



Promoting community support for learners with disabilities: A study on youth leaders' roles, practices, and challenges

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ABSTRACT

Inclusive education extends beyond classrooms, requiring active community engagement to ensure participation and belonging for learners with disabilities. Youth leaders, particularly those in barangay and municipal governance, hold strategic positions to influence attitudes, mobilize resources, and promote inclusion. This phenomenological study explored the lived experiences of eight purposively selected youth leaders actively involved in community and educational programs in Ilocos Norte, Philippines. Semi-structured interviews were conducted, and data were analyzed thematically using Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-phase framework. Findings reveal that youth leaders conceptualize their roles as multifaceted—advocates, bridge-builders, motivators, influencers, and facilitators of inclusive opportunities. Their practices include designing inclusive youth programs, policy advocacy through youth councils, partnerships with schools and social welfare offices, parental engagement, and social media-based awareness campaigns. Key challenges include limited disability awareness, inaccurate community data, parental apprehensions, accessibility constraints, and persistent social stigma. Participants emphasized the need for targeted capacity-building, inter-agency collaboration, accessibility support, and peer mentoring systems. This study highlights youth leaders as critical agents of community-based inclusive education and provides empirical evidence on grassroots strategies that can inform policy, youth leadership development, and sustainable inclusion initiatives.

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Introduction

Inclusive education is a cornerstone of global and national educational reform, grounded in the principle that all learners—regardless of ability, background, or circumstance—are entitled to equitable and meaningful learning opportunities (Ainscow & Messiou, 2018; UNESCO, 2020). Framed as both a

pedagogical approach and a social justice imperative, inclusion aligns with the United Nations Sustainable Development Goal 4 (SDG 4), which emphasizes equitable, quality education and lifelong learning for all (United Nations, 2015; Singal, 2019).

Effective inclusion extends beyond classrooms, requiring active engagement from families, communities, and local institutions to foster acceptance, participation, and a sense of belonging among learners with disabilities (Florian & Spratt, 2021). Empirical evidence demonstrates that social attitudes, collective responsibility, and community participation are critical determinants of inclusive practice success (Ainscow & Messiou, 2018; UNESCO, 2020).

In the Philippines, Republic Act No. 11650—the Inclusive Education Act of 2022—provides a robust policy framework for integrating learners with disabilities into regular schools and community life (Official Gazette of the Republic of the Philippines, 2022). Despite this, implementation is constrained by limited resources, uneven awareness, and persistent social stigma, reflecting broader challenges in translating policy into meaningful community inclusion (Singal, 2019; Arias et al., 2023).

Youth leaders, particularly those in Sangguniang Kabataan (SK) councils, occupy a strategic position to influence peer attitudes, design youth-centered programs, and bridge schools, local governance, and social welfare initiatives (Lee & Koo, 2020; Camino & Zeldin, 2021). However, empirical research examining their lived experiences, strategies, and challenges in promoting inclusion for learners with disabilities remains scarce. Existing studies have predominantly focused on teachers, school leaders, and institutional policies, overlooking youth as community-based actors in inclusive education (Singal, 2019).

Addressing this gap, this study investigated how youth leaders enact inclusive practices in their communities, exploring their roles, strategies, and barriers. By foregrounding youth perspectives, the research generated context-sensitive insights to inform inclusive education policy, community engagement, and youth leadership development, advancing both theory and practice toward sustainable, participatory inclusion (Camino & Zeldin, 2021; Lee & Koo, 2020).

Literature review

This review situates the study within the broader discourse on inclusive education, emphasizing the role of youth leaders in supporting learners with disabilities at the community level.

Inclusive education and community engagement

Inclusive education is a holistic approach that addresses learner diversity, promoting participation, belonging, and equity (UNESCO, 2020). Schools remain primary sites for practice; however, communities significantly shape attitudes, norms, and opportunities that influence inclusion (Florian & Spratt, 2021). Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory (1979) highlights the interconnected influence of family, community, and governance on learners' development.

