



Student Leaders' Role In The Effective Implementation Of Inclusive Education In Ghanaian Senior High Schools

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Citation: Yeboah, T.J. and Phasha, N (2026). Student Leaders' Role in the Effective Implementation of Inclusive Education in Ghanaian Senior High Schools. *Educational Administration: Theory and Practice*, 32 (01) 29 - 42
Doi: 10.10.53555/kuey.v32i1.11494

ARTICLE INFO

ABSTRACT

The emergence of inclusive education has shifted school leadership from a traditional model dominated by principals to a more collaborative approach involving shared leadership among various stakeholders, including often-overlooked student leaders. This study employed a case study design to explore the contributions of student leaders to the effective implementation of inclusive education in a Ghanaian high school. Data were collected through in-depth interviews with 18 student leaders and 2 members of the school management. It was thematically analyzed to derive 4 subthemes, namely, Roles and Responsibilities, Relationship and Engagement, Positive Impact and Inclusive Education Recognition, and Challenges. Findings indicate that student leaders play a crucial role in promoting diversity and fostering a culture of respect and acceptance. They collaborate with school authorities to identify challenges, propose solutions, and facilitate the implementation of inclusive policies. By establishing supportive networks, they assist peers with disabilities in navigating academic activities and the physical environment while advocating for their needs within the classroom. The relationships built by student leaders are founded on empathy and trust, which are essential to the well-being of all students. However, student leaders also face challenges that impede their effectiveness in supporting students with disabilities within the Inclusive education framework.

Keywords: Inclusive Education, Student Leaders, School Leadership, Disabilities, Collaboration, Diversity, Respect, Empathy, Acceptance

Introduction

A primary goal of education is to prepare students to be valuable members of society. Schools provide students with knowledge and skills that benefit both themselves and the community. Importantly, they give students the tools to navigate their lives and prepare for adulthood (Foley, 2020). All the experiences students have in school aim to help them become responsible adults capable of taking on leadership roles in their communities.

In contemporary inclusive society, having students in leadership roles in schools is important for creating a supportive culture for the future. Kuranchie and Affum (2021) argue that involving students in school leadership aligns with democratic values and helps them contribute positively to society later. This paper examines the roles of student leaders in school governance and their contributions to successful inclusive education.

Research indicates that effective school leadership is crucial for implementing inclusive education policies (Day et al., 2020; Van Miegheem et al., 2020). A common finding is that principals play a key role in school leadership. Their leadership style significantly impacts the effectiveness of inclusive education, as a team's success can depend on the leader's quality (Nordbäck & Espinosa, 2019). This highlights the crucial role of school leadership in promoting inclusive education.

Giving students a role in school governance makes their leadership more legitimate (du Plessis et al., 2022) and enables them to participate in school administration. This empowerment is important for implementing inclusive education. When student leaders are seen as part of the school's leadership, they can effectively communicate the concerns of all students, both those with and without special needs, to school authorities.

Their close ties with their peers enable them to act as links between students and the administration. This paper contributes to our understanding of school leadership dynamics by highlighting the vital role of student leaders in achieving successful inclusive education. It uses a case study to explore the contributions of student leaders in an inclusive high school in Ghana.

Literature Review

The significance of partnership and collective leadership in inclusive education is evident. Hollowell (2019) emphasizes that school leaders must foster collaboration with all stakeholders, including student leaders. However, literature reveals a lack of student leader involvement in implementing inclusive education policies. DeMathew et al. (2020) found that, while school leaders are optimistic about inclusive education, they struggle to engage staff, parents, and students. This disconnect may hinder inclusive education in many ways, including students' preparedness for an inclusive society.

Collegial engagement is crucial to school effectiveness (Dyson, 2021), yet the role of student leaders in school governance and in promoting inclusive education remains underexplored. Studies on teachers' and school leaders' understanding of inclusive education enactment have produced contradictory results. Findings from Porakari et al. (2015) indicate that primary school leaders are more aware of inclusive practices than secondary leaders, who often fail to create supportive environments. On the contrary, Barnová et al. (2022) found that secondary school teachers in Slovakia are more supportive of inclusive education than primary teachers.

Overall, the previous studies exhibited two significant shortcomings. First, a lack of awareness among school leaders may contribute to the exclusion of student leaders from these roles. Additionally, the positivist approach employed in the earlier research limited the representation of participant voices and experiences. In contrast, the current investigation emphasizes the lived experiences of student leaders as they implement inclusive education policies.

Darlington and Scott (2020) utilized qualitative research principles to effectively gather diverse perspectives from participants. Their findings indicate that primary school leaders have a better understanding of inclusive practices than their secondary school counterparts. This highlights a gap in the literature on comparing inclusive education across different educational levels, particularly regarding the involvement of student leaders, which has yet to be addressed.

The aforementioned research snapshots highlight a substantial oversight regarding the role of student leaders in the effective implementation of inclusive education. Prior studies have consistently failed to acknowledge student leaders as integral partners in school administration, despite their considerable potential to advance inclusive practices. The lack of recognition for their contributions may hinder the development of a collaborative environment, which is essential to fostering an inclusive educational landscape. Emphasizing the importance of student leadership could facilitate a more integrated approach to inclusive education, ultimately benefiting the entire school community. Inclusive educational landscape. Emphasizing the importance of student leadership could facilitate a more integrated approach to inclusive education, ultimately benefiting the entire school community.

