
Fostering Inclusive Youth Leaders: A Review of Key Findings and Best Practices

Special Olympics Global Center
for Inclusion in Education

*Jennifer Donahue, Kaitlyn Hamrick, Katharine Brush Gilmore,
and Lily Massaro*



**SPECIAL OLYMPICS
GLOBAL CENTER**
FOR INCLUSION IN EDUCATION



Ray Lane of Lane Global Youth Leadership joins youth from Special Olympics Oman at the Global Youth Leadership Summit in Abu Dhabi, United Arab Emirates

About the Global Center

The Global Center for Inclusion in Education began in 2020 as a conceptual framework: it would serve as a centralized resource of support for the expanding network of Special Olympics Unified Champion Schools® with their three components of school-based Unified Sports®, Inclusive Youth Leadership, and Whole-School Engagement. The foundational goal of the Global Center is to illuminate, broaden, and intensify the impact of the World Games Abu Dhabi 2019 by driving targeted, grassroots change for social inclusion across the globe using the Middle East/North Africa Region as a base. This work includes serving as a hub for evaluation research on inclusive programming and for basic research on the development of inclusive mindsets across cultures. To help achieve this goal, the Center supports a series of research and policy briefs, as well as case studies, on topics critical to inclusion in education. These briefs bring Special Olympics experts together with thought partners in the research and policy fields related to education and youth development and their intersection with Unified Sports programming.

About the Harvard EASEL Lab

The Ecological Approaches to Social Emotional Learning (EASEL) Laboratory, a leading research center at the Harvard Graduate School of Education, explores the effects of high-quality, social-emotional interventions on the development and achievement of children, youth, teachers, parents, and communities. The work of the EASEL Lab takes place in applied settings (e.g., schools and communities) and employs a combination of rigorous quantitative and qualitative methods to investigate how particular configurations of and transactions among individuals, their social groups, the settings in which they interact, and broader social contexts influence human development.

Visit <https://easel.gse.harvard.edu> to learn more about the work of the EASEL Lab.

About the Authors

Jennifer Donahue, MEd, is the Director of Research for Education and Youth Development at Special Olympics, where she oversees a portfolio of research projects, including global impact evaluations and field-building projects about social inclusion in education and sports contexts. Jenny has more than a decade of experience researching, developing, and evaluating interventions and strategies designed to build SEL, student well-being, and mental health in school and out-of-school settings, along with writing and disseminating peer-reviewed articles, practical resources, white papers, and other tools that translate research into practice.

Kaitlyn Hamrick is the Senior Director of Global Youth Development at Special Olympics, where she oversees the organization's youth leadership initiatives and applies over a decade of professional experience in both Special Olympics International and Special Olympics North Carolina. Her early work as a youth leader within Special Olympics helped shape her deep commitment to fostering inclusive communities. Committed to empowering young individuals globally, Kaitlyn strives to nurture them as catalysts for change within inclusive schools and communities.

Katharine Brush Gilmore is a Senior Research Manager at the Ecological Approaches to Social Emotional Learning (EASEL) Laboratory at the Harvard Graduate School of Education and is co-author of the lab's Navigating SEL guides. Her work supports projects that strengthen the links between research and practice in the field of social and emotional learning, and her research interests include the effective promotion of social, emotional, and ethical development in early childhood and K-12 settings. Prior to joining the EASEL Lab, she served as an AmeriCorps tutor and mentor at City Year, a nonprofit that partners with public schools to help students stay in school and on track to graduate. Katie holds an EdM in Human Development and Psychology from Harvard and a BA from Tufts University.

Lily Massaro is a Project Coordinator at the EASEL Lab, working on projects about equity, inclusion, and localization in U.S. and international settings. Her research interests include equity-focused SEL, research-practice partnerships, and strengthening developmental relationships. Prior to joining the Lab, she worked in children's literacy programming, international education, and SEL curriculum development. Lily holds an EdM in Human Development and Education from Harvard and a BA in Psychology and Education Studies from Middlebury College.

Suggested Citation for This Publication

Donahue, J., Hamrick, K., Gilmore, K. B., & Massaro, L. (March 2024). Fostering inclusive youth leaders: A review of key findings and best practices. (Research brief 112). Special Olympics Global Center for Inclusion in Education. <https://www.specialolympics.org/what-we-do/youth-and-schools/global-center-for-inclusion-in-education/research?locale=en>

Easy Read: An Easy Read version of this brief is available at:
<https://www.specialolympics.org/what-we-do/youth-and-schools/resources/briefs?locale=en>

Introduction to Inclusive Leadership

Across the globe, individuals with intellectual disabilities (ID) are routinely underestimated and undervalued. They experience drastically lower rates of employment, are often overlooked in discussions of diversity in the workplace, and have few opportunities to develop marketable or employable skills. Unsurprisingly, individuals with ID report that these experiences have negative impacts on their overall confidence and motivation.¹

An important avenue for fostering more inclusive organizations, schools, and communities is to focus on the development of inclusive leaders—those who value and prioritize equity and acceptance and can act as agents of change, not only for people with ID but across all ability, race, gender, sexuality, age, religion, and class differences. The work of developing such leaders begins with youth.

Since its inception in 1968, Special Olympics has been working toward a more inclusive world. The purpose of Special Olympics' youth leadership programming is to empower young people of all abilities to find their voices and serve as inclusive leaders in their communities—now and into the future. All around the world, Special Olympics supports young people with and without ID working together in their schools and communities to plan and lead advocacy, awareness, and other inclusive activities. Inclusive youth leadership means that everyone has the opportunity to contribute their unique perspectives, abilities, and leadership skills to projects that feel meaningful to them.

