Teachers' Perceptions on Student Leadership Traits in Malaysian Secondary Schools

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Abstract

Student leadership is seen to be one of the crucial issues in educational leadership field due to its impact on students, especially for the secondary and tertiary level students. Traits of student leaders are being investigated as one of the factors contributing to the effectiveness of student leadership in school. Categorised as one type of school leadership, student leadership is considered very beneficial for personal development of self-confidence and self-esteem as well as very prudent for the nation. The main purpose of this study is to investigate teachers' perceptions on student leadership - its definition and benefits - and the shared traits possessed by student leaders. This generic qualitative study involved eight (8) respondents who are secondary school teachers from various schools and age groups, using purposeful sampling. Semi-structured interview was used in order to gain the teachers' perceptions. The data was analysed using descriptive thematic approach. The findings revealed that there are ten shared traits of student leaders which are closely related to Northouse's (2004) traits on good leaders and one concluded definition of student leadership also came out as a result.

Keywords: Student Leadership, Leader Traits, Teachers' Perceptions

1. INTRODUCTION

Student's participation in school leadership is a crucial element in secondary education in Malaysia. Students are valued as potential individuals who will develop future generation and the nation towards success, as emphasized in the National Philosophy of Education (FPN) "that education in schools helps to build individuals in a holistic and integrated manner which includes leadership skill possession" (Ministry of Education [MOE], 1993 as cited in Keow, 2008).

The Ministry of Education in Malaysia has emphasised on individual development when it comes to education in pre-school, primary, secondary, and higher education. The balance between both knowledge and skills, as well as between ethics and morality is included in student aspirations in Malaysia Education Blueprint. The six attributes for students that the higher education system aims for are ethics and spirituality, leadership skills, national identity, language proficiency, thinking skills, and knowledge (Malaysia Education Blueprint, 2015-2025).

Striving towards successful nation, we need to understand the definition of student leadership and the shared traits possessed by student leaders. Understanding student leadership in school from teachers' perspective, therefore, helps us to see in the eye of educators on how they perceive student leadership and the shared traits of student leaders (Mullick, Sharma & Deppeler, 2009). In this study, teachers' view regarding student leader attributes and student leadership will be compared and presented.

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1.1 Problem statement

Leadership in school involves all members of the organisation such as the principal, teachers, administrative staff, and also students (Brower & Balch, 2005). When it comes to school leadership, students are typically seen as followers instead of leaders. However, studies on school leadership prove that students are crucial members in school community and they are also leaders, especially when leadership in school is seen as a form of transformational leadership (Brower & Balch, 2005). According to Greenleaf, Beazley and Beggs' (2003) Servant Leadership theory, students also serve as leaders in school. Student leadership is as important as teacher leadership in making the school work.

In secondary education in Malaysia student leadership is commonly observed when students actively participate in the student body. Other than the student body, students are also trained to hold positions in clubs and organisations in school. These extra-curricular activities build a special responsibility for students to experience leadership. In achieving the goals of National Education Philosophy in Malaysia, schools indeed play a big role in developing students' potential in educational leadership, which is important in preparing great future leaders needed by the nation and its people. However, it is yet to be determined and recognised the right students' traits for nomination of a student leader. Together with the nomination process, the traits of a student leader need to be investigated in order to know the depth and breadth of this pertinent non-academic element of education. Thus, the current study hopes to uncover leadership traits in student leaders in the attempt to understand the characteristics of a future leader and to determine the possibility of early identification of a leader.

Since there are a lot of theories on leadership traits, this study is done to investigate the commonly shared characteristics of a student leader as perceived by teachers and to compare the perceptions with selected theories on leadership. Whether these traits of leaders are merely inborn qualities or can be developed by individuals through learning, still yet to be confirmed from the teachers' perception. Therefore, it is vital to understand these perceptions in order to provide useful insights into student leadership and for the benefits of future research and studies.

1.2 Research questions

This study aims to examine the teachers' perception on the shared traits of a student leader and on student leadership in school. Therefore, the following are the research questions to be answered:

1. How do teachers define student leadership in school?
2. What are the common shared traits of a student leader according to teachers' view?