Community engagement fosters shared responsibility, reduces stigma, and extends support beyond

formal schooling (Ainscow & Messiou, 2018). Positive community attitudes correlate with improved social participation, self-esteem, and educational outcomes for LWDs (Wang et al., 2023). Conversely, misconceptions and limited awareness reinforce exclusion (Arias et al., 2023). In rural Philippine communities, these challenges are compounded by fragmented implementation and scarce resources, underscoring the need for localized, community-driven inclusion initiatives (Arias et al., 2023).

Youth leadership and social advocacy

Youth leadership plays a critical role in social transformation, fostering equity, civic engagement, and inclusion (Camino & Zeldin, 2021). Youth leaders function as advocates, facilitators, and mobilizers, influencing peer norms, shaping public attitudes, and connecting communities with institutional resources. Platforms such as Sangguniang Kabataan (SK) councils provide youth with formal avenues to participate in policy-making and community development (Alampay & Angeles, 2017; Lee & Koo, 2020).

Evidence suggests that youth-led initiatives are more effective when supported with capacity-building, mentorship, and a positive community environment (Wu, Shereda, Stacy, Weiss, & Heintschel, 2022). In inclusive education, youth leaders challenge stigma, promote awareness, and create inclusive opportunities through programs, campaigns, and peer engagement (Lee & Koo, 2020). Nevertheless, qualitative research on youth leaders' lived experiences and strategies for supporting LWDs remains limited, representing a significant gap in both global and Philippine contexts.

Challenges and gaps in community-based inclusion

Despite recognition of community roles, inclusion efforts face persistent barriers. Limited disability awareness, inaccurate data on LWDs, accessibility constraints, and parental hesitations continue to impede progress (Salvador et al., 2021). In the Philippines, community-based inclusion initiatives are often fragmented, under-resourced, and poorly coordinated among schools, social welfare offices, and local stakeholders (Arias et al., 2023).

While research has extensively examined teachers' and administrators' perspectives, there is a notable gap in qualitative studies centering on youth leaders' lived experiences as advocates for inclusive education. Addressing this gap, the present study explores how youth leaders conceptualize, enact, and sustain community support for LWDs, offering evidence to inform policy, youth leadership development, and sustainable inclusion practices.

Statement of the problem

This study explored youth leaders' lived experiences in promoting community support for learners with disabilities in inclusive education.

Specifically, it sought to answer the following questions:

1. How do youth leaders describe their roles in promoting community support for learners with disabilities in inclusive education?

2. What practices do youth leaders employ to fulfill these roles?
3. What challenges do youth leaders encounter in promoting inclusive education within the community?

Methodology

This section outlines the research design, study locale, participants, sampling procedures, data gathering instruments and procedures, data analysis techniques, and ethical considerations employed in the conduct of the study.

Research design

This study employed a phenomenological research design to explore the lived experiences of youth leaders who promote inclusive education in their communities. Phenomenology was chosen to capture participants' subjective meanings, reflections, and interpretations of their roles, allowing for an in-depth understanding of inclusion as experienced in community and governance contexts (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

Locale of the study

The study was conducted in selected barangays and municipalities within the Province of Ilocos Norte, Philippines. These barangays operate under the local government unit and actively implement youth development programs through the Sangguniang Kabataan. The locale was selected for its relevance to community-based inclusive initiatives and the presence of youth leaders engaged in education- and welfare-related activities.

Population and sampling

Youth leaders were purposively selected based on the following criteria: (1) currently serving as SK officials or active youth leaders, (2) involvement in community programs related to education or social welfare, and (3) willingness to share experiences openly. Purposive sampling ensured rich, information-dense narratives appropriate for phenomenological analysis (Palinkas et al., 2015). Pseudonyms were assigned to protect participants' identities.

Data gathering instrument

The interview guide was developed in response to the study's research questions and a review of the literature on youth leadership and inclusive education. It underwent expert validation by three specialists in special education and qualitative research, who assessed the clarity, relevance, and alignment of the questions with the study objectives. Revisions were made in response to their feedback to improve question flow and ensure sensitivity to participants' experiences. Sample interview questions included: "*How do you describe your role as a youth leader in supporting learners with disabilities in your community?*" and "*What challenges do you encounter when implementing inclusive activities at the barangay or municipal level?*"

Data gathering procedure

Individual interviews were conducted over two weeks, lasting approximately 30–45 minutes each.

