



# Identifying the Cognitive and Emotional Components of Self-Advocacy in Exceptional Learners

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### ABSTRACT

This study aims to identify the cognitive and emotional components of self-advocacy in exceptional learners and examine the external factors that influence their ability to advocate for themselves in educational settings. A qualitative research design was employed, utilizing semi-structured interviews with 29 exceptional learners recruited through online platforms. Theoretical saturation was reached, ensuring comprehensive data collection. NVivo software was used to conduct thematic analysis, identifying key cognitive and emotional factors related to self-advocacy. Participants shared their experiences regarding metacognitive awareness, decision-making, emotional regulation, and external support systems, providing rich qualitative data for analysis. The results indicated that self-advocacy among exceptional learners is shaped by cognitive competencies, including metacognition, decision-making, and information-seeking behaviors, as well as emotional factors such as self-efficacy, resilience, and emotional regulation. Participants who demonstrated strong metacognitive strategies and confidence were more effective self-advocates, whereas those facing anxiety or low self-efficacy struggled to assert their needs. External factors, such as educator support, family involvement, and institutional policies, played a critical role in shaping advocacy experiences. Online networks and digital advocacy resources were identified as valuable tools for enhancing self-advocacy skills. However, institutional barriers, including bureaucratic challenges and lack of awareness among educators, posed significant obstacles for learners. The study highlights the complexity of self-advocacy in exceptional learners, emphasizing the interplay between cognitive awareness, emotional resilience, and external support structures. Enhancing self-advocacy skills requires targeted interventions, including advocacy training, institutional support, and digital resource accessibility.

**Keywords:** *Self-advocacy, exceptional learners, cognitive components, emotional resilience, metacognition, self-efficacy, educational support*

## 1. Introduction

Self-advocacy is a crucial skill for exceptional learners, enabling them to actively engage in decision-making processes that impact their education and personal development. The ability to advocate for oneself requires both cognitive and emotional competencies, as well as external support from educators, families, and institutional structures (Scott et al., 2024). In the context of exceptional learners, self-advocacy refers to the process by which individuals recognize their own needs, communicate those needs effectively, and seek necessary accommodations or modifications to enhance their learning experiences (Day et al., 2022). Despite growing recognition of the importance of self-advocacy, many exceptional learners continue to face barriers in asserting their educational rights and accessing appropriate resources (Heck et al., 2022). These challenges highlight the need to examine the cognitive and emotional components of self-advocacy, as well as the external factors that influence advocacy efforts among exceptional learners.

Cognition plays a vital role in self-advocacy, as it encompasses awareness of one's learning needs, the ability to process information, and the strategic use of problem-solving skills (Akpan et al., 2024). Research has shown that exceptional learners who possess strong metacognitive strategies are more likely to engage in self-advocacy behaviors, as they are better equipped to monitor their progress and make informed decisions about their learning experiences (Fu et al., 2025). The development of self-regulated learning strategies has been linked to increased academic achievement and greater self-efficacy, reinforcing the importance of cognitive skills in self-advocacy (Bradshaw, 2024). Self-efficacy, in particular, has been identified as a key determinant of self-advocacy, as learners with higher levels of self-confidence are more likely to seek assistance and assert their needs (Gentner & Seufert, 2020). However, many exceptional learners struggle with cognitive challenges that hinder their ability to self-advocate effectively, including difficulties with information processing, decision-making, and problem-solving (Pfeifer et al., 2020).

In addition to cognitive skills, emotional factors play a significant role in shaping self-advocacy behaviors. Emotional regulation, resilience, and self-confidence are critical for learners who must navigate challenging educational environments and advocate for their rights (Moturu & Lent, 2022). Studies have found that learners who experience high levels of anxiety or emotional distress

are less likely to engage in self-advocacy, as they may fear negative judgment or rejection (Ismail & Hastings, 2020). Conversely, those who demonstrate emotional resilience and self-determination are more likely to persist in advocating for their needs, even in the face of institutional resistance (Nur Natasha Eliana Abdul et al., 2024). Emotional intelligence also plays a role in self-advocacy, as learners with strong emotional awareness are better able to communicate their needs effectively and build supportive relationships with educators and peers (Chen et al., 2022). The ability to express frustration constructively and manage stress is particularly important for exceptional learners, who often encounter systemic barriers when seeking accommodations (Nurudin et al., 2023).