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Leadership and leader

Leadership is defined as "*the process of influencing others to understand and agree about what needs to be done and how to do it, and the process of facilitating individual and collective efforts to accomplish shared objectives*" (Yukl, 2006, p.8). Meanwhile, Northouse (2010) views leadership as "*a process whereby an individual influences a group of individuals to achieve a common goal*" (p.3). These definitions by Yukl (2006) and Northouse (2010) suggest that there are some vital elements that can be related to leadership. Firstly, it is a process which involves the relationship between a leader and followers. Secondly, leadership happens in the context or within the context of a group. Thirdly, it involves the achievement of shared objectives or goals. Leadership is not restricted to anyone and everyone has the potential to be a leader (Daft, 2005; Jago, 1982; Northouse, 2010).

Early leadership studies focused on the traits of leaders as great people (Tuohy, 1999). From the 1950s to the 1980s, leadership studies shifted their focus from a 'great man' approach to examining particular leadership styles and behaviours. However, Aristotle believes that leaders are made, not born; thus, traits of a leader are acquired and are called 'virtues'. Examples of these 'virtues' are kindness, honesty, loyalty, and trustworthiness (Morris, 1997). Similarly, Bennis (1989) posits four virtues of a leader which includes integrity, dedication, openness, and creativity. According to him, integrity concerns our moral and intellectual honesty. Meanwhile, dedicated leaders are those who are passionate and committed. Openness deals with the idea of being open to change and of willingness to tolerate others. Creativity has to do with being original and being able to make unfamiliar things familiar. Bennis (1989) further argues that, "leaders do the right thing; managers do things right" (p.118). Doing

the right thing refers to mastering four competencies which include managing attention, managing meaning, managing trust and managing oneself (Bennis, 1989, p. 118).

2.2   Leadership and intelligences

Human beings possess a lot of intelligences. Gardner (1983, 1999) defines social intelligence as interpersonal intelligence and also intrapersonal intelligence. Interpersonal intelligence refers to the ability to understand other people, while intrapersonal refers to the ability to understand oneself. According to Gardner, these two intelligences create social intelligence. Social and emotional intelligence are both important components in leadership development.

Goleman (1995) believes that emotional intelligence is vital to become a great leader. He defines emotional intelligence as having both social and personal competencies which include self-awareness and social awareness. Both self and social awareness are the most important element in leadership. Fullan (2001) *in Leading in a Culture of Change* has also claimed that by recognising leadership in others and promoting this development is one of the characteristics of an effective leader. Leadership involves handling the emotion of self and others, therefore, an emotional and intelligent leader would demonstrate leadership traits seen in empathy, trustworthiness, and active listening (Hernon & Rossiter, 2006).

2.3   Leadership and secondary school education in Malaysia

In the Malaysian context, leadership is one of the important elements that need to be developed throughout education. Malaysia National Philosophy of Education has emphasised goals to be achieved through education in school:

> *"Education in Malaysia is an on-going effort towards further developing the potential of individuals in a holistic and integrated manner, so as to produce individuals who are intellectually, spiritually, emotionally and physically balanced and harmonious based on a firm belief in and devotion to God. Such an effort is designed to produce Malaysian citizens who are knowledgeable and competent, who possess high moral standards and who are responsible and capable of achieving a high level of personal well-being as well as being able to contribute to the betterment of the family, society and the nation at large"*

[Ministry of Education [MOE], 1993 as cited in Keow, 2008, p.111]

Clearly, the education system in Malaysia is built up to develop the potential of individuals holistically so that they are intellectually, spiritually, emotionally and physically balanced. The purpose of education in Malaysia is to produce Malaysian citizens who are knowledgeable and competent and can give some contributions to the nation. These attributes are strongly related to the characteristics of a leader. A leader is viewed as someone who has skills in group dynamics, can be an inspiration to others and inspire others, and can communicate and adapt themselves very well to various people (Feldhusen & Pleiss, 1994). A leader is also able to communicate well, help and lead groups in solving problems, build goals and objectives for a group, and evaluate the progress of a group in retrieving the goals (Feldhusen & Pleiss, 1994).

Student leadership and student leadership development within secondary schools are critical issues worth investigating (Archard, 2009; Bunn et al., 2010; Dempster & Lizzio, 2007). All students possess leadership potential, and they can acquire the leadership skills through a variety of situations and experiences. As claimed by Fertman and Van Linden (1999), "…all middle school and high school students have leadership potential" (p. 11). In his research of student leadership, Lavery (2002) asserts that "developing and affirming the intrinsic leadership potential of all Year 12 students is a fundamental means by which schools can prepare senior students for the challenges of the future" (p. 3). Chapman and Aspin (2001) argue that developing student leadership is crucial to promoting social responsibility, community leadership, active citizenship and service leadership.