Interviews were audio-recorded with consent and supplemented by field notes to capture contextual details. Participants reviewed transcripts to check for credibility and accuracy (DiCicco-Bloom & Crabtree, 2006).

Data analysis tool

Data were analyzed using Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-phase thematic analysis. This process involved familiarization, coding, theme development, review, naming, and reporting, ensuring that findings remained grounded in participants' lived experiences.

Ethical considerations

Ethical approval was obtained from the Graduate School of Education, Divine Word College of Laoag. Written informed consent was secured, participation was voluntary, and confidentiality was maintained through pseudonyms and data protection measures. Ethical principles of respect, beneficence, and integrity guided the research process (BERA, 2018).

Presentation and analysis of results

This section presents the findings of the study based on thematic analysis of the interview data using Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-phase framework.

Problem 1: How do youth leaders describe their roles in supporting learners with disabilities in inclusive education?

The narratives of the participating youth leaders were analyzed using **Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-phase thematic analysis framework**. Through this process, five overarching roles were identified, reflecting youth leaders' conceptualizations and lived experiences in supporting learners with disabilities. These roles are as follows: **1. Advocate, 2. Bridge-builder, 3. Motivator, 4. Influencer, and 5. Facilitator of inclusive opportunities**

Interpretation of the themes was guided by participants' narratives and supported by relevant literature to contextualize youth leadership within inclusive education frameworks.

The following table summarizes the identified roles, their specifications, and representative participant statements.

Table 1. Youth Leaders' Insights on Their Roles in Supporting Learners with Disabilities

Roles	Specifications	Statements
Advocate	Promoting awareness of inclusive education and learners' rights	"Uhm, I think my role is to advocate for inclusivity and to make people more aware that disabilities shouldn't limit one's participation." – Rei

	Challenging misconceptions and stigma about disabilities	“As a youth leader, I see my role more as advocacy. I always remind my fellow youth that inclusion starts with acceptance.” – Cza.
Bridge-builder	Connecting youth with schools and local government programs	“Uhm, as a youth leader, I really see my role as a bridge between the youth and the school system. For me, part of our duty is to help raise awareness that learners with disabilities also deserve equal opportunities in education.” – Jir.
	Facilitating communication between learners, parents, and community stakeholders	“Uhm, as a youth leader, I really see my role as a bridge... part of our duty is to help raise awareness” – Jir.
Motivator	Encouraging learners with disabilities to participate in activities	“I think my role is to be a motivator...someone who supports learners with disabilities so they don’t feel left out.” – Jus
	Providing emotional support and reassurance	“I think my role is to be a motivator...someone who supports learners with disabilities so they don’t feel left out.” – Jus.
Influencer	Shaping positive perceptions of learners with disabilities	“As a youth leader, I consider myself an influencer...in a positive way. I want to change how people view learners with disabilities.” – JM.
	Promoting inclusive attitudes among peers and community members	“I see my role as a voice for inclusion. We youth leaders must show that disability is not inability.” – Alle.
Facilitator of inclusive opportunities	Designing activities and programs that are safe and accessible	“For me, my role as a youth leader is to make our activities safe and open for all, especially learners with disabilities.” – Reic
	Providing educational support through scholarships and outreach programs	“For me, my role is more on providing educational support. We help learners by including them in our scholarship and outreach programs.” – Kat.

Source: Interview data (2025)

The findings indicate that youth leaders perceive their roles in supporting learners with disabilities as **multifaceted**, encompassing advocacy, community connection, motivation, social influence, and practical facilitation. This aligns with literature positioning youth leaders as *relational actors* who simultaneously influence attitudes, mobilize participation, and translate inclusive values into community action (Camino & Zeldin, 2021; Lee & Koo, 2020).

As **advocates**, youth leaders actively promote awareness of inclusive education, articulate learners’ rights, and challenge misconceptions surrounding disability. Advocacy at the community level has been identified as a critical mechanism for reducing stigma and fostering inclusive norms, particularly in

contexts where formal support systems remain limited (UNESCO, 2020; Singal, 2019).