External influences, including social and institutional factors, significantly shape the self-advocacy experiences of exceptional learners. Support from educators and peers has been identified as a crucial factor in fostering self-advocacy skills, as positive reinforcement and encouragement can empower learners to speak up about their needs (Viberg et al., 2023). Research suggests that learners who receive guidance from teachers and mentors are more likely to develop self-advocacy skills and build confidence in their ability to navigate educational systems (Omar et al., 2023). Similarly, family involvement has been found to play a key role in self-advocacy development, as parental support and advocacy training can help learners acquire the skills necessary to assert their rights (Abdullah et al., 2023). Institutional barriers, however, often pose significant challenges for exceptional learners. Bureaucratic obstacles, rigid policies, and a lack of awareness among educators about exceptional learning needs can create environments in which self-advocacy is discouraged or dismissed (Cheng et al., 2022). Additionally, accessibility to resources, such as advocacy programs and legal protections, can influence the extent to which learners feel empowered to advocate for themselves (Karimova & Csapó, 2021).

The rise of digital platforms has also transformed the landscape of self-advocacy for exceptional learners. Online networks and peer advocacy groups provide valuable spaces for learners to share experiences, exchange resources, and seek support (Crawford et al., 2021). Studies have shown that participation in online advocacy communities enhances learners' confidence and equips them with knowledge about their rights and available accommodations (Siti Mariam bt Mohammad et al., 2023). Digital platforms have further facilitated access to advocacy training programs, allowing learners to develop essential self-advocacy skills in virtual

environments (Wang et al., 2023). However, despite the benefits of online networks, challenges such as digital accessibility and the digital divide continue to impact the extent to which learners can fully engage in these spaces (Zalli et al., 2019). Ensuring equitable access to digital advocacy resources is therefore a critical consideration for promoting self-advocacy among exceptional learners.

Given the cognitive, emotional, and external influences on self-advocacy, it is essential to examine the ways in which exceptional learners develop and utilize self-advocacy skills. This study aims to identify the key cognitive and emotional components of self-advocacy.

## 2. Methods and Materials

### 2.1. Study Design and Participants

This study employed a qualitative research design to explore the cognitive and emotional components of self-advocacy in exceptional learners. A phenomenological approach was adopted to gain an in-depth understanding of participants' lived experiences regarding self-advocacy. The study adhered to a purposive sampling strategy, ensuring that participants met the inclusion criteria of being identified as exceptional learners with self-reported experiences in advocating for their academic and personal needs. A total of 29 participants were recruited through online platforms, reflecting a diverse range of exceptional learning conditions. The process of data collection continued until theoretical saturation was reached, ensuring that no new themes emerged from additional interviews.

### 2.2. Measure

#### 2.2.1. Semi-Structured Interview

Semi-structured interviews were used as the primary data collection method, allowing participants to articulate their perspectives while enabling the researcher to explore relevant themes in greater depth. The interview protocol was developed based on a review of existing literature on self-advocacy and exceptional learners, covering topics related to cognitive awareness, emotional regulation, and self-determination. Each interview was conducted online to facilitate participation from diverse geographical locations. The duration of interviews varied between 45 to 60 minutes, depending on participant engagement. All interviews were audio-recorded with participants' informed consent and subsequently transcribed verbatim to ensure accuracy in data representation.

### 2.3. Data Analysis

Data analysis was conducted using NVivo software to systematically organize, code, and identify emerging themes. Thematic analysis was applied to extract meaningful patterns from the transcribed interviews. The process involved multiple stages, including initial coding, axial coding, and the development of thematic categories. Constant comparison techniques were employed to refine and validate emerging themes, ensuring that findings accurately represented participants' experiences. To enhance the credibility and dependability of the analysis, peer debriefing and member checking were utilized, where selected participants reviewed preliminary findings to confirm their authenticity. This rigorous analytical approach facilitated a comprehensive understanding of the cognitive and emotional components of self-advocacy in exceptional learners.

