

Review

Preparing Preservice Special Education Graduate Students as Advocates: Centering Student Voice of Marginalized Learners

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Abstract

Special education should empower students with disabilities as active participants in their educational experiences, yet many students, particularly those from culturally and linguistically diverse (CLD) backgrounds (a population designated CALD in some international contexts), those with more significant disabilities such as high-support-needs autism spectrum disorder (ASD) and/or intellectual/developmental disabilities (IDDs), and those experiencing socioeconomic and immigration-related challenges, continue to experience exclusion, segregation, and limited opportunities to express themselves in traditional educational settings. This theoretical position paper argues that special education graduate preparation must be reorganized to focus on advocacy, and it presents an integrated framework for preparing special education graduate students as advocates capable of amplifying and centering student voice for the most vulnerable and marginalized learners. Drawing on contemporary research in special education, professional development, and teacher preparation, this paper examines how graduate preparation programs can intentionally develop advocacy competencies, embed culturally responsive practices, and create conditions for system-level change. The paper provides specific recommendations for curriculum design, experiential learning, and professional development necessary to transform special education graduate preparation into a vehicle for advancing equity and inclusion through student-centered advocacy. By positioning special education teachers as advocates and student voice champions, this paper envisions education systems that respond authentically to the needs, aspirations, and experiences of all learners.

Keywords: teacher education; culturally responsive pedagogy; self-determination; family–professional partnerships; disability rights; individualized education program (IEP); social justice education; teacher agency



Academic Editors: Maria Georgiadi
and Eleni Tragoulia

Received: 22 August 2026

Revised: 26 September 2026

Accepted: 5 October 2026

Published: 12 October 2026

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1. Introduction

For decades, special education policies and practices have been designed and delivered largely by professionals, with limited authentic input from students and families regarding their own educational experiences, goals, and aspirations ([Johnson et al., 2024](#)). Students with disabilities are rarely asked what they need, want, or experience in their own education; reviews spanning two decades document persistently low levels of student participation in individualized education program (IEP) meetings, even when students are present ([Sanderson & Goldman, 2020](#); [Test et al., 2004](#)). While the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) mandates family participation in individualized education program (IEP) planning, research continues to reveal significant gaps between policy intent and practice reality. Students with disabilities remain underrepresented in general

education settings, overrepresented in restrictive placements, and frequently excluded from meaningful participation in decisions affecting their own lives (Beane, 2024). This exclusion is particularly pronounced for students from culturally and linguistically diverse (CLD) backgrounds, those with more significant disabilities, and those experiencing socioeconomic and/or immigration status adversity.

This paper takes the position that the fundamental challenge confronting special education systems is not merely one of access or placement, but rather one of voice, input, and empowerment. This position is consistent with recent scholarship, such as Beane (2024) and Johnson et al. (2024), arguing that special education must evolve from a deficit-oriented, professionally driven system to one that actively involves students with disabilities in shaping their educational experiences, policies, and practices. This transformation requires educators who understand the power dynamics inherent in disability services, who possess skills to amplify marginalized voices, and who are committed to advocacy as a core aspect of their professional identity.

While special education teacher preparation programs have made significant strides in addressing content knowledge, evidence-based practices, and instructional competencies (Brownell et al., 2020; Hugh et al., 2024; McKissick et al., 2023), few explicitly and systematically develop the advocacy skills and dispositions necessary for teachers to serve as champions of student voices and systemic change. Graduate programs in special education frequently focus on technical competencies such as assessment, curriculum adaptation, and behavior management, while giving scant attention to the broader advocacy responsibilities that enable teachers to dismantle barriers to inclusion and amplify marginalized perspectives (Frake et al., 2025; Nagro et al., 2019).

The need for advocacy-centered preparation becomes particularly urgent when considering the populations most vulnerable to continued marginalization in special education systems. Research reveals that culturally and linguistically diverse (CLD) students experience persistent patterns of overrepresentation in disability categories, underrepresentation in gifted programs, and systematic exclusion from meaningful participation in their educational planning (Harry & Klingner, 2014; Jonak, 2025; Klingner et al., 2005). Students with low-incidence disabilities such as high-support-needs autism spectrum disorder (ASD) are educated within systems designed with limited input from autistic self-advocates, resulting in practices and policies that may not align with their lived experiences or preferences (Gouws, 2025). The emphasis on low-incidence populations here is deliberate: these students often have extensive support needs, may communicate in ways schools are not equipped to interpret, and depend on families to coordinate multiple service systems, conditions that make their voices the easiest to overlook (Gouws, 2025; Walker et al., 2025). Students with high-incidence disabilities also stand to benefit from advocacy-centered preparation, and the framework developed here applies to them; the argument simply prioritizes the learners for whom exclusion from voice has been most persistent. Students experiencing socioeconomic challenges, immigration-related trauma, and language barriers face compounded barriers to inclusion and having a voice in education systems (Pejic et al., 2025).

The case for advocacy-centered preparation is sharpened by the current state of graduate preparation itself. Programs have diversified considerably. Traditional master's programs now sit alongside apprenticeship models (Pickett et al., 2025), alternative certification pathways (Day et al., 2023), and online and hybrid formats (Johnston et al., 2025). Well-designed programs show real strengths: mentorship and coaching relationships that enhance classroom readiness (Choiseul-Praslin et al., 2026), community-based service learning that builds authentic relationships in diverse communities (McKenzie et al., 2025), and competency-based frameworks aligned with professional standards (McKissick et al.,

2023). Yet research consistently identifies persistent gaps: insufficient preparation in case management and family–professional partnerships (Kyzar et al., 2019), variable knowledge of special education law and of the practice-based responsibilities that flow from these laws (Green et al., 2025), limited emphasis on culturally and linguistically responsive practices (Shelton et al., 2025), and preservice teachers who report feeling unprepared to serve students with extensive support needs or to advocate for their students (Walker et al., 2025).

These gaps are most consequential for marginalized learners. Few programs sustain an intensive focus on the barriers faced by CLD students, students with low-incidence disabilities, and students experiencing socioeconomic or immigration-related adversity, and preservice special educators frequently perceive themselves as ill-prepared to meet the needs of diverse populations (González et al., 2023; Kea et al., 2025; Shelton et al., 2025). Advocacy competencies, including working through complex systems on behalf of students and families, challenging inequitable structures, and amplifying marginalized voices, are rarely explicitly addressed in graduate curricula (Frake et al., 2025). When programs do address them, the content is typically confined to a single course rather than integrated across preparation. This paper responds directly to that gap.

This paper draws on Frake et al. (2025), who define advocacy as “an activity used by individuals or groups to influence policy and practice” (p. 26), and extends this conceptualization to encompass deliberate professional action across classroom, school, district, and policy levels on behalf of and alongside students with disabilities and their families (Fisher & Miller, 2021; Nagro et al., 2019). Operationalized in this way, advocacy is not a personality trait or sporadic intervention but a teachable, observable set of knowledge, skills, and dispositions that special education teacher preparation programs can and must explicitly develop in preservice teachers (Frake et al., 2025).