Training student leaders is vital for cultivating future leaders and effective inclusive practices, as noted by Biesta (2021) and Moldoveanu and Narayandas (2019). In contrast to previous positivist approaches, the current qualitative study focuses on the lived experiences of student leaders. Findings aim to fill the existing gap between student leaders and the successful implementation of inclusive education, a gap that previous researchers have overlooked.

Leadership challenges in inclusive education are prevalent. Tian et al. (2022) found that many leaders lack confidence, which adversely impacts their understanding of student roles. In this context, Charalampous (2022) emphasizes the importance of inclusive leadership training, especially for student leaders who are often overlooked. Strengthening the skills of student leaders not only has a lasting impact on their future engagement within inclusive school settings but also influences their participation in society as a whole.

Additionally, Begum et al. (2019) found that decision-making on inclusive education in Bangladesh is overly centralized, marginalizing student voices. Including student leaders in discussions is necessary to counter the perception that only adults should lead. Woodcock and Woolfson (2019) also highlight the role of student leaders in supporting principals in implementing inclusive education. Furthermore, a study in Cameroon found that younger teachers in need of training in Special Needs Education were less enthusiastic about inclusive practices than experienced, trained teachers (Bennett et al., 2021). This suggests that training should begin at the student leadership level to promote effective, inclusive education.

Hindle (2021) emphasizes the critical role of stakeholder participation in school leadership and management, as schools are fundamentally tasked with training active citizens for societal benefit. Society, in turn, is motivated to support schools because of the benefits of a well-educated populace. Mbua (2023) reinforces this idea, stating that education should address societal needs and values. This argument reinforces the need for student leaders to fully participate in implementing inclusive education.

Lesotho has successfully implemented inclusive education through partnerships among the government, churches, and NGOs, despite resource constraints (Mosa & Lephoto, 2023). This model can be replicated in similar socio-economic contexts, such as Ghana, with emphasis on student leadership involvement. Collaboration should occur at the local school level, involving stakeholders such as student leaders, teachers, and parents in implementing inclusive education.

Student leaders play a crucial role consistent with inclusive education principles, engaging in community outreach and co-curricular activities to promote integration (Pahl, 2019). Team building is essential, fostering healthy social interactions that enhance respect for diversity. A study by Murage et al. (2019) found that 73.9% of Kenyan university students believed they could participate in team-building activities, showcasing the potential of student leaders.

The current study examined whether secondary school student leaders in Ghana can inspire their peers to foster inclusive education. Research on student leaders' specific roles in implementing inclusive education in Ghana is limited, with most studies focusing on broader aspects or on teachers' roles. Opoku et al. (2021) studied inclusive education in Ghana from the perspective of headteachers, highlighting the importance of collaborative leadership and suggesting a greater role for student leaders in these initiatives

Theoretical Foundation of the Study

This study is grounded in Distributed Leadership Theory (DLT), as articulated by Gronn (2000) and Spillane (2005). DLT challenges traditional hierarchical models of school leadership by emphasizing the sharing of responsibilities among multiple actors within the organization. Rather than concentrating authority in principals or senior administrators, distributed leadership promotes a dynamic, collaborative model in which leadership is enacted collectively across teachers, staff, and students. As Goksoy (2015) notes, this approach fosters a culture of collective responsibility and values diverse perspectives, thereby enhancing schools' capacity to address challenges and implement effective strategies.

While much of the literature on DLT has focused on organizational employees and academic staff, this study extends the framework to include student leaders as critical actors in the leadership process. In Ghanaian schools, student leaders such as prefects and class leaders are elected by peers and collaborate with teachers to maintain discipline and organize routines (Griffin, 2023). Their dual role as followers within the hierarchical structure and as leaders of their peers, illustrates the collaborative and situational nature of distributed leadership (Bouwman, 2019). This perspective highlights that leadership is not confined to formal authority figures but is enacted through the interactions of multiple stakeholders.

Naidoo (2021) reinforces this argument by rejecting the notion that school success can be attributed solely to principals. Instead, leadership is shaped by collective philosophies, particularly distributive leadership, which recognizes the contributions of both formal and informal leaders. This aligns closely with inclusive education practices, where principals, teachers, students, parents, and communities all play essential roles in advancing inclusion (Ní Bhroin & King, 2020). Within this framework, student leaders emerge as vital intermediaries who bridge policy and practice, advocate for peers with disabilities, and collaborate with administrators to foster inclusive environments.

Overall, Distributed Leadership Theory provides a robust lens for understanding the role of student leaders in inclusive education. By situating leadership as a collective, interactive, and democratic process, DLT highlights the importance of collaboration, shared responsibility, and stakeholder engagement. In the Ghanaian context, student leaders embody distributed leadership by promoting equity, advocating for peers with disabilities, and reinforcing inclusive practices. Their involvement demonstrates that inclusive education is not the responsibility of a single leader but the outcome of distributed efforts across the school community.

Distributed Leadership can be understood as the superstructure of various leadership concepts, conveying the idea that leadership is not to be monopolized or concentrated in the hands of a few traditional organizational leaders. Looking at the school as an organization, the situation where all power and authority rest with principals and their deputies is no longer tenable in this era of post-heroic school leadership.

Post-heroic leadership concepts, such as collaborative, participatory, dispersed, shared, and democratic leadership, are used interchangeably to portray the essence of power distribution in organizations, including schools. Thus, within the school, leadership tasks can be shared among principals, teachers, parents, school management boards, and students. These leaders are expected to carry out their respective duties in a manner that embodies esprit de corps, whereby teamwork and cooperation remain the underlying philosophy.