Student leadership is simply leadership at a student level and is an integral part of student success. Chapman and Aspin (2001) believe that leadership experiences contribute positively to student development. It is the most beneficial extracurricular activity a student can perform while in a learning institution as the experience gained from a leadership role will be valuable for a lifetime. Developing student leaders is positive for both the young leader and the organisation. Developing students as leaders enables and provides them with opportunities to utilize their talents, skills, and interests while also learning to develop a new set of skills to be learned from the peers and

teachers. A student leader is thrown into a learning environment that encourages hands-on experience that allows him or her to build the skills of planning, decision making, communicating, and working as a teammate.

Student leadership is usually seen in secondary education where students are active participants in the student body. In Malaysia, students are trained to hold positions in clubs and organizations in school. These extra curricular activities provided a special experience for students to be responsible leaders. When a student is being put in charge in a society or in educational activities, he or she is actually exploring his or her talent of leadership through experience (Bisland, 2004). This is true as the student will practically use the giftedness of leadership talent in becoming a student leader.

According to Kouzes and Posner (2002), there is consistency in the chosen traits people admire most in a leader. In order to persuade people to follow willingly, a quality of honesty, forward looking, competency and also inspiration must be possessed by a leader. Intelligence, courage, caring, and determination are among other characteristics which are important for a leader to have in order to lead successfully. Kouzes and Posner (2002) conclude that through character, practice and skills observed, the leadership traits in adults can be discovered. Mullick, Sharma and Deppeler (2009) find that teacher's perception is very important in defining and identifying leadership potential amongst students. Teachers can also influence the development and outcome of student leadership in school. This study, thus, aspires to gather teachers' insights into student leadership traits and practices to confirm if the they are observable and identifiable.

2.4   Theoretical framework

This study is designed based on a theoretical framework by Northouse (2004) that identifies key traits, qualities and characteristics in a good leader. As illustrated by the figure below, the traits include intelligence, self-confidence, determination, integrity, and sociability. In this study, the researcher uses this framework to compare the findings and data from the interviewees and the theories stated by Northouse (2004). At the end of the analysis, the researcher produces ten traits of effective student leaders.
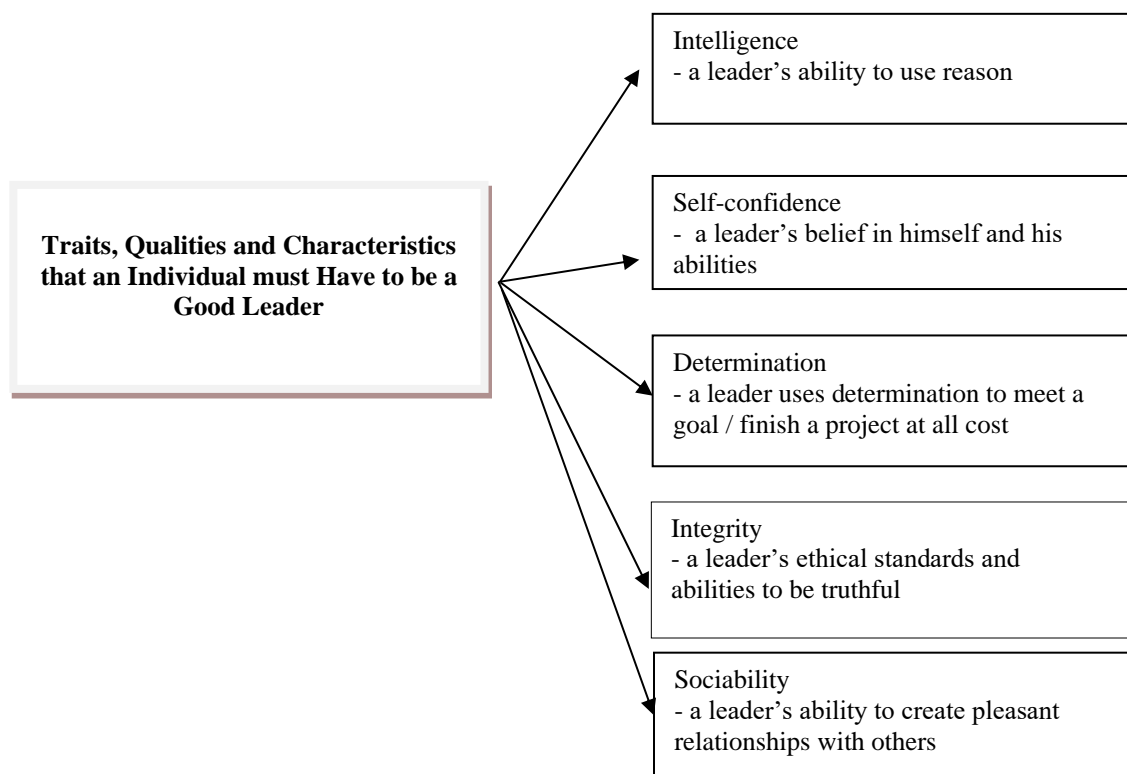