This theoretical position paper takes a direct position: advocacy competencies belong at the organizing center of special education graduate preparation, not at its periphery. To advance that position, the paper presents an integrated framework for transforming graduate preparation to prioritize advocacy development among preservice special education teachers. Specifically, this paper examines how graduate programs can intentionally develop the knowledge, skills, and dispositions necessary for special education teachers to:

- Center and amplify the voices of students with disabilities, particularly those from marginalized populations.
- Understand and address complex systemic barriers to inclusion and equitable participation.
- Engage in advocacy at multiple levels, particularly in classrooms, schools, and districts.
- Partner authentically with families from diverse cultural and linguistic backgrounds.
- Engage in reflective practices that address personal biases and advance justice-oriented teaching.

Drawing on contemporary research in special education, teacher preparation, professional development, and student voice initiatives, this paper provides evidence-based recommendations for curriculum design, experiential learning opportunities, professional development approaches, and systemic changes necessary to realize this vision.

2. Approach

This is a theoretical position paper, not an empirical study or a systematic review. The position it advances is argued from the literature, and the basis for that argument is reported here in full. The framework was derived through a structured narrative literature synthesis (Greenhalgh et al., 2018; Sukhera, 2022), drawing on contemporary scholarship in special education teacher preparation, culturally and linguistically diverse learners, low-incidence disabilities, student voice, and graduate-level pedagogy. Priority was given

to peer-reviewed empirical and conceptual sources published between 2019 and 2026, a window selected so the synthesis would reflect preparation scholarship contemporaneous with the current CEC preparation standards (CEC, 2020) and with the recent growth of advocacy-focused work, and indexed in Education Source, ERIC, PsycINFO, and Google Scholar. Search terms combined “special education teacher preparation,” “advocacy,” “student voice,” “culturally and linguistically diverse,” “low-incidence disabilities,” and “graduate education.” Sources were included when they (a) addressed teacher preparation, professional development, or program design; (b) explicitly engaged equity, voice, or advocacy; or (c) reported outcomes for marginalized learners served by special education. Classic works (e.g., Klingner et al., 2005; Harry & Klingner, 2014) were retained because they establish the historical and conceptual foundations of the equity issues taken up by more recent scholarship.

The framework was constructed iteratively. After initial reading, recurring preparation domains were identified across sources and clustered into the three competency dimensions (knowledge, skills, dispositions) that organize the Council for Exceptional Children’s Initial Preparation Standards (CEC, 2020) and that have been used in prior teacher-preparation syntheses (Brownell et al., 2020). Dimensions were retained when supported by at least three independent sources across distinct authorship teams. This paper focuses on graduate-level preparation because graduate programs in special education are the predominant route to advanced special education credentials in the United States and therefore represent the most consequential point for program-level redesign (Day et al., 2023); however, several recommendations are transferable to undergraduate preparation, a point addressed again in the limitations. The framework is offered as a synthesis-derived heuristic rather than an empirically validated model, and this is made explicit throughout. The CEC architecture supplied the organizing categories only. The substantive content of each dimension, including competencies such as critical consciousness that the CEC standards do not explicitly name, was derived from the synthesized advocacy and equity scholarship, as will be detailed in the opening of Section 4.

Three guiding questions organized the review and structure the argument: (1) What advocacy-related knowledge, skills, and dispositions does contemporary scholarship identify as essential for special education teachers serving marginalized learners? (2) Through what curricular, experiential, and structural mechanisms can graduate programs intentionally develop these competencies? (3) What institutional and systemic conditions enable or constrain advocacy-centered preparation, and how can programs respond?

These questions translate into three objectives that structure this paper: (1) to synthesize what contemporary scholarship identifies as the advocacy-related knowledge, skills, and dispositions essential for special education teachers serving marginalized learners (Sections 3 and 4); (2) to derive from that synthesis an integrated, assessable framework and the curricular, experiential, and structural mechanisms for developing it (Sections 4 and 5); and (3) to identify the institutional and systemic conditions under which advocacy-centered preparation can succeed, together with recommendations for programs and school systems (Sections 6 and 7). The conclusions return to each objective in turn.

To keep the origin of each argument transparent, three conventions are used throughout: claims derived from the literature are cited at their point of use; interpretive extensions of that literature are marked explicitly as the position this paper advances; and the conceptual proposals that constitute the framework are presented as exactly that, proposals derived from the synthesis and awaiting empirical validation.

3. Understanding the Value of Student Voice in Special Education

Student voice represents far more than token student representation on committees or perfunctory input into IEP planning. Rather, authentic student voice involves creating genuine conditions for students with disabilities, particularly those whose voice has been historically marginalized, to shape the decisions, policies, and practices that affect their educational experiences (Beane, 2024). This requires intentional structural changes, shifts in adult mindset, and educators capable of recognizing, emphasizing, encouraging, and acting upon student perspectives. As marginalized individuals within educational systems, students with disabilities have seldom been positioned as experts on their own experiences, preferences, and needs (Charlton, 1998; Sanderson & Goldman, 2020; Test et al., 2004). Instead, professional expertise and parental authority have traditionally dominated decision-making, often with limited attention to what students themselves understand about their learning, aspirations, and strengths (Johnson et al., 2024). This exclusion is particularly acute for students from CLD backgrounds, students with significant support needs, and those experiencing intersecting oppressions based on race, class, immigration status, and disability (García & Ortiz, 2013; Kea et al., 2025).

Beane (2024) demonstrates that when students are authentically engaged in their educational planning and decision-making, multiple benefits emerge including increased engagement, improved academic outcomes, stronger self-advocacy skills, and greater sense of ownership over educational goals (Beane, 2024; Sanderson & Goldman, 2020; Test et al., 2004). Yet these benefits remain inaccessible to many students with disabilities because educators lack preparation in how to facilitate meaningful student voice and participation. Educator preparation programs (EPPs) need to take a more active role in producing professionals who are passionate about increasing student voice and participation in their educational experiences.

Because this paper works at the intersection of three constructs, student voice, advocacy, and culturally responsive practice, their boundaries deserve precision. Student voice is the end goal: the authentic participation of students with disabilities in shaping the decisions, policies, and practices that affect their education (Beane, 2024). Advocacy is a primary means to that end: the deliberate professional action, as defined in Section 1, through which educators influence policy and practice on behalf of and alongside students and families (Frake et al., 2025). Culturally responsive practice is the orientation that disciplines both. It determines whose voices are heard, how they are interpreted, and whether advocacy challenges or reproduces existing inequities (Singh, 2023; Jonak, 2025). The three constructs are related but not interchangeable. Advocacy that does not center student voice becomes professional paternalism, the assumption that professionals know best and may act on behalf of disabled people without consulting them, a stance disability rights scholars have long identified as a defining feature of disability oppression (Charlton, 1998); student voice initiatives that ignore culture and language privilege the students already best positioned to be heard; and culturally responsive practice without advocacy remains confined to the classroom while systemic barriers stand. The framework developed in Section 4 treats the constructs in exactly this relationship: student voice as the goal, advocacy as the competency set, and cultural responsiveness as a quality criterion that runs through every dimension. Figure 1 provides a visual overview of this relationship in advance of the framework's full development in Section 4.

