designed to incorporate appropriate support measures and interventions aimed at facilitating the student's learning process. Thus, it can be said that Vygotsky's theory emphasizes promoting and optimizing individual learning by providing education and learning experiences that are tailored to students' unique abilities, levels, and needs (Ismail & Majid, 2020).

## **2.7 IEPs and Inclusion: Friends or Foes?**

With the new shifts in educational legislation that emphasize the importance of quality IEPs as well as the need for inclusion, much of the recent research and literature has resulted in

mixed perceptions regarding IEPs in relation to inclusion. That being said, a vast majority of the literature and research has portrayed many challenges and negative aspects surrounding IEPs in relation to inclusion, however, some studies and literature have still provided positive aspects. Examples of challenges and negatives aspects, as well as positive aspects will be discussed below.

### **2.7.1 Challenges/ Negative aspects of IEPs and Inclusion**

IEPs are essentially roadmaps for teachers, in that they outline everything that the student needs to be successful. Therefore, in theory, IEPs should be very useful and beneficial tools for both general education and special education teachers to ensure the success of students with disabilities in the inclusive education setting. Even so, IEPs, for all their promise and potential, have always been fraught with problems and concerns (Huefner, 2000).

*The IEP in general.* The results of many studies have suggested that IEP teams often wrote IEPs that were either not helpful or ignored in practice (Huefner, 2000; Dudley-Marling, 1985). Likewise, McLaughlin and Waren (1995) argued that general education teachers often do not even have copies of the students' IEPs, making it theoretically impossible to implement the IEP in practice. McLaughlin and Waren (1995) also expressed concern that IEPs are rarely linked to larger state, district, or school-level student outcomes and indicators. Similarly, many studies have identified that IEPs often have limited relevancy to the general education classroom/curriculum (Schrag, 1996; Dudley-Marling, 1985). As such, according to Schrag (1996), this results in a fragmented system in which students with disabilities are taught skills not related to the broader general education curriculum and disconnected with general education school improvement and education reform. Furthermore, perhaps the harshest critic of IEPs, Goddard (1997), claims that IEPs isolate children from each other, inhibiting collaborative learning, and suppress the child's initiative and independence because they become dependent upon the teacher's requests.

*Parental Involvement.* Parental involvement has also been indicated as a challenge related to IEPs. Several studies have reported less than optimal parental involvement in the IEP process, going as far as saying approximately one fourth of parents do not participate at all in their child's IEP meeting (Schrag, 1996; Katsiyannis & Ward, 1992).

*Special Education Teacher Perspectives.* In a study conducted by Dudley-Marling (1985), special education teachers voiced excessive demands on time and the lack of involvement by general education classroom teachers and parents as problems with the IEP process. Teachers in this study additionally expressed that they thought IEPs were time consuming to prepare and were not especially useful in the planning of daily activities. The results of several studies cited that teachers have often expressed IEP concerns such as increased workload, excessive paperwork, insufficient support, and lack of adequate training (Schrag, 1996; Smith, 1990; Dudley-Marling, 1985). Additionally, minimal coordination with general educators was also seen as evidence of the failure of IEPs to produce their intended results (Huefner, 2000; Nevin et al., 1983).

*General Education Teacher Perspectives.* With inclusive education, general education teachers are now tasked with most of the responsibility for educating students with disabilities in their classrooms. The results of a recent study show that in general, general education teachers have negative attitudes towards inclusion, and, if given a choice, are unwilling to accept a student with disabilities into their general education classroom (Lee-Tarver, 2006). While many researchers have also identified the attitudes of general education teachers towards inclusion to be a key aspect in the success or failure of inclusive education practices, other research suggests that it is not their attitudes towards inclusion that impacts teacher-student interactions of student outcomes, but rather their thoughts and feelings about their students (Goodin, 2011). Furthermore, The National Council on Disability (1995) explored barriers which could impede the implementation of identified promising practices in special education, one of which concerns general educators' lack of feeling responsible for educating students with disabilities (as cited in Tanner et al., 1996). General education teachers are also tasked with more responsibility and involvement in the implementation and use of IEPs, as well as in the development and assessment of the IEP's. However, McLaughlin and Waren (1995) identified lack of participation by general education teachers in IEP development as a continued issue. Schrag, (1996) draws the conclusion that this lack of involvement in IEP development and implementation makes linking special and general education more difficult and results in limited instructional usefulness of the IEP.

### **2.7.2 Positive aspects of IEPs and Inclusion**

While majority of the recent literature focuses on the challenges of IEPs and inclusion, some positive aspects have also been identified. According to McLaughlin and Warren (1995), the IEP is powerful document which has been suggested by many teachers as being a valuable tool for all students. Smith (1990) reported that in general, most teacher-perception studies indicate that teachers felt that the IEP contributed to an understanding of the child and that it could be used as a general reference. In a study conducted by Rotter (2014), teachers evaluated the usefulness of various portions of the IEP (i.e., the goals, objectives, and present levels of academic achievement and functional performance) in lesson planning. The results indicated that teachers found each to be of moderate usefulness (receiving average ratings of approximately 3 or “good” where 5 was “excellent”) (Rotter, 2014). Likewise, individualized education plans, when systematically planned and evaluated, have been shown to have positive effects on academic achievement and functional living of students with disabilities (Schrag, 1996). Supportively, the IEP offers a unique opportunity to properly align special and general education and to ensure that students with disabilities do not receive a fragmented or piecemeal education (McLaughlin & Warren, 1995).

In their study, Ritter et al., (1999) examined both students with disabilities and their parents and general education teacher’s perceptions about inclusion. The findings from the students and their parents were identical and emphasized that students with disabilities in the inclusive classroom have made gains in the areas of increased self-confidence, camaraderie, teacher support, and high academic expectations (Ritter et al., 1999). Additionally, students with disabilities were more likely to engage in extra curriculum activities, develop more peer friendships and take part in the community more (Ritter et al., 1999). While some findings from the teacher’s perceptions were similar to that of the parents and students, the teachers in this study also noted the importance and effectiveness of interventions to accommodate improved learning and training, as well as increased student confidence and improved academic progress of students with disabilities in the inclusive classroom (Ritter et al., 1999). Additionally, respondents in a study conducted by Goodin (2011) identified increased self-advocacy for some students enrolled in inclusive classes.

As it shows, despite the numerous studies focused on identifying the negative aspects of IEPs in relation to inclusion, there are many ways in which IEPs are seen as a tool that supports

inclusion. As such, do the negatives truly outweigh the positives? Or can we find a way to overcome our predetermined and negative perceptions about IEPs and open our eyes towards embracing IEPs as supports to inclusion? Thus, this raises the question of IEPs and Inclusion: Friends or Foes?

## **Chapter 3: Methodology**

### **3.1 Research Design**

According to Neergaard et al. (2009), a qualitative approach is best used for research projects that aim to gain first-hand information of participants' experiences and perspectives with a specific topic. Therefore, a qualitative thematic analysis approach proved most suitable for this study as it both allowed participants to share their own personal perspectives and experiences and enabled the expansion and revelation of their unique insights. Braun & Clarke (2019) outline three different approaches to thematic analysis (TA), which include the coding reliability approach, codebook approach, and reflexive approach, the latter of which is employed in this study. Reflexive Thematic Analysis (RTA) is a qualitative research method that is creative, reflexive, and subjective, and in which researcher subjectivity understood as a resource rather than a potential threat to knowledge production (Braun & Clarke, 2019). RTA highlights the researcher's active role in knowledge production (Byrne, 2021; Braun & Clarke, 2019), as it emphasizes the researcher's reflective and thoughtful engagement with their data and with the analytic process (Braun & Clarke, 2019). It is an ongoing interpretive and reflective analytical process that involves immersing oneself in the data, reading, contemplating, inquiring, visualizing, writing, taking breaks, and returning to the analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2019), all of which were encountered while analyzing the data in this study. The use of RTA in this study additionally stemmed from the ability to examine codes and themes, as well as to identify prevalent and repeated patterns, including those that may have remained unnoticed initially. By employing RTA, the thesis delved into the experiences, perspectives, and shared meanings expressed by the participants.

### **3.2 Ethical Aspects**

To abide by the ethical guidelines when conducting research for this thesis, an application was submitted to the Data Protection Services at SIKT, formerly known as the Norwegian Center for Research Data (NSD), in early January 2023, before any data collection began. The application was assessed and evaluated and then approved on 06/02/2023 (see appendix 1 for the attached assessment). Additionally, all necessary approvals, such as the approval of the thesis

proposal and supervisor assignments, were obtained from the Department of Special Needs Education at the University of Oslo.

When recruiting participants, all contact with participants was done solely through private emails. All interviewees were informed that the interviews would be conducted through a private UiO zoom link. Each participant was also informed that they would be audio and video recorded during the interviews and that they had the right to have their cameras off if they only wished to be audio recorded and did not wish to be video recorded. To ensure transparency, all participants received a consent form prior to conducting the interview. The consent forms were retrieved from SIKT and adjusted accordingly. The consent forms provided participants with information about the study overall, that the participation in this study is purely voluntary, their right to withdraw from the study at any time, and their right to have access to the thesis upon its completion if they so desire. Participants were also provided with contact information and told they could reach out if they had any additional questions after the interview. Additionally, the form informed participants of the anonymity of their personal data and how their personal data would be securely stored and for how long. In compliance with UiO's data storage regulations, data was stored on an encrypted hard drive since only yellow data was collected from participants.

To ensure anonymity and confidentiality, each participant was assigned code that was used when quoting the participant. No names of the participants or the schools will be used in the study, only their position (general education teacher or special education teacher), years teaching, current grade level(s) they teach, and basic information about the school district they teach at (i.e., number of schools in the district, number of students, etc.) will be used. During the interviews, participants were asked to refrain from using any identifiable words, such as the names of students, school, etc., and any accidental mention of names, schools, etc., was removed from the transcriptions and the results to ensure all information was kept anonymous.

To ensure validity and credibility of this thesis, member checking was used. According to Candela (2019), member checking allows the researcher to ensure that participants' voices are accurately represented by giving them the opportunity to confirm or deny the accuracy and interpretations of data, adding credibility to the qualitative study. At the conclusion of each interview, participants were told they would be given the opportunity to review their own statements if they wanted to. I took careful steps to ensure each participant's voice is protected



and accurately portrayed, while refraining from making assumptions of their emotions and feelings. Once the interviews had been transcribed, coded, and themed, each participant was sent an email containing their own statements to verify what they had said or make any corrections.

### **3.3 Recruitment and Participants**

The participants in the current study were recruited using a combination of purposeful sampling and snowball sampling. Purposeful sampling involves selecting participants based on specific criteria that are relevant to the research question or topic of interest, thereby allowing the researcher to choose participants who are likely to provide relevant and informative data (Cohen et al., 2007). Additionally, the goal of purposeful sampling is to ensure that the sample is diverse and representative enough to provide rich and varied data that can inform the research findings. The recruitment process first began by contacting friends and former co-workers who are current elementary general education and special education teachers. Participants were contacted via email and presented with a brief overview of the study and what the interviews would entail. To obtain all the participants, snowball sampling was also used, as one of the participants was recruited through a connection to another participant. According to Bryman (2012), snowball sampling involves the researcher making initial contact with individuals who are relevant to the study and then uses them to establish contacts with additional relevant individuals. Once the participants agreed to the interviews, they were each sent an official email regarding their participation in the study and the consent form (see appendix 2), which included all the details of the study, information about the interview and the interview process, and their rights as participants, which they were asked to sign and return before their interview was conducted.

The initial sample group consisted of 6 participants from 3 different school districts in Illinois, with one general education teacher and one special education teacher from each school. Unfortunately, one of the general education teachers withdrew from the study before the interview was conducted due to personal reason. Shortly after, the special education teacher from the same school became unreachable, and eventually also withdrew from the study for reasons not specified. Therefore, the final sample included 4 participants from 2 different school districts in Illinois, with one general education and one special education teacher being from each school. The chosen participants were recruited because of certain specific characteristics that could be

beneficial in answering the research question, such as their varying teaching backgrounds and experiences with IEP's and inclusion.