Recent studies focus on the escalating mental health challenges facing youth—challenges that have noticeably worsened as a result of the enduring aftermath of the COVID-19 pandemic. This global crisis in the realm of physical health intensified mental health stressors such as social isolation, disruptions in education, and economic uncertainty, disproportionately impacting young people worldwide.² Compounding this issue is the significant population of youth residing in regions vulnerable to conflict and instability, heightening their susceptibility to mental health struggles. Approximately one in four youth globally reside “in settings affected by armed conflict or organized violence,” accelerating the urgency to address their mental health needs and prevent long-lasting consequences.³

Tackling the critical mental health challenges of young people requires innovative approaches. Recent research by Tint and colleagues underscores the positive impact of Special Olympics participation in mitigating these struggles. Their analysis of 46 articles reveals that individuals who engage in Special Olympics exhibit improved general physical health, a more positive psychological and emotional outlook, and enhanced social connections as compared with their peers with intellectual disabilities who do not participate.⁴ Moreover, involvement in Special Olympics is associated with increased feelings of self-worth and self-esteem, as well as a reduction in challenging behaviors.⁵



Youth Leaders from Special Olympics Kansas (U.S.) encourage each other at the 2023 Special Olympics Global Youth Leadership Summit in Berlin, Germany

These findings highlight the importance of programs such as Special Olympics in providing opportunities for social skills development and fostering supportive friendships, ultimately bolstering mental well-being among youth. Youth report that Special Olympics programming exposes them to new experiences and people, that it helps them develop valuable leadership skills and learn to work with people who are different from them, and that participating in leadership activities boosts their self-esteem and ability to advocate for themselves.⁶⁻⁸ It is clear that something valuable is happening within Special Olympics settings.

This brief summarizes key findings from a comprehensive review of the literature on youth leadership development.² The review was commissioned by Special Olympics as part of the Inclusive Mindsets & Behaviors Research Initiative, a partnership between Special

Olympics and the Ecological Approaches to Social Emotional Learning (EASEL) Laboratory at the Harvard Graduate School of Education. Although the compilation and analysis will help guide and strengthen Special Olympics' work in this area, the information shared in this brief extends beyond Special Olympics settings. It is relevant to any organization or practitioner seeking to translate and apply what is known from the literature on youth leadership to their work with young people.

The brief begins with an overview of the state of the research on youth leadership development and then builds upon that knowledge base to offer a concrete working definition of youth leadership development, best practices for developing inclusive youth leaders, and recommendations for strengthening youth leadership programming.

The State of the Research on Youth Leadership Development

Before moving into an analysis of the state of youth leadership, it is important to note that little is known about this area of youth development, and this is particularly true when it comes to youth with disabilities. Despite a rapid increase in recent decades in the number and reach of leadership development programs that target youth,¹⁰ youth leadership is not a common focus of educational theory or research. Much of the research on leadership development is focused on adults in business or political settings, with little attention given to youth contexts or needs.¹¹ There have been few attempts to clarify or define what leadership looks like and how it develops within this age group,¹²⁻¹⁵ resulting in fragmented definitions and understandings across the field.

For example, while some conceptualizations of youth leadership focus on *civic* leadership, emphasizing interest in and engagement with issues of broad public interest and critical social analysis, others focus on *relational* leadership, stressing the ability to manage interpersonal dynamics for the good of the group.¹⁶⁻¹⁸ In other words, research does not yet provide a clear or robust understanding of what youth leadership looks like in practice, how it can be developed, and which outcomes practitioners should be aiming for, or expect to see, in programming. As a result, despite

the large number of youth leadership programs in existence today, few are grounded in strong theory or evidence.¹⁹⁻²⁰

Even less is known about leadership development for youth with disabilities, and very few leadership programs explicitly include or focus on youth with ID.²¹⁻²² The literature that does exist was born out of a movement to promote independence and the right to decision-making powers for people with disabilities. This literature primarily frames leadership development as a pathway toward greater self-advocacy and self-determination.^{21,23-26} Youth with disabilities often have limited opportunities to voice their preferences and make choices, which can lead them to be uncertain about or have difficulty in articulating their strengths, interests, preferences, and future plans.^{21,23,27} Self-advocacy, or the ability of a person to advocate for their own rights and desires, is a critical component of self-determination, which is the ability of a disabled person to make decisions for themselves.²⁶ The disability movement views the ability of self-advocates to serve as organizational and civic leaders as a critical step on the path toward better representation and rights for the disability community;²⁸ however, the literature lacks information about the concept of *inclusive* youth leadership, which involves youth with and without disabilities working together to promote greater social inclusion, equity, and acceptance within their communities.

What Is Youth Leadership and How Can It Be Developed?

Despite the fragmented nature of the research on youth leadership development and the lack of a coherent definition, several consistent core themes emerge from the literature. The authors consolidated these themes into a single working definition to capture how youth leadership has been defined to date: **Youth leadership is a relational process whereby individuals influence others to achieve a common goal, mobilize people to face shared challenges, and empower them to act on their own beliefs out of a sense of shared responsibility.**[12,14,20,29-30](#)

This definition aligns with many of the important developmental milestones of adolescence, such as a desire to build a social identity, the quest for independence, and a growing sense of idealism.[12,18,20,30](#) Special Olympics' approach to inclusive youth leadership is consistent with this definition, providing expanded and intentional opportunities for youth to build foundational leadership skills and become agents of change in their schools and communities. Integral to this approach is the bringing together of youth with and without intellectual disabilities to learn and lead as partners, fostering a collaborative environment where all young people are valued equally and are recognized as catalysts for positive transformation.