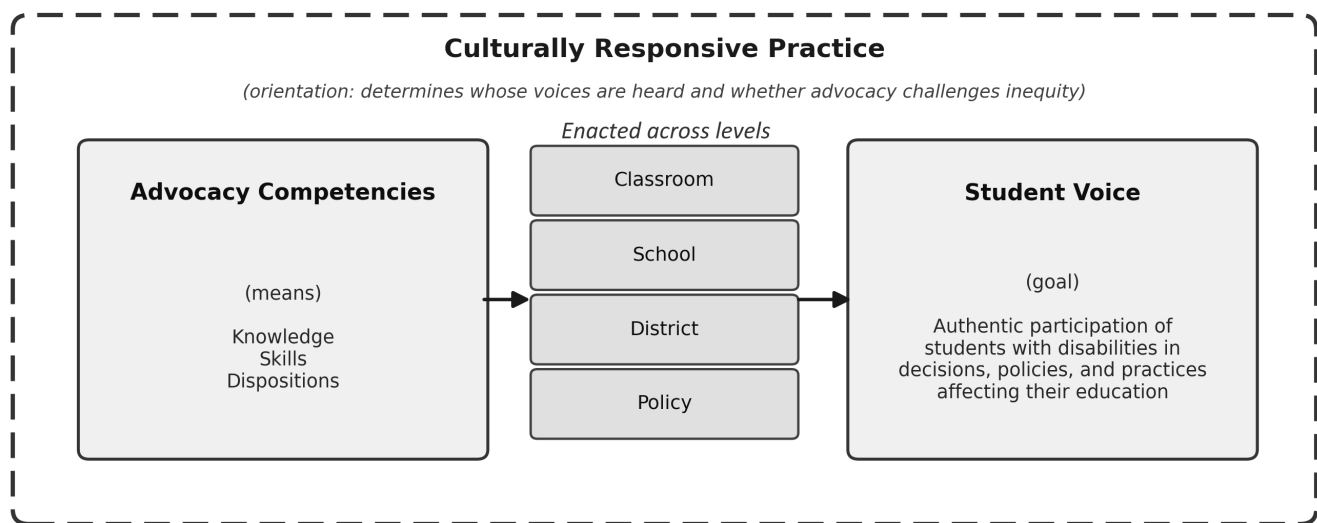


Figure 1. Overview of the advocacy-centered preparation framework: student voice as the goal; advocacy competencies (knowledge, skills, and dispositions) enacted across classroom, school, district, and policy levels as the means; and culturally responsive practice as the orientation that disciplines both.

3.1. Advocacy as a Core Professional Competency

Beyond the classroom, special education teachers occupy a unique position as advocates because they are professionals capable of intervening in systemic processes that shape educational opportunities and outcomes for students with disabilities (Fisher & Miller, 2021). Teacher advocacy can manifest at multiple levels including supporting individual students in IEP meetings and transitions, advocating within school systems for equitable policies and practices, engaging in policy advocacy at state and national levels, and working toward systemic transformation of special education (Nagro et al., 2019).

Research on teacher educators reveals that those most effective in advancing equitable special education practices employ multiple advocacy strategies, including building relationships with stakeholders, developing specialized knowledge, and facilitating policy engagement (Nagro et al., 2019). These educators understand that individual student success depends not only on instructional quality but also on systemic conditions that either enable or constrain inclusive practice. They recognize that true advocacy extends beyond individual intervention to systemic reform. In doing so, they are committed to reforms even in the face of pressure to conform with the status quo. This can be particularly difficult for special education teachers early in their careers, especially when they are untenured.

The critical question is whether current special education graduate preparation programs explicitly develop these advocacy competencies in preservice teachers. While many programs effectively teach evidence-based instructional practices and assessment approaches, few have intentionally designed curricula to develop the advocacy knowledge, skills, and dispositions that enable teachers to work within systems, challenge inequitable structures, and amplify marginalized voices (Frake et al., 2025). When these topics are included in the graduate curriculum, they are often embedded into one course or lecture topic, as opposed to integrated throughout all program courses. This isolates and minimizes the importance of advocacy and amplifying student voices.

3.2. Culturally Responsive Special Education as Advocacy

Advocacy grounded in student voice must be culturally responsive, meaning that it is attentive to, affirming of, and instructionally built upon the diverse backgrounds, values, and experiences of students and families served (Gay, 2018). Students from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds encounter multiple barriers within special education systems. Research documents persistent patterns of misidentification and overrepresentation of CLD students in special education categories, which result from culturally biased assessment practices, inadequate differentiation between language development and disability, limited implementation of multi-tiered systems of support, and insufficient educator preparation in culturally responsive practice (Harry & Klingner, 2014; Mohamed, 2023). Decades of scholarship on English learners with special education needs make the same point: distinguishing language difference from disability and designing responsive instruction require intentional preparation that most educators do not receive (Artiles & Ortiz, 2002; García & Ortiz, 2013; Linan-Thompson et al., 2018).

Culturally responsive special education moves beyond basic cultural awareness to fundamentally challenge deficit ideologies and transform structures that perpetuate inequities (Singh, 2023). This requires educators to have deeper knowledge of students' cultural identities, values, and community contexts; who actively work to overcome implicit biases; and who design learning environments that affirm and build upon students' strengths and cultural assets (Singh, 2023). For CLD students with disabilities, culturally responsive approaches often include dynamic and dual-language assessment, culturally sustaining pedagogy, and strengthened school–family–community collaboration (Jonak, 2025)

Building on this, advocacy for students with low-incidence disabilities such as high-support-needs autism and intellectual disabilities requires educators who understand these students' lived experiences and perspectives. All too often, special education systems are designed by professionals with limited input from autistic self-advocates or individuals with intellectual disabilities themselves. Advocacy-centered preparation must intentionally incorporate the perspectives and voices of disabled communities, ensuring that preservice special education teachers learn from disabled people themselves about what meaningful inclusion, autonomy, and support look like from the inside (Elaiho et al., 2026). The focus on low-incidence populations in this discussion is deliberate rather than exclusive. Because these students may use augmentative and alternative communication, rely on families to coordinate services across multiple systems, and are frequently excluded even from the research meant to represent them, accessing their perspectives requires the most intentional effort (Gouws, 2025; Walker et al., 2025). The same commitments extend to students with high-incidence disabilities, whose voices are also routinely filtered through adult interpretation.

3.3. Professional Development as a Vehicle for Transformation

The importance of professional development in shaping educator competencies and practices is well-established (Hugh et al., 2024). Research demonstrates that carefully designed professional development produces meaningful changes in teacher knowledge, skills, and classroom practices (Wang et al., 2024). These PD opportunities often include incorporating multiple components such as content instruction, live modeling, practical exercises, performance feedback, and ongoing coaching. When professional development is sustained, tied to specific learning outcomes, and includes opportunities for practice and feedback, teachers are significantly more likely to implement new practices with fidelity and confidence.

A terminological clarification is warranted here. In educational contexts, professional development typically refers to in-service training that districts and schools provide to

practicing educators. The argument in this paper is different: graduate preparation can adopt the design principles that make in-service professional development effective, multicomponent instruction, live modeling, practice with feedback, and sustained coaching (Hugh et al., 2024; Wang et al., 2024), while functioning as preservice preparation. Framed this way, graduate training is an especially promising site for developing advocacy competencies because it offers an extended timeframe, opportunities for deep learning, and the chance to shape professional identity before candidates enter compliance-oriented systems (Brownell et al., 2020).