The Distributed Leadership approach has significant implications for inclusive education. It is now well established that the diversity in the composition of learners in today's schools necessitates the support of various professionals and leaders to facilitate their success in school. Stott and Murphy (2020) agree that a joint vision is required from stakeholders to bring about the transformational agenda that inclusive education seeks to accomplish.

The needs of learners in today's schools may stem from various factors, including health, educational, psychological, social, cultural, linguistic, and economic circumstances. This wide range of diversity and needs among learners with special needs necessitates the engagement of multiple professionals, approaches, and working methodologies (Stott & Murphy, 2020) to address the challenging task of meeting these needs. By implication, experts from relevant professional backgrounds mutually influence each other to bring about successful inclusion. Thus, without collaboration, the goal of inclusion cannot be achieved (Alhumam, 2021; Ackah-Jnr & Appiah, 2025; Sanders et al., 2019).

The goal of inclusion is best achieved through collaboration, shared responsibility, and concerted efforts. Every team member matters in implementing inclusive education. In inclusive schools, therefore, leadership responsibility is distributed among general education teachers, special education teachers, health

professionals, social workers, parents, school governing boards, and students; however, the principal effectively coordinates it.

Ní Bhroin and King (2020) argue that when the competencies and experiences of inclusive education professionals are effectively coordinated, learners achieve more than when they work separately. This is affirmed by Goddard et al. (2015), who established in an empirical study that there is a direct relationship between collaborative school leadership and student academic achievement. The study concluded that leadership collaboration provided a sure way to build academic capacity in schools.

Distributed Leadership is about social interaction. Through this interaction, ideas are exchanged, and knowledge is shared to provide joint solutions to the problems faced by learners with special needs (Ní Bhroin & King, 2020). This is better understood when one considers Vygotsky's concept of the zone of proximal development (ZPD). Vygotsky (1978) highlights the importance of collaboration and social interaction, which aims to bridge the gap between the child's current abilities and his potential. Thus, the child's developmental progress can be measured by their ability to move from a task they can accomplish today without assistance to one they can achieve in the future. It is within this zone that the role of adult guidance and more competent peers becomes critical.

The quality of interaction that takes place within the ZPD between the learner with special needs and the adults or fellow learners without disability will determine the developmental progress made. As previously established, effective collaboration is necessary to enhance student achievement (Ní Bhroin & King, 2020). Consequently, all adult stakeholders are required to cooperate to provide the necessary support to ensure the development of students who have special needs. This can be achieved through the exchange of ideas and the sharing of experiences within a team.

Within the classroom, for example, both general and special education teachers can collaborate to address any learning problems the learners face, ensuring their development. This reinforces the already established belief that learners achieve higher levels of achievement through cooperation (Ní Bhroin & King, 2020). In his description of the ZPD, Vygotsky (1978) makes a strong case for more capable peers to assist learners who need support. The theorist suggests that learners' peers who demonstrate mastery can also help them overcome the challenges that hinder their development. This presupposes that fellow students also share in the cooperation aimed at helping learners with special needs overcome their challenges through inclusive education.

The students live together and, therefore, understand each other well. Those who are more competent are, thus, better placed to assist those who need help. For example, more competent peers can promote not only academic achievement but also social inclusion. This is why I am making a strong case for this investigation: to examine the contributions of student leaders to the implementation of IE in the selected Ghanaian senior high school.

Woodgate et al. (2019) report that some students with disability still encounter social challenges like discrimination and bullying in the school. In cases such as the student leaders are expected to ensure that the affected students' interests and rights are protected. Inclusive education is about social justice. An inclusive school should provide a welcoming environment that enables every student to learn and participate.

One area where teamwork manifests itself through collaboration is the development of an Individualized Education Plan (IEP). The IEP is a document that provides detailed information on the learner's current academic and functional status, goals that will guide the necessary intervention, methods for measuring progress toward goal achievement, and the type of support provided to the student, among others. The IEP membership team develops the IEP. DeMathew (2021) indicates that the membership team should comprise general and special education teachers, district representatives, and school leadership.

Research Methodology

Research Design

A case study design was adopted to enable an in-depth investigation of complex phenomena (Hancock et al., 2021). This approach allows comprehensive analysis of single or multiple cases, focusing on the 'why' and 'how' of the phenomenon (Tagnin & Riordain, 2022). As Creswell and Hirose (2019) note, case study research examines real-life events within their context, drawing on detailed data from multiple sources. Accordingly, this study employed a single-case analysis of student leadership contributions to inclusive education in a senior high school, with data collected from student leaders and school management staff.

Although case study research has faced criticisms of methodological inconsistency (Goodrick, 2020; Ivanova & Elsayah, 2022), its growing use in educational research (Davey, 2019) highlights its relevance for this study. The design facilitated a deeper exploration of how student leaders promote inclusive practices, advocate for peers, and foster supportive environments for students with disabilities. Overall, it proved well-suited to the research problem and context, offering a strong means of examining leadership dynamics within a Ghanaian. In line with Yin (2018), the case study approach enabled a detailed examination of how student leaders advance inclusion and collaborate with administrative staff.