Overall, leadership education is associated with many positive outcomes for youth. In addition to enhancing skills in communication, social-emotional expression, decision-making, and self-regulation,[11,31-32](#) research shows that efforts to develop youth leadership promote outcomes associated with positive youth development more generally, such as increased self-esteem, fulfillment, independence, and motivation for academic achievement.[15,31](#) Moreover, when healthy amounts of stress are introduced during leadership development experiences (e.g., public speaking), they support the development of executive functioning, self-regulation, and coping strategies.[30,33](#) Multiple studies have shown that the decision-making processes involved in leadership experiences can strengthen a young person's sense of ethical and social responsibility, prosocial values, civic engagement, and the belief that one can make a positive difference in the world.[10,14-15,19,30-31](#) Other benefits of youth leadership experiences include increased confidence, personal fulfillment, and resiliency.[12,31](#)

The following section presents a number of key understandings, skills, attitudes, and values that research-based evidence demonstrates to be essential to youth leadership, as well as the processes and practices that support leadership development in this population.

Leadership Knowledge, Skills, Attitudes, and Values

What specific knowledge, competencies, and mindsets do young people need if they are to become effective leaders and serve as agents of positive change in their communities? As with many areas of development, becoming a good leader is about more than just acquiring certain skills. While **leadership skills and knowledge** form the core of the competencies and information that youth are able to learn, practice, and put to use in order to be effective leaders, the application of those skills and knowledge is also driven by a set of **attitudes and values** that influence how people view and understand themselves and the world around them. Together, these attitudes and values serve as an “internal guide” that drives and directs behavior and action.

These principles are closely aligned with Special Olympics’ [framework for inclusive mindsets and behaviors](#), which outlines a core set of values, skills, and experiences that ultimately drive inclusive behavior and, in this context, inclusive youth leadership.

Essential to the framework is the role that youth leadership can and should play as a driver for inclusion as youth learn to advocate for themselves and their peers, to believe in their ability to effect change, and to amplify and champion marginalized voices in their schools and communities.

And while the research specific to leadership competencies for youth with disabilities is still limited, one study found that when youth with disabilities were asked which leadership competencies they most value, they listed **communication, perseverance, independence, and motivation to lead.**²¹

Table 1 draws from the current range of youth leadership literature, as well as related research on civic engagement and social change, to outline a set of core knowledge, skills, attitudes, and values associated with effective youth leadership. While these lists are not all-inclusive, by delineating areas that may be important to target or promote in programming, they can serve as a starting place for organizations, programs, and other entities seeking to develop youth leadership.



Youth Leaders from Special Olympics Mongolia connect digitally with Youth Leaders from across the globe

Table 1

Knowledge, Skills, Attitudes, and Values of Youth Leaders [11-12,14,16,18,22,30-31,34-35](#)

Knowledge and Skills of Youth Leaders

- **Effective communication**, including being able to clearly articulate a vision.
- **Critical thinking and decision-making skills**, including the ability to analyze, reason, and make choices.
- **Empathy**—understanding others’ emotions and point of view.
- **Interpersonal skills**, including conflict resolution, collaboration, and relationship-building skills such as cultivating trust and belonging.
- **Self-awareness, self-reflection, and self-regulation**, including the ability to honestly monitor, assess, and manage one’s strengths, weaknesses, and behavior, as well as a general awareness and understanding of one’s position in the group and contribution to group dynamics.
- **Insight and knowledge** in the relevant field.
- **Critical awareness** of sociopolitical structures that contribute to marginalization.

Attitudes and Values of Youth Leaders

- **Social and ethical responsibility**, including having compassion for others and being sensitive to the needs of society.
- **Inclusivity**, including empowering people, valuing the talents and perspectives of others, and commitment to collaboration.
- **Self-efficacy**—a belief in one’s own capabilities.
- **Independence**, including thinking for oneself and using one’s voice to autonomously act for change.
- **Process orientation toward leadership**—viewing leadership as a process of acquiring knowledge and skills rather than as a static state of being.
- **Motivation**—an inner drive to lead and accomplish tasks.
- **Perseverance**—continuing to strive toward a goal in the face of challenges.



Global Youth Leadership Council members representing Special Olympics Africa, Special Olympics Asia Pacific, Special Olympics East Asia, Special Olympics Europe/Eurasia, Special Olympics Latin America, Special Olympics Middle East/North Africa, and Special Olympics North America discuss ways to elevate youth voice through Special Olympics' work around the world

Best Practices for Developing Youth Leaders

For researchers and practitioners alike, many questions remain about how the skills and attitudes associated with youth leadership can be developed most effectively. However, most models of youth leadership development posit that leadership knowledge, skills, attitudes, and values are acquired gradually over time and in stages. The exact number of stages and their unique characteristics vary among the different models of youth leadership development, but there is general agreement that youth move along a continuum from not actively thinking about leadership, to reflecting on their own leadership potential, to seeking out opportunities to learn and practice leadership skills, to actively improving their leadership skills, to finally viewing themselves as leaders. In order to progress along this continuum and develop as leaders, youth must continuously be (a) expanding their self-awareness, (b) participating in social relationships, and (c) strengthening their communication skills. It is through ongoing engagement in these three essential components that youth are, over a period of years, able to develop their capacity to act as effective leaders. [18,27,30](#)

The remainder of this brief delves into the youth leadership model that has been developed by Special Olympics and that continues to prove its effectiveness across the globe. It should be noted that the authors have personal experience with the implementation and impact of the model and its applicability for replication by like-minded organizations and programs.