Teacher aliases are grouped by school, meaning that G1 (general education teacher 1) and S1 (special education teacher 1) come from the same school and G2 (general education teacher 2) and S2 (special education teacher 2) come from the same school. G1 is a 4<sup>th</sup> grade teacher with 29 years of teaching experience in the field and S1 is a special education teacher for grades 3-5 with 20 years of teaching experience, 12 years as a teaching assistant and 8 years as a special education teacher. These 2 teachers teach in a very large school district containing a total of 34 schools (1 preschool, 21 elementary schools, 7 middle schools, 3 high schools, 1 alternative high school and 1 STEPS) with a total enrollment of 26,000 students (IPSD 204, 2023). On the other hand, G2 is a 3<sup>rd</sup> grade teacher with 6 years of teaching experience and S2 is a special education teacher for grades K-3 with 10 years of teaching experience in the field. In contrast, these 2 teachers are from a very small school district containing 8 schools (1preschool, 3 elementary schools (2 of which are grades K-3, and 1 with grades 4-5), 1 middle school, 1 high school, and 2 charter schools (grades k-8)) with a total enrollment of 3,340 students (NCCUSD 187, 2023). The purpose of selecting both general education teachers and special education teachers was to include and compare their valuable and differing insights, perspectives, and experiences with IEPs in relation to inclusion. Also, selecting teachers with differing knowledge backgrounds and teaching experiences, as well as from two very different types of schools, provides insight into the ways IEP's and inclusion are viewed and how they might differ based on the teacher and/ or the school.

### **3.4 Procedures and Data Collection**

Interviews are one of the main qualitative methods used for gathering data. According to Patton (2002, as cited in Loria, 2010), qualitative interviews operate under the assumption that the perspectives of others hold significance, possess valuable insights, and can be explicitly articulated. They also allow researchers to probe into the thoughts, experiences, and perceptions of the participants. As such, the use of qualitative interviews in this study emphasizes the importance and value of the participants experiences and perspectives. The interviews were structured as semi-structured interviews, which are standardized but at the same time open-ended. In other words, semi-structured interviews not only allow researchers to collect in-depth

information and evidence from interviewees, actively considering the focus of the study, but also provides the flexibility and adaptability to track their studies and ask relevant questions to the participants (Ruslin et al., 2022). After each participant was selected and agreed to participate in the study, a date and time to conduct each individual interview was agreed upon. All interviews were conducted via UiO's secure zoom link due to the differing geographical location between the participants and the researcher. Additionally, all interviews were recorded for transcription purposes. The interviews all took place within the last two weeks of March. All participants were asked the same set of questions which were grouped into three overarching themes regarding the teacher's perspectives on their roles in (1) planning IEPs, (2) implementing IEP's and (3) assessing IEPs, as well as challenges and positive aspects of each in relation to inclusive education (see appendix 3). However, the wording of certain questions had to be adjusted based on whether the participant was a general education teacher or a special education teacher, but the purpose of the questions remained the same. Additionally, since semi-structured interviews are meant to be flexible, the order in which the questions were asked often depended on the participants answer to the last question or were sometimes asked in a different order to maintain the flow of the interview, but all questions were still asked to all participants, nonetheless. Participants were also prompted at times to elaborate in their responses if their statements weren't clear to help eliminate any misunderstanding when transcribing the interviews. Each interview lasted between 30-45 minutes. The data from each interview was transcribed immediately after each interview and was stored on an encrypted hard drive.

### **3.4.1 Data Analysis**

Reflexive Thematic Analysis (RTA) is one of the most effective qualitative research methods for identifying, analyzing, organizing, describing, and reporting themes found within a data set (Braun & Clarke, 2006). RTA was employed in this study due to its flexibility in identifying and analyzing patterns or themes within a given dataset, through the use of semantic coding (Byrne, 2021; Braun & Clarke 2012). Semantic coding involves examining the participants' explicit meanings and focusing solely on what the participants have stated (Byrne, 2021). The analysis process evolves from initially organizing the data to reveal patterns in semantic content and providing a summary, to progressing towards interpretation, which

attempts to conceptualize the significance of the patterns and explore their broader meanings and implications.

Braun & Clarke (2006) created six-phase process to facilitate the analysis and help the researcher identify and attend to the important aspects of a thematic analysis, which is employed in this thesis below. While the six phases are organised in a logical sequential order, the analysis is not a linear process of moving forward through the phases but instead is recursive and iterative, requiring the researcher to move back and forth through the phases as necessary (Byrne, 2021; Braun & Clarke, 2020).

*Phase 1: Familiarization with the data.* This phase is centered around becoming familiar with the data. Familiarization entails the reading and re-reading of the entire dataset in order to become intimately familiar with the data, which is necessary to be able to identify appropriate information that may be relevant to the research question(s) (Byrne, 2021). As such, I started this phase with familiarizing myself with the data by first listening to each interview recording twice before transcribing each recording using UiO's Autotekst tool. The transcriptions were originally downloaded as Autotekst .txt files but were then copied and pasted into word documents so that the coding process could be done manually during the next phase. During the second playback of each interview, I employed active listening, which is used in order to develop an understanding of the primary areas addressed in each interview prior to transcription (Byrne, 2021). Each transcription was then read multiple times and edited for any unnecessary repetitive words and content that was unrelated to the thesis. As I was reading, I took notes of some initial trends, as well as documenting my own thoughts and feelings surrounding the data and the analysis process, while staying mindful of the participants thoughts and perspectives. According to Byrne (2021), in terms of transparency, it would be beneficial to adhere to this practice throughout the entire analysis.

*Phase 2: Generating initial codes.* According to Nowell et al., (2017), qualitative coding is a process of reflection and a way of interacting with and thinking about data. Coding allows the researcher to simplify and focus on specific characteristics of the data (Nowell et al., 2017). As such, the codes are understood to represent the researcher's interpretations of patterns of meaning across the dataset and are the fundamental building blocks of what will later become themes (Byrne, 2021). The coding process for this thesis began with using the 'comments' function of Microsoft Word, which allowed the codes to be noted in the side margin, while also

using colors to identify the area of text assigned to each code (see appendix 4). The codes were developed using a mixture of the deductive approach, as some codes were based on the research question, and the inductive approach, as other codes emerged from the data as it developed. Additionally, a combination of descriptive coding and process coding was used when writing the codes. This was done on a Microsoft Word document and was stored on an encrypted hard drive. The data was then organized to create meaningful groups and establish connections between them. Nowell et al. (2017) describes this process as a systematic process for coding data in which specific statements are analyzed and categorized into themes that represent the phenomenon of interest. The coding process helped to identify and make note of key words and phrases that were frequently used by the participants. In the last step of this phase, all of the codes were collated, and many different codes were created across the data set.

*Phase 3: Generating themes.* During this phase, the focus shifts from the interpretation of individual data items within the dataset, to the interpretation of aggregated meaning and meaningfulness across the dataset (Byrne, 2021). As such, this phase began once all the coding had been collated and many different codes were created across the data set. In the first step of this phase, the codes were grouped into a table and all the identified statements and quotes from all the interviews were grouped and placed into the table of their corresponding code (see appendix 5). Through the reflexive approach, themes are not predefined in order to “find” codes, but instead, are created by organizing codes around a core commonality that has been interpreted from the data (Byrne, 2021). Next, using tables and mind-maps, the coded data was reviewed and analysed as to how different codes may be combined according to shared meanings/ commonalities to form themes and sub-themes.

*Phase 4: Reviewing potential themes.* This next phase, reviewing the potential themes, involves two levels of review, which essentially function to demonstrate that items and codes are appropriate to inform a theme, and that a theme is appropriate to inform the interpretation of the dataset (Byrne, 2021; Braun & Clarke 2006). During level one, all the gathered statements for each theme were reviewed, reread, and analyzed to determine whether they formed a coherent pattern. In determining these patterns, the criterion was that the patterns had to be discovered across the entire data set. Ensuring the data was being analyzed and not just merely repeating what the participants said was essential. In the next level, the themes were then assessed as to their ability to provide the most relevant interpretation of the data in relation to the research

question(s). Upon completion of this two-level review, it is essential to have a comprehensive understanding of the various themes, their interrelationships, and the overarching narrative they collectively convey about the data (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Four main themes had emerged during this phase. These main themes are challenges, the role of the teacher, inclusion, and IEP supports inclusion. Within each main theme, several sub-themes also emerged during this process. The objectives of this thematic analysis were to acknowledge and demonstrate the importance of the roles of the general education and special education teachers in planning, implementing, and assessing of IEPs in relation to inclusive education, as well as to identify both the challenges and positive aspects posed by IEPs in relation to inclusive education. A mind map was also created to display the themes and sub-themes more clearly (see appendix 6).

*Phase 5: Defining and naming themes.* In this phase, a detailed analysis, identifying the story that each theme tells was conducted and written for each individual theme. This was done to achieve the essential components of this phase, which are to determine what aspect of the data each theme captures as well as to identify the essence of what each theme is about. Additionally, at this stage, it is important to consider how each theme fits into the overall story about the entire data set in relation to the research questions (Nowell et al., 2017). At this point, the themes already had working names, however, it was important to consider what names would be best used to ensure the themes are understood right away. A final mind-map depicting the themes and sub-themes was developed in this phase (see appendix 6). Once the themes were created, they were renamed, as it is suggested to use catchy names for the themes that may more immediately capture the attention of the reader while also communicating an important aspect of the theme (Byrne, 2021; Braun & Clarke, 2006). Theme 1 was renamed to “The Barriers”, as it depicted several challenges participants faced with and related to IEPs in relation to inclusion. Theme 2 was renamed “The Keys to Success” as it symbolizes the importance of the roles of general education and special education teachers as being the keys to success for inclusion of students, and wherein the collaboration between them is imperative in relation to the successful planning, implementation, and assessment of IEPs and inclusive education. Theme 3 was renamed “Embracing the Power of All” as it depicted the participants various conceptions of inclusion. Lastly, theme 4 was renamed to “Breaking the Barriers”, as it directly contrasted the information provided in theme 1, “The Barriers”, in that it portrays the many ways participants noted that IEPs do in fact support inclusion, thus breaking the barriers that were previously mentioned. The

final version of the mind map (Figure 3) was created as a way to visualize the themes and sub-themes more clearly.

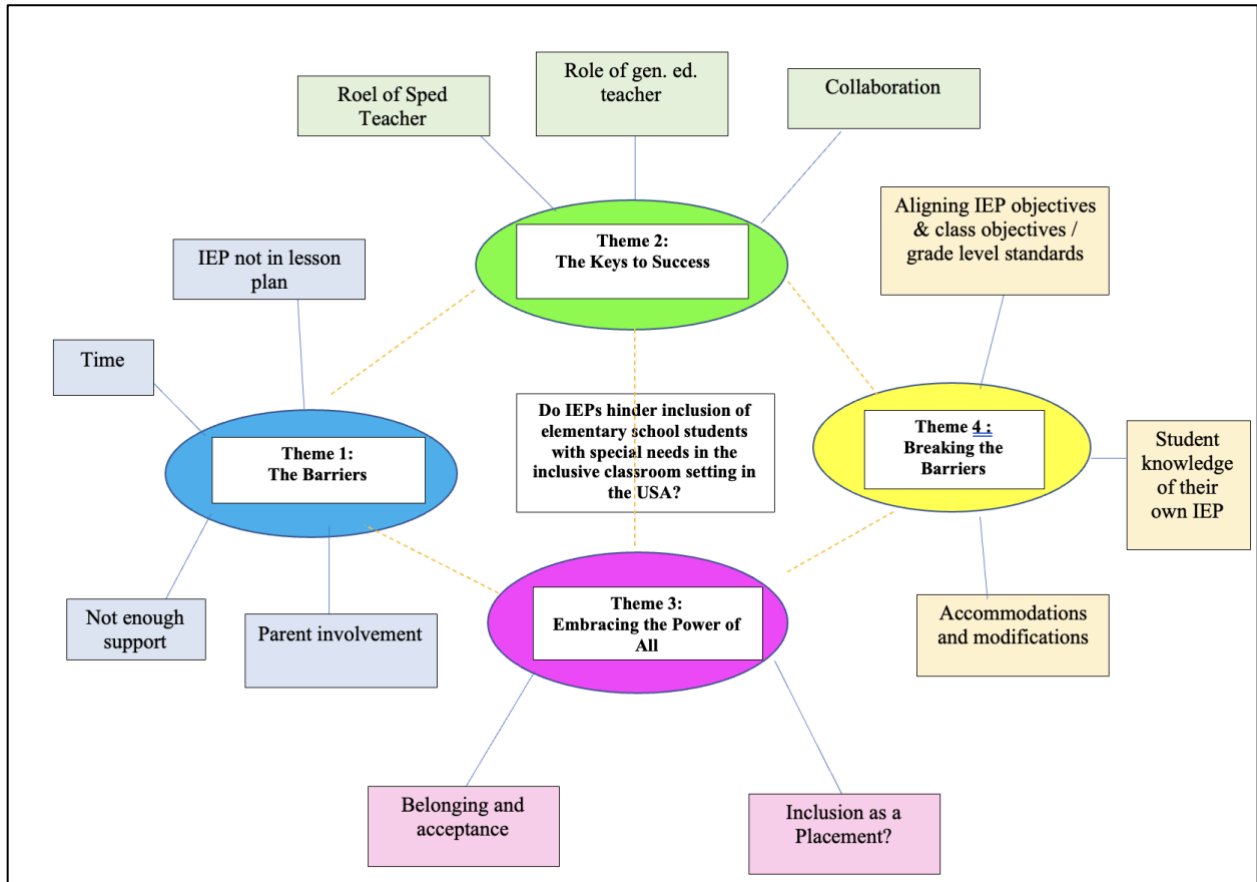


Figure 3. Thematic Mind Map  
(See appendix 6)

In an RTA, the data extracts serve as illustrations of the analytical insights and interpretations the researcher makes about the data and should be used to support and exemplify an analysis that extends beyond their specific content, to make sense of the data, and convey its significance or potential implications to the reader (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Data extracts can be reported either analytically or illustratively or using a combination of both. Illustrative data extracts provide elevated descriptions of what the participants said (Byrne, 2021). These extracts are dynamic and captivating and help to bring the data to life. On the other hand, analytical data extracts involve closely examining the significance of the participants statements and

contextualizing the interpretations in relation to the available literature (Byrne, 2021). These extracts are used to deepen the analysis, as they help to shed light on the emerging themes and illustrate key points made in the thesis. In this thesis, I chose to aim towards producing a more illustrative write-up of the analysis, meaning most of the relations between the results and the existing literature were not discussed until the discussions chapter (Byrne, 2021). However, while most of the data extracts were reported illustratively, some data extracts were still reported analytically in order to provide a deeper understanding of the research topic.