Sampling and Participants

The study employed purposive sampling, consistent with the qualitative design, to select individuals best positioned to provide insights into inclusive education practices (Creswell & Hirose, 2019). This approach allowed the identification of information-rich cases (Creswell & Hirose, 2019), and ensured diverse perspectives. School prefects were included for their leadership roles, serving as a link between the student

body and administration, while sports and entertainment prefects contributed views on inclusion in co-curricular activities. Two senior management staff members were also selected due to their responsibility for overseeing equitable learning opportunities, thereby strengthening data triangulation and credibility (Yin, 2018).

In total, 20 participants were involved: 18 student leaders drawn from the Student Representative Council (SRC), including the senior boys' prefect, his deputy, and prefects responsible for dormitories, athletics, and entertainment, and two senior management staff engaged in school administration. This composition provided both peer leadership perspectives and administrative insights into inclusive education (Ainscow & Sandill, 2010). The participant count aligns with qualitative case study guidelines, which recommend between 15 and 30 participants to achieve data saturation

Recruiting participants

The sample to be used in this study was obtained using purposive sampling method so that those people who were directly concerned with the leadership and practice of inclusive education were covered. This process of recruitment was initiated by getting an official authorization of the school administration that gave an access to student leaders and management personnel. Following an administrative passage, the researcher approached the Student Representative Council (SRC) and school prefects to clarify on the purpose of the study and what to expect in the research study, in addition to making sure that the participants understood their role in the study. This was a necessary procedure in creating an atmosphere of openness and trust.

Student leaders were recruited in consultation with the SRC, who helped to find out the prefects that would offer the most topical opinions regarding the inclusion of education practices in the school. This was done to have diversity within the student respondents to the extent to which there was a balance between the various leadership positions like sports, entertainment, and dormitory prefects to get a broad spectrum of opinion regarding the issue. The senior management staff became chosen because they are involved in the administration and management of inclusive practices in the school. These employees were selected to give a more comprehensive picture of how student leadership crosses over school administration in the operating of inclusive education policies.

To observe ethical practices in research, the participants were made fully aware of what the research was and what it was meant to achieve and were free to participate in the study. Both the student leaders and senior management staff gave informed consent before data collection. In order to make the participants feel comfortable and informed about the goals of the study, a consent form was used which included the voluntary character of the participation and the possibility of dropping out of the study at any time without any penalty. Also, the participants were guaranteed of the privacy of their responses and the identification of any such details would be pseudonymized.

In order to further observe the ethical standards, the participants were told that the interviews would be audio-recorded as a way of accuracy and that such records would be utilized in the research only. Confidentiality of data was put into high priority and all the interview transcripts were kept safely and only the researcher had access to them. The researcher also followed institutional ethics and was given the consent of the concerned ethics committee assuring the research that all conditions were met in qualitative research ethics. Through these ethical principles the study was able to secure the integrity of the data collection process and also honored the rights of every participant.

Ethical considerations

Ethical considerations were rigorously addressed, with informed consent obtained for all participants, particularly the student leaders. Approval from the school administration and ethical committees was secured, ensuring confidentiality and participants' rights to withdraw. Data protection measures were implemented, and participants reviewed their interview transcripts for accuracy. These ethical practices adhere to guidelines highlighted by Traianou and Hammersley (2024) and were thoroughly documented to ensure transparency and replicability, consistent with Tracy's (2024) criteria for qualitative research.

Ethical considerations were rigorously addressed throughout the sampling process. Following the guidelines of Bloomberg and Volpe (2019), informed consent was obtained from all participants, with special attention paid to student leaders, given their age. The school administration's permission was secured before approaching any potential participants. Confidentiality was ensured by using pseudonyms throughout all research documentation, and participants were informed of their right to withdraw from the study at any time without consequences. Additionally, the research adhered to institutional ethical guidelines and received approval from the relevant ethics committee.

Data protection measures were implemented to secure all collected information, and participants were allowed to review their interview transcripts for accuracy. These ethical considerations align with Hammersley and Traianou's (2022) emphasis on protecting participants' rights and dignity in educational research. The sampling strategy and ethical procedures were thoroughly documented to ensure transparency and replicability of the research process. This approach follows Tracy's (2024) criteria for excellent qualitative research, emphasizing rigorous, transparent methodological procedures.

Data Collection

Semi-structured interviews were employed as the primary instrument for data collection. This method was chosen because it combines the structure of predetermined questions with the flexibility to explore emerging themes, making it particularly suitable for qualitative research (Creswell & Hirose, 2019). By allowing participants to respond in their own words, semi-structured interviews provide nuanced insights into lived experiences and enable researchers to probe further when new issues arise.

The interview guide consisted of open-ended questions designed to elicit detailed responses. While the guide ensured consistency across interviews, the format allowed the researcher to adapt questions, follow up on unexpected themes, and probe for deeper understanding. This flexibility facilitated active listening and the observation of nonverbal cues, both of which enriched the data. The researcher's role as the primary instrument required attentiveness, reflexivity, and ethical sensitivity throughout the process.

Being the central tool in this research, the researcher used active and reflective approach to make sure that the process of data collection was ethical and rigorous. The researcher was also very keen during the interviews, listening to the responses of the participants carefully without taking sides so that they would not be influenced to respond in a certain way. This care also grew to the observation of non-verbal gestures, which allowed the researcher to gain a complete picture of the words uttered by the participants as well as to make changes in the course of the interview. One of the key factors involved in the role of the researcher was reflexivity. The researcher kept on reflecting on his or her own possible prejudice, preconceptions and assumptions, and understanding that this would affect how questions are asked and how answers will be interpreted by the researcher. This reflective exercise played a significant role in ensuring that the researcher was objective and open enough to the different perspectives that were presented by the participants.