Youth exchange high fives at a Unified football match during the Special Olympics Africa Regional Youth Leadership Summit in Johannesburg, South Africa

Since its inception, Special Olympics has been dedicated to fostering the growth of young leaders, both with and without intellectual disabilities. This work is undertaken through an inclusive youth leadership framework that prioritizes developmentally appropriate opportunities to build the knowledge, skills, attitudes, and values that research and practical experience have shown to be essential to developing youth leaders. Integral to this model is the bringing together of individuals with and without intellectual disabilities. This focus on inclusion provides increased visibility, interaction, and appreciation of one another, leading to improvements in social and emotional skills that are critical not only to leadership but to success and well-being across multiple domains of life. [6.36-37](#)

It is clear that organizations and programs seeking to develop youth leaders should be intentional about providing youth with experiences, both structured and informal,

that are designed to help them build leadership competencies and engage in the essential components of leadership development. [33](#) In many countries, this provision of experiences is limited by cultural preferences that (a) place youth in what turn out to be pseudo-leadership roles lacking any real power and (b) teach leadership skills in isolation from real-life experiences and influences, without addressing authentic youth concerns.

Special Olympics' youth leadership programming is grounded in the belief that young people possess the ability to drive inclusive change in their schools and communities today. The model involves a range of youth initiatives, such as skills training, in-person events, summits, youth councils, and youth-led inclusion grants—all designed to empower and equip young individuals in the real world. Through this approach, Special Olympics has learned that effectiveness stems not only from the opportunities provided to young people, but also from the frequency of these opportunities. Both the sustained engagement and the accumulation of experiences are crucial in creating lasting impact. For example, as part of its Youth Innovation Initiative, Special Olympics provides funding directly to young people to lead grassroots-level projects that they design themselves and then execute to drive inclusion and make a meaningful impact within their communities.

In addition to offering financial support for young leaders to implement their projects, Special Olympics also provides high-quality project management training, youth leadership development, and technical assistance to help them expand their skills. The organization’s youth programming is itself driven by youth leaders who model and lead trainings for other youth around the globe. By entrusting the power to the youth and equipping them with the skills they need, Special Olympics recognizes their potential to flourish as leaders.

Table 2 outlines the factors identified in the literature as essential to facilitating leadership development opportunities for youth, both with and without disabilities. The list reflects elements that support youth leadership development in general, as well as those that apply specifically to disability contexts.^{21,23-24} These factors have been critical in guiding Special Olympics’ youth development model.

Table 2
Key Factors That Influence Youth Leadership Development

Factors	Best Practices
Adult Support	Foster positive relationships with adults who can serve as role models, mentors, and motivators. Adults supporting youth with disabilities should be intentional and informed about the developmental needs of youth and be able to connect youth to networks, people, and opportunities for leadership development— especially since lack of access to such opportunities can be a significant barrier for youth with disabilities. It's important to recognize that some cultural environments establish and support impediments to allowing youth to have a voice. Adults must actively work to dismantle these barriers and create inclusive spaces where youth, regardless of ability, can thrive and contribute meaningfully.
Emotional Engagement & Reflection	Create safe spaces where youth can feel comfortable revealing vulnerability and reflecting on discomfort. If young people are in touch with their emotions, understand the source of their vulnerability, and have high self-awareness, then they are better able to practice leadership with a sense of empathy for others. This factor is particularly important for young people who come from marginalized backgrounds; they may be able to gain greater self-awareness as leaders if they have a safe environment in which to reflect on their struggles and work through their feelings with a trusted adult.
Early Access	Provide early access to formal training opportunities—before late adolescence—so young people are prepared to take advantage of leadership opportunities that arise later in life. Point out everyday examples of youth leadership to help young people recognize what it looks like and the many forms it can take. Schools often lack spaces or programs for children and youth with disabilities to start experiencing and learning about leadership from a young age. Studies argue that given early exposure to such programs, students could develop self-advocacy skills and competencies much sooner, allowing them to seize greater advantage from opportunities that come their way later in adolescence or after high school.

Table 2 (continued)

Factors	Best Practices
<p>Educational Attainment</p>	<p>Support academic rigor, recognizing its influence on the leadership development process; promote the climate of academic environments as safe spaces for exercising self-advocacy. Students who do well in school have greater self-efficacy and confidence, allowing them to feel empowered to participate in leadership programs and to challenge themselves by accepting leadership positions.</p>
<p>Working with Others</p>	<p>Nurture communication and social interaction skills, especially by providing opportunities to collaborate and work with diverse others. Engaging in such opportunities helps young people learn how to listen, resolve conflicts, and navigate different perspectives. These key competencies of any leader are ultimately connected to the concept of youth leadership as a relational process that involves influencing a diverse group to come together and work towards a shared goal.</p>
<p>Inclusive Infrastructure</p>	<p>Provide access to community services and supports such as assistive technology, transportation, and personal assistance services. A lack of access to these necessary supports has been shown to undermine or even prevent disabled youth's participation in leadership development.</p>
<p>Structured & Authentic Learning Experiences</p>	<p>Offer real-world, relevant, and contextualized leadership experiences that help youth develop skills such as decision-making, goal-setting, and teamwork through practice, especially in community-based settings. Opportunities to lead in the real world in a structured context, whether in a student club at college or via a community-based project, help concretize the abstract idea of leadership. Young people are better able to define for themselves what leadership is and who they are as leaders in these authentic, contextualized experiences.</p>
<p>Integrated Learning Environments</p>	<p>Provide access to both general and disability-specific community settings for a mutually beneficial exchange between youth with and without disabilities. These inclusive opportunities allow youth with and without disabilities to interact and collaborate with each other, which can improve positive attitudes and potentially reduce the harm and discrimination that youth with disabilities often face. In addition, having access to general, integrated communities, as well as disability-specific communities, can give youth with disabilities greater access to diverse opportunities.</p>