*Phase 6: Producing the report.* This final phase involved the final results and analysis, as well as the writing process, which, as is standard practice for RTA, was carried out simultaneously with the analysis process. During this phase, I regularly referenced my notes to enhance my understanding of whether the findings and conclusions were interpreted credibly and supported by relevant literature. The theme “The Barriers” was reported first, as it involves discussing the various challenges regarding IEPs and inclusion that were identified by the participants. The second theme “The Keys to Success” discussed the roles of the general education and special education teachers when it comes to the planning, implementing, and assessing of IEPs in relation to inclusion. This theme also emphasized the importance of collaboration between general education and special education teachers when it comes to inclusion. The next theme, “Embracing the Power of All” followed nicely as it depicted the participants’ perceptions on inclusion. Lastly, the fourth theme “Breaking the Barriers” was reported last as it directly contrasts theme 1, “The Barriers”. This theme emphasizes how participants highlighted the various ways in which IEPs effectively support inclusion, thereby breaking the barriers that were outlined in theme 1.



## Chapter 4: Results

The data collected from the individual interviews were organized into themes and sub-themes which are presented in this chapter. In the data analysis process outlined in the previous chapter, shared aspects among the individual participants, including their responses, statements, and expressed perceptions or thought were coded and documented.

### 4.1 Theme 1: The Barriers

*Sub-themes: IEP not in lesson plan, time, not enough support, parent involvement*

Challenges with and related to IEPs in relation to inclusion was a common theme amongst all participants, and incorporated challenges such as IEPs not being in the lesson plans or used when planning lessons, time, not having enough supports and parental involvement. The first sub-theme was created from data from all four participants which showed IEPs not being in the lesson plans or used when planning lessons. Three out of the four participants admitted to not having the IEP(s) at hand when lesson planning, saying “I’m going to be honest. No. Probably should” (G2), or “No, it’s in my desk drawer... So it's close” (S1), or just a simple “I would say no” (G1). Additionally, both general education teachers stated that there was no section on their lesson plans that they had to note that they were using the student(s) IEP or how they were using it, but that there was a section for general differentiation. One participant stated:

There's like a section on there for a differentiation but it doesn't say like if you're asking for like which particular student... So there's not for one particular student but differentiation for like extra support and then also the other way like to challenge students (G2).

Participants responses here confirmed assumptions I had formed based on my own teaching experiences, as well as the results of related studies.

The second sub-theme that emerged was the challenge of not having enough support. While all participants noted lack of support as a challenge, the general education teachers and special education teachers provided different sources of this challenge. In a sense, the cause of the lack of support for the general education teachers stemmed from the special education

teachers and vice versa. For the general education teachers, the main concern was “we just don't have enough support” (G1), with the biggest issue being “not having enough support to work with the student (in small group or one on one)” (G2). The general education teachers noted two causes of this issue. The first cause was from “not having enough TAs (teaching assistants) and not having enough TAs that are self-motivated that can like do things” (G1). This was not a surprise as hiring and retaining qualified support personnel in schools has been a major issue across the USA in recent years (García & Weiss, 2019). The second cause was that they felt that they “don't always have the resources that they need” (G2), in which the word “they” is referring to all students. This is because general education teachers are not only tasked with providing supports outlined in the IEPs to those specific students, but also attending to all the “different levels” (G1) of the rest of the students in their class. This is supported by G1 who stated, “I mean all the different levels that you have to deal with, I think that's like a challenge forever”. Additionally, G2 provided a strong response to this challenge when she said:

I mean basically just everybody learns a different way and trying to accommodate all those learning needs is very difficult and to keep them engaged they all need different resources and they're all at a different pace. You know some get it super quick, some you know need five other supports in order to get it.

Conversely, one of the biggest challenges noted by both special education teachers was that “a lot of times teachers aren't giving the accommodations” (S2). If the general education teachers are not being provided with the appropriate resources and supports, they are not able to provide them to the students. Thus, it should be an important aim of schools and school districts to ensure that both general education and special education teachers are provided with all the necessary resources required to best support all students.

The third sub-theme was time, which reflected the challenge of time, or lack thereof. For all the participants, time was noted as being one of the biggest challenges, with one participant stating, “I think time is just the most, the biggest hurdle to get through” (S2). One common agreement amongst the participants was not having enough time with the special education teacher or general education teacher. G1 stated “I think it would be nice to have, in a perfect world, it'd be really nice to have more time with a special ed teacher to talk about that student”.

Likewise, S2 noted that “I wish we had more time to communicate. I would like to be more collaborative with the whole team and the gen ed teachers. But there's just so much going on. There's never a time to.” Participants also mentioned that one cause of this is due to the minimal amount of planning time they are given during the school day. This limited amount of time topped with the already large amounts of planning and paperwork needed to be done during that time doesn't allow time to meet with other teachers. Additionally, participants noted that they often “don't have a common planning time” (S2) with the special education or general education teachers. These responses support my assumptions regarding insufficient amounts of time teachers are provided and the ever-increasing demands and requirements teachers are supposed to accomplish during that time.

The final sub-theme revolved around parental involvement in and with the IEP. One of the commonalities amongst the participants responses is the lack of consistency when it comes to parental involvement. All participants discussed parental involvement as a mix of some parents being involved and others not. To begin, G1 stated, “I think it would depend on the goals. But for the most part, I would say no”. S1 gave a more in-depth comment, in which she stated:

Some of the parents are very active in what the kids do and they know their kids struggle and they try to help them out at home. I have other parents that say school is where they learn. We don't do anything here at home or I'm working at night. And so what they get done at school is what they get done. And so I guess some are active in the IEPs and some aren't.

Similarly, in her experience, S2 expressed “I think some parents, yes. Some parents not so much. I would say a lot of our parents rely on us to be doing it”. She continued in saying “and then it gets a little frustrating when it's like, or deflating almost like, Oh, I did all this work and you guys aren't even doing anything” (S2). These responses made by the participants support the experiences I had as a teacher, and therefore my assumptions of parental involvement.

In summary the findings in this theme revealed different challenges with and relating to IEPs, including IEPs not being in the lesson plans or used when planning lessons, lack of time, not having enough supports and lack of parental involvement.

## 4.2 Theme 2: The Keys to Success

*Sub-themes: Role of special ed teacher, role of general ed teacher, and collaboration*

The second theme that emerged from the data was the role of teachers in relation to the IEP and included sub-themes such as role of sped teacher, role of gen. ed. teacher, and collaboration. In the first sub-theme, participants discussed the role of the special education teacher in terms of planning, implementing, and assessing IEPs. When it comes to planning IEPs, the main responsibility lands on the special education teacher to set up the meeting, inform the other team members and make sure all the information needed in the IEP is in the IEP. S1 supported this by stating “I facilitate everything, and I start everything for my case load kids.” She continued to explain how she reaches out to all the other IEP team members to “let them know that the IEP is open so that they can put their own information in into the present levels and put their own goals in” (S1).

The planning process of IEPs was then specified and discussed in terms of initials or re-evaluations (re-evals) and annual reviews of IEPs, as the process is slightly different. When it comes to planning for initial IEPs or for re-evals, S2 explained:

The psych, the speech, the OT, PT's if needed, and social work group, they're all doing their testing. And then once they're done with the testing, I'm going to look at their evaluation reports. And then that's kind of when I start my planning process in writing the IEP.

S1 supported this in saying “if it's a re-eval, then I have like all that data that they can look at”, in which “all that data” was referring to the data provided by the testing done by the other IEP team members. On the other hand, S2 noted that “if they're annuals, then I'm collecting data from like MAP, the gen ed teacher, progress monitoring on my own goals. And then that's what I'll gather to start writing and planning the IEP”. Similarly, S1 revealed that “if it is just an annual review, then I determine what the goals and objectives are based on their prior year. If they're making progress, if they're not making progress, do they make a lot of progress or a little?”

Once the data is collected, the next step in the planning process is writing goals. For initials and re-evals, S2 mentioned “I go write the goals based on the information, like other information from the reports”, whereas if it is just writing new goals for the annual review, “I

progress monitor their current goals, and seeing, are they ready to move on? Or do we need to tweak this goal, add more modifications or combinations to have them successful within that goal?” (S2). Both S1 and S2 mentioned that they also take into consideration information provided from the general education teachers about the students’ academic and social skills in their classroom when writing their goals. This supports my assumptions about the role of the special education teacher in the planning of IEPs based on my own experiences in planning IEPs.

Another main role of the special education teacher concerns the implementation of the IEP, which includes making sure they implement it properly and that the general education teachers and other personnel are also implementing it properly. S2 provided an explanation of how she ensures she is implementing the IEP properly:

I have like a log. So, it says like each kid, their goals, the minutes I'm meeting on that day. So which goal I work on that day, the minutes that I'm meeting, and then what we did, like what we progress monitored. So, I try to just try to keep up with that log as much as I can.

To help ensure the general education teachers are properly implementing the IEP, it is crucial that the special education teacher “gives the teachers a copy of the IEP and highlights all the important parts” (S1). This provides the general education teachers with the instructions and tools needed to implement the IEP, “and then it's just reminding them occasionally” (S1) on what they are supposed to be doing. Proper implementation of the IEP also includes using the specified accommodations and making the correct modifications for assignments and assessment. In many cases, it is the role of the special education teacher to provide these accommodations and modifications, whether it is to be used by themselves or the general education teacher. For example, G1 noted that in their weekly meetings, S1 will say things like “all right, I can modify the social studies test, I can modify the science test, what do you need? Study tools like do you need flashcards? Do you need extra practice? Do you need you know, those kinds of things”. She also stated that when it comes to assignments and assessments in the classroom, “obviously the special ed teacher would like kind of modify it for us, for those kids” (G1). This was supported by S1 who said, “I mean, in classroom, I modify everything”.

However, the special education teachers expressed that it sometimes it is easier for them to provide the modifications or accommodations to the student(s) themselves than for the general education teacher to do it. S2 supported this by stating “I just can give them their accommodations easier than if the gen ed teacher is doing it because they have a million other kids there.” She also mentioned that she has all of her student’s accommodations listed on a separate tab on her log, so she can “look quickly to see, oh, do I give them less answer choices? Do they have less questions? A lot of times teachers don't do that” (S2).

Lastly, assessing the IEP is another main role of the special education teacher. Concerning assessing the IEP, this involves looking at the goals and objectives and assessing whether the student has met them or has not met them. IEP objectives are usually assessed a few times a year, either every quarter or trimester, depending on the school, whereas the goal itself is only assessed once a year, during the final quarter or trimester, which is also when it is time for the student’s annual review or re-evaluation. At these times, special education teachers are primarily assessing if the student has met or has not met each benchmark or goal. To do this, a common assessment practice amongst special education teachers is progress monitoring. According to Etscheidt, (2006) progress monitoring is a vital component of an IEP and essential to evaluating the appropriateness of a child's individualized education plan (p. 60). In fact, as outlined in IDEA (2004), progress monitoring is a required component of an IEP (Etscheidt, 2006). Progress monitoring is a method for tracking and assessing an individual's progress towards a specific goal or set of goals over time, as well as for identifying areas that need improvement and making data-informed decisions to support ongoing growth and development. It typically involves regular assessments of a student's academic skills or performance, such as reading fluency or math computation, to identify areas of strength and weakness and to measure growth over time. Regarding using progress monitoring for assessing the IEP, S2 explains:

On Fridays, I'll try to progress monitor their goals. Really their specific goals, but then we also are progress monitoring like with our intervention systems. So, like with Bridges Intervention, you know, when we start a unit, they'll do a pretest and then you do posttest and see their growth with that. So, within their interventions, we're progress monitoring them or like within like how many sight words they're getting within their curriculum.