In their role as **bridge-builders**, youth leaders connect learners, parents, schools, and local institutions, facilitating communication and access to services. This function reflects ecological perspectives on inclusion, which emphasize the importance of linkages across family, community, and institutional systems in supporting learners with disabilities (Bronfenbrenner, 1979; Arias et al., 2023).

As **motivators**, youth leaders provide emotional reassurance and encouragement, enabling learners with disabilities to participate more confidently in community activities. Prior research suggests that such psychosocial support enhances learners' sense of belonging and participation, which are central goals of inclusive education (Ainscow & Messiou, 2018; Wang et al., 2023).

Their role as **influencers** highlights how youth leadership shapes peer attitudes and community perceptions through modeling inclusive behavior. Social learning theory explains how visible, positive interactions contribute to attitude change and norm formation regarding disability and inclusion (Bandura, 1986).

Finally, as **facilitators of inclusive opportunities**, youth leaders design accessible programs, provide educational support, and ensure participation in community initiatives. This practical dimension of leadership reinforces findings that inclusion requires both structural access and intentional social inclusion strategies (Florian & Spratt, 2021; UNESCO, 2020).

Collectively, these roles underscore youth leaders as **critical agents of community-based inclusive education**, bridging policy intentions with grassroots implementation.

Problem 2: What practices do youth leaders employ to fulfill these roles?

The narratives of the participating youth leaders were analyzed using Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-phase thematic analysis framework. Through this process, five overarching **practice strategies** were identified, reflecting the ways youth leaders operationalize their roles in supporting learners with disabilities. These strategies are as follows: **1. Inclusive program design 2. Community and parental engagement, 3. Policy and organizational advocacy, 4. Accessibility and support provision, and 5. Awareness and outreach campaigns**

Interpretation of the themes was guided by participants' narratives and supported by relevant literature to contextualize youth leadership within inclusive education frameworks.

The following table summarizes the identified practices, their specifications, and representative participant statements.

Table 2. Youth leaders' practices in fulfilling their roles

Practices	Specifications	Statements
Inclusive program design	Designing youth programs to include learners with disabilities	"We try to fulfill that by making our programs inclusive... like when we organize art contests, we make sure they can also join and feel welcome." – Jir
	Adapting activities or games to ensure participation	"We make adjustments like simplifying games or making sure the venues are friendly for them." – Reic
Community and parental engagement	Involving parents in activities and decision-making	"We fulfill it through simple things, like including them in our feeding programs or barangay clean-ups, and even by reaching out to their parents." – Cza
	Encouraging participation in community programs and providing volunteer/transport support	"We fulfill that by including them in barangay activities, and if needed, we provide volunteers or transportation assistance." – Jus.
Policy and organizational advocacy	Using SK resolutions to promote inclusive participation	"I try to push that through our SK resolutions. We actually encourage inclusive participation in youth activities." – Rei.
	Coordinating with schools and youth organizations for awareness campaigns	"We fulfill that by partnering with schools and youth orgs to conduct awareness campaigns. Sometimes we invite speakers from DepEd." – Alle.
Accessibility and support provision	Providing transportation and volunteer assistance	"We fulfill that by including them in barangay activities, and if needed, we provide volunteers or transportation assistance." – Jus
	Ensuring access to learning materials and educational support	"When we distribute school supplies or conduct tutorials, we also make sure to invite learners with disabilities." – Kat
Awareness and outreach campaigns	Promoting inclusive practices through social media	"I use social media to promote awareness, to share posts about inclusion and success stories of differently-abled learners." – JM
	Conducting awareness campaigns in partnership with schools and organizations	"We fulfill that by partnering with schools and youth orgs to conduct awareness campaigns. Sometimes we invite speakers from DepEd." – Alle.

Source: Interview data (2025)

Analysis of participants' narratives revealed that youth leaders operationalize their roles through **five interconnected practices**: inclusive program design, community and parental engagement, policy and organizational advocacy, accessibility and support provision, and awareness and outreach campaigns. Inclusive program design reflects universal participation principles, ensuring that activities are adaptable, safe, and welcoming for learners with disabilities. Such practices are consistent with inclusive education frameworks that emphasize participation over segregation (Ainscow & Messiou, 2018; Florian & Spratt, 2021).