Recommendations for Strengthening Youth Leadership Programming

While organizations and programs focused on youth leadership have been around for decades, given the limited and fragmented research in this area many such programs are not grounded in a strong theory of youth development, nor are they necessarily using curricula and leadership activities that are well-aligned with what is known about effective youth leadership development.¹⁹ Indeed, findings from the authors' recent content analysis of youth leadership programs,* including some that work explicitly with youth with ID and others that have a broader focus on youth in general, uncovered a set of common gaps and areas for improvement, including that:

- Leadership programs for youth with disabilities are more focused on personal development than on leading one's community to change for the better.
- A strong focus on career readiness/professional development across all leadership programs is reflective of the programs' tendency to focus on future leadership potential rather

than on enabling youth to lead right here, right now, as they are.

- While skills in social-emotional learning are a desired outcome of leadership programs, few activities directly target the development of these skills.
- Adult mentors could be better positioned as equal partners with youth mentees.
- Most programs lack an explicit definition or conceptual framework of youth leadership to guide programming.

These challenges are consistent with trends in the literature on youth leadership development and highlight several opportunities for growth within youth leadership programming—especially for creating more inclusive leadership opportunities for youth with disabilities. Based on the review of the literature on youth leadership development and the challenges identified in the content analysis, Special Olympics offers the following recommendations for organizations or practitioners seeking to adapt and strengthen existing approaches to youth leadership development.

1 Include youth voice in developing their learning experiences. Youth have their own language, approaches, and mindsets when it comes to practicing leadership. Adults need to solicit youth voice and take their perspectives into account when conducting research and developing programs.

How to put it into practice:

Ensure that youth voice and perspective are embedded into every facet of youth programming by giving youth a seat at the table. Including young people in the planning of programming or events will promote programming that is *for* youth, *by* youth. For example, Special Olympics has established a Global Youth Leadership Council. This council consists of young individuals, both with and without intellectual disabilities, who offer valuable guidance, counsel, and leadership. They play a pivotal role in shaping the initiatives and programs that Special Olympics develops specifically for the youth community.

*Programs analyzed were Special Olympics, TechGirls, National Youth Leadership Council (NYLC), Partners for Youth with Disabilities, and Latin American Leadership Academy. These programs were chosen to represent a variety of target ages, geographic locations, and levels of governance (local, federal, and international).

2 Create opportunities that foster youth leadership in the present, instead of training them to lead in the future. Encourage them to actively engage in community projects, collaborative initiatives, and decision-making processes, cultivating the skills and confidence needed for effective leadership in the present moment.

How to put it into practice:

The foundation of Special Olympics' youth leadership programming rests on the conviction that today's young people have the power to instigate inclusive change. Give youth leaders the opportunity to lead from the beginning by including them in planning and decision making, by asking them to co-develop skills trainings and events, and by scaffolding opportunities to build important skills throughout these essential processes. Special Olympics' approach involves a range of youth initiatives, such as skills training, in-person events, summits, youth councils, and inclusion grants, all designed by youth for youth with appropriate adult mentorship and modeling. Together, Special Olympics programs across the world are cultivating a generation of leaders dedicated to creating a more inclusive and supportive society.

3 Include more critical approaches to leadership. Such approaches should address power dynamics and social structures in both the design of youth leadership (e.g., more horizontal power structures) and the skills and competencies being taught to young people. Doing so can help equip youth to challenge the status quo and to lead change in their own settings and contexts.

How to put it into practice:

Recognize and value the unique perspective and capability of young people. Special Olympics firmly believes that young individuals possess not only the potential but also the essential insight needed to drive meaningful transformation. Their contributions are at least as valid and vital, if not more so, than those of other leaders within the organization. This acknowledgment forms the foundation for adopting a horizontal power structure in youth leadership. Emphasis on a collaborative and inclusive approach aims to break away from conventional hierarchies that may undermine the voices and contributions of young leaders. Accordingly, youth leadership programming should support young people to examine and call out prejudice and stereotypes, to stand up for themselves and others, and to advocate for community support and resources.

4 Foster the identification and development of strengths in all leaders. By recognizing and developing the strengths of all leaders, regardless of age or disability, organizations can harness the unique skills and capabilities of each leader, prompting increased collaboration, innovation, and overall success.

How to put it into practice:

Provide youth with opportunities to recognize and build upon their strengths. For example, engage youth in activities designed to promote self-awareness and self-reflection. This could be as simple as building in questions at the end of an activity or meeting that prompt individuals to think about the different skills they used and to identify things they want to continue to improve. Peer feedback also provides mutually beneficial opportunities for youth to reflect, share, and learn from each other. Special Olympics utilizes Unified pairs (one person with ID and one without) to do just this, providing the pair of youth with a scaffolded activity and dialogue for sharing observations with each other about their leadership strengths.

Conclusion

This brief summarizes what is currently known about youth leadership development with the goal of guiding and strengthening youth leadership programming and research at Special Olympics and beyond, including helping to inform future directions for programming and research. Little is known in either theory or practice about inclusive youth leadership—what it is, who it involves, and how it best develops—especially for youth with disabilities. Despite this, Special Olympics and other youth development programs have an opportunity to grow and adapt based on the insights included in this brief, and to conduct research with the youth participating in their programs, with the goal of helping to build the knowledge base and case for inclusive youth leadership far beyond the reach of their own organizations. Inherent in this work is the need to increase the world’s common understanding of what leadership looks like, or can and should look like, for youth with disabilities.