Fig. 2.81: Key Leadership Traits by Northouse (2004)

3. METHODOLOGY

The purpose of this study is to investigate secondary teachers' opinions on student leadership in school as well as the shared traits of student leaders. This study employs a generic qualitative approach that seeks to explore and discover the perspectives and views of the people directly involved in the subject matter as suggested by Caelli, Ray and Mill (2003). On similar grounds, Stebbins (2001) posits that "exploration might be thought of as a perspective, a state of mind, a special personal orientation towards approaching and carrying out social inquiry" (p.30). For the purpose of getting the information related to individual's experience, interview is the best method to be used (Davidson & Tolich, 2003). This study used semi-structured interview with the use of a digital voice recorder to gather the data needed.

A set of semi-structured interview questions was used to get the data for this study. The semi-structured format allows flexibility in that the interviewees are able to share their experiences without being restricted by the demands of specific questions (Bryman, 2004; Cohen, Manion, & Morrison, 2007). There were two sections in the interview questions: i) the demographic data and ii) the information on teacher's perceptions about student leadership and traits of student leaders. All eight participants involved are secondary school teachers in Kedah, Malaysia, who were selected based on purposeful sampling technique. Creswell and Plano Clark (2011) postulate that purposeful sampling involves identifying and selecting individuals who are knowledgeable about or are experienced with a phenomenon. Four (4) female teachers and four (4) male teachers were selected as participants in this study, for they are considered fulfilling the requirements of purposeful sampling criteria. Some of these teachers are senior teachers who have direct involvement in student leadership matters in school and some are new teachers with two to three years of teaching experience who have been involved in school's extra curricular activities.

Thematic analysis is a qualitative method for identifying, organising, describing and reporting themes discovered in a qualitative data set (Braun & Clarks, 2006). These are the steps which guided the data analysis in this study.

4. RESULTS AND FINDINGS

4.1 Teachers' profile

All respondents are Malay teachers and their personal information is summarised in the following table:

Table 1: Teachers' Profile and Background Information

| | Respondents | | | | | | | |
	R1T1M1	R2T2F1	R3T3M2	R4T4F2	R5T5F3	R6T6M3	R7T7F4	R8T8M4
Age (years old)	55	56	50	27	42	27	27	38
Gender	M	F	M	F	F	M	F	M
Taught subject	Science	Malay Science	English Math Science	Counselling	Malay Physical Education	History Physical Education	History	English
Teaching Experience (years)	30	31	24	3	18	2	3	13
Position in School	Disciplinary teacher	Subject Teacher	Subject Teacher	Counsellor	Subject Teacher	Subject Teacher	Subject Teacher	Subject Teacher

Legends: R = Respondent   T = Teacher   M = Male   F = Female

4.2 Self-definition of student leadership

When it comes to defining student leadership, all respondents agreed that student leadership is a type of leadership which is led by students. This is illustrated in this answer:

> *"Student leadership is simply a kind of leadership where students are trained to be leaders in school. These leaders are selected by the school members such as teachers and also students,*

due to their ability to lead. The active participation in clubs, organisations are a part of student leadership."

[R6T6M3]

It is also agreed that holding even a small position in school is also considered as having leadership position. Students who become class monitors, librarians, club's committee members, head committee members and prefects are considered as student leaders.

"The term student leadership itself doesn't mean that it must be a big role or position they would be assigned to. Being a class monitor, a school prefect, and also a librarian is considered as leadership and student leaders. Holding position as a club committee is also seen as a student leader even though in small number, we named it as leadership."