4. Designing Advocacy-Centered Preparation in Special Education Graduate Programs

Transforming special education graduate preparation to prioritize student voices and advocacy requires a carefully designed framework addressing three interconnected dimensions: knowledge, skills, and dispositions. This framework must be integrated throughout the program rather than isolated in single courses, and it must explicitly connect to the needs and experiences of the most vulnerable student populations.

The organizing architecture used here, comprising knowledge, skills, and dispositions, is drawn from the Council for Exceptional Children's Initial Special Education Preparation Standards (CEC, 2020) and is consistent with the InTASC Model Core Teaching Standards (Council of Chief State School Officers [CCSSO], 2013). The architecture supplies structure, not content. CEC provides the structural categories: the tripartite structure is already operationalized in accreditation review and therefore actionable for program redesign; it separates declarative knowledge from enacted skill, the point where advocacy preparation most often fails (Frake et al., 2025; Nagro et al., 2019); and it permits assessment at both the candidate and program levels. The content of the competencies derives from the advocacy and equity scholarship synthesized in Section 2, not from the CEC standards themselves. Critical consciousness, for example, is not an explicit CEC competency; it enters the framework from advocacy scholarship (Frake et al., 2025) and from DisCrit and intersectional analyses of special education (Ocasio-Stoutenburg & Connor, 2026; Lee et al., 2024). The framework therefore uses the CEC architecture as scaffolding while extending beyond it where the synthesized literature demands, and it is presented as such rather than as a direct application of the standards. This paper further organizes advocacy by classroom, school, district, and policy levels because Nagro et al. (2019) and Fisher and Miller (2021) demonstrate that effective special education advocates routinely operate across these levels, and preparation programs that target only one level leave graduates unable to challenge the systemic barriers most consequential for marginalized learners. In one graduate special education program, for example, this knowledge–skills–dispositions split organizes advocacy assessment across coursework and field experience.

Table 1 provides a detailed measurement framework for assessing advocacy competencies across knowledge, skills, and dispositions. This framework operationalizes the three core dimensions described above, offering concrete assessment domains and measurable indicators that programs can use to evaluate student development and program effectiveness.

Table 1. Advocacy competency assessment framework.

Assessment Domain	Assessment Methods	Key Indicators	Timeline	Advocacy Domain
Knowledge Competencies	- Legal and policy analysis assignments examining historical and contemporary frameworks (e.g., the disability rights movement, DisCrit, and the CEC preparation standards).	- Demonstrates critical understanding of how laws enable/constrain opportunities for marginalized students.	- Ongoing throughout program with capstone integration.	Legal literacy, systemic barriers, and disability identity, enacted primarily at classroom and policy levels.
	- Case study examinations of systemic barriers.	- Identifies root causes of inequities and develops advocacy responses.	- Mid-program and final assessments.	
	- Cultural responsiveness evaluations.	- Shows understanding of intersectional approaches and cultural humility.	- Each semester with progressive complexity.	
	- Disability rights framework applications.	- Engages meaningfully with community perspectives and disability culture.	- Final year with community partner feedback.	
Skill Development	- Communication simulation exercises across cultural contexts.	- Effectively communicates across cultural/linguistic differences and facilitates difficult conversations.	- Multiple assessments per year with increasing complexity.	Communication, data literacy, and system navigation, enacted at classroom, school, and district levels.
	- Data analysis and presentation projects.	- Uses evidence strategically for advocacy purposes and communicates findings persuasively.	- Annual comprehensive projects.	
	- System navigation portfolio development.	- Demonstrates strategic thinking, coalition building, and understanding of organizational dynamics.	- Capstone project with real-world application.	
	- Conflict resolution demonstrations in authentic contexts.	- Handles advocacy conflicts while maintaining relationships and advancing equity goals.	- Field experience assessments.	
Disposition Assessment	- Critical reflection journals documenting consciousness development.	- Shows growth in awareness of systemic inequities and personal biases over time.	- Monthly submissions with faculty feedback.	Critical consciousness, cultural humility, and persistence, enacted across all levels.
	- Community engagement evaluations from partnership organizations.	- Receives feedback on cultural humility, respect, and collaborative approach.	- End of each community engagement.	
	- Peer and mentor feedback systems assessing advocacy commitment.	- Demonstrates persistence, resilience, and commitment to equity in challenging situations.	- Ongoing with formal reviews each semester.	
	- Self-advocacy development tracking.	- Shows personal growth in advocacy skills and commitment to lifelong learning.	- Annual self-assessment with goal setting.	

Note. CEC = Council for Exceptional Children; DisCrit = disability critical race theory; IEP = individualized education program.

4.1. Knowledge Competencies

Advocacy-centered preparation must develop knowledge across several domains. First, preservice teachers require sophisticated understanding of special education law and policy at federal, state, and local levels (Green et al., 2025; Yllades et al., 2021). However, this knowledge must extend beyond technical compliance to include understanding how laws shape and constrain educational opportunities for vulnerable students. Graduate students should engage in critical analysis of how special education law has been used historically to segregate and exclude students of color with disabilities, and how contemporary legal

frameworks both enable and impede inclusive practices (Klingner et al., 2005). For example, candidates might trace how *Larry P. v. Riles* (1979) curtailed the IQ-testing practices that had funneled Black students into segregated classes in California, and then examine their own state's current disproportionality data to see how those legal legacies persist.

Second, advocacy-centered programs must develop deep knowledge of systemic barriers and disproportionate representation. Preservice teachers must understand the historical and ongoing patterns of overrepresentation of students of color in certain disability categories, underrepresentation in gifted programs, and exclusion from general education settings (Jonak, 2025). They must grasp how assessment bias, cultural deficit thinking, and systemic racism intersect with disability categories to create barriers for CLD students (Lee et al., 2024).

Third, program curricula must include knowledge of evidence-based practices specifically for diverse learners that are grounded in strengths-based, culturally responsive approaches. Rather than positioning diverse students as deficient, the curriculum should emphasize how evidence-based strategies can be delivered while honoring cultural identity and family values (Hugh et al., 2024). Preservice teachers should understand naturalistic instruction, family partnership approaches grounded in authentic collaboration, and developmentally appropriate practices for students with significant support needs (Foykas et al., 2025).

Finally, advocacy-centered preparation must include knowledge grounded in disability identity and perspective. This means engaging meaningfully with disabled communities, learning the history and values of disability rights movements, and understanding neurodiversity frameworks (Charlton, 1998; Foykas et al., 2025; Gouws, 2025). Special education teacher candidates should graduate with familiarity with disability self-advocacy organizations, research by disabled scholars and activists, and diverse perspectives on what inclusion, autonomy, and support mean from those with lived disability experiences.

4.2. Skill Development

Beyond knowledge, advocacy-centered preparation must develop specific, practical skills. Communication and negotiation skills are essential, as teachers must effectively communicate with students, families, colleagues, and administrators. Many times, this communication occurs across cultural and linguistic differences and frequently in contexts involving disagreement or conflict (Jeong & Strassfeld, 2024; Kyzar et al., 2019). Graduate curricula should include structured opportunities to develop and practice these skills, with feedback and coaching from experienced professionals to enhance effectiveness.