Special Olympics’ youth leadership efforts are already making a difference in the lives of youth with and without ID. It is now critical to dig deeper and identify which aspects of that programming are most effective, which are most challenging, and specifically what can be adjusted, refined, or scaled, and within which contexts, in order to help Special Olympics achieve its goals of empowering young people to find their voice and become inclusive leaders, not only in the present but for life.

Youth Leaders from Special Olympics Connecticut (U.S.) admire a mural installed as part of a youth-led inclusion project called "Project Kindness"



References

1. Special Olympics Center for Inclusive Health (2020). *Unified Leadership*. <https://ihc.bright-spotcdn.com/6d/f0/ce3c1e3e42db950bbe883e22cf61/unified-leadership-external-overview-2-sept-2020.pdf>
2. World Health Organization. (2024). *Health Topics: Mental Health*. <https://www.who.int/health-topics/mental-health>
3. Simpson, G. (2018). *The missing peace: Independent progress study on youth, peace and security*. UN Population Fund and Peacebuilding Support Office. <https://www.youth4peace.info/ProgressStudy>
4. Tint, A., Thomson, K., & Weiss, J. A. (2017). A systematic literature review of the physical and psychosocial correlates of Special Olympics participation among individuals with intellectual disability. *Journal of Intellectual Disability Research*, 61(4), 301-324. <https://doi.org/10.1111/jir.12295>
5. Lloyd, M., Temple, V. A., Foley, J. T., Yeatman, S., Lunskey, Y., Huang, A., & Balogh, R. (2023). Young adults with intellectual and developmental disabilities who participate in Special Olympics are less likely to be diagnosed with depression. *Social Psychiatry and Psychiatric Epidemiology*, 58(11), 1699-1708. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s00127-022-02406-8>
6. Jacobs, H. E., Osborne, K., Landis, K., Jang, Y., McDowell, E., & Siperstein, G. N. (2017). *Special Olympics Unified Champion Schools: Year 9 evaluation report 2016-2017*. Center for Social Development and Education, University of Massachusetts Boston. https://www.umb.edu/csde/research/project_unify
7. Jacobs, H., Osborne, K., Landis, K., Van Gaasbeek, E., Smith, L., McDowell, E., & Siperstein, G. N. (2018). *Special Olympics Unified Champion Schools: Year 10 evaluation report 2017-2018*. Center for Social Development and Education, University of Massachusetts Boston. https://www.umb.edu/csde/research/project_unify
8. Special Olympics (2022). *Called to connect: Special Olympics 2022 Virtual Global Youth Leadership Summit: Event impact report*. <https://www.flipsnack.com/specialolympicsglobalyouth/virtual-global-youth-leadership-summit-final-report/full-view.html>
9. Nachtigal, T. & Shreeraman, S. (2022). *Literature review of youth leadership development* [unpublished]. Special Olympics & the Ecological Approaches to Social and Emotional Learning (EASEL) Lab, Harvard Graduate School of Education.
10. Carroll, B., & Firth, J. (2021). Leading or led? A critical exploration of youth leadership development. *Management Learning*, 52(1), 6-25. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1350507620917849>
11. Shek, D. T. L., & Yuen, A. (2019). The quest for holistic youth leadership development: What should be the desired attributes of youth leaders? *International Journal of Child and Adolescent Health*, 12(1), 43-60. <http://hdl.handle.net/10397/93756>

12. Conner, J. O., & Strobel, K. (2007). Leadership development: An examination of individual and programmatic growth. *Journal of Adolescent Research*, 22(3), 275-297. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0743558407299698>
13. Houwer, R. (2016). *Changing leaders, leading change: A leadership development model for marginalized youth in urban communities*. Youth Research and Evaluation eXchange (Youth-REX). <https://doi.org/10.15868/socialsector.34106>
14. Ricketts, J., & Rudd, R. (2002). A comprehensive leadership education model to train, teach, and develop leadership in youth. *Journal of Career and Technical Education*, 19(1), 7-17. <https://doi.org/10.21061/jcte.v19i1.655>
15. Roach, A. A., Wyman, L. T., Brooks, H., Chaves, C., Health, S. B., & Valdes, G. (1999). Leadership giftedness: Models revisited. *Gifted Child Quarterly*, 43(1), 13-24. <https://doi.org/10.1177/001698629904300103>
16. Govan, R. H., Fernandez, J. S., Lewis, D. G., & Kirshner, B. (2015). International perspectives on youth leadership development through community organizing. *New Directions for Student Leadership*, 2015(148), 87-99. <https://doi.org/10.1002/yd.20155>
17. Klau, M. (2006). Exploring youth leadership in theory and practice. *New Directions for Youth Development*, 2006(109), 57-87. <https://doi.org/10.1002/yd.155>
18. Komives, S. R., Longerbeam, S. D., Owen, J. E., Mainella, F. C., & Osteen, L. (2006). A leadership identity development model: Applications from a grounded theory. *Journal of College Student Development*, 47(4), 410-418. <https://doi.org/10.1353/csd.2006.0048>
19. Seemiller, C. (2018). A competency-based model for youth leadership development. *Journal of Leadership Education*, 17(1), 56-72. <http://doi.org/10.12806/V17/I1/R1>
20. Redmond, S., & Dolan, P. (2014). Towards a conceptual model of youth leadership development. *Child & Family Social Work*, 21(3), 261-271. <https://doi.org/10.1111/cfs.12146>
21. Carter, E. W., Swedeen, B., Walter, M. J., Moss, C. K., & Hsin, C. T. (2011). Perspectives of young adults with disabilities on leadership. *Career Development for Exceptional Individuals*, 34(1), 57-67. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0885728810387411>
22. Tan, K. L., & Adams, D. (2021). Leadership opportunities for students with disabilities in co-curricular activities: Insights and implications. *International Journal of Disability, Development and Education*, 70(5), 788-802. <https://doi.org/10.1080/1034912X.2021.1904504>
23. Caldwell, J. (2010). Leadership development of individuals with developmental disabilities in the self-advocacy movement. *Journal of Intellectual Disability Research*, 54(11), 1004-1014. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1365-2788.2010.01326.x>
24. Carter, E. W., Swedeen, B., Moss, C. K., & Pesko, M. J. (2010). "What are you doing after school?" Promoting extracurricular involvement for transition-age youth with disabilities. *Intervention in School and Clinic*, 45(5), 275-283. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1053451209359077>