[R2T2F1]

Student leadership can also be seen from many aspects of actions in school. A respondent used the word 'amanah' to describe the responsibilities and the state of being responsible. 'Amanah' is a Malay and Arabic word which carries two meanings: a noun which means responsibility, and an adjective that means being responsible. Student leaders are seen as those who can carry out responsibilities and are responsible.

"Leadership among students can be seen through many aspects. Giving instruction, asking for help and guidance, being 'amanah' and fulfilling responsibility, and the way of communicating with others are all aspects which consist of the value of leadership.

[R4T4F2]

Another aspect of student leadership is the ability to influence others in a good way and possess the ability to make decisions in school.

"Students are called leaders when they are able to influence others in a good way. These student leaders will lead other students and therefore play vital roles in making changes that will impact the entire school. The real meaning of leadership is having an impression on others, possibly inspiring their decisions."

[R3T3M2]

Thus, according to the teachers, student leadership can be defined as a kind of leadership where the student leaders become a role model in school, are followed by others and are able to influence others in a good way. They are also involved in decision-making processes in school while holding the responsibilities to make the school become successful. These are the students who are able to lead and actively participate in school events or activities.

4.3   Traits of student leaders

Leader traits lead to practices of exemplary leadership. Under this theme, all respondents' answers on what they believed as suitable and shared traits of student leaders were analysed. Each respondent in this study was able to provide at least three traits. The common described traits were taken into account as common leader traits as they occur in most respondents' answers. Themes such as 'Intelligence,' 'Self-Confidence,' 'Determination,' 'Integrity,' and 'Sociability' have emerged and are categorised under traits of good student leader, which conveniently match the five leadership traits of Northouse's (2004).

4.3.1 Intelligence

According to Northouse (2004), intelligence is a leader's ability to use reasons. All respondents included elements of intelligence as the must-have-trait of a leader, although some of them did not use the exact word 'intelligence' but rather use other term such as 'smart' or 'having skills'.

"A student who will become a leader should have a nice personality and being accepted by others. He should have knowledge and skills in whatever he is appointed to lead. For example, when a student is appointed as a prefect, he should have a good and positive characters, have knowledge and skills to be a prefect."

[R8T8M4]

Two other teachers also view intelligence in academics as one necessity for leadership.

> *"One of the traits of a student leader is excellent in his or her study. A student leader must be a good example to other students; therefore I believe he or she must be excellent in the study."*

[R3T3M2]

> *"Confident, brave, smart, quick thinking, having nice communication skills with others, honest, and trustworthy."*

[R5T5F3]

From the respondents' answer, it is clear that intelligence is one of the traits that a leader should possess. By having 'intelligence' traits (academically or skills), leaders are able to set example with shared values with the followers.

4.3.2 Self-confidence

In this study, all respondents agreed that in order for students to become leaders, they should possess self-confidence. Self-confidence is one factor that enables a person to have influence on others. As R6T6M3 stated in the interview session:

> *"A leader needs to be confident to lead, if not, they cannot lead or influence others to follow."*
> [R6T6M3]

Another example of respondent's response regarding self-confidence is illustrated in the answer below:

> *"The suitable traits or characteristics of a student leader would be one who is trustworthy, having authentic good qualities and active in all aspects of school field. If you want to be a leader, make sure that you inspire others to follow your lead. A great leader must have a self confidence and calm demeanour. But you have to be yourself and act in the line with your personality."*

[R7T7F4]

Self-confidence is seen as a leader's belief in himself and his abilities (Northouse, 2004). Therefore, these respondents thought the 'originality' of a person's personality is one of the factors of effective leadership.

Self-confidence is portrayed as an important element to students' life and future.

> *"If someone becomes a leader, his outspoken, confidence and self-esteem level would be high. The person with high self-confidence and self-esteem would be advantageous in anywhere, even in university or life. This kind of person would be a strong individual who will not easily give up in life. if we can see, the students with low self-confidence and self-esteem would be easily give up and feeling down."*

[R2T2F1]

Leadership roles and opportunities are also found to affect students' self-confidence and self-esteem. Self-confidence is portrayed as an important element to students' life and future. Being confident will make one become strong in life. Strong is a symbol of a good leader. A leader should be confident in his or her stands and beliefs.

4.3.3 Determination

According to Northouse (2004), a leader uses determination to achieve goals. In the respondents' answer, being active student leaders who participate in any school activities is seen as determination. Having the knowledge and skills in whatever the leaders are appointed to lead is another element of determination.