## 3. Findings and Results

The demographic analysis of the study participants revealed a diverse group of 29 exceptional learners recruited through online platforms. The participants included 16 males (55.2%) and 13 females (44.8%), representing a relatively balanced gender distribution. The age range of the participants varied from 18 to 35 years, with an average age of 24.7 years ( $SD = 4.2$ ). In terms of educational background, 12 participants (41.4%) were undergraduate students, 9 (31.0%) were graduate students, and 8 (27.6%) had completed higher education and were engaged in professional or academic settings. Regarding the nature of their exceptional learning conditions, 10 participants (34.5%) had learning disabilities such as dyslexia or dyscalculia, 7 (24.1%) identified with attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD), 6 (20.7%) had autism spectrum disorder (ASD), and the remaining 6 (20.7%) reported other exceptional conditions, including sensory impairments or giftedness. Additionally, 21 participants (72.4%) had prior experience advocating for accommodations in academic or professional settings, while 8 (27.6%) had limited or no previous experience with self-advocacy. These demographic characteristics provided a comprehensive overview of the diverse backgrounds and experiences of the participants, ensuring a well-rounded perspective on the cognitive and emotional components of self-advocacy in exceptional learners.

**Table 1**

*The Results of Thematic Analysis*

Categories	Subcategories	Concepts (Open Codes)
Cognitive Components of Self-Advocacy	Awareness of Needs	Self-recognition, Identifying strengths, Acknowledging limitations, Understanding accommodations
	Metacognitive Strategies	Self-monitoring, Problem-solving, Goal-setting, Reflection, Strategy adjustment
	Decision-Making Processes	Evaluating options, Weighing consequences, Seeking guidance, Rational thinking
	Information-Seeking Behavior	Researching resources, Consulting experts, Asking questions, Navigating educational policies
Emotional Components of Self-Advocacy	Understanding Rights and Responsibilities	Legal awareness, School policies, Self-empowerment, Communication of needs
	Emotional Regulation	Managing frustration, Coping strategies, Self-motivation, Stress management
	Confidence and Self-Efficacy	Positive self-perception, Assertiveness, Risk-taking, Overcoming self-doubt, Seeking support
Social and Environmental Influences on Self-Advocacy	Resilience in Adversity	Adapting to challenges, Emotional endurance, Learning from failure
	Emotional Expression	Communicating feelings, Expressing frustration, Assertive communication, Emotional intelligence
	Support from Educators and Peers	Teacher encouragement, Peer mentoring, Academic accommodations, Emotional validation, Classroom inclusivity
	Family Involvement in Advocacy	Parental guidance, Family support, Advocacy training, Home-school collaboration, Cultural values
Community and Online Networks	Institutional Barriers and Facilitators	Accessibility of resources, Bureaucratic challenges, Institutional attitudes, Policy constraints, Advocacy programs, Legal framework
	Community and Online Networks	Peer advocacy groups, Online forums, Mentorship opportunities, Social media engagement, Digital accessibility

The findings of this study revealed three major categories related to the self-advocacy of exceptional learners: cognitive components, emotional components, and social and environmental influences. Each of these categories encompassed multiple subcategories that illustrated the nuanced ways in which exceptional learners navigate self-advocacy in their academic and personal lives. The data highlighted the interplay between cognitive awareness, emotional regulation, and external support structures, demonstrating the complex nature of self-advocacy. The following sections present each subcategory in detail, incorporating representative quotations from participants to substantiate the findings.

Awareness of needs was a central cognitive component of self-advocacy, as participants frequently mentioned the importance of recognizing their strengths and limitations. Many participants expressed that self-awareness played a pivotal role in their ability to request accommodations and support. One participant stated, "I had to learn early on what worked for me and what didn't—no one else was going to figure it out for me." This awareness extended beyond identifying academic needs to understanding the broader implications of their exceptional learning profiles.