Travers et al. (2026) indicate that data literacy represents another critical skill for advocates. Teachers must be able to disaggregate data by student demographics to understand disparities, use data to make the case for systemic change, and evaluate whether advocacy efforts are producing equitable outcomes (Klingner et al., 2005; Travers et al., 2026). Preservice teachers should engage with real data from school systems, analyze patterns of representation and achievement, and develop the ability to communicate findings persuasively to different audiences.

Navigation of complex school systems and advocacy pathways constitutes another essential skill. Graduate students must learn how to access information, understand bureaucratic processes, identify key decision-makers and influencers, build coalitions, and strategically pursue change within and beyond existing systems. These skills develop through mentorship, modeling, practice, and reflection (Choiseul-Praslin et al., 2026).

4.3. Disposition Development

Perhaps most fundamentally, advocacy-centered teacher preparation must develop specific dispositions or professional identities. Critical consciousness, which is the awareness of systemic inequities and the commitment to addressing them (Freire, 1970/2000), must be developed throughout the time in special education teacher preparation training (Frake et al., 2025). Unfortunately, it is most often assumed that critical consciousness is something students bring to their training. Special education faculty must prepare preservice teachers to develop the awareness of how systemic racism, ableism, and socioeconomic discrimination have historically shaped special education systems. In turn, they must build a strong commitment to working toward more just systems for marginalized and vulnerable students.

Scott (2024) indicates that cultural humility involves a commitment to learning from and with communities different from oneself. When special educators couple this learning with awareness of power dynamics inherent in professional–community relationships, cultural humility becomes an essential professional disposition (Santamaría Graff, 2022; Scott, 2024). Programs must create conditions for preservice special education teachers to develop genuine relationships with CLD families and disabled communities. This allows them to develop the capacity to learn from these relationships rather than merely imposing their professional knowledge during interactions.

Finally, advocacy-centered preparation must develop resilience and persistence. Advocacy work in inequitable systems is emotionally and cognitively demanding, and teachers frequently encounter resistance and systemic barriers when they confront these systems (Hall & Pavez, 2023; Hong et al., 2025). For special educators who are early in their career, it can be particularly challenging to resist the pressure to conform with the status quo. Special education graduate programs must help preservice teachers develop a realistic understanding of the challenges involved in advocacy, skills for sustaining effort over time, and access to support systems that prevent burnout.

4.4. Community-Based Service Learning

Service learning within marginalized communities provides important opportunities for preservice special education teachers to develop a deeper understanding of systemic barriers, build authentic relationships, and develop cultural humility (McKenzie et al., 2025). These opportunities are especially important for preservice teachers who are likely to teach in schools in such communities (Kea et al., 2025). Unlike brief site visits or superficial exposure, meaningful service learning involves consistent engagement within community settings. This allows preservice special education teachers to provide direct services that allow for critical examination of power dynamics and systemic structures. When these experiences are connected to self-reflection assignments, preservice special education teachers develop a deeper understanding of how their work impacts the students and families they serve. Programs should partner with community-based organizations (CBOs) that serve families of CLD students with disabilities, support immigrant youth, or that promote disability rights. These partnerships can create opportunities for graduate students to engage in meaningful work while learning about and developing a strong commitment to advocacy.

Effective service learning in advocacy-centered preparation should include structured self-reflection. Assignments that include self-reflection help students move beyond surface-level understanding to more of a critical analysis of barriers and systemic change (Poláčková, 2025). Rather than positioning communities as service recipients, programs should emphasize partnership and mutual learning. When done in conjunction with community members and disabled people, it allows community members and disabled

individuals to be positioned as experts on their own experiences and equal contributors to impactful solutions. This is evident in how it allows preservice special education teachers to learn directly from those most affected by marginalization.

Assembled, these components look less like a checklist than like a semester. The composite that follows condenses recurring patterns from community placements into one candidate's experience.

Vignette 1 (composite illustration). During her second semester, a graduate candidate is placed with a community organization serving immigrant families of children with autism. Working alongside a bilingual family advocate, she helps a mother prepare for an upcoming IEP meeting, drafting questions in Spanish, assembling a one-page profile of her son's strengths and communication preferences, and rehearsing how to request an interpreter. At the meeting, the team adopts two goals the family drafted. In her reflection, the candidate connects the experience to each framework dimension: knowledge of procedural safeguards, skill in facilitating communication across languages, and the disposition to follow the family's lead rather than her own agenda.

Nothing in the episode required heroics; it required preparation aimed at the right competencies.

4.5. Mentorship and Coaching

Pairing graduate students with experienced teacher advocates and leaders provides opportunities for authentic modeling, coaching, and relationship-based learning (Choiseul-Praslin et al., 2026; Pickett et al., 2025). Mentors can model how to work through systems, interact with families respectfully, advocate for students, and maintain commitment amid challenges. Graduate students benefit when they observe and participate in real advocacy work, with mentors that can provide real-time feedback and help them reflect on their experiences.

Effective mentoring relationships involve genuine partnership, ongoing communication, and explicit focus on developing advocacy competencies. Rather than mentorship focused solely on classroom instruction and behavior management, advocacy-centered mentorship explicitly targets the knowledge, skills, and dispositions necessary for advocacy work (Choiseul-Praslin et al., 2026; Nagro et al., 2019). Mentors can serve as liaisons that introduce mentees to advocacy organizations, invite them to policy meetings, involve them in working through systems to address student concerns, and reflect with them on what they are learning about advocacy in practice.

5. Centering Marginalized Student Voices in the Curriculum

An advocacy-centered approach in graduate preparation requires deliberate, sustained focus on the experiences and perspectives of the most vulnerable students. This must occur through multiple mechanisms including curriculum content that focuses on diverse learners and authentic engagement with disabled communities and CLD families.

5.1. Curriculum Content Focused on Diverse Learners

Courses should include substantial content on intensive strategies to improve outcomes for diverse learners. The content of these courses should be delivered through culturally responsive, strengths-based approaches. Rather than treating diverse students as an add-on topic, programs should ensure that diversity is integrated and connected throughout all courses. When teaching the curriculum and instruction, faculty should emphasize how instructional adaptations can be implemented while honoring cultural identity (Hugh et al., 2024). When addressing behavior support, courses should include content on how to implement positive behavioral interventions and supports (PBIS) in culturally affirming ways by including how cultural values and family practices shape

behavior (Walker et al., 2025). When discussing assessment, faculty should emphasize culturally responsive assessment approaches, recognition of assessment bias, and dynamic assessment methods that better capture the capabilities of CLD students (Jonak, 2025).

5.2. Authentic Engagement with Disabled Communities and CLD Families

Rather than relying solely on faculty expertise or textbooks, programs should create direct engagement with disabled communities and CLD families through multiple interconnected approaches (McKenzie et al., 2025). This sustained engagement begins with inviting guest speakers such as autistic self-advocates, parents of children with disabilities from CLD backgrounds, and disability rights activists to share their lived experiences and perspectives with preservice teachers (Santamaría Graff, 2022). Simultaneously, programs must ensure that disabled scholars and scholars from marginalized communities are prominently featured in reading lists and curriculum materials, moving beyond token representation to meaningful inclusion of diverse voices and scholarship (González et al., 2023).