> *"There are some responsibilities that student leaders hold in school, such as assisting with and conducting school assembly, acts as role models for all students, actively participating and promoting all school events, promoting initiatives of the school, helping with school organisation, and nurture guidance and leadership skills within fellow leaders."*
> [R3T3M2]

Five out of eight respondents had mentioned 'brave' as one trait of a leader. Being brave comes under the theme determination. A leader should be brave enough to take risk in his or her leadership. A leader is the one who is able to be creative and innovative in his or her leadership. The first respondent explained about being a brave student leader as the following:

> *"He or she must be a brave one, who dares to be strict to implement his or her stand on school rules, for example, if students not allowed to throw rubbish everywhere, he or she will make sure that the breaking of the rules will not happened."*

> *"Student leaders must be brave to implement the rules, being strict in the implementation."*
>
> [R1T1M1]

4.3.4 Integrity

Integrity is a leader's ethical standards and abilities to be truthful. This relates to traits such as being truthful and honesty. All respondents' answers involved the use of words such as honesty and trustworthy which suggest the element of integrity.

> *"When it comes to suitable leaders, the most prior trait would be 'sahsiah', or in other words 'akhlak' which suggested a person should be responsible, 'amanah', honest, and having integrity... 'Sahsiah' must be the first criteria to be looked for in a leader, so that in the future, if the person becomes a nation leader, he or she won't involve himself or herself in bribery et cetera."*
>
> [R2T2F]

Being truthful and honest is related to '*sahsiah*' or in other words good character. Honesty is seen as crucial and compulsory trait of a leader. Integrity is like a guarantee trait which a leader can be trusted. All respondents agree to this fact.

4.3.5 Sociability

Finally, being able to communicate with others, and to discuss and use nice communication skills are a part of sociability. It is a leader's ability to create pleasant relationship with others. Open-mindedness in accepting ideas is also regarded as having good communication skills.

> *"A student leader must be polite, respected by other students and loved, cooperative, able to influence his fellow students, open-minded, benevolent, and also a positive person. When I say open-minded, it is actually related to having good communication skills. Student leaders must have good communication skills. If they are not open-minded, unwilling to accept the ideas of others, and do not clearly state their ideas, they cannot efficiently lead others."*
>
> [R3T3M2]

Sociability leads to trust building between leaders and followers, and facilitating the relationship between them. This is where leaders allow followers to take action and trust them with responsibilities. Sociability is also manifested in leaders showing appreciation through appraisal, motivating each other, and giving support to others so as not to give up. This is all done through social and communication skills.

5. DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

5.1 Definition of student leadership

Teachers defined student leadership from students' participation in school activities and events such as how they lead and guide other students, and how they convey instruction and information clearly to others. Student leadership is seen as a kind of leadership at the student level, where students conduct the assembly, become a chairperson of a club or society, be appointed as class monitor and prefect, and be directly involved in leading a small group of students in school.

Student leaders are also seen to have power in decision-making in school. For example, based on the respondents' answers, students need to help teachers in planning and managing activities which are related to societies or clubs.

When a student is being put in charge in a society or in educational activities, he or she is actually exploring his or her talent of leadership through experience (Bisland, 2004).

5.2   Student leaders' common traits

Student leaders are believed to share some common traits. In this study, each respondent was able to provide at least three traits of student leaders. Some traits given are the same as those given by the others and the researcher assumed that these traits are among the shared traits of student leaders.

From this study, the researcher concluded and came out with ten traits of student leaders: brave or courteous, honest, polite, trustworthy, inspiring others, possess good communication skills, possess integrity, intelligent (academically or skillfully), and risk-taker.

Traits of student leaders need to be highlighted in the requirement list of student leader nomination. The list of the traits as provided by the results of this study will help teachers in setting the benchmark of leaders' criteria when it comes to leader selection in the future. This study has explored the presumably shared leadership traits that teachers acknowledge and can be used as useful guideline in the observation of students' qualification to be leaders in school.

Since it is exploratory in nature, this study can only provide some basic insights on the traits of student leaders that are beneficial for educators or school stakeholders to look upon as a guideline in deciding the syllabus or the leadership skill standard (LSS) for future reference.

Secondary schools in Malaysia therefore can use the findings in this study to develop leadership skill standard in their schools and the educators can start to instill the value of leadership skills in any school lesson and activities, including classroom activities.

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