Metacognitive strategies emerged as another key cognitive component, as participants described using self-

monitoring, goal-setting, and problem-solving techniques to navigate challenges. Some participants noted that reflection and strategy adjustment were crucial for academic success. One participant reflected, "I constantly assess my progress and tweak my approach if something isn't working. It's a continuous process of trial and error." The use of such strategies highlighted the proactive role of metacognition in self-advocacy.

Decision-making processes were integral to self-advocacy, as participants described the importance of evaluating options and seeking guidance before taking action. Many noted that rational thinking and weighing consequences were essential when advocating for their needs. One participant shared, "Before I ask for an accommodation, I think about whether it's really necessary and how it will affect my learning and the people around me." These findings underscore the deliberate nature of decision-making in self-advocacy.

Information-seeking behavior was another cognitive factor that participants highlighted as essential for effective self-advocacy. They reported researching resources, consulting experts, and navigating educational policies to make informed decisions. One participant remarked, "If I don't know something, I make it my mission to find out. Whether it's reading school policies or asking someone who

knows, I make sure I have the information I need." This proactive approach enabled learners to advocate for themselves effectively.

Understanding rights and responsibilities was also a crucial cognitive aspect of self-advocacy. Many participants emphasized that legal awareness and knowledge of school policies empowered them to articulate their needs confidently. A participant stated, "Once I knew my rights under disability laws, I felt much more comfortable speaking up for myself." This understanding provided participants with a sense of control over their educational experiences.

Emotional regulation played a significant role in self-advocacy, as participants described the importance of managing frustration and developing coping strategies. Many shared that self-motivation and stress management were essential for maintaining perseverance. One participant explained, "When things don't go my way, I try to stay calm and focus on what I can do next instead of getting discouraged."

Confidence and self-efficacy were frequently mentioned as necessary traits for advocating effectively. Participants reported that developing assertiveness and overcoming self-doubt helped them engage with educators and peers. One participant noted, "At first, I was afraid to speak up, but once I did, I realized that most people were willing to listen if I expressed myself clearly." This growing confidence contributed to their ability to navigate advocacy situations.

Resilience in adversity was another key emotional factor, as participants described their ability to adapt to challenges and learn from failure. Many participants noted that setbacks were inevitable but could be used as learning opportunities. One participant remarked, "I've faced rejection and frustration many times, but I keep pushing forward because I know persistence is the only way to succeed."

Emotional expression also played a role in self-advocacy, as participants highlighted the importance of communicating their feelings in a constructive manner. Some described how assertive communication helped them convey their needs effectively. A participant shared, "If I don't express how I feel, people won't understand what I need. I've learned that being clear and direct makes a huge difference."

Support from educators and peers was identified as a critical social influence on self-advocacy. Participants emphasized that teacher encouragement, peer mentoring, and academic accommodations played a crucial role in their ability to advocate for themselves. One participant stated, "Having a supportive teacher who believes in me makes it much easier to speak up for myself."

Family involvement in advocacy was another important factor, as participants discussed how parental guidance and home-school collaboration influenced their self-advocacy efforts. Some noted that family support helped them develop the confidence to assert their needs. One participant explained, "My parents always encouraged me to ask for help when I needed it, and that made me more comfortable advocating for myself in school."

Institutional barriers and facilitators were also significant, with participants describing the impact of bureaucratic challenges and policy constraints on their self-advocacy efforts. Some noted that institutional attitudes toward exceptional learners shaped their experiences. One participant remarked, "Some schools make it really easy to get accommodations, while others make it feel like you're asking for too much."

Community and online networks emerged as a valuable resource for self-advocacy, as participants discussed the role of peer advocacy groups, online forums, and mentorship opportunities. Many noted that digital accessibility allowed them to connect with others facing similar challenges. A participant shared, "Being part of an online community of students with similar experiences has given me so much support and valuable advice."