And then their goal is being more specific, like, their goal is to read words with vowel combinations. Like I'll just assess them on that specific thing.

This shows how special education teachers are assessing their student's progress on both their IEP goals as well as within the general education curriculum. It also helps to hold teachers accountable for ensuring their students are making progress towards their goals.

The data provided from progress monitoring is then used by the special education teachers to help them assess whether the students has met their benchmarks and/ or goals. S2 noted that when it comes time to assessing whether students have met a specific benchmark, if she notices that the student is not close to meeting the benchmark, "I'm going to only focus on their goals, like, kind of throwing away the interventions, because like, if they're not working right now, we're gonna throw a Hail Mary, we're gonna do what they need, they need to grow." Without the use of frequent progress monitoring, it would be much harder for special education teachers to identify students lack of progress towards their benchmarks and realize that they need to adjust their teaching methods. Pertaining to the overall IEP goals themselves, is a student has met their goal or goals, S2 stated, "I'm looking at the next standard, or the next step, like if they know how to blend two sounds together, let's put it in so we can read a CVC word, or let's change it to do two syllables." On the other hand, if a student has not met their goal or goals, S1 expressed:

If they didn't meet their goals, then I will revise it. I'll either take that particular goal and I'll raise it up. I'll just say this was just difficult. We just struggle. We didn't get as far as we needed to, so I'll back it up (S1).

Likewise, S2 made a similar statement which stated:

If they haven't met, then I'm always looking at like, okay, what am I doing? What do I need to do to support them more? Like, do I need to give them more cues? Do I need to give them like, a field of four options? I don't know, something in my instruction that will support them more. And again, looking at like the curriculum, like, is this the right

curriculum for them? Or do they need something more interest based, which is usually the way you should do it, but the way that we were told to do it is different.

In the second sub-theme, participants discussed the role of the general education teacher in terms of planning, implementing, and assessing IEPs. With respect to planning IEPs, the role of the general education teacher is not as prominent as that of the special education teacher, but still vital, nonetheless. In both initials or re-evals and annual reviews, gathering input from general education teachers “about the students’ strengths and weaknesses regarding behavior and academics, and any supports like that we think they would need to be successful” (G2) is an essential component when planning IEPs. To gather this information, special education teachers will either “have a form that they fill out” (S1) or “meet with them, like one on one” (S2), and ask them questions such as “how do they act as in relationship to other students in the classroom? What do you see pros cons?” (S1) and “what accommodations they think the student needs in the classroom” (S2). General education teachers will also provide information such as “information from MAP (standardized test), like scores and stuff, or from their curriculum and assessments” (S2). The input that is given by general education teachers is extremely important in the sense that they are the ones who are actually teaching the student and have the student in their classroom, for whatever length of time it may be.

Pertaining to implementing the IEP, the role of the general education teacher is very important because “ultimately it’s still her student or his students” (G1) who have the IEP and “they’re in your class and you’re responsible” (G1). I think this statement is powerful in the sense that many general education teachers feel that students with IEPs are the special education teacher’s responsibility, when in reality, if a student with an IEP is in their classroom, they have just as much responsibility, if not more, depending on how much time that particular student spends in the classroom. In order to implement the IEP, the general education teachers need to know what they need to be doing, “so usually our special ed teacher gives us like a little one-page IEP summary, which is easy for me to pull out if I want or need to look at” (G1). Providing students with accommodations and modifications in the classroom is also a role of the general education teacher. G2 provided some examples of accommodations and modifications that she has given to her students such as “if there's 10 questions asking the same concept, we'll take away some of it” and “giving students extra prompting”.



For general education teachers, the role they play in terms of assessing usually just pertains to assessing the student in general, not assessing the student for the IEP or assessing the IEP itself. However, that is not always the case as noted by G2 who states, “I would say probably a little bit of both, because you still you know want them to not be too far behind on the grade level content, but also be making their progress on their objectives”. Referring to assessing IEPs, G1 also mentioned that “each quarter, she (the special education teacher) will give me, based on their goals, like a rubric to see if they're meeting like those goals that I have to fill out”. Typically speaking though, general education teachers are usually just assessing the students to the “class objectives” (G1). As for the assessments themselves, students with IEPs “take basically the same test as everybody else just modified” (S1). Additionally, students are “graded on the same grade level standards” (S2) as their general education peers. This is consistent with my experiences and assumptions regarding general education teacher’s role regarding assessments.

The final sub-theme in this section pertains to the collaboration between special education teachers and general education teachers. During the interviews, all the participants expressed that collaboration and communication between the special and general education teacher was crucial for students to be successful in the inclusive classroom setting. S1 stated that “I work really closely with the teachers. I go to all the meetings with them”. This is supported by G1 who mentioned that the special education teacher checks in with her at their weekly team meetings. Having a set time to meet helps to establish and maintain consistent communication between general and special education teachers.

When it comes to ensuring the IEP is being properly implemented, G2 stated “I have constant communication with the SPED teacher. And then I mean I do check back, or I’ll ask the SPED teacher if I’m unsure about something”. S2 provided an additional example, where she said, “I just try to talk with the teachers, making sure they're doing the accommodations that are listed on their IEP, asking them about goal information and progress monitoring that they might be tracking”. She continued by saying, “and then for test accommodations, making sure the teachers know, for example, you're not going to test them with your class because they have all these accommodations”. Additionally, G1 mentioned that when it comes to making modifications or accommodations for students, she, and the special education teacher “kind of do

it together”. In doing this, it makes both parties responsible instead of making it the responsibility of the special education teacher to modify everything.

Likewise, a student’s success comes from all parties being on the same page. G2 supported this statement when she said, “I’ll talk with the sped teacher and be like hey this person's really behind on this you know, what can we do?” Similarly, S2 discussed that it is especially important to have open communication with the general education teachers if students are struggling. She explained that she sends out an email to the general education teachers of her students when it is nearing time for progress reports to be sent home, saying if a student with an IEP is getting a D or an F to send her an email so they can set a time to meet and “figure out what we are doing or we're not doing to support them, or specifically like what accommodations or modifications we need to be doing to help them be successful so we can bump up their grade”. Thus, having open lines of communication and supporting each other is essential for students with IEPs to be successful in the inclusive classroom setting.

In summary, the findings highlighted the roles of both the special education and general education teachers in the planning, implementation, and assessment of IEPs in relation to inclusive education. Participants also emphasized the importance of collaboration between special and general education teachers for the success of students with IEPs in the inclusive education classroom.

### **4.3 Theme 3: Embracing the Power of All**

*Sub-themes: belonging & acceptance and inclusion (as a setting)*

Inclusion was another theme that emerged during this process, which incorporated belonging and acceptance and inclusion (as a setting). The first sub-theme revolved around students developing a sense of belonging and acceptance from both teachers and other students. Participants expressed that belonging and acceptance “depends on your classroom” (G1) and “your class (students)” (G2). For all intents and purposes, evoking a sense of belonging and acceptance in the classroom begins with the teacher, as it is their job to create the environment and set the tone for the other students. This was supported by one participant who stated:

I know that like my teammate and I, we foster a community of like caring and obviously inclusion and, you know, making sure that everyone's respectful. And so that's something that we start from the beginning of the year and that's for everyone (G1).

Similarly, when it comes to establishing an inclusive setting, S1 stated “this is their only time for socialization and to be with friends. So, my big thing is to make these kids feel loved and happy and part of the group as much as possible”. One of the best ways teachers can support a sense of belonging for students is to have them “work in groups or in pairs or something like that” (G1). This ensures students are given opportunities to interact with their peers and feel like they are a part of the classroom. Likewise, G2 noted that a student’s sense of belonging often just comes from “just making sure that they are included... That they are put into groups and put with strong kids”. Thus, other students in the class also play a role when it comes to creating a sense of belonging and acceptance in the classroom. Participants noted that younger students are generally more accepting and inclusive of students with disabilities than older students. However, participants agreed that the earlier students are exposed to students with disabilities, the longer they are more likely to remain accepting of students with disabilities. This is supported by G1 who states, “I think because they've grown up with this, the students or these students, like probably since kindergarten, I think they have a lot more empathy towards them and they're like willing to help”. Therefore, educating students about disabilities and exposing them to students with disabilities at a young age is beneficial in establishing acceptance.

A final sub-theme refers to inclusion in terms of placement/ as a setting. More specifically, participants discussed the different ways inclusion can look. When talking about inclusion, all participants referenced the term least restrictive environment, or LRE. As previously discussed, the least restrictive environment (LRE) involves students with disabilities being educated alongside their non-disabled peers to the maximum extent possible. Having special education teachers “push-in” to the general education classroom to provide support for students is one way to ensure students are educated in the LRE. This is supported by S2, who stated “we always want to look at, the least restrictive. Looking into pushing the kid in, seeing them in their gen ed classroom. If they're not too far below academically, or if they need more of like a functional support.” This means that students are usually in the general education classroom full-time since they also receive their special education services there.

Another way inclusion can look, as described by the participants, is in the form of “pull-out” services, where the special education teacher will pull the student out of the general education classroom to provide services. This means that generally, students are “in their gen ed classes for 80% or more of their day” (S2). Participants noted that students receiving this level of pull-out services are often not too far behind academically, but still need more support than what can be provided within the general education classroom setting. For students who are further behind academically, they may be pulled out of the classroom more frequently to receive the proper support. To this, S1 mentioned that “I like them to be at least in the classroom and exposed to it. And then I pull them out after that”. She continued by stating that this allows students to “to be part of the classroom” even if for only short periods at a time.

In summary, the findings in this theme depict two ways that teachers view and define inclusion. First, a student’s sense of belonging and acceptance plays an important role in defining and measuring the effectiveness of inclusive education, and second, inclusion can also be defined by the different ways that it looks.

#### **4.4 Theme 4: Breaking the Barriers**

*Sub-themes: Student knowledge of their own IEP, aligning IEP objectives & class objectives/ grade level standards, and accommodations and modifications.*

The final theme that emerged discussed how IEPs support inclusion, which included sub-themes of student knowledge of own IEP, aligning IEP goals/ objectives & class objectives/ grade level standards, and accommodations and modifications.

The first sub-theme refers to students’ knowledge of their own IEP. One common stance amongst the participants was that older students were knowledgeable that they had an IEP, but not necessarily younger students. All the participants in this study taught older aged elementary students for the most part, so they all had similar responses, such as “I think the older ones definitely do” (S2), “Yes, because my kids are older” (S1), and “I think they know just because they’re a little bit older” (G1). Since S2 was the only teacher in this study who taught both older and younger elementary school students, she was able to provide more concrete evidence to support the common stance that older students are aware that they have an IEP whereas younger students as less likely to be aware. S2 explained that:

A lot of times in second and third grade, they'll say like, oh, why am I here? I'm like, well, because you have an IEP. And they'll say, what is an IEP? So I'll kind of go through that with them because they're a little bit more mature (S2).

S2 goes even further to say that her third graders are additionally aware “because I like reference it a lot. Like this is your goal. This is what you need to work on. Let's track your goal”. Where on the other hand, S2 noted that “my kindergarten and first grade, probably not... the kindergarten and first graders just think we're having fun and they get to go and they're excited about that”. While it is important for students to be knowledgeable of their IEPs, both the students age and the severity of their disability play important factors in determining the appropriateness to inform students about their IEP.

Participants also discussed that students being knowledgeable of their IEP supported the student's academic success in that they are aware of the supports they can receive and why they receive them. This is backed by G2, who mentioned “they know they get pulled by the SPED teacher to get extra help”, as well as by G1, who similarly noted that “depending on how much support they get in the classroom, like they know someone's coming to help them”. Additionally, participants noted that being knowledgeable of their IEP allows students to be more involved in their education and teaches them self-advocacy skills. This is supported by G2 who states that “they know that they get special help and that they could go there to like take tests and stuff and sometimes they'll ask to take tests up there.” Being able to advocate for their supports is especially important for students when there is a substitute teacher or a teacher that is not familiar with the student. As such, students being aware and knowledgeable of their own IEPs supports the inclusion of students in the general education setting.