Community and parental engagement emerged as a critical practice, recognizing families as key partners in inclusive initiatives. Research consistently shows that parental involvement enhances participation and mitigates fears related to stigma and safety (UNESCO, 2020).

Policy and organizational advocacy through SK resolutions and partnerships illustrates how youth leaders leverage formal governance structures to institutionalize inclusive practices. Youth participation in local policy processes has been shown to improve responsiveness and sustainability of community initiatives (Camino & Zeldin, 2021).

Accessibility and support—including transportation, volunteers, and learning materials—address structural barriers that often exclude learners with disabilities from community participation (Arias et al., 2023).

Awareness and outreach campaigns, particularly on social media, serve to reshape community perceptions and normalize inclusion. Prior studies confirm that storytelling and visibility are effective strategies for reducing stigma and fostering inclusive norms (Lee & Koo, 2020; Wang et al., 2023).

Together, these practices demonstrate how youth leaders translate inclusive values into **concrete, context-sensitive actions**, reinforcing their role as implementers of community-based inclusion.

Problem 3: *What challenges do youth leaders encounter in fulfilling these roles?*

The narratives of the participating youth leaders were analyzed using **Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-phase thematic analysis framework**. Through this process, five overarching **challenges** were identified, reflecting the barriers youth leaders face in supporting learners with disabilities in inclusive education. These challenges are as follows: 1. **Limited awareness and mindset barriers**, 2. **Parental concerns and resistance**, 3. **Data and Planning Constraints**, 4. **Accessibility and resource limitations**, and 5. **Social stigma and reluctance to engage**

Interpretation of the themes was guided by participants' narratives and supported by relevant literature to contextualize youth leadership within inclusive education frameworks.

The following table summarizes the identified challenges, their specifications, and representative participant statements.

Table 3. Challenges encountered by youth leaders in fulfilling their roles

Challenges	Specifications	Statements
Limited awareness and mindset barriers	Lack of awareness of inclusion among youth	“Siguro, one of the challenges is the lack of awareness among some youth. Some are not yet open when it comes to interacting with persons with disabilities.” – Jir.
	Need to remind peers about respect and equality constantly	“The challenge is, not all youth are open-minded. You have to remind them about respect and equality constantly.” – Jus.
	Resistance or hesitation to engage with learners with disabilities	“Challenge talaga is starting the conversation. Some people are still uncomfortable talking about disabilities.” – JM.
Parental concerns and resistance	Fear of bullying or judgment	“One big challenge is the mindset of some parents. Sometimes, they do not allow their children to join because they are scared they might be bullied or judged.” – Rei.
	Reluctance to allow participation in programs	“Sometimes, they do not join because they are shy or they think they are not capable.” – Kat.
	Hesitation to engage in inclusive initiatives	“We also face parents who avoid participating in community activities involving learners with disabilities.” – Cza (translated)
Data and planning constraints	Lack of accurate data on learners with disabilities	“Honestly, our biggest challenge is the lack of data. We do not exactly know how many learners with disabilities are in the barangay, so it’s hard to plan projects.” – Cza.
	Difficulty in planning programs and allocating resources	“Planning is hard because of incomplete information about learners with disabilities in our community.” – Reic (translated)
	Challenges in identifying target participants	“Sometimes it’s difficult to identify who should participate in our programs because we don’t have exact data.” – Jir (translated)
Accessibility and resource limitations	Insufficient budget for inclusive programs	“The challenge is, of course, budget and accessibility. Not all venues are suitable... no ramps or proper facilities.” – Reic.
	Venues lacking proper facilities	“Some activity locations are not accessible, which limits the participation of learners with disabilities.” – Alle (translated)
	Limited availability of materials or volunteers	“We sometimes don’t have enough volunteers or materials to assist learners during activities.” – Jus (translated)

Social stigma and reluctance to engage	Community misconceptions about inclusion	“The challenge is, some people still don’t understand what inclusion means. They think separate programs are better.” – Alle.
	Reluctance to discuss disabilities openly	“The challenge really is starting the conversation. Some people are still uncomfortable talking about disabilities.” – JM.
	Peer and community stigma toward learners with disabilities	“Some youth and community members have negative perceptions, which makes inclusion difficult.” – Jir (translated)

Source: Interview data (2025)

The findings reveal that youth leaders face **interrelated social, structural, and resource-based challenges** in promoting inclusive education.