25. Kimm, C. H., Yoon, S., & Kim, C. (2018). Success stories and issues in transition services for youths with intellectual disabilities in the United States of America. *The Journal of the Korean Association on Developmental Disabilities (KADD)*, 22(3), 185-211. <https://doi.org/10.34262/kadd.2018.22.3.185>
26. Test, D. W., Fowler, C. H., Wood, W. M., Brewer, D. M., & Eddy, S. (2005). A conceptual framework of self-advocacy for students with disabilities. *Remedial and Special Education*, 26(1), 43-54. <https://doi.org/10.1177/07419325050260010601>
27. Martinek, T., Schilling, T. & Hellison, D. (2006). The development of compassionate and caring leadership among adolescents. *Physical Education & Sport Pedagogy*, 11(2), 141-157. <https://doi.org/10.1080/17408980600708346>
28. Grenwelge, C., Zhang, D., & Landmark, L. (2010). Comprehensive leadership training for youth with disabilities: A new and improved youth leadership forum model. *Teaching Exceptional Children*, 42(4), 62-68. <https://doi.org/10.1177/004005991004200407>
29. Kahn, L., Hewes, S., & Ali, R. (2009). *Taking the lead: Youth leadership in theory and practice*. The Young Foundation. <https://youngfoundation.org/wp-content/uploads/2012/10/Taking-the-Lead-October-2009.pdf>
30. van Linden, J., & Fertman, C. (1998). *Youth leadership: A guide to understanding leadership development in adolescents*. Jossey-Bass.
31. De Simone, L. (2012). *Youth leadership development from the grade 8 perspective: A case study of a school-based program* [Master's thesis, University of Toronto]. https://tspace.library.utoronto.ca/bitstream/1807/33643/1/DeSimone_Laura_201211_MA_thesis.pdf
32. Watkins, E. A. (2020). *Advisor perspectives of student leadership in college organizations for students with disabilities* [Doctoral dissertation, Fordham University]. ProQuest Dissertations Publishing. <https://www.proquest.com/docview/2432920526?pq-origsite=gscholar&fromopenview=true&sourcetype=Dissertations%20&%20Theses>
33. Day, D. V. (2000). Leadership development: A review in context. *The Leadership Quarterly*, 11(4), 581-613. [https://doi.org/10.1016/S1048-9843\(00\)00061-8](https://doi.org/10.1016/S1048-9843(00)00061-8)
34. Hinds, Y. L., Thorne, K. J., Scwhean, V. L., & McKeough, A. M. (2008). Promoting intra-personal qualities in adolescents: Evaluation of Rapport's Teen Leadership Breakthrough program. *Canadian Journal of School Psychology*, 23(2), 206-222. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0829573508327307>
35. Zeldin, S. & Camino, L. (1999). Youth leadership: Linking research and program theory to exemplary practice. *New Designs for Youth Development*, 15(1), 10-15. <https://eric.ed.gov/?id=EJ583161>

36. Siperstein, G. N., Summerill, L. A., Jacobs, H. E., & Stokes, J. E. (2017). Promoting social inclusion in high schools using a schoolwide approach. *Inclusion*, 5(3), 173-188. <https://doi.org/10.1352/2326-6988-5.3.173>
37. Siperstein, G. N., McDowell, E. D., Jacobs, H. E., Stokes, J. E., & Cahn, A. L. (2019). Unified extracurricular activities as a pathway to social inclusion in high schools. *American Journal on Intellectual and Developmental Disabilities*, 124(6), 568-582. <https://doi.org/10.1352/1944-7558-124.6.568>