Extending these foundational elements, programs should engage in participatory research methods that fundamentally reposition students and families as knowledge co-creators rather than passive research subjects (Bishop et al., 2020). This collaborative approach extends to the critical analysis of authentic student work and family input from IEPs and educational planning documents. During this analysis, preservice teachers examine how truly student-centered and family-inclusive these documents are in practice. Throughout this process, programs must engage critically with how curriculum materials and assessments might perpetuate deficit ideologies, actively working to disrupt these harmful frameworks (Cartagena & Pike, 2022; Ocasio-Stoutenburg & Connor, 2026).

These authentic engagements serve multiple interconnected purposes that strengthen teacher preparation. They expand preservice teachers' understanding beyond narrow professional perspectives while simultaneously developing essential relationships and cultural humility (Kea et al., 2025; McKenzie et al., 2025). Most importantly, they position disabled people and marginalized communities as experts deserving of respect and partnership, fundamentally shifting the power dynamics that have historically characterized special education practice through what Santamaría Graff (2022) terms the "Family as Faculty" approach.

6. Systemic Conditions and Barriers

The ability of programs to develop advocacy-centered approaches depends on broader systemic conditions. Most graduate programs operate within resource constraints, including limited faculty and insufficient funding for field placements and community partnerships, that pressure them toward traditional competencies tied most directly to licensure. Disconnects between what universities teach and what schools expect compound the problem. When districts value compliance over advocacy, new graduates encounter systems that discourage the very practices their preparation instilled (Gal et al., 2025). The tension is heightened in the current socio-political environment for those advocating for students with immigration-related challenges or students served by diversity, equity, and inclusion initiatives.

These conditions carry human costs that programs must anticipate. Advocacy work in inequitable systems is emotionally demanding and contributes to burnout and attrition (Hall & Pavez, 2023); educators who receive explicit instruction about structural inequities are better equipped to work through them without the exhaustion that comes from believing individual effort alone can produce systemic change (Hong et al., 2025). Programs must therefore pair advocacy preparation with honest discussion of barriers, realistic strategies, and sustained support, including faculty who remain points of contact after graduation. Fi-

nally, meaningful advocacy is strengthened when the workforce itself is diverse: recruiting candidates from marginalized communities through paraeducator-to-teacher pipelines and grow-your-own models, and supporting them once enrolled, brings lived experience and cultural knowledge into a profession that remains predominantly white and female (Ray et al., 2025).

Feasibility ultimately turns on faculty capacity, and programs need concrete development pathways rather than an assumption of readiness. Four pathways are within reach of most programs. First, faculty learning communities can study the advocacy and equity scholarship together and redesign one course per cycle, distributing the load while building shared ownership (Brownell et al., 2020). Second, co-teaching arrangements can pair faculty with compensated community experts, disabled self-advocates and family leaders, so that faculty learn the content alongside their candidates (Santamaría Graff, 2022). Third, freely available technical assistance infrastructure, including the CEEDAR Center's course enhancement modules and the IRIS Center's instructional resources, allows programs to adopt vetted advocacy-related content without building it from scratch. Fourth, doctoral programs preparing the future professoriate can treat advocacy pedagogy as core content rather than an elective interest, addressing the pipeline problem at its source. Each pathway becomes feasible when institutions back it with concrete supports, particularly release time or course-load credit for redesign work; feasibility, in other words, is as much a resourcing decision as an expertise problem.

Scalability concerns can likewise be addressed through staged adoption rather than wholesale redesign. Programs can begin by embedding advocacy assignments within existing required courses and field placements already in place, an approach that requires no new credits or faculty lines. Virtual formats extend family-as-faculty panels and self-advocate presentations across large cohorts and distance programs (Johnston et al., 2025). Programs can share openly licensed modules to divide development costs, and advocacy assessment can be integrated into the accreditation portfolios programs already maintain (Table 1) rather than requiring parallel systems. Staged adoption has a further advantage: each stage generates natural pilot data for the empirical validation this framework awaits.

7. Recommendations for Practice

The framework presented above describes what advocacy-centered preparation should include. The following recommendations translate those dimensions into implementation priorities for graduate programs and school systems.

7.1. For Graduate Programs: Transforming Curriculum and Structure

Adopt advocacy-centered missions and goals. Programs should explicitly articulate that developing teacher advocates for student voices is a core mission and not just a peripheral add-on. Program goals, course descriptions, and learning outcomes should reflect this commitment. A program's mission statement should clearly communicate the commitment to advocacy as a central tenet of the program. Programs should integrate advocacy competencies throughout the curricula rather than addressing advocacy in a single course. Advocacy knowledge, skills, and dispositions should be developed across all major courses and field experiences. Each course should explicitly address how content relates to advocacy for equitable, student-centered education and amplifying student voices. This recommendation is consistent with Frake et al. (2025) and Nagro et al. (2019), who demonstrate that advocacy must be foregrounded in program mission, learning outcomes, and course design rather than appended as a peripheral elective. In practice, this can be as concrete as mission language: a program might commit to preparing special educators

who amplify student and family voice and act on inequities in their schools, and then align admissions essays, course objectives, and portfolio requirements to that commitment.

Develop intensive content on vulnerable populations. Programs should provide extended, sustained focus on the specific strengths, needs, and barriers of CLD students, students with low-incidence disabilities, students experiencing socioeconomic challenges, and immigrant students. This focus should extend throughout the program, not be confined to a single course. Highlighting strengths helps shift the mindset of program candidates from the need to “fix” deficits to capitalizing on what students can do well. Relatedly, by incorporating the focus on the needs of marginalized students, program content can be centered on developing actionable solutions and help candidates develop their advocacy skills to put these solutions in place. Sustained, asset-based focus on marginalized learners is supported by [González et al. \(2023\)](#), [Jonak \(2025\)](#), and [Shelton et al. \(2025\)](#), who show that brief or add-on coverage of CLD and low-incidence populations produces graduates who default to deficit framings under field conditions. Openly available resources can anchor this content without new development costs, including the CEEDAR Center’s course enhancement modules, the IRIS Center’s instructional modules, and family-as-faculty designs in which families of disabled children serve as compensated co-instructors ([Santamaría Graff, 2022](#)).

Implement experiential learning and authentic partnerships. Special education graduate programs should move beyond traditional classroom instruction to include substantial community-based service learning, mentorship with practicing advocates, simulations with feedback, and genuine partnerships with schools and community organizations serving vulnerable populations. Including real-world experiences within the program structure allows candidates to gain valuable insights to the inner workings of school systems. Moreover, these experiences provide opportunities for in-class discussions that unpack challenges and explore solutions. To make these opportunities more impactful, these discussions should include participants from the communities where the experiences take place. Community-based service learning, simulation with feedback, and sustained school–university partnerships are the experiential mechanisms most consistently associated with advocacy development in preservice special educators ([McKenzie et al., 2025](#); [Walker et al., 2025](#)). Existing exemplars include community-based service learning embedded across coursework rather than confined to a single class ([McKenzie et al., 2025](#)) and registered apprenticeship partnerships that place candidates in paid district roles with wraparound mentoring ([Pickett et al., 2025](#)).