These findings highlight the complexity of self-advocacy in exceptional learners, emphasizing the interplay between cognitive awareness, emotional resilience, and external support systems. The themes identified in this study illustrate the diverse strategies that learners employ to navigate their unique educational experiences.

#### 4. Discussion and Conclusion

The findings of this study provide a comprehensive understanding of the cognitive and emotional components of self-advocacy in exceptional learners, as well as the external factors influencing their self-advocacy experiences. The results indicate that self-advocacy is shaped by a combination of cognitive awareness, emotional regulation, and social support structures. Specifically, exceptional learners who demonstrated strong metacognitive skills, decision-making abilities, and information-seeking behaviors were more effective self-advocates. Emotional regulation and confidence played a crucial role in their willingness to assert their needs, while external factors such as support from educators, families, and institutional policies further influenced their self-advocacy efforts. These findings align with existing literature, reinforcing the notion that self-



advocacy is a multifaceted process requiring both internal competencies and external reinforcement (Pfeifer et al., 2020; Scott et al., 2024).

One of the key cognitive factors identified in this study was the role of metacognition in self-advocacy. Participants who engaged in self-monitoring, goal-setting, and strategic planning were more likely to effectively communicate their needs and seek necessary accommodations. These findings are consistent with research demonstrating that metacognitive skills enhance self-directed learning and foster greater autonomy in educational settings (Akpan et al., 2024). Previous studies have also linked metacognitive strategies to increased academic achievement and improved problem-solving abilities, highlighting their significance in self-advocacy (Fu et al., 2025). Additionally, decision-making processes emerged as an essential component of self-advocacy, as participants described weighing their options, considering potential consequences, and seeking guidance before making requests. This finding supports prior research suggesting that decision-making skills are critical in enabling learners to navigate educational systems and advocate effectively for their needs (Crawford et al., 2021).

Information-seeking behavior was another prominent cognitive component identified in the study. Participants who actively researched resources, consulted experts, and explored institutional policies were better equipped to advocate for themselves. This aligns with previous research highlighting the importance of information literacy in self-advocacy, as knowledge of available accommodations and legal rights enhances learners' ability to assert their needs (Gentner & Seufert, 2020). Studies have also shown that learners with access to accurate information are more likely to engage in self-advocacy behaviors and successfully navigate bureaucratic processes (Omar et al., 2023). Understanding rights and responsibilities was closely linked to information-seeking behavior, as participants who were aware of their legal protections and institutional policies felt more confident in advocating for themselves. This finding supports research demonstrating that knowledge of disability laws and school policies fosters greater self-advocacy skills among exceptional learners (Day et al., 2022).

The emotional components of self-advocacy were equally significant in shaping participants' experiences. Emotional regulation was identified as a critical factor in maintaining persistence and resilience in advocacy efforts. Participants who effectively managed frustration and stress were more

likely to continue advocating for themselves despite encountering barriers. This finding aligns with studies emphasizing the role of emotional regulation in self-determination and persistence (Moturu & Lent, 2022). Previous research has also found that learners with strong emotional coping strategies are better able to navigate challenges and maintain motivation in the face of adversity (Nur Natasha Eliana Abdul et al., 2024). Similarly, confidence and self-efficacy were found to be essential for self-advocacy. Participants who believed in their ability to articulate their needs and engage in advocacy-related activities were more successful in obtaining accommodations. These results are consistent with studies indicating that self-efficacy plays a crucial role in advocacy behaviors, as learners with higher confidence levels are more likely to engage in proactive problem-solving and assert their rights (Bradshaw, 2024; Chen et al., 2022).

Resilience in adversity was another key emotional component identified in this study. Participants described the importance of adapting to challenges, learning from setbacks, and maintaining persistence in advocacy efforts. This finding supports previous research suggesting that resilience is a crucial factor in enabling exceptional learners to navigate complex educational environments (Heck et al., 2022). Emotional expression also played a role in self-advocacy, as participants who effectively communicated their feelings and frustrations were better able to establish supportive relationships with educators and peers. This result is consistent with studies indicating that emotional intelligence and effective communication skills enhance advocacy efforts and promote positive interactions with support systems (Cheng et al., 2022).