The study was conducted with sensitivity to morality. The researcher was conscious of the power relations that come with researching student leaders, who might have been affected by their positions in the school. To this end, the researcher made sure that all the participants were very relaxed and free to air their views and their consent to participate was made known to them as well as their responses were confidential. Moreover, the researcher was aware of the possible emotional tone of the interview process concerning the topics of disability and inclusion and made sure that the interviews took place in the encouraging and understanding atmosphere. Constant visits to the participants were also made to make sure the participants were at ease with the interview procedure and that they felt respected. Such caution to reflexivity, attention, and ethical sensitivity allowed the research process to be not only respectful but also comprehensive and made the study integrity intact.

Interviews were conducted within the school environment during break periods to minimize disruption to academic activities. Each session lasted approximately one hour, providing sufficient time for participants to reflect and elaborate on their experiences. With participants' consent, interviews were audio-recorded to ensure accuracy. These recordings were later transcribed verbatim, and transcripts were subjected to member checking, whereby participants reviewed their accounts to confirm accuracy and authenticity. This process enhanced the credibility and trustworthiness of the data.

Ethical considerations were central to the interview process. Participants were assured of confidentiality through the use of pseudonyms, and interviews were conducted in a safe and supportive environment to encourage openness. The researcher avoided leading questions and remained mindful of potential biases, ensuring that participants' voices were authentically represented. While semi-structured interviews offer significant advantages, including flexibility, depth of responses, and the ability to capture complex social realities, they also present challenges.

Regarding this study, the issue of time management proved to be a critical one since the interviews had to be carried out within a definite time interval to cause minimal inconvenience to the participants and permit them to answer the questions in details. The researcher had to strike a good balance between having to seek in-depth information and time limitations and did not rush any participants on essential subjects. It was also necessary to be consistent throughout the interviews, as these should provide all participants with an equal chance to express their experiences, but also modify the interview methodology to suit specific reactions. It needed a dynamic but orderly process following the interview guide but being willing to negotiate new themes as they arose. It was necessary to establish a rapport with the participants, particularly because of a sensitive topic. The researcher attempted to establish a good atmosphere in which the respondents felt important and listened to and this was paramount in getting the respondents to give honest and meaningful answers. Nonetheless, the researcher also needed to make sure that the rapport-building is not at the cost of the data integrity, as it should be objective, concentrated on the objectives of the research and develop the respectful and supportive environment.

Data analysis, including trustworthiness

The thematic analysis was used to analyze the data that were collected in this study and thematic analysis is a qualitative method whereby patterns or themes can be identified and interpreted out of the data. It was selected due to its flexibility and the potential to give more detailed information about the experience and opinion of the participants on the role of student leaders in the process of implementing inclusive education. Thematic analysis was done with the 6 phase procedure developed by Braun and Clarke (2006) that included

familiarization with data, initial code generation, theme searching, theme reviewing, theme definition and naming, and final report generation.

In order to guarantee the credibility of the findings, a number of strategies were used. Firstly, it was conducted through member checking involving invitations to participants to go through the transcripts of their interviews to ensure that their answers were sufficiently recorded. This procedure assisted in making the voices of participants to be represented in an authentic manner. Also, data triangulation was adopted through incorporation of various view points; student leaders and senior management staff among others, to have a more detailed insight on the practice of inclusive education at the school.

Reflexivity was also observed by the researcher as he constantly thought about personal biases as well as made sure that these biases did not affect the interpretation of the data. In a bid to increase trustworthiness, the researcher maintained a detailed notes and audit trail where he recorded the decision-making process in the course of the analysis, which also brought transparency to the research. All these measures added up to the credibility, dependability and confirmability of the study findings making the results reliable and valid in the context of the research.

Results

The findings of the study are discussed in four general themes that were defined by means of the thematic analysis: Roles and Responsibilities, Relationship and Engagement, Favorable Effect and Inclusion Education Impact., and Challenges. These themes indicate the most significant contributions and experiences of student leaders in the process of introducing inclusive education to the Ghanaian senior high school.

Roles and Responsibilities

The student leaders were instrumental in bringing about diversity, promoting respect, and being inclusive in the school community. Their practice involved the development of supportive networks, partnership with the school to ensure the inclusion policy of education, and peer advocacy of disabled peers. They were not only leading through administration but through direct activities like academic and social support to students with disabilities and collaborating with fellow students to ensure a warm-hearted atmosphere.

Relationship and Engagement

The success of inclusive education revolved around strong and empathetic relationships between the student leaders and the students with disabilities. These relations based on trust and working together as a result of mutual respect played a key role in ensuring the involvement of students with disabilities in both academic and non-academic activities. Student leaders in addition to mentoring and peer supporting also played the role of advocates and therefore, the needs of disabled students were effectively passed to the administration.

Positive Impact and Inclusive Education Recognition

The role played by the student leaders in inclusive education was known throughout the school. They have brought positive changes to the school environment through their advocacy efforts that led to the creation of a culture of inclusion and respect. The participants showed hope on the long-term outcomes of inclusive education as the method has the potential to transform students with and without disabilities. With the help of the positive results, the academic achievement was observed, as well as the social inclusion and empowerment of students with disabilities, who received a chance to become leaders and to be involved in every school activity.