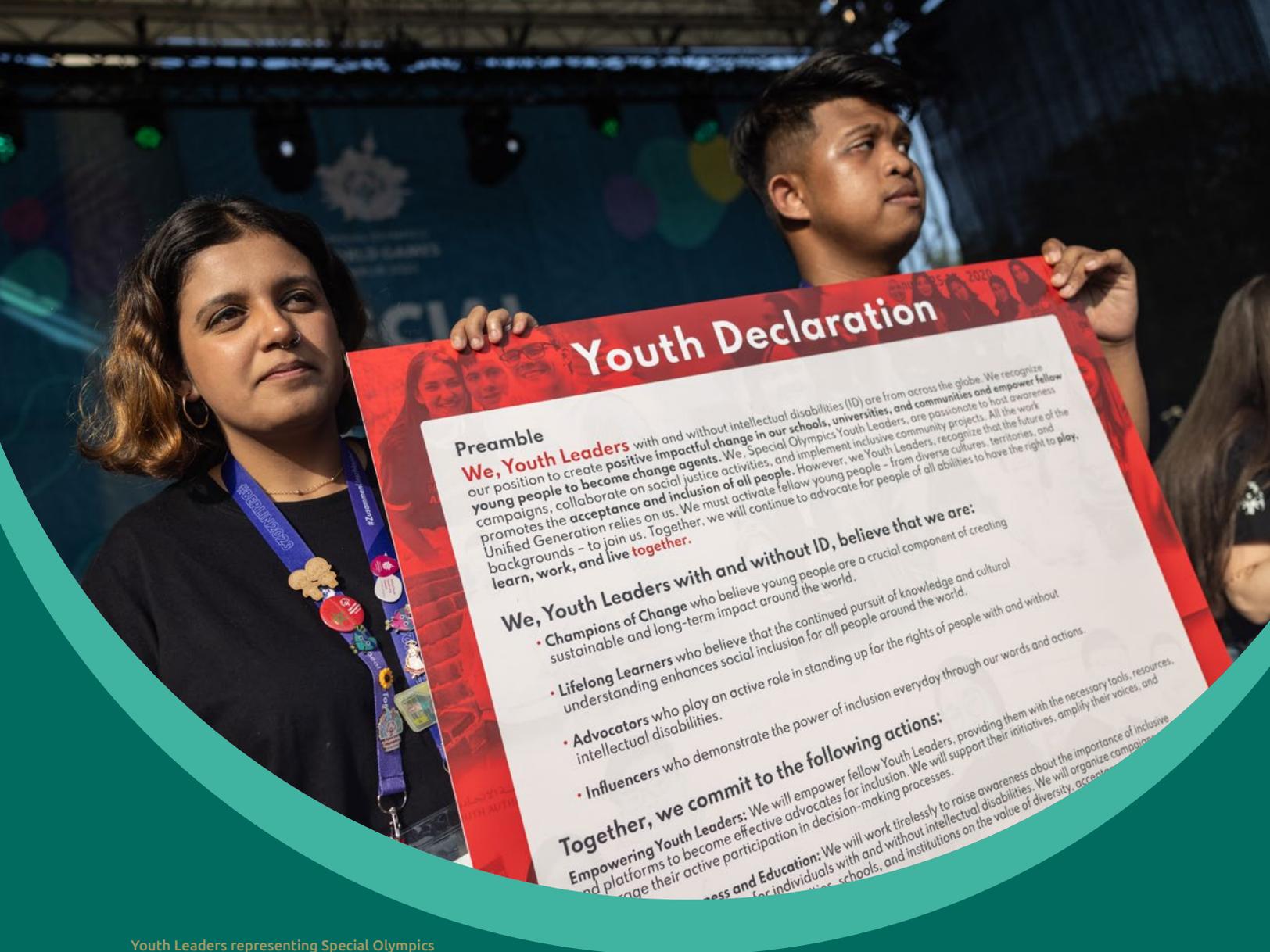
The authors wish to thank Tom Nachtigal and Shreya Shreeraman of the EASEL Lab for conducting the inclusive youth leadership literature review for this brief.



LANE GLOBAL YOUTH LEADERSHIP

Special Olympics Youth Leadership work is made possible through the generous support of Lane Global Youth Leadership.

The Global Center for Inclusion in Education wishes to recognize the contributions of Joyce A. Barnes, who supports the work of Special Olympics Global Youth and Education in her role as lead editor.



Youth Leaders representing Special Olympics Asia Pacific present the Special Olympics Youth Declaration created by young people at the 2023 Special Olympics Global Youth Leadership Summit in Berlin, Germany

Youth Declaration

Preamble

We, Youth Leaders with and without intellectual disabilities (ID) are from across the globe. We recognize our position to create **positive impactful change in our schools, universities, and communities** and **empower fellow young people to become change agents**. We, Special Olympics Youth Leaders, are passionate to host awareness campaigns, collaborate on social justice activities, and implement inclusive community projects. All the work promotes the **acceptance and inclusion of all people**. However, we Youth Leaders, recognize that the future of the Unified Generation relies on us. We must activate fellow young people - from diverse cultures, territories, and backgrounds - to join us. Together, we will continue to advocate for people of all abilities to have the right to **play, learn, work, and live together**.

We, Youth Leaders with and without ID, believe that we are:

- **Champions of Change** who believe young people are a crucial component of creating sustainable and long-term impact around the world.
- **Lifelong Learners** who believe that the continued pursuit of knowledge and cultural understanding enhances social inclusion for all people around the world.
- **Advocators** who play an active role in standing up for the rights of people with and without intellectual disabilities.
- **Influencers** who demonstrate the power of inclusion everyday through our words and actions.

Together, we commit to the following actions:

- **Empowering Youth Leaders:** We will empower fellow Youth Leaders, providing them with the necessary tools, resources, and platforms to become effective advocates for inclusion. We will support their initiatives, amplify their voices, and engage their active participation in decision-making processes.
- **Business and Education:** We will work tirelessly to raise awareness about the importance of inclusive practices for individuals with and without intellectual disabilities. We will organize campaigns targeting schools, businesses, and institutions on the value of diversity, acceptance, and inclusion.



SPECIAL OLYMPICS
GLOBAL CENTER
FOR INCLUSION IN EDUCATION

with support of

HIS HIGHNESS SHEIKH
MOHAMMED BIN ZAYED AL NAHYAN