Another sub-theme that was developed in this theme describes the alignment between IEP goals/objectives and class objectives/ grade level standards. During the interview it was noted that the alignment between IEP goals/ objectives and the class objectives/ grade-level standards “always depends on the child's academic level” (G1), which means that “some are really close, some are not close at all” (S1). This is true in the sense that some students may be way below grade level when it comes to reading or math. If this is the case, then the IEP objectives and class objectives would “still be parallel but obviously not lining up” (G1). For example, S2 noted “when I'm writing for a third grader, I have to use the third-grade standards.

Even if they're at a first grade or kindergarten level". This is because IDEA (1997) requires that IEP goals must directly relate to academic content standards for the grade-level that the student is currently in. Having to match the goal to a grade-level standard helps to create IEP goals that are parallel to what the general education students are working on, which all participants mentioned they believe helps to support the inclusion of the student.

The third sub-theme that emerged was use of accommodations and modifications. Participants expressed that they believe the accommodations and modifications that are given to students help in supporting inclusion for students with IEPs. G2 supports this statement when she stated that "IEPs are giving the child what they need to be successful". She then elaborated by saying, "So for example you know you have glasses. Well, somebody else doesn't need glasses. Why are we going to give them glasses. So, giving them the resources they need to be successful whether that's for behavior academics or both" (G2). This is a great analogy to portray the importance of providing students with the supports that are outlined in their IEP. Examples of accommodations can include things such as having "extra time" (G1) or being able to "use manipulatives" (S2) to complete tasks. When taking assessments, "IEP students go to a small group and do it with the SPED teacher" (G2) and they may also take "modified tests" (S1) or have other accommodations such as "read the questions to... or read the questions and the answer choices" (S2) or "crossing things out or cutting up a full sheet of paper into the individual questions" (S2). All of these accommodations allow for students to be successful and participate in the general education setting.

When it comes to doing assignments or tasks in the classroom, providing students with the same task that has been modified for their level is another way to support inclusion. G1 stated that "the IEP kids, depending on where they're at, may have a modified one. So, I feel like they're still doing the same thing. They're still included in the same thing, but just modified for their, you know, for their level". Additionally, G1 provided an example, which noted "and that student reads at a kindergarten level. So, in terms of like science, like we just finished a unit on plants and the environment. So, for him, it was more like these are the four parts of a plant." Modifying tasks for students supports inclusion in that it allows opportunities for all students to participate in the general education classroom, regardless of their academic level.

In summary, contrary to the first theme outlined in this section, as well as much of the current literature available, the findings in this theme showed many instances of how IEPs do in

fact support inclusion. These instances include student's knowledge of their own IEP, aligning IEP objectives & class objectives/ grade level standards and accommodations and modifications.

## **Chapter 5: Discussion**

Employing a qualitative research methodology, this study gathered and analyzed participants perspectives and experiences regarding IEPs and inclusion. Participants discussed the IEP and inclusion and their relation to one another, as well as challenges they face and their roles as special education teachers and general education teachers in relation to IEPs and inclusion. From the data emerged four themes which included challenges of IEPs in relation to inclusion (The Barriers), the roles of the teachers in planning, implementing & assessing IEPs in relation to inclusion (The Keys to Success), various conceptions about inclusion (Embracing the Power of All), and lastly, the ways in which the IEP supports inclusion (Breaking the Barriers). The four themes came together to answer the two sub-questions of this thesis,

- What are general education and special education teacher's general perspectives of and experiences with planning, implementation, and assessment of IEPs in relation to inclusive education?
- What are the challenges and positive aspects posed by IEPs regarding inclusion/ inclusive education?

And in turn, the answering of these two sub-questions answers the main research question:

- Do IEPs hinder inclusion for elementary school students with disabilities in the inclusive classroom setting?

### **5.1 Theme 1: The Barriers**

Theme 1 (The Barriers) discussed various challenges teachers face regarding IEPs and inclusion. The use of the IEP when planning lessons was discussed as a challenge and the data confirmed my assumption that teachers do not use the IEP when planning lessons and that IEPs usages are not documented in the lesson plans. While both general education teachers noted that they were aware that they should have it out and be referring to it when lesson planning, they admitted that they did not use it or have it visible when planning their lessons. They cited that a possible reason for this is that they do not need to document anywhere on their lesson plans that they are or how they are using the IEP, nor are they required to turn in their lesson plans. Earlier



research conducted by Dudley-Marling (1985) also suggested that IEPs were not accessible nor were they referred to very often by teachers when planning instruction. In my experience, I too found that many general education teachers I worked with did not use or take into consideration the IEP when planning their lessons. Additionally, some teachers admitted that they didn't even know where the students IEP summary sheet was. The only way to properly implement an IEP is to have access to it, read it and follow it. As such, Rotter (2014) expressed that without IEP information, both large and small errors can be made; thus, teachers who have not yet consulted the students' IEPs are arguably not ready to teach those students. The information provided in IEPs are there not as suggestions, but are the necessary supports and services required by the student to be successful in the inclusive classroom setting. Thus, if teachers are not knowledgeable of the students IEP, they are not able to provide student with the proper supports and services that the student needs to succeed. This is supported by Dudley-Marling (1985) who stated that the IEP cannot qualitatively affect the education of students with disabilities unless it guides the delivery of services on a daily basis. Therefore, ensuring that teachers are knowledgeable of the IEP and actively using the IEP is essential when it comes to inclusion.

As previously stated, providing students with the proper supports and services as outlined in their IEP is essential for the student to be able to be successful in the inclusive setting. The special education teachers commented that they often feel the general education teachers are not providing the students with the proper accommodations and modifications in the inclusive classroom setting. To this note, both general education teachers discussed they often feel they just don't have the resources that they need. If teachers aren't given the necessary resources or supports themselves, they are not able to provide them to the students, thus, why they aren't giving the accommodations. In their study, Wolery et al., (1995) surveyed general and special education teachers involved in inclusive education concerning their perceptions of supportive practices for inclusion. One of the major findings in this study was that while both general and special education teachers reported having similar levels of need for resources, special education teachers noted having a greater availability of resources compared to general education teachers. Both general education teachers also mentioned that they did not have enough support from support personnel to properly assist students with IEPs. A lack of adequate amounts of staff was found to be one of the top three perceived barriers to inclusion in a study conducted by Tanner et al. (1996). Similarly, in their report addressing the teacher shortage in the USA, García & Weiss

(2019) noted that the lack of sufficient, qualified teachers and support personnel, along with staff instability, threaten students learning capabilities and reduce the effectiveness of teachers. Furthermore, the general education teachers expressed that they feel they are not able to provide the supports themselves due to the amount of differentiation already required for the rest of their class. In support of this, Cook (2001) expressed that limited resources and students' wide combination of learning characteristics reduces the teachers' ability to address all student needs at any given moment. I experienced similar challenges when I was teaching. I often felt like the general education teachers were not supporting my students like they were supposed to, but I also felt at times that I did not have enough or adequate support when teaching. In providing general education teachers with the proper supports and resources, that eliminates challenges presented by both general education teachers and special education teachers.

Not having adequate time to meet and communicate with one another was expressed as one of the biggest challenges for all participants. The findings showed that an insufficient amount of planning time was a major contributor to not being able to meet with one another. A shortage of common planning times between special and general education teachers was also discussed during the interviews. In a study conducted by Tanner et al. (1996), the results indicated that a lack of shared special/education planning time and lack of amount of planning time allocated were two of the top perceived barriers to inclusion. Time was also a struggle in my experience. Not having common planning periods with general education teachers made it difficult to find time during the day to connect and discuss students and staff meetings and IEP meetings made it difficult to meet before or after school.

During the interviews, all participants commented on a lack of consistency and a mixture of the level of parental involvement in relation to their students IEP as being an additional challenge. Supportive of this, in a study conducted by Dudley-Marling (1985), teachers cited lack of parental involvement as a challenge related to implementing IEPs. As IEP team members, parents play an important role in both the planning and implementation of the IEP. When it comes to writing IEPs, there is always a spot for parent input, where they are able to note any questions and concerns they have both prior to the IEP meeting and during the meeting if they have anything else to add. They are also able to look at the IEP and ask questions and provide input for the student's strengths and goals. Additionally, for initial IEPs or re-evals, parents are also responsible for providing an overview/ history about the student's health, which provides

the IEP team with some information about the student's background, their birth, and any medical conditions they may have. By parents failing to provide accurate information, students cannot be accurately supported at school. However, the main concern amongst participants was not so much parental involvement with planning, but with the implementation and involvement in their student's IEP and school in general. Both special education teachers expressed that some parents are active in the IEPs while other aren't. They noted that some parents will consistently ask what they can do at home to support, while others indicate that schoolwork is only to be done at school. The level of involvement from my students' parents was also very mixed. I had some parents who were wonderful and whom I had daily communication with and others that I only spoke to at IEP meetings or possibly conferences. I too found parental involvement to be a challenge in the sense that there are many opportunities for parents to help their children whether it be with an academic goal or a social skills goal or a function goal such as tying their shoes or hanging up a coat.

In keeping with the information provided in most of the available literature and in the results of many recent studies, the participants in this study also all identified various challenges they face with IEPs and inclusion. Most surprising though, was that all participants identified the same four challenges during the interviews, which are also aligned with those in the results of the aforementioned studies and literature. Despite these challenges, the participants did not indicate that this means that IEPs hinder inclusion, but rather are miniscule obstacles that can be overcome and do not affect their perspectives on the usefulness of IEPs in relation to inclusion.

## **5.2 Theme 2: The Keys to Success**

The roles of the special education teacher and the general education teacher in terms of planning, implementing, and assessing IEPs, and the collaboration between them are essential components when it comes to IEPs and inclusive practices. In discussing the role of the special education teacher, participants noted that the special education teacher plays the prominent role when it comes to IEPs. It was mentioned that they are responsible for facilitating everything for the IEP, from setting up the meeting, contacting the rest of the IEP team, writing their respective goals, and ensuring all the information is put in the IEP. This is supported by Ardekani (2012), who states that the role of the special education teacher is fundamental in the IEP process in terms of writing the document, implementation, reviewing, and evaluation. Similarly, Hill (2010)

states that the primary role of the special education teacher is perceived as the member who functions in developing the IEP, chairing the meeting, facilitating discussion, and handling the paperwork. The special education teachers also discussed the difference between writing initial or re-evals versus annual reviews of IEPs and IEP goals, such as the use of evaluation testing results for support in writing initials and re-evals versus using data collected by themselves, the general education teachers, and from standardized testing results. I found my experiences with planning and writing IEPs as being similar to what was expressed by the participants in this study.

Conversely, the general education teachers viewed their role in the planning of IEPs very minimal in comparison to the special education teachers. They expressed that while they are not involved in the actual writing of the IEP, they do provide the special education teachers with information about the student's academic and behavioral strengths and weaknesses as well as supports they believe would be beneficial for the student. Because most students with disabilities are assigned to the general education classroom for some part of the day, the involvement of general education teachers in the IEP process is important (Schrag, 1996). When I was writing IEPs for my students who were pushed out into the general education setting, I always made it a point to include this input in my IEPs and use the information to guide my creation of accommodations, modifications, IEP goals, or whatever the information was saying. I found that even though some of the information might be contradicting to what my students do academically or how they behave with me, they should be able to have a strong academic performance and demonstrate the same positive behaviors regardless of the setting they are in, which means providing them with the proper accommodations and modifications that can only be provided by the general education teacher.

The implementation of the IEP, as previously stated, is also an important role of the special education teacher that was expressed by the participants during the interviews. All participants noted that in addition to implementing the IEP themselves, the special education teachers are also responsible for making sure the general education teachers and other personnel are implementing it properly. Both special education teachers emphasized the importance of providing the general education teachers with a copy of the IEP and highlighting all the important parts, such as the goals and the accommodations and modifications, as implementing the IEP involves providing the student with the accommodations and modifications outlined in

the IEP. Likewise, participants explained that in addition to providing the accommodations and modifications to the students themselves, the special education teachers will often also provide the accommodations and modifications to the general education teachers. As well, all participants expressed that in most instances, the special education teacher is responsible for deciding what accommodations and modifications the student needs and when they should be used during the planning process, and then also for making them or obtaining them during the implementation process. This requires the special education teacher to not only understand the students IEP, but also to be knowledgeable of the general education curriculum and its standards to ensure the accommodations and modifications are as effective as possible. This is backed by Fisher et al., (2003) who states that “the role of the special education teacher is to create accommodations and modifications that maintain the integrity of the lesson while addressing the unique learning needs of the student” (p. 46).