Challenges

Student leaders though had a number of challenges to the implementation of inclusive education despite the positive contributions they made. These were resource constraints, negative attitudes towards the disabled students, barriers in communication, and organizational constraints. Student leaders have complained of challenges in accessing the resources required to assist them including assistive technology and some of them were opposed by some students who found it hard to accept their disabled counterparts. Besides, having to balance academic tasks and leadership roles frequently contributed to burnout which made them unable to maintain inclusive practices.

Roles and responsibilities

Promoting Diversity and Respect

Student leaders play an important role in fostering diversity and cultivating an environment of respect and acceptance within the school community. They actively discourage discriminatory practices and promote inclusivity, ensuring that all students feel valued regardless of their abilities or backgrounds. Their emphasis on discipline and moral integrity establishes a foundation of ethical behaviour essential to sustaining an inclusive environment. Participants highlighted this responsibility:

“As a leader, my duty entails fostering discipline and moral integrity among my peers, in collaboration with the school administration; this is to ensure that all students, regardless of their abilities, are valued.” (Student 18)

“Helping to promote discipline and uprightness of my fellow students with the help of the administration is my core duty as a student leader in this inclusive school.” (Student 9)

“Regarding my leadership roles my main focus is on the concerns of the female students. I make sure that no students speak rudely or do anything discriminatory against female students with disabilities.” (Student 17)

“Because of the inclusiveness of the school, we as student leaders educate our colleagues to show love and acceptance for other students with disabilities.” (Student 5)

These accounts illustrate how student leaders address discrimination directly, educate peers on empathy and acceptance. Importantly they lead by example.

Creating supportive networks

Student leaders also establish supportive networks that ensure students with disabilities are not left behind academically or socially. They facilitate access to resources, encourage peer assistance, and promote inclusive study groups. Illustrative comments include:

“Among many other roles, my role is to ensure that the learning needs of students are provided by management in aid of their education... After these are provided, students need to study, that is why as a prefect I come in to encourage my colleagues who are disabled to study hard.” (Student 12)

“So, my main duty is to take care of what students will use and ensure that those with disabilities get help from other students... I ensure that paired students up to assist those with disabilities.” (Student 3)

“My primary role as a leader is to support students in achieving their academic goals within the school by ensuring they have study groups. Each study group includes at least one student with disabilities.” (Student 15)

These findings demonstrate how student leaders contribute to academic inclusion by organizing peer support systems and monitoring group dynamics to ensure equitable participation.

Collaborating with school administration

Collaboration with school authorities emerged as a central theme in student leaders’ responsibilities. They work closely with housemasters and academic heads to identify challenges, propose solutions, and enforce inclusive policies. Examples include:

“In collaboration with the school administration, we make sure that no students are left behind and their needs are met.” (Student 9)

“My role as a student leader in this inclusive school is to help promote discipline and uprightness of my fellow students with the help of the administration, and make sure we all follow the inclusive education policy governing the school.” (Student 10)

“So most of the time, when there is a report about bullying... we investigate and report the culprit to the school management for necessary actions. We do this quickly because we do not want bullying to be part of our school culture.” (Student 7)

Staff perspectives reinforced this collaborative dynamic:

“After they are appointed as student leaders, we do orientation for them... ensuring that colleagues with some form of disability feel included in all school activities.” (Department Head)

“Upon their appointment, we provide orientation... because we, the staff, do not live with the students in their dormitories, so we must collaborate with the student leaders to ensure that their colleagues with disabilities are well taken care of.” (Headmaster)

This partnership highlights the shared responsibility between students and administrators in sustaining inclusive practices.

Providing peer support

Peer support emerged as a critical dimension of student leadership in inclusive schools. Leaders assist students with disabilities in navigating academic and physical challenges, thereby fostering equity and belonging.

Participants explained:

“Helping students with disabilities is my priority as a prefect in an inclusive school. Sometimes I volunteer to help my classmates who are visually impaired to understand concepts... and encourage other students to do the same.” (Student 1)

“We assist with mobility and orientation. We help our visually impaired colleagues... show them where the classrooms are, and aid them with any physical challenges.” (Student 17)

“To guarantee that our visually impaired classmates have access to the same information... we volunteer to read aloud or explain visual items to them. We also take notes, giving thorough summaries of lessons or study sessions.” (Student 5)

These practices highlight the importance of peer-led initiatives in bridging accessibility gaps and ensuring that students with disabilities participate fully in school life.

Relationship and Engagement

Building Strong Bonds

The findings highlight the importance of cordial relationships between student leaders and peers with disabilities in fostering inclusive school environments. These relationships are grounded in empathy, trust, and collaboration, which safeguard the holistic growth and welfare of all students. Respect and understanding were consistently emphasized as critical to sustaining inclusivity. Participants described these bonds as follows:

“The relationship among the student leaders and those with disabilities is cordial... The student leaders include their colleagues with disabilities in programmes such as group studies, social gatherings and religious activities, making them feel part of the school community.” (Head of Department)

“I have a healthy and good relationship with learners with disability... I have devoted my time to serve student boarders with disability.” (Student 1)

“My relationship with students with disabilities is very friendly... the bond between students with disabilities and me is quite strong.” (Student 13)

“Our relationship is close-knit; we consider them integral members of our community and strive to support and cooperate with them.” (Student 18)

These accounts demonstrate how student leaders actively integrate peers with disabilities into academic, social, and religious activities, thereby reinforcing their sense of belonging within the school community.