Limited awareness and mindset barriers among peers reflect persistent misconceptions about disability, necessitating continuous advocacy and education. Such attitudinal barriers have been widely documented as major impediments to inclusion, particularly in non-school settings (UNESCO, 2020; Singal, 2019).

Parental concerns—often rooted in fear of discrimination, bullying, or social judgment—further constrain participation. Family hesitancy has been identified as a significant barrier when communities lack visible, inclusive practices and protective mechanisms (Wang et al., 2023).

Data and planning constraints, including incomplete information on learners with disabilities, limit effective program design and monitoring. Accurate data systems are essential for inclusive planning, yet remain weak in many local contexts (Arias et al., 2023).

Accessibility and resource limitations, such as insufficient budgets and inaccessible venues, reflect broader structural challenges in implementing inclusive initiatives at the grassroots level (Beltran et al., 2025).

Finally, social stigma and reluctance to engage highlight the enduring cultural dimensions of exclusion, underscoring the need for sustained awareness efforts and dialogue facilitation (UNESCO, 2020).

These challenges demonstrate that while youth leaders play a pivotal role in advancing inclusion, their efforts require **systemic support, family engagement, and institutional collaboration** to be sustainable.

Discussion

As a youth leader engaged in local governance, the researcher maintained reflexive awareness throughout the study to minimize bias and ensure that participants’ voices, rather than preconceived assumptions, guided data interpretation.

Youth leaders represent a critical yet underexplored force in fostering community-based inclusive education, serving as a bridge between policy mandates and grassroots action to ensure that learners with disabilities can participate meaningfully in both educational and social spheres. This finding reinforces global assertions that inclusive education extends beyond school systems and depends heavily on community actors who can translate inclusive principles into everyday social practice (UNESCO, 2020; Ainscow & Messiou, 2018). In the Philippine context, where the implementation of Republic Act No. 11650 relies substantially on local governance and community engagement, youth leaders occupy a strategic position to operationalize inclusion at the grassroots level (Official Gazette of the Republic of the Philippines, 2022).

This study shows that youth leaders in Ilocos Norte perceive their roles as multifaceted—encompassing advocacy, bridging community and institutional resources, motivation, social influence, and facilitation of inclusive opportunities. Such role multiplicity aligns with youth leadership frameworks that conceptualize young leaders as relational, adaptive, and values-driven actors capable of influencing both peer cultures and institutional processes (Camino & Zeldin, 2021). Rather than functioning as passive implementers, youth leaders in this study actively shaped inclusive norms, echoing international findings that youth-led initiatives are particularly effective in challenging stigma and fostering participatory inclusion (Lee & Koo, 2020).

Advocacy emerged as a central function, with youth leaders actively promoting awareness of learners' rights, challenging misconceptions, and encouraging peer acceptance. These advocacy efforts—manifested through inclusive program design, Sangguniang Kabataan (SK) resolutions, and awareness campaigns—demonstrate how youth leadership integrates both policy-oriented and community-based approaches. This supports earlier research indicating that youth participation in governance structures enhances policy responsiveness and strengthens social accountability at the local level (Camino & Zeldin, 2021). In inclusive education, such advocacy is particularly crucial, as stigma and misinformation remain persistent barriers to participation for learners with disabilities (UNESCO, 2020). The role of bridge-builder further illustrates youth leaders' capacity to connect learners, parents, schools, and local institutions, ensuring access to resources and inclusive opportunities. This finding is consistent with Bronfenbrenner's (1979) ecological systems theory, which emphasizes that interactions across family, community, and institutional systems shape learners' development. By facilitating communication among these systems, youth leaders serve as mediators, translating inclusive policy frameworks into locally relevant practices. Similar patterns have been observed in community-based inclusion studies, where cross-sector collaboration significantly improves access to educational and social support for learners with disabilities (Arias et al., 2023)

Motivational and influencer roles highlight the socio-emotional dimensions of youth leadership in inclusive education. Participants not only encouraged learners with disabilities to engage in community activities but also modeled inclusive behavior for peers and community members. This dual function reflects social learning processes in which attitudes toward disability are reshaped through visible, positive interactions (Bandura, 1986). Prior studies affirm that youth-led peer influence is particularly effective in shifting norms related to inclusion, belonging, and acceptance (Lee & Koo, 2020).