Both general education teachers acknowledged that just as much of the responsibility falls on them when it comes to implementing the IEP as it does on the special education teachers. This is because, as previously stated, many times they are the ones who are actually teaching the student and are with the student for longer periods of time than the special education teachers. Participants also discussed how being knowledgeable of the students IEP is essential to properly implement it, as they need to be aware of what accommodations and modifications each student needs. This is supported by Smith (2013) who states that because general education teachers are now also responsible for the progress and achievement of students with disabilities, reading IEPs is critical to the general education teachers’ success as well as the success of the students.

Assessing students, as well as the IEP, is an additional responsibility of special education teachers. Participants discussed the importance of progress monitoring to collect data to use in assessing whether a student has met or has not met their goals and objectives/ benchmarks, as well as the student’s progress with the curriculum. Progress monitoring helps teachers address a lack of any unexpected progress toward the annual IEP goals and make decisions concerning the effectiveness of curriculum delivery (Etscheidt, 2006). When an unexpected lack of progress is identified, the special education teachers specified how they will adjust their methods and make it a priority to focus on working on that specific benchmark. According to Rokowski (2020), special education teachers must use effective assessment tools to ensure accurate progress monitoring, so that necessary changes to the instructional strategies or the IEP objectives can be

implemented quickly and efficiently. In my experience, there were many times where my students were not making the desired progress towards their benchmarks, and I too would make it a priority to focus on that specific benchmark and use whatever method worked best for them. Additionally, the special education teachers cited how they adjust the student's goals for the next IEP depending on if they did or did not reach their goals. The participants statements are supported by Rokowski (2020), who identified several factors that must be considered when determining the goals for the students next IEP, including the student's progress made towards the previous goal, the students present levels of performance, how the goals will benefit the student both short- and long-term, the priority of current needs, and the amount of time it will take to achieve the goal.

Lastly, the general education teachers discussed their roles in terms of assessment as primarily pertaining to assessing students in general and not as much in relation to the IEP. Current legislation (i.e., IDEA, 2004), ensures that all students are provided with equal access to the general education curriculum. As such, both general education teachers noted they generally assess all students based on the general education class and state objectives. Since these students are also their responsibilities, general education teachers are thus held accountable for ensuring that all students are making progress in the general education curriculum. With that, the purpose of classroom assessments is to inform teachers and to improve learning (Slate & Jones, 2000). In other words, this can also be related back to Vygotsky's theory as it refers to assessment for learning, which as discussed earlier, is an interactive process in which teachers and peers collaborate to support learners in using their zone of proximal development (ZPD) to progress to the next stage of their learning (Sardareh & Saad, 2012).

Collaboration is key when it comes to the success of students in the inclusive classroom setting. Although a lack of time to collaborate was noted as a challenge, participants emphasized the importance of collaboration and discussed their many efforts to establish and maintain frequent communication with one another. Both special education teachers noted attending the general education teacher's weekly grade-level team meetings, which provides a set time for collaboration once a week. In fact, the results of the study by Tanner et al. (1996) revealed that time for staff collaborative planning was identified as one of the top three supports to inclusion.

Due to the increasing number of students with disabilities in the inclusive classroom settings, and the added accountability of IEP implementation on general education teachers, collaboration between general and special education teachers is more essential than ever. As such, according to Johnson, (1999) the response to addressing accountability is collaboration (as cited in Smith, 2013). For the implementation of the IEP, the special education teachers mentioned they try to check in with the general education teachers frequently to make sure they are giving the student their accommodations and just following the IEP. Likewise, the general education teachers also mentioned that they try to maintain communication with the special education teacher if they have any questions to ensure they are properly implementing the IEP. Collaboration leads to a reimagining of the most effective ways to provide support services by both general and special education (Idol, 2006). This is supported by the participants who described the importance of collaboration between special and general education teachers to determine the best methods and supports to use for students to be successful in the inclusive education setting. Sanderson & Rojas (2022) describe this as “collaborative teaming”, in which each IEP team member contributes their unique insight, knowledge and perspective to the team in order to best serve the child’s needs and help them make meaningful progress. Similarly, according to Smith (2013), when teachers collaborate, everyone can contribute as a team to student outcomes, and everyone can have ownership of the results.

While special education and general education teachers don’t play the exact same roles when it comes to the planning, implementation, and assessment of IEPs, the roles they do play are equally important. Both special education and general education teachers can provide valuable insight about their student’s that may not be known to the other, but that is essential to ensuring the students success, especially in the inclusive classroom setting. Through a collaborative relationship, teachers can share these insights with one another, resulting in the ability for both teachers to provide the student with the appropriate supports and services necessary to make progress in their education. Therefore, the roles of special education and general education teachers can be seen as being the keys to success for inclusion of students with disabilities in the inclusive classroom, and wherein the collaboration between them is imperative in relation to the successful planning, implementation, and assessment of IEPs in relation to inclusive education.

### **5.3 Theme 3: Embracing the Power of All**

Inclusion was discussed in terms of belonging and acceptance and inclusion as a placement. All participants acknowledged that creating a sense of belonging and acceptance begins with the teacher, as they are the ones responsible for creating the classroom environment and influence the feelings of the other students. According to Rose & Shevlin (2017), acceptance and belonging are interconnected concepts that mutually influence one another to a significant extent. Goodenow & Grady (1993) define a students' sense of belonging in the school or classroom, as the extent to which they feel personally accepted, respected, included, and supported by others-especially teachers and other adults in the school social environment (p.60-61). Therefore, the creation of an environment in which students feel that they are accepted is critical to their inclusion and the development of a sense of belonging in a specific school context (Rose & Shevlin, 2017). Likewise, participants expressed that the other students in the class also play a role in creating a sense of belonging and acceptance. It was noted that the earlier students are included in the general education setting, the more and longer the other students will be accepting of students with disabilities due to their existing relationships with them. In a study conducted by Rose & Shevlin (2017) 120 children identified as having special education needs were interviewed to learn about their everyday schooling experiences, their beliefs about their sense of belonging and how it relates to the provision of a more inclusive education environment. The findings indicated that the student's sense of belonging was founded upon positive relationships with both their peers and the adults in their school life.

Additionally, participants noted that having students work together in groups with their peers also contributes to the student's sense of belonging and acceptance in the classroom. In referring to Vygotsky's theory of learning and development, it has been argued that students learn more when they work together in groups because they are likely to operate in one another's zone of proximal development (ZPD), which the distance between what students can do independently and what they can do with adult guidance or in collaboration with more capable peers (Slavin et al., 2003; Wade, 2000; Vygotsky, 1978). This is because students are able to explain things to one another in a way that they are better able to understand, which ultimately allows students who would normally become frustrated to be involved in more challenging tasks and activities (Wade, 2000). As such, being able to actively participate in groups with their peers is one of the best ways to help students feel like they are included and belong in the classroom.



During the interviews, participants discussed different approaches to inclusion, all of which were in relation to the least restrictive environment (LRE). To reiterate, the least restrictive environment (LRE) means that students with disabilities must have the opportunity to be educated with their non-disabled peers to the greatest extent appropriate, including as access to the general curriculum, school environment, programmes, or extra-curricular activities to which non-disabled students also have access (Shyman, 2015). Participants first discussed inclusion in terms of “push-in” services. According to Peltier, (1997; as cited in Jones, 2002), “push-in” involves keeping special education students in the general education classroom and bringing support services to the students rather than taking the students to the support services out of the classroom. This is reiterated by the participants who described “push-in” services as having students included in the general education classroom full-time and having the special education teacher “push-in” to the classroom to provide services to the students. This approach generally supports the full inclusionist model, which describes inclusion as when a student with special learning and/or behavioral needs is educated full time in the general education program (Idol, 2006). In my experience, this approach is most appropriate for students who do not require much support and are performing academically close to grade-level.

Pull-out services were additionally discussed by the participants as a means of inclusion. This generally refers to removing students from the general education classroom to receive special education services. Participants discussed that this allows for students to still be included in the general education classroom for certain aspects, while still being able to receive the amount of supports and services they require. This is supported by Jones (2002) who states that pull-out instruction provides the chance to personalize skills, work at the student's proficiency level, and deliver instruction in an environment with fewer disturbances compared to the regular classroom. During the interviews, participants additionally noted that the frequency and length the student is pulled out for is dependent upon the student and their needs. However, the participants also agreed that they like for students to be a part of the general education classroom or at least be exposed to it as much as possible, and for whatever amount of time. In my experience, my students were “pulled-out” of the general education setting and into the self-contained classroom for majority of the day, but ensuring they were able to be with their general education peers for whatever possible was a priority of mine. For my students, this ranged from only attending specials classes (i.e., P.E., art, music, etc.) with the general education students to

also receiving academic instruction, such as all math instruction in the inclusive setting. As such, including students in the general education classroom, for any length of time, is beneficial for both the student with the disability as well as the other students in the class (Hill & Sukbunpant, 2013), to make progress in their academic abilities, social skills, and personal development (Wang, 2009).

Tying into the previous theme, inclusion, no matter how it looks, begins, and ends with the teachers. While not outlined in their official roles, teachers are responsible for creating a classroom environment that promotes the inclusion of all students. Regardless of how much time a student spends in the inclusive classroom, this environment should enable all students to feel that they are accepted and belong, as a student's sense of acceptance and belonging can be used to measure the effectiveness of the inclusive education setting. Therefore, despite the many different ways that inclusion can look, inclusion is achieved when teachers are embracing the power of all.

#### **5.4 Theme 4: Breaking the Barriers**

The final theme discussed how IEPs support inclusion, which included sub-themes of student knowledge of own IEP, aligning IEP goals/ objectives & class objectives/ grade level standards, and accommodations and modifications. A common agreement amongst participants was that in elementary school, older students are typically knowledgeable that they have an IEP. The special education teachers mentioned that they will often reference the IEP when working with their older students and show them what their goals are and stuff. As a self-contained special education teacher, all my students knew that they were in a special classroom, but not all of them knew why. For my older students and higher functioning students who would ask questions about why they were in my class, I also would sit down with them and go over their goals with them, so they knew what we were going to be working towards. As students get older, I think they should all know that they have an IEP because it can be beneficial for the student, if they are able, to provide input as to what their goals should be, and even more so when it comes to developing a transition plan for students.

Participants also discussed that being knowledgeable of their IEP supported the student's academic success in that they are aware of the supports they receive and why they receive them. Research suggests that by students being aware of their disability and the accommodations they

receive, it may lead to increased performance of students as well as multiple other benefits such as increased engagement, involvement in the classroom, and enhanced academic skills (Pounds & Cuevas, 2019; Nolan-Spohn, 2016). In addition, (Prater et al., 2014) stated that “teaching students to understand their strengths and needs, to identify which accommodations are necessary for them to be successful, and to appropriately request those accommodations will give students control over their education, and they will assume more of the responsibility for their education” (p. 304). This was reiterated by the participants who noted that being knowledgeable of their IEP allows students to be more involved in their education and teaches them self-advocacy skills. In a study conducted by Sanderson & Rojas (2022), parents of students with IEPs noted that teachers should dedicate class time to teaching students about their disabilities, the IEP process and self-advocacy, as they found the awareness beneficial for students. Additionally, self-advocacy skills are necessary as students with disabilities get older and prepare for the transition to adulthood (Sanderson & Rojas, 2022; Roberts et al., 2016).

During the interviews, participants noted that having IEP goals that are as closely aligned with the class objectives/ grade-level standards as possible helps to support the inclusion of the student in the general education classroom. They noted that this especially helps to support inclusion of the student in participating in all academic tasks, even if they need to modify the task for that student. Teachers in a study conducted by Smith (2013) acknowledged that there were benefits to IEP goals that included grade level expectations, such as providing skills for standardized tests, affording students with disabilities opportunities to progress in the general education curriculum, and preparing students for success in all aspect of their lives.

However, participants also noted that the alignment between IEP objectives and class objectives/ grade-level standards, always depends on the student and that some student’s IEP objectives are close, but others are not. Additionally, they agreed that the IEP objectives, while not always directly lining up, were still parallel to what the class was learning, just at a different level. For example, a student of mine was in second grade, but was performing at a kindergarten/ first-grade level for math. Since the rest of the students in the class would be working on adding and subtracting multi-digit numbers with regrouping, and my student had not yet mastered single digit addition, I made the IEP goal for the student to be able to add and subtract multi-digit numbers without regrouping. Therefore, this student’s goal was not directly aligned to the class standards but remained parallel. This is supported by Frederickson & Cline (2015), who states

that where possible, learning objectives should be chosen for students that are similar and related to the aspect that the whole class is working on, because keeping learning objectives as closely aligned to the curriculum as possible helps promote inclusive education.