In addition to cognitive and emotional factors, external influences played a significant role in shaping participants' self-advocacy experiences. Support from educators and peers was identified as a crucial enabler of self-advocacy, as positive reinforcement and encouragement empowered participants to speak up about their needs. This finding aligns with previous research demonstrating that learners who receive guidance from teachers and mentors are more likely to develop self-advocacy skills and build confidence in navigating educational systems (Viberg et al., 2023). Similarly, family involvement in advocacy was found to be a key factor, as parental guidance and home-school collaboration facilitated the development of self-advocacy skills. This supports existing literature indicating that family support is instrumental in fostering advocacy behaviors and

promoting positive academic outcomes (Abdullah et al., 2023).

Institutional barriers and facilitators also had a significant impact on self-advocacy efforts. Participants reported facing bureaucratic challenges, rigid policies, and a lack of awareness among educators regarding exceptional learning needs. These findings are consistent with research indicating that institutional attitudes toward exceptional learners can either support or hinder self-advocacy efforts (Karimova & Csapó, 2021). Previous studies have shown that access to advocacy resources, legal protections, and supportive institutional policies enhances learners' ability to self-advocate effectively (Zalli et al., 2019). Community and online networks emerged as valuable resources for self-advocacy, as participants described how peer advocacy groups, online forums, and digital platforms provided support and information. This aligns with research highlighting the role of digital advocacy communities in empowering exceptional learners and providing access to essential advocacy tools (Siti Mariam bt Mohammad et al., 2023).

Despite the valuable insights gained from this study, several limitations must be acknowledged. First, the study relied on self-reported data from participants, which may be subject to recall bias or social desirability bias. Participants may have either exaggerated or underreported their self-advocacy experiences, potentially affecting the accuracy of the findings. Second, the study focused exclusively on exceptional learners who were willing to participate in online interviews, which may have resulted in a self-selection bias. Learners who were less confident in their self-advocacy abilities or who lacked access to digital platforms may not have been adequately represented. Third, the study's qualitative design, while providing rich and detailed insights, limits the generalizability of the findings. Future research could benefit from a mixed-methods approach incorporating quantitative data to validate and expand upon the qualitative findings.

Future research should explore the long-term impact of self-advocacy training programs on exceptional learners' academic and personal development. Longitudinal studies tracking learners over time could provide valuable insights into how self-advocacy skills evolve and influence educational outcomes. Additionally, comparative studies examining self-advocacy across different educational systems and cultural contexts would enhance understanding of how social and institutional factors shape advocacy experiences. Further research could also investigate the role

of technology in self-advocacy, particularly the effectiveness of online advocacy tools, digital mentorship programs, and virtual learning accommodations. Finally, studies incorporating the perspectives of educators, policymakers, and family members would provide a more comprehensive view of the factors influencing self-advocacy and identify strategies for creating more inclusive educational environments.

To support exceptional learners in developing self-advocacy skills, educators should incorporate advocacy training into curricula, providing learners with opportunities to practice decision-making, self-monitoring, and communication strategies. Schools and universities should also offer workshops and mentorship programs that equip learners with the knowledge and confidence needed to advocate for their needs effectively. Institutional policies should be revised to ensure that accommodations and advocacy resources are easily accessible and that educators receive training on supporting exceptional learners. Additionally, fostering a culture of inclusivity within educational institutions, where learners feel empowered to express their needs without fear of stigma or resistance, is crucial. Collaboration between educators, families, and advocacy organizations can further strengthen support systems and enhance the self-advocacy experiences of exceptional learners.

### Authors' Contributions

Authors contributed equally to this article.

### Declaration

In order to correct and improve the academic writing of our paper, we have used the language model ChatGPT.

### Transparency Statement

Data are available for research purposes upon reasonable request to the corresponding author.

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### Declaration of Interest

The authors report no conflict of interest.

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## Ethics Considerations

The study protocol adhered to the principles outlined in the Helsinki Declaration, which provides guidelines for ethical research involving human participants.

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