Advocating for support

Beyond relationship-building, student leaders serve as advocates for students with disabilities, acting as intermediaries between the student body and school administration. Their role involves reporting concerns, negotiating for resources, and ensuring inclusive policies are implemented effectively.

Illustrative comments include:

“Because I am a leader, I serve as a link between the student body and administration. So, I will report their issues to the administration.” (Student 4)

“School management is actively improving resource centres for students with disabilities, which I have advocated for, and I have noticed positive changes.” (Student 14)

“Any student, whether sighted or visually impaired, reports to me about his or her problem; I take it into consideration and engage other students and the school management to address the issue.” (Student 2)

“I try to negotiate with management to seek help from them in order to address the needs of our students with disability.” (Student 5)

These findings underscore the dual role of student leaders as both peer supporters and policy advocates, ensuring that students with disabilities have access to necessary resources and equitable opportunities.

Positive impact and recognition of Inclusive Education

Participants expressed optimism about the transformative potential of inclusive education, recognizing its role in empowering students with disabilities and preparing them for leadership in society. Their narratives reflect confidence in inclusive education as a catalyst for broader societal inclusion.

Examples include:

“Yes, inclusive education has a future because it has produced prominent people in society, including those with disabilities; the school serves as a platform for everyone to hone their leadership skills for society.” (Student Leader 10)

“I believe it has a promising future because... they once had a visually impaired student as the head school prefect in 2019. The inclusive education he received in our school helped develop his leadership skills.” (Student Leader 12)

“I am highly optimistic because this programme is being carried out in this school... Not long ago, some past students from this school were called to the Ghana Bar as lawyers. Everybody in Ghana was happy that visually impaired people had been able to study to become lawyers. As teachers, we look at such news, and we become proud of our achievement.” (Headmaster)

These reflections highlight the broader societal recognition of inclusive education’s success, with student leaders and staff viewing it as a pathway to empowerment, professional achievement, and social transformation.

Challenges faced by student leaders in supporting Inclusive Education

While it is evident that student leaders play a pivotal role in fostering diversity and ensuring equal opportunities for all learners in Ghanaian schools, they often face various challenges that hinder their ability to advocate for and support students with disabilities.

Resource limitations

A recurring theme in the interviews was the lack of adequate resources and facilities tailored to the needs of students with disabilities. This deficiency not only impedes learning but also perpetuates exclusion within the school community:

“We do not have adequate resources, and it is retarding our work.” (Student 1)

“We lack resources, hindering our work. We seek assistance, especially in acquiring assistive technology like computers, crucial for effective teaching.” (Staff Two)

Negative attitudes and discrimination

Persistent negative attitudes towards students with disabilities remain a barrier to social integration. Student leaders reported challenges in orienting new students and addressing discriminatory behaviours:

“Some students find it difficult relating with students with disabilities.” (Student 11)

“Most of the students in the first year... find it weird sleeping in the same dormitory or eating with students with disabilities. In such situations, we as leaders must find ways to orient them.” (Student 15)

“Some sighted students take advantage of the visually impaired students, which needs to be stopped for a positive, inclusive environment.” (Student 8)

Communication barriers

Effective communication among stakeholders is essential for inclusion, yet student leaders often encounter difficulties in engaging peers with disabilities, leading to misunderstandings:

“Communicating with our colleagues with disabilities can be tough sometimes, as they at times feel they are being taken advantage of.” (Student 13)

“Some of the visually impaired students... pressure you with their issues... when you are telling them the right thing, they do not like it. They still insist that whatever they are saying is the right thing.” (Student 4)

Organisational and administrative constraints

Systemic issues such as delays in student placement, inefficient scheduling, and conflicting responsibilities further complicate student leaders' roles:

“We are often called upon during our study and prep times to supervise activities, which can be quite challenging.” (Student 12)

“Incoming Form One students often face delays in their placement, affecting their integration into the educational system.” (Student 2)

Knowledge and training gaps

The student leadership is often not trained as per disability awareness and inclusive practices which restricts them to effectively meet the complex needs of students with disabilities. Such disparity in knowledge and training is often followed with the best intentions but wrong. Lack of a good interpretation of the principles of inclusive education and what students with disabilities need as the particular ones, student leaders can fail to recognize some significant elements of support or use the proper strategies.

One of the student leaders told me:

“We make our best effort to accommodate students with disabilities however, there are cases when we do not know what to do to meet the needs of these students. I believe that they could do a better job of helping them, particularly in academics, with more training” (Student 6)

The consequences of this training gap on the capacity of the other student leaders to represent their colleagues were also noted by another student leader:

“I sometimes do not know what resources or strategies to propose when a person with a disability wants to have some difficulties. It is frustrating since I would like to help, yet I do not necessarily have the knowledge to do it”. (Student 9)

The insufficiency of the organized training also affects the confidence of the leaders in their positions. According to one of the student leaders:

“I feel uncertain at times. I would also like to make sure that I am being inclusive but I am also afraid that I could be doing less or even doing something wrong without the necessary training”. (Student 15)

This feedback brings out the need to introduce structured capacity-building programs with an aim of filling the knowledge and training gaps. Disability awareness, inclusive education practices, and needs of the students with disabilities formal training programs would enable the student leaders to become more effective and informed in their efforts to offer more effective support. Also, it may be possible to develop confidence in student leaders in the programs and they would feel prepared to deal with the complications of serving peers with disabilities. One participant suggested:

“We should have more workshops or trainings on how we can better help the students with disabilities, communicate with them, and make them feel a sense of inclusion. That would be a tremendous difference”. (Student 18)

This explanatory requirement of such training is evident and organized capacity building efforts would be important in imparting skills and knowledge required by the student leaders in their work of promoting inclusive education.