A key feature of inclusion is that all students with disabilities are provided access to the same curriculum as their general education peers. One way to ensure this is by providing students with the proper accommodations/ modifications outlined in their IEP. During the interviews, participants revealed that they believe the accommodations and modifications that are given to students help in supporting inclusion for students with IEPs. This is supported by Smith (2013), who identified accommodations and modifications as being integral to student achievement in the general education curriculum. Several examples of accommodations and modifications were provided by the participants, as well as explanations as to how they support students in accessing and participating in the general education curriculum. As such, well-chosen accommodations can compensate for what students cannot do by allowing them to demonstrate what they know (Smith, 2013; Fletcher et al., 2006). In my experience, ensuring students are provided with the proper accommodations and modifications outlined in their IEP(s) is one of the most beneficial ways to support inclusion. The accommodations and modifications listed in the IEP are there to ensure the student is able to be as successful as possible. If the student didn't need them, they wouldn't be there. Therefore, it is vital for all IEP team members to use and apply them whenever they are needed.

Circling back to much of the current literature and research and the information presented in theme 1, "The Barriers", which depict the challenges and negative aspects of IEPs in relation to inclusion, most of the findings in this study, especially those presented in this section, portray just the opposite, and are thus "Breaking the Barriers". In other words, despite having identified some challenges, the very many ways in which IEPs support inclusion ultimately outweigh the challenges.

## **5.5 Limitations**

First, the information collected relied on the participants' personal accounts, which introduced a subjective element to the data. Thus, biases also had to be considered for the research to be considered uncompromising. According to Shah (2019), participant bias could encompass answering the questions based more on what they believe to be the correct answer or

what is considered socially acceptable than on how they truly feel. Additionally, biases may exist within the researcher's familiarity with the topic, as they may ask questions in a way that may guide participants towards a desired response or provide their own input that in turn may influence the participants response. Throughout the interviews however, I tried to remain as unbiased as possible by asking questions that were open-ended, and providing responses or further questions only as a means to help the participants expand on their responses, as to respect their perspectives, and refrain from making any assumptions.

Having data from only four participants may also not portray an accurate representation of other special education and general education teachers. Additionally, not having direct input from students with disabilities is also a limiting factor. One should consider the perspectives of students who have IEPs, as reporting only how it appears from an outsider's point of view (i.e., special education and general education teachers), may not be providing a complete representation.

## **5.6 Conclusion**

With the ever-growing emphasis towards inclusive education, there has been a shift in focusing on developing IEPs to be implemented in the general education setting, resulting in increased responsibilities for both special education and general education teachers. Both special education and general education teachers play important roles in the planning, implementation, and assessment of IEPs in relation to inclusion. In the past, the special education teacher played the primary role in planning, implementing, and assessing IEPs. However, with more and more students with disabilities now receiving most of their instruction in the general education classroom, general education teachers often work more often and closely with the students than the special education teacher. As such, they are able to provide more specific information about the student, thus making their role even more, if not just as important as that of the special education teacher. The results of this study indicated just that, wherein both special education and general education teachers equally play a critical role in planning, implementing, and assessing of IEPs in relation to inclusive education. By being more involved in the IEP process, this may help to adjust the negative stigma many general education teachers have surrounding IEPs in relation to inclusion.

Collaboration between the teachers is emphasized as being a best practice for supporting students in the inclusive setting. Through collaboration, proper IEP implementation is more likely to occur, which was also identified in this study as being one of the keys to successful inclusion of students with disabilities in the general education classroom. Proper implementation ensures students are being provided with the proper supports and services outlined in their IEP that are necessary for them to be successful and progress in their learning. Working as a collaborative team also helps to share the responsibility for the student more evenly. Additionally, having all “team members” be on the same page can lead to improved outcomes for students, as it results in them being properly no matter which teacher they are working with.

Inclusion of students with disabilities does not only entail providing academic instruction to students in the general education setting for whatever amount of time the student is in the inclusive education setting. These students are not guests in the classroom, but are full-fledged members of the class, regardless of the amount of time they spend in there. As such, creating an environment where all students feel a sense of belonging and acceptance is an essential feature of inclusion. Likewise, since teachers are ultimately responsible for creating these inclusive environments, the success of inclusive education can be said to begin and end with teachers.

Since its introduction with the passing of EHA in 1975, the IEP continues to be identified as the most important document to have emerged from educational legislation. IEPs serve as central educational tools used to guide and tailor the educational support provided to students with disabilities. However, at the same time, IEPs are constantly being criticized and portrayed in a negative light in recent studies and literature, especially when discussed in relation to inclusive education. In this study, the participants also identified various challenges regarding IEPs in relation to inclusion. However, the overall results indicated that these challenges did not indicate that IEPs hinder inclusion, but instead were considered more as inconveniences, and did not affect the teacher’s general perspectives on the usefulness of IEPs in relation to inclusion. As such, in contrast to much of the recent literature and research, the overall results of this study highlighted a variety of ways in which IEPs support inclusion. Creating IEP goals that are as closely aligned to general education standards as possible, ensuring students are provided with the appropriate supports, informing students about their own IEP, as well as ensuring proper implementation of the IEP through collaborative practices and creating a welcoming and inclusive environment for all students, are some of the many ways in which IEPs help to support

the inclusion of students with disabilities in the inclusive education setting. Thus, the results of this study lead to the conclusion that IEPs and inclusion are friends, not foes.

## **5.7 Recommendations for Research and Practice**

Several recommendations can be made following the results of this study. While the results of this study highlighted the positive aspects surrounding IEPs in relation to inclusion, most of the recent studies and available literature have focused on identifying the challenges and negatives aspects of IEPs and inclusion. Therefore, further studies that focus on the positive aspects and benefits of IEPs in relation to inclusion is required.

Furthermore, due to the small sample size of this study, further research should be done in order to collect data that allows for generalizations to be made to the population. Further studies should include more teachers with a wider range of backgrounds and teaching experiences. Additionally, more schools with differing demographics, either within same area or state, or expanding to various states in the within country, should be involved in future studies. Furthermore, this study could be extended even further to include teachers and schools from different countries to explore and compare the perspectives of teachers worldwide. The larger the participant pool as well as the larger the study expands across various settings helps to increase the generalizability of the results, thus providing a more concrete answer to the research question. Likewise, including the perspectives of students who have IEPs may also offer new findings as it will be focused on data that comes from an insider instead of an outsider.

Additionally, schools should work towards addressing the various challenges identified by teachers. By providing solutions to these issues, it can help to change teacher's perspectives into viewing and embracing IEPs as one of the most useful tools to support inclusion.

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# Appendices

## Appendix 1

### SIKT Assessment & Evaluation

6/1/23, 5:16 AM

Notification form for the processing of personal data



[Notification form](#) / [IEP's and Inclusion](#) / Assessment

## Assessment of processing of personal data

<b>Reference number</b> 324303	<b>Assessment type</b> Standard	<b>Date</b> 03/02/2023
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**Project title**  
IEP's and Inclusion

**Data controller (institution responsible for the project)**  
University of Oslo / Faculty of Education / Department of Special Education

**Project leader**  
Luca Tateo

**Student**  
Allison Passaneau

**Project period**  
09.01.2023 - 01.06.2023

**Categories of personal data**  
General

**Legal basis**  
Consent (General Data Protection Regulation art. 6 no. 1 a)

The processing of personal data is lawful, as long as it is carried out as stated in the notification form. The legal basis is valid until 01.06.2024.

[Notification Form](#)

#### Comment

##### ABOUT OUR ASSESSMENT

Data Protection Services has an agreement with the institution where you are a student or a researcher. As part of this agreement, we provide guidance so that the processing of personal data in your project is lawful and complies with data protection legislation.

##### FOLLOW YOUR INSTITUTION'S GUIDELINES

We have assessed that you have legal grounds to process the personal data, but remember that you must store, send and secure the collected data in accordance with your institution's guidelines. This means that you must use data processors (and the like) that your institution has an agreement with (ie cloud storage, online survey, and video conferencing providers).

Our assessment presupposes that the project will meet the requirements of accuracy (art. 5.1 d), integrity and confidentiality (art. 5.1 f) and security (art. 32) when processing personal data.

##### NOTIFY CHANGES

If you intend to make changes to the processing of personal data in this project, it may be necessary to notify us. This is done by updating the information registered in the Notification Form. On our website we explain which changes must be notified. Wait until you receive an answer from us before you carry out the changes: <https://sikt.no/en/notify-changes-notification-form>

##### FOLLOW-UP OF THE PROJECT

We will follow up the progress of the project at the planned end date in order to determine whether the processing of personal data has been concluded.

Good luck with the project!

## Appendix 2

### Example of participant consent letter

#### **Are you interested in taking part in the research project: “IEP’s and Inclusion: Friends or Foes”?**

This is an inquiry about participation in a research project where the main purpose is to answer the question: *Do IEP’s hinder inclusion for students in elementary school? A comparison of the perspectives of general education teachers versus special education teachers in Illinois, USA*

In this letter we will give you information about the purpose of the project and what your participation will involve.

#### **Purpose of the project**

The purpose and overall aim of this research project is to understand what your views and perspectives are on: the role of the general education teacher in the planning, implementation, and assessment of IEPs in relation to inclusion; the role of the special education teacher in the planning, implementation, and assessment of IEPs in relation to inclusion; what are the challenges posed by IEPs regarding inclusion; and what are the positive aspects posed by IEPs regarding inclusion

#### **Who is responsible for the research project?**

*University of Oslo* is the institution responsible for the project.

#### **Why are you being asked to participate?**

You are receiving this inquiry because you have agreed to participate in interviews with me. You, alongside five other participants, will participate in independent interviews with myself which you will discuss your knowledge and experiences with IEP’s and inclusion.

I am sending this to you after your consent to share your email.

#### **What does participation involve for you?**

If you chose to take part in the project, this will involve one online zoom meeting. The meeting will take approximately 30-45 minutes.

Questions in the interview will include questions such as: how are you involved in planning IEPs, how do you ensure inclusion when planning IEP, do you use the IEP when lesson planning, how do you ensure the IEP is being implemented properly, how do you assess a child with an IEP and how do you assess if the child has met their goals.

The zoom meeting will be recorded, for transcription purposes. It is entirely up to you to have your cameras on or off.

## **Appendix 2 (continued)**

### **Participation is voluntary**

Participation in the project is voluntary. If you chose to participate, you can withdraw your consent at any time without giving a reason. All information about you will then be made anonymous. There will be no negative consequences for you if you chose not to participate or later decide to withdraw.

### **Your personal privacy – how we will store and use your personal data.**

We will only use your personal data for the purpose(s) specified in this information letter. We will process your personal data confidentially and in accordance with data protection legislation (the General Data Protection Regulation and Personal Data Act). Your personal data will be stored on an encrypted hard drive as well as in UiO's secure storage system for sensitive data.

I alone will have access to any personal data. For this project aliases, pseudonyms or codes to your names when quoting your experiences to ensure anonymity when writing the proposed thesis. The list of names, contact details, professional occupation and respective codes will be stored separately from the rest of the collected data, on a research server, locked away and encrypted. Participants will not be recognizable in the thesis.

With regards to ownership and control of data, you will be given a chance to verify your statements and validate the data, if you wish to. I will ensure steps to report accurately and consider your sensibilities, while making no assumptions of your feelings and emotions.

### **What will happen to your personal data at the end of the research project?**

The project is scheduled to end June 1, 2023. Personal data will be deleted after 6 months of completion of the project.

### **Your rights**

So long as you can be identified in the collected data, you have the right to:

- access the personal data that is being processed about you.
- request that your personal data is deleted.
- request that incorrect personal data about you is corrected/rectified.
- receive a copy of your personal data (data portability), and
- send a complaint to the Data Protection Officer or The Norwegian Data Protection Authority regarding the processing of your personal data

### **What gives us the right to process your personal data?**

We will process your personal data based on your consent.

Based on an agreement with University of Oslo, Data Protection Services has assessed that the processing of personal data in this project is in accordance with data protection legislation.

### **Where can I find out more?**

If you have questions about the project, or want to exercise your rights, contact:

- University of Oslo via: Allison Passaneau at [allisolp@uio.no](mailto:allisolp@uio.no)
  - Project supervisor at University of Oslo via: Luca Tateo at [luca.tateo@isp.uio.no](mailto:luca.tateo@isp.uio.no)

## Appendix 2 (continued)

- Our Data Protection Officer: Roger Markgraf-Bye [personvernombud@uio.no](mailto:personvernombud@uio.no)
- Data Protection Services, by email: ([personvertjenester@sikt.no](mailto:personvertjenester@sikt.no)) or by telephone: +47 53 21 15 00.