Engage disabled communities and marginalized families. Programs should create ongoing relationships with disabled communities, autism self-advocates, families from CLD backgrounds, and disability rights organizations. These communities should be positioned as knowledge experts, not service recipients, and should have meaningful roles in curriculum design, instruction, and program evaluation. To facilitate these relationships, program faculty should invest time and effort in developing partnerships. Partners should be invited to attend class sessions, provide their perspectives, and contribute to the development of program candidates. Positioning families and disabled self-advocates as knowledge experts (rather than as service recipients or guest speakers) is foundational to family-as-faculty models ([Kea et al., 2025](#); [Kyzar et al., 2019](#); [Santamaría Graff, 2022](#)).

Provide multicomponent professional development. Following research on effective professional development, programs should incorporate multiple components including content instruction, modeling, practice, feedback, and coaching. Extended field experiences with mentorship should complement coursework. These experiences should be buttressed by teaching candidates to use critical analysis and self-reflection. This will widen the discussion and allow program candidates to learn and practice advocacy skills under

the careful guidance of program faculty. These components (content, modeling, practice, feedback, and coaching) mirror the effective in-service training components identified in Wang et al.'s (2024) systematic review and Hugh et al.'s (2024) competency analysis. The faculty development pathways described in Section 6 equip programs to deliver this recommendation.

Diversify and support graduate student cohorts. Programs should implement targeted recruitment of candidates from marginalized communities. Once in programs, these candidates should be provided with full support, including mentorship and academic assistance, to help them succeed. An important component of any graduate program is to create inclusive environments that are welcoming. Supporting first-generation and diverse students in special education graduate programs is essential to building a diverse advocacy-focused workforce. Targeted recruitment, grow-your-own pipelines, and structured support for first-generation candidates are necessary conditions for workforce diversification in special education (Day et al., 2023; Pickett et al., 2025; Ray et al., 2025).

7.2. For School Systems: Creating Conditions for Advocacy

Support teacher advocacy in hiring and evaluation practices. Rather than hiring for compliance, schools should actively seek teachers with demonstrated advocacy commitment. Teacher evaluation should recognize and reward advocacy efforts and student-centered practice, not penalize teachers for asking difficult questions or challenging the status quo. This takes the active effort of district administrators, who are themselves committed to advocating for change and amplifying student voices. Reshaping hiring and evaluation systems to recognize advocacy practice is essential because graduates entering compliance-oriented systems experience role conflict and accelerated attrition (Gal et al., 2025; Hong et al., 2025).

Create partnerships with universities. School districts should develop genuine partnerships with special education teacher preparation programs. These partnerships are essential when collaborating on the design of field placements, serving as mentors and cooperating teachers, and providing feedback on graduate program quality and relevance. Authentic field experiences in community schools are a bedrock of successful special educators. By providing a bridge to real world experiences, special education practitioners will learn directly from professionals, students, and families in the communities. Sustained school-university partnerships of this kind are consistently associated with stronger candidate readiness and program relevance, operating through structured mentorship and coaching relationships (Choiseul-Praslin et al., 2026), collaborative registered-apprenticeship models (Pickett et al., 2025), and community-embedded field experiences (McKenzie et al., 2025).

Invest in continued professional development. Schools should provide ongoing professional development for teachers in advocacy, system changes, and culturally responsive practices. This might include creating learning communities focused on advocacy, providing coaching and mentorship, and allocating time for teachers to engage in policy work. Although time is always a challenge, most school districts have dedicated time for professional development opportunities. Some of these opportunities should be directly dedicated to advancing the work of student advocacy and highlighting student voices. Ongoing PD that pairs advocacy content with coaching and collaborative learning communities is associated with sustained implementation gains (Wang et al., 2024).

Embed student voices in school processes. Schools should create structures ensuring genuine student participation in decision-making at the classroom, school, and district levels. This includes meaningful student input in IEP planning, student participation on committees, and systems for hearing and responding to student and family feedback. When creating these structures, school leaders should actively involve preservice special

education teachers in the process. This supports learning on all sides and models the inclusion of student voices. In doing so, it helps build trusting and lasting relationships between students and their teachers. Embedding student voice in IEP processes, school committees, and feedback systems is associated with stronger self-advocacy, engagement, and post-school outcomes (Beane, 2024; Johnson et al., 2024; Travers et al., 2026).

On paper, structures like these can sound aspirational. In schools, they turn on small, concrete decisions, a master schedule, an elective slot, and whether anyone notices who keeps losing them.

Vignette 2 (composite illustration). A first-year teacher prepared in an advocacy-centered program notices that the students in her school who use augmentative and alternative communication are routinely scheduled out of elective classes to receive services. Rather than accepting the schedule as fixed, she disaggregates the master schedule, documents the pattern, and brings it to her principal with a rotation-based alternative developed with the related-service team. The principal adopts the rotation, and the following year the district reviews scheduling practices across schools. The example is modest by design: advocacy at this level rarely looks like litigation and more often looks like a teacher who knows how to read a system, assemble evidence, and propose a workable alternative.

Table 2 presents complementary program evaluation metrics operating at the student-outcome, system-impact, and program-quality levels, which programs and school systems can use to monitor implementation of these recommendations.

Table 2. Program evaluation metrics.

Evaluation Level	Metrics	Data Sources	Collection Timeline
Student Outcomes	- Advocacy competency development scores using validated assessment tools.	- Pre/post assessments, portfolio evaluations, community partner feedback.	- Program entry, mid-program, graduation, and 1-year follow-up.
	- Cultural humility growth indicators and cross-cultural effectiveness.	- Self-assessment instruments, community partner evaluations, peer feedback.	- Semester-end with longitudinal tracking.
	- Community engagement quality ratings and partnership sustainability.	- Partnership organization structured feedback, relationship longevity measures.	- After each placement and annually.
	- Graduate employment in advocacy roles and continued advocacy engagement.	- Alumni tracking surveys, employer feedback, professional development participation.	- 1, 3, 5 years post-graduation with ongoing updates.
System-Level Impact	- Student voice initiative implementation in graduates' workplaces.	- Graduate workplace surveys, student outcome data, policy change documentation.	- Annual surveys with case study development.
	- Documented systemic changes and policy improvements.	- Case studies from graduate schools/districts, policy analysis, outcome tracking.	- Ongoing collection with annual analysis.
	- Partnership sustainability measures and community relationship quality.	- Community organization feedback, partnership longevity, mutual benefit assessment.	- Annual partnership evaluations.
	- Policy influence tracking and broader advocacy impact.	- Documentation of policy engagement, legislative testimony, community organizing.	- Ongoing documentation with annual synthesis.

Table 2. Cont.

Evaluation Level	Metrics	Data Sources	Collection Timeline
Program Quality	- Faculty advocacy competency development and modeling.	- Faculty self-assessment, peer review, community partner feedback on faculty engagement.	- Annual faculty development reviews.
	- Community partnership satisfaction and mutual benefit.	- Partner organization surveys, relationship quality assessments, reciprocity measures.	- Annual partnership evaluations with improvement planning.
	- Resource allocation for advocacy preparation and sustainability.	- Budget analysis, resource tracking, cost-effectiveness assessment.	- Annual budget review with strategic planning.
	- Graduate satisfaction with advocacy preparation and career readiness.	- Alumni surveys, employer feedback, career progression tracking.	- Annual alumni surveys with longitudinal analysis.