Balancing academic and leadership roles

Student leaders are supposed to perform leadership roles in addition to the academic performance and this dual responsibility tends to overwhelm them, resulting into burnout and low efficacies in advocacy. Numerous student leaders explained that it is challenging to juggle between their school work and leadership responsibilities. One student leader shared:

“It's tough. In other cases, I may miss on studying hours or homework to make appearances at meetings or assisting with the school work. I think that I have to balance between academics and leadership all the time, and it is a burden”. (Student 3)

The other student leader commented on the fact that you feel the pressure of trying to be good in both aspects: “I have also had those days where I am so tired since I am striving to be a good leader and at the same time maintain my grades. One cannot fully commit to either of them and I tend to think that I am not doing well” (Student 10).

The pressure of having to balance between these two jobs does not only affect their well-being but also their capacity to act on behalf of the students with disabilities. One of the participants noted the decreased ability to participate in inclusive education initiatives because of this imbalance:

“At times, I feel too exhausted to be an active participant in the discussions or ensure I champion students with disabilities since I am mentally exhausted with balancing other aspects. I feel as though I do not put my best in either of the roles” (Student 6).

Moreover, the frequent change of student leaders breaks the continuity of inclusive efforts, and it becomes difficult to maintain the course of development. One of the student leaders said:

“There are plenty of changes in leadership. Whenever there is a new leader, he or she must start afresh and this is a slowing down of the progress we have made in relation to inclusive education” (Student 12).

Lack of institutional memory is also a result of this turnover where new leaders might not even know the initiatives or strategies that had been put in place before. One of the student leaders described it as follows:

“There should be greater consistency in leadership. This is a different group of leaders every year, and we tend to do the same things over and over again since it is not continuous. It is difficult to maintain the momentum going”. (Student 8)

Academic demands, leadership roles, and high turnover are some of the challenges facing student leaders in ensuring that they remain focused and effective advocates of inclusive education. This shows that more attention should be paid to support systems, including time management workshops or mentoring, so that student leaders would be able to balance their academic and leadership jobs more successfully.

Discussion

This study provides new perspectives on the contributions of student leadership to inclusive learning environments in Ghanaian schools. The findings highlight recurring themes of student leaders promoting diversity, inclusiveness, and empowerment for all students, regardless of ability. The duties and responsibilities of student leaders revealed their significant influence in implementing inclusive education. Their advocacy through co-curricular activities, team-building, and community outreach fosters inclusion, echoing DeMatthews et al. (2021) findings that extracurricular participation supports inclusive practices. By shaping attitudes and cultivating a welcoming school culture, student leaders advance diversity and equity.

The results also resonate with Magaldi and Berler (2020) concept of Distributed Leadership, which emphasizes shared responsibility among stakeholders. Applied to inclusive education, this approach enables more individualized and effective solutions by addressing diverse learner needs. Similarly, the collaboration between student leaders and administrators reflects research on stakeholder involvement and shared leadership (Dawadi et al., 2021; DeMatthews et al., 2020). Their distinct student perspectives, often overlooked, inform decision-making and ensure policies are responsive to varied student populations. This is consistent with Ainscow and Sandill’s (2010) emphasis on shared values and equitable opportunities.

Findings on relationships and engagement indicate the transformative potential of close connections between student leaders and peers with disabilities. Built on empathy, trust, and cooperation, these relationships foster inclusive school cultures that value diversity and individual strengths. This aligns with Causton-Theoharis et al. (2011) who emphasised on the importance of shared vision, and Oliver and Raney (2014) social model of disability, which locates barriers in society rather than individual limitations. By encouraging meaningful interactions, student leaders help dismantle social barriers and generate social capital (Putnam, 2000), strengthening networks of support within the school community.

Participants’ recognition of inclusive education’s benefits reflects Messiou (2019) and Hernández-Torrano et al. (2022), who argue that inclusive schooling can catalyze broader societal inclusion. This optimistic view aligns with Swaffield and Major’s (2019) call for stakeholder cooperation. Student leaders contribute by fostering respectful, empowering environments that enable all students to succeed. Evidence from Oh-Young and Filler’s (2015) meta-analysis further reinforces that inclusive settings enhance academic achievement, suggesting student leaders are instrumental in realizing these benefits.

Nonetheless, challenges remain. Participants identified barriers such as inadequate facilities and resources for students with disabilities, consistent with prior studies on infrastructure limitations (Andrews et al., 2021). These issues mirror global obstacles, including insufficient funding, teacher shortages, and inaccessible schools. Addressing them requires collective advocacy, with student leaders playing a vital role in pressing for improved accessibility and resources.

Finally, the findings point to the importance of adopting a critical stance toward inclusive education. As Liasidou (2012) argues, inclusion is an ongoing process requiring negotiation and reflection rather than a straightforward solution. The awareness and proactive engagement of student leaders and other stakeholders represent meaningful progress toward overcoming these challenges and advancing inclusive practices.

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