Yours sincerely,



Allison Passaneau  
(Student/ Researcher)

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## Consent form

I have received and understood information about the project “*IEPs and Inclusion: Friends or Foes?*” and have been given the opportunity to ask questions. I give consent:

- to participate in an online interview
- for my personal data to be processed until the end date of the project, approximately June 1, 2023

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(Signed by participant, date)

## Appendix 3

### Sample Interview Questions

#### Interview Questions

- What grade do you teach?
- How long have you been teaching?

#### **1. What is your role in planning IEPs?**

- a. Who is involved in the planning?
  - i. What is your role/ how are you involved?
  - ii. Are parents involved in the planning? How?
- b. How do you determine goals/ objectives?
  - i. Who is involved in this? How much?
- c. How do you ensure inclusion when planning IEPs?
  - i. What are some challenges?
- d. What are some general challenges when planning IEPs?

#### **2. What is your role in implementing IEPs?**

- a. Do you have the IEP at hand when planning each lesson?
- b. What do you do to ensure the IEP is being implemented properly?
  - i. What does the gen. ed./ sped teacher do?
- c. Does the lesson plan show you are using the IEP?
  - i. Do you need to write/ document anywhere how you are using the IEP?
- d. Does the child know they have an IEP?
  - i. How is this communicated to them?
- e. What is the role of the parents in regards to implementing the goals in the IEP?
- f. What are some challenges of implementing IEPs in relation to inclusion?
- g. What are some positive aspects of implementing IEPs in relation to inclusion?

#### **3. What is your role in assessing IEPs/ students?**

- a. How do you assess a child with an IEP?
  - i. Gen. ed. Class-- Same as rest of students??
  - ii. Standardized testing?
- b. How close are class objectives to IEP objectives?
  - i. If close, do you assess based on meeting their goals or class objectives/ grade level standards?
- c. Do you assess if they have met their goals?
  - i. Gen. ed.—are you involved in assessing if they have met their goals or providing any input?
  - ii. How do you adjust the goals if they have been met? Haven't been met?
- d. What are some challenges of assessing IEPs/ students in relation to inclusion?
- e. What are some positive aspects of assessing IEPs/ students in relation to inclusion?

# Appendix 4

## Coding Process- Examples of first round coding

G1: Sure, so at our school, we have special ed teachers, and those special ed teachers have case loads. So we usually have one assigned to our grade level. She meets with us once a week at our team meetings. We'll probably my teammate and I, we share about our curriculum and things like that. She kind of listens. And then at the end, she'll throw in like, all right, I can modify the social studies test, I can modify the science test, what do you need? Study tools like do you need flashcards? Do you need extra practice? Do you need you know, those kinds of things. Then she will either push in, but most of the time it's pull out. |

A: All right. How are parents involved in the planning, or are they involved that you know of?

G1: They are not involved in the planning of or the goals for the IEP. So I think if I would say this, if one of the goals has to do with something they could work on at home, like, I mean, anytime it has to do with reading or anything like that. It's mostly, you know, just any help at home we have like programs like Lexia, which is like a computer based.

A: Yeah, I use that at my school too.

G1: Okay, good. And then like I Ready, that's a new program that we started so like that can be personalized. But in terms of like planning and having input that way, I would say it's zero to minimal for parents. |

A: That was actually my next question. How do you determine goals and objectives? Like who are you involved in this process as well?

G1: So we go to the meetings when they do come up with like their goals. And I would say, in all of the IEPs that I've been involved in, I've probably contributed to a goal in the meeting, probably 10% of the time. I think I want a writing goal. I want these two reading goals. What do you think? So it's kind of like that.

This screenshot shows a vertical list of coding tags for the first example. Each tag is preceded by a small speech bubble icon. The tags are: 'Role of sped teacher Collaboration', 'Allison Passaneau Who is involved in the planning', 'Allison Passaneau Parent involvement', 'Allison Passaneau Parent involvement, minimal', and 'Allison Passaneau Role of gen ed teacher Role of sped teacher - planning'. A final tag 'Allison Passaneau Collaboration' is at the bottom.

about as far as I go on an author's purpose. Yeah, you know in writing the teachers are just trying to get them to do elaboration. I mean, they're just practicing, you know, the whole year for those IAR tests. Yeah, I don't do that. If you can write if you can write a couple sentences and remember capitalization and punctuation. I am one happy girl. So they're loosely my objective are loosely based on their objectives. |

A: Okay. What about for grade level standards?

S1: I mean, it also kind of comes down to I can say that they do the same standards because the standards are all based off their grade level curriculum. Yeah, and we do follow that pretty closely to a degree. I mean if the classroom is doing division in math will do division, but if they're doing three digit into three digit, I made you single digit. So they're loosely based on what the classroom needs. Except for one boy in the in the building who's pulled consistently the rest of them are at least introduced to or exposed to the science and the social studies. You know fifth grade is studying wars, you know instead of having to know six of the major wars. We just settle study one, you know, we focus on one the book we're reading is, you know Revolutionary War on Wednesday. That's based on a certain what the war of Trenton or something Trenton war battle against the battle, you know, so we'll focus on that one little thing right there as opposed to all of them. So we I loosely based everything on grade level standards.

A: So when you assess do you assess based on meeting their goals or meeting the class objectives?

S1: Their goals. |

A: Yeah, I knew that one. Do you do you assess that they have met their goals? More towards gen ed teachers, but.

S1: And you know, do classroom teachers I would say are they do they assess based on they involved in assessing? No, no, I would say they just have their regular assessments that they're assessing the class on and then I modify it. I because I all my goals are only based on reading writing and math and then some executive functioning. I don't have any goals based on science and social studies. So what they're doing or even SEL goals. So when teachers are assessing on those particular goals, they take basically the same test as everybody else just modified. So I modify it to meet their goals. They do not. Most of the time, although our teachers are really

This screenshot shows a vertical list of coding tags for the second example. Each tag is preceded by a small speech bubble icon. The tags are: 'Allison Passaneau Aligning IEP objectives and class objectives', 'Allison Passaneau Aligning IEP objectives and grade level standards', 'Allison Passaneau Differentiation - modification (assessment)', 'Allison Passaneau Assessing to IEP goals', and 'Allison Passaneau Role of gen ed teacher'.

# Appendix 5

## Examples of collating the codes

### Themes

<b>Challenges</b> IEP not in lesson plan Time Work overload/ Not enough support Parent involvement	<b>Role of Teachers</b> Role of sped teacher Role of gen. ed. Teacher Collaboration	<b>IEP supports Inclusion</b> Student knowledge of own IEP Aligning IEP objectives & class objectives/ grade level standards Accommodations/modifications	<b>Inclusion</b> Belonging & acceptance Inclusion as Placement
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+

<b>Challenges (25)</b> IEP not in lesson plan Time Not enough support / Work overload Parent Involvement
<b>IEP not in lesson plan (11)</b>
G1: No. Submit them? No.
G1: I would say no. I think in those little, like, so I have like old school, like paper pencil lessons. So like in the box, I would either put like, so in my little like math, let's say I would put in the bottom left corner or bottom right corner, I would put something like, like an H and I would just put like what I would do to like in rich the lesson. And I would put an L to see what I could do for like re-teaching types of things.
S1: No, it's in my desk drawer. It's in my desk drawer. So it's close.
S1: Nope. The school I work at we do not have to turn in lesson plans.
S1: Yeah, but our principal and none of the principles that we've had have ever required that.
G2: I'm going to be honest. No. Probably should.
G2: There's like a section on there for a differentiation but it doesn't say like if you're asking for like which particular student.
G2: So there's no for no particular student but differentiation for like extra support and then also the other way like to challenge students.
S2: Yeah, I have access to it. Yes.
S2: No, we do not.

<b>Role of gen ed teacher (16)</b>
G1: So we go to the meetings when they do come up with like their goals. And I would say, in all of the IEPs that I've been involved in, I've probably contributed to a goal in the meeting, probably 10% of the time.
G1: However, I think I would, or a TA would have to kind of help depending on the need or whatnot.
G1: Well, and you can be in only so many places, you know? I mean, the teacher does have to, I mean that again, ultimately it's still her student or his students.
G1: So that's, that's our job. Yeah.
G1: I feel like there's only a small amount of time when I'm included in like the goal, the actual goals.
G1: I think sometimes, again, I've seen teachers over the years that have like, you know, it's an IEP kid and then that's just the special ed teacher, you know, it's like hands off type of thing. But again, ultimately they're in your class and you're responsible.
G1: The only thing I provide is those quarterly rubrics, which are based on their goals.

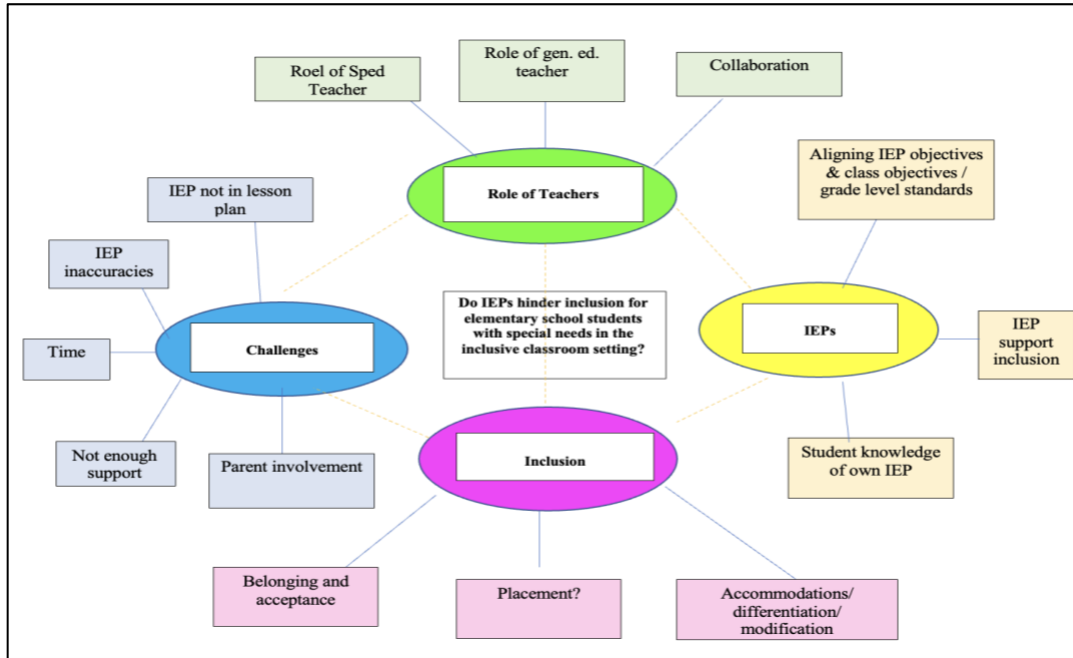
G1: I give feedback on that, like what I see in the classroom
S1: I would say they just have their regular assessments that they're assessing the class on
G2: So usually we get a Google form like a survey to fill out about the <u>students</u> strengths, weaknesses regarding behavior, academics, any supports like that you think they would need to be successful...*
G2: like in our classroom it's more just the general third grade curriculum.
G2: But I would also say I've also had times before where like I know a student knew the information but maybe has a hard time writing it down. So I would be the recorder write down stuff for them. If I knew they knew the information. So maybe give them like some extra prompting. So I guess give them extra support in that way.*?
G2: And I know sometimes like show like maybe like write like a sentence frame or something like that or yeah draw a picture of maybe what they're saying kind of like what I was just saying.*?
G2: I mean I've done that before for other students where like if there's 10 questions asking the same concept you know we'll take away some of it*?
G2: I mean I had to put in data from like the bridges assessments and their reading level. So yeah.
G2: Just when their meetings are coming up.
<b>Assessing student/ IEP (9)</b>
G1: I think they do have the same standards. I would say there's always second chance opportunities. Even with gen ed kids, I give them a second opportunity to go home study or tell me, hey, I'll be ready in two days. Nobody ever takes advantage of that or takes me for granted. Being like, you know, they don't study the first time they're not, they're nine and 10 years old. But if that's the case, I would have them, you know, do a little studying and whatnot.
G1: I would do the grade level. Well, it wouldn't be grade level standards, but it would be the class of class objectives.
S1: So when teachers are assessing on those particular goals, they take basically the same test as everybody else just modified.
G2: I mean honestly yes I shouldn't be but yes I mean I guess that kind of depends. (same standards*)
G2: That's like a million dollar question. I would say probably a little bit of both because you still you know want them to not be too



# Appendix 6

## Thematic maps

Original Thematic map



Final Thematic map