8. Implications and Conclusions

When teachers are prepared as advocates grounded in student voice, several shifts become possible (Beane, 2024; Frake et al., 2025). First, graduate candidates shift from deficit to strengths-based perspectives. They move from professional-driven to collaborative decision-making. They focus less on compliance and more on authentic engagement with families. They pursue inclusive service delivery and work toward systemic transformation. These shifts have the potential to reshape special education in ways that fundamentally honor the humanity, voice, and dignity of students with disabilities, particularly those whose voices have been historically marginalized.

When students from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds, students with low-incidence disabilities, and students experiencing socioeconomic and immigration-related challenges encounter teachers prepared as advocates, they experience education differently (Beane, 2024; Test et al., 2004). Rather than encountering professionals who view them through deficit lenses, they meet educators grounded in strengths-based perspectives who actively work to understand their experiences, honor their identities, and amplify their voices in systems designed to shape their futures. Rather than passive recipients of services determined by professionals, these students become active agents in their own educational experiences, with teachers supporting their self-advocacy and working through systems on their behalf when needed.

Beyond individual student impact, advocacy-centered teacher preparation has the potential to drive system-level changes. Special education teachers prepared to understand systemic barriers, analyze disaggregated data revealing disparities, and engage in advocacy at multiple levels can serve as agents for transforming schools and systems (Fisher & Miller, 2021; Nagro et al., 2019). When cohorts of graduates from advocacy-centered programs enter schools, they bring not only individual commitment but also a collective effort and shared frameworks for change. They can work together to challenge inequitable practices, advocate for policy changes, and support one another in sustaining advocacy amid systemic barriers. In turn, when these new special education teachers have the support of program faculty and community partners, they can have a monumental impact on the lives of students.

An important caution tempers these implications. Positioning teachers as agents of social change risks asking too much of individuals working in a historically feminized profession that affords limited autonomy, status, and compensation. In the United States, it also means asking this amid conditions in which roughly one in seven children lives in

poverty and schools absorb responsibilities far beyond instruction (Pejic et al., 2025). The argument advanced here is therefore not that teachers alone should carry the burden of systemic transformation. Preparation should equip them to exercise the advocacy possible within their spheres of influence, while institutions, districts, and policymakers create the conditions, addressed in Sections 6 and 7, under which that advocacy can succeed (Gal et al., 2025; Hong et al., 2025). Absent that reciprocal commitment, advocacy-centered preparation risks producing role strain rather than change.

8.1. Limitations

Several limitations bound what this paper can claim. The first is the most fundamental: the framework is conceptual. It was derived from a structured narrative review rather than tested in programs, and no implementation or outcome data yet exist for the model as a whole. Program-level evidence, which competencies develop, on what timeline, and with what effects for students, remains the burden of future work. Second, the composite vignettes are illustrations rather than case data; they compress recurring patterns from practice into single narratives and should be read as depictions of plausibility, not proof. Third, the literature base is drawn mainly from U.S. policy and legal contexts, including IDEA and Larry P. v. Riles (1979), and from U.S. preparation structures; the framework's categories may travel, but its specific mechanisms will require adaptation in systems with different legal foundations and workforce arrangements. Fourth, the argument deliberately foregrounds CLD learners and students with low-incidence disabilities. That emphasis was defended earlier, but it limits how directly the claims extend to other groups, including students with high-incidence disabilities, whose advocacy needs the framework addresses only in outline. Fifth, the paper reflects a particular vantage point: it is written by a faculty member and Board-Certified Behavior Analyst who coordinates one U.S. graduate program, and that position shapes which barriers and which solutions are most visible. Finally, the constraints named in Section 6, faculty capacity, credit-hour ceilings, and accreditation and licensure requirements, are mitigated by the staged-adoption and faculty development strategies proposed there, but they are not resolved; in some programs they will remain decisive.

These limitations define the research agenda. Single-case and mixed-methods evaluations can test whether the advocacy competencies in Table 1 develop as proposed and with what fidelity. Social validity data from students with disabilities and their families should carry particular weight, since the framework's central claim is about whose voice counts. And program-level implementation studies of staged adoption, ideally across programs of different sizes, would show whether the scalability strategies hold beyond the page.

8.2. Conclusions

Special education stands at a critical juncture. Current systems continue to exclude, segregate, and marginalize many students with disabilities, with students from vulnerable populations bearing the disproportionate burden of these challenges (Beane, 2024; Harry & Klingner, 2014; Jonak, 2025). Yet growing recognition of the importance of student voice, coupled with research demonstrating effective approaches to professional development and special education teacher preparation, creates opportunity for meaningful transformation (Sanderson & Goldman, 2020; Wang et al., 2024).

This paper posed three guiding questions, and the position developed across its sections supports an answer to each. The first question asked what advocacy-related knowledge, skills, and dispositions contemporary scholarship identifies as essential. Section 4 answered with knowledge of special education law, systemic barriers, and disability identity; skills of communication, data literacy, and system navigation; and dispositions of

critical consciousness, cultural humility, and persistence (Frake et al., 2025; Nagro et al., 2019; Green et al., 2025). The second concerned the mechanisms through which graduate programs can develop these competencies: Sections 4 and 5 identified integrated coursework, community-based service learning, mentorship and coaching, and authentic engagement with disabled communities and CLD families (Choiseul-Praslin et al., 2026; Kea et al., 2025; McKenzie et al., 2025; Santamaría Graff, 2022). And the third asked what institutional and systemic conditions enable or constrain advocacy-centered preparation. Section 6 answered with resource constraints, university–school disconnects, and burnout risks, together with the workforce diversification and district-level commitments that mitigate them (Gal et al., 2025; Hall & Pavez, 2023; Hong et al., 2025; Ray et al., 2025). Taken together, these answers establish that student voice is foundational to equitable special education, that advocacy is a teachable professional competency, and that graduate programs are uniquely positioned to develop it, provided school systems and policy environments create conditions in which teacher advocacy can take root. The students most marginalized by current systems, including CLD students, students with low-incidence disabilities, and those facing socioeconomic and immigration-related challenges, stand to gain most from this transformation, and they deserve no less.

The vision articulated in this paper, that special education systems can genuinely center student voice, honor the dignity and agency of students with disabilities, and work toward equitable outcomes for all, is achievable. It requires intentional effort, commitment of resources, and willingness to challenge existing structures and assumptions. Yet the stakes could not be higher. Students whose voices are currently marginalized deserve to encounter educators prepared to amplify those voices, work through systems on their behalf, and work toward inclusion in meaningful communities and opportunities. By transforming graduate preparation to prioritize advocacy for student voice, the field can take critical steps toward special education systems that are not merely special in their services, but truly special in their commitment to the dignity, agency, and flourishing of every learner. This paper frames this vision as a hypothesis for the field rather than as an established outcome and calls for empirical work that tests which configurations of the framework produce the equity outcomes advanced here.

Funding: This research received no external funding.

Institutional Review Board Statement: Not applicable.

Informed Consent Statement: Not applicable.

Data Availability Statement: No new data were created or analyzed in this study. Data sharing is not applicable to this article.

Conflicts of Interest: The author declares no conflicts of interest.

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