Practical facilitation—through inclusive program design, accessibility support, parental engagement, and outreach campaigns—demonstrates a holistic approach to operationalizing inclusion. These practices align with international literature emphasizing that sustainable, inclusive education requires both material support and social transformation (Ainscow & Messiou, 2018; UNESCO, 2020). By combining tangible assistance (e.g., transportation, volunteers, learning materials) with advocacy and awareness efforts, youth leaders address both structural and attitudinal barriers to participation.

Despite these proactive strategies, youth leaders encountered persistent challenges, including limited peer awareness, parental apprehension, incomplete community data, resource constraints, and social stigma. These challenges reflect broader patterns identified in Asian contexts regarding fragmented implementation and systemic barriers to inclusive education, as well as local evidence highlighting rural community constraints (Arias et al., 2023). Parental hesitancy, often rooted in fear of discrimination or bullying, further underscores the need for family-centered engagement strategies within inclusive initiatives (UNESCO, 2020).

Overall, the findings demonstrate that youth leadership in inclusive education requires a balance of advocacy, relational engagement, and practical facilitation, supported by institutional recognition and resources. While youth leaders possess the motivation and capacity to advance inclusion, sustainable impact depends on continuous capacity-building, inter-agency collaboration, and supportive policy environments. These insights reinforce the view that community-based inclusive education is most effective when youth leadership is intentionally integrated into local governance and education systems.

Theoretical implications

This study contributes to inclusive education literature by extending ecological and community-based inclusion frameworks to explicitly include youth leadership as a mediating force between policy and practice. The findings reinforce Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory by illustrating how youth leaders operate across microsystem (peer and family), mesosystem (school–community linkages), and exosystem (local governance) levels. The study also advances youth civic engagement theory by situating youth leaders as active agents of social inclusion rather than passive beneficiaries of policy.

Practical implications

Practically, the findings highlight the need to formally integrate youth leaders into local inclusive education mechanisms. Capacity-building programs on disability awareness, inclusive program design, and data management should be institutionalized for Sangguniang Kabataan officials. Local governments and schools are encouraged to establish structured partnerships with youth councils to support accessibility initiatives, parental engagement, and community awareness campaigns.

Limitations of the study

This study is limited by its small sample size and geographic focus on selected barangays and municipalities in Ilocos Norte, which may limit transferability to other contexts. The reliance on self-reported data may also introduce social desirability bias. Additionally, the study focused solely on youth leaders' perspectives and did not include the voices of learners with disabilities, parents, or educators.

Future studies may employ mixed-methods designs to triangulate youth leaders' perspectives with those of learners with disabilities, parents, and educators. Comparative studies across regions or longitudinal research examining the long-term impact of youth-led inclusion initiatives are also recommended. Further research may explore policy integration models that formally position youth leaders within inclusive education governance structures.

Conclusion

This study highlights the pivotal role of youth leaders in promoting community-based inclusion for learners with disabilities, showing that they function as advocates, motivators, facilitators, and bridge-builders who translate inclusive education policies into tangible practices. Through strategies such as inclusive program design, policy advocacy, parental engagement, accessibility support, and awareness campaigns, youth leaders actively foster participation, belonging, and equitable opportunities for learners with disabilities. The findings generate new knowledge by documenting how grassroots leadership complements school-based interventions, revealing the practical, context-specific ways inclusion is enacted outside the classroom. Grounded in sociocultural and community-based inclusion frameworks, the study underscores that effective inclusion relies on the interplay between individual agency, social structures, and institutional support. To enhance these efforts, targeted capacity-building, improved data systems, accessible infrastructure, and sustained collaboration among schools, local governments, and social welfare agencies are recommended, demonstrating that empowering youth leaders is crucial for sustainable, participatory, and equitable inclusion.

Author's contribution: The author conceptualized the study, conducted data collection and analysis, and prepared the manuscript.

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