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Leadership Opportunities for Students with Disabilities in Co-Curriculum Activities: Insights and Implications

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ABSTRACT
The leadership opportunities for students with disabilities are dependent on school leaders and teachers as they are advocates and provide natural support in fostering their leadership development. However, the leadership opportunities for students with disabilities remain relatively overlooked. Students with disabilities have a right to participate and lead in the co-curriculum activities just as their able peers do. Therefore, this study aims to explore the leadership opportunities for students with disabilities to lead in co-curriculum activities. A qualitative phenomenological case study approach was employed. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with the school’s senior assistant and four special education teachers in a public secondary school located in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia. Interviews were transcribed and analysed using ATLAS.ti 8. Findings indicate students are given opportunities to lead in co-curriculum activities in various capacities. In addition, suggestions to further improve the leadership opportunities for students with disabilities were discussed. Hence, this study contributes to the scarce body of literature on leadership opportunities for students with disabilities by providing empirical evidence leading to new knowledge and a better understanding on the types of leadership development and opportunities for students with disabilities generally in the Southeast Asian region.

KEYWORDS
Co-curriculum activities; leadership opportunities; leadership skills; Malaysia; secondary school; student leadership; students with disabilities; teachers

Introduction
Social inclusion for students with disabilities and promoting inclusive education remains an important aim in current times (Adams, Harris, & Jones, 2017; Koster, Nakken, Pijl, & Van Houten, 2009). Social inclusion for students with disabilities is important to build their self-confidence, which is an essential skill to enhance their social interaction skill (Emam & Alkharusi, 2018). When social interaction skill is acquired, these students are capable to advocate (Coffey & Lavery, 2017) and access to equal education (Adams, Harris, & Jones, 2018). From a broader perspective, instead of derecognising the differences between students with disabilities, students with disabilities need to be valued in the inclusion education and social inclusion (Lee, 2020).

However, the leadership opportunities for students with disabilities remain relatively overlooked (Adams, Semaadderi, & Tan, 2019; Dugan & Komives, 2007). Students with
disabilities have a right to participate and lead in the co-curriculum activities just as their able peers do. This is supported by the UNESCO International conference on Education in Salamanca 1994, the global movement on building the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and the goals of Education for All (EFA) on which all countries embraced the concept of ‘every learner matters equally’ and agreed to promote inclusion in education to ensure all students have the same right to receive effective educational opportunities, including the students with disabilities (Meijer & Watkins, 2019; Yeo, Chong, Neihart, & Huan, 2016).

On the other hand, student leaders require certain prerequisite skills in order to assume leadership positions (Adams, Kamarudin, & Tan, 2018). These skills are teamwork and collaboration (Kaselman et al., 2015; Simonsen et al., 2014), relationship-building (Van De Valk, 2008), critical thinking, as well as time and conflict management (Amirianzadeh, 2012). Even so, leadership development programs and activities for students with disabilities are few and far between (Adams et al., 2019).

Students with disabilities are encouraged to participate in co-curriculum activities (Klisz, 2014), but the available opportunities to lead are still significantly lacking (Grenwelge, Zhang, & Landmark, 2010). This gap is more apparent as research on leadership among students with disabilities is yet to be widely uncovered (Adams et al., 2019; Chapman, Ainscow, Miles, & West, 2011). Carter, Swedeen, Walter, Moss, and Hsin (2011) discovered that student leaders with disabilities earn more respect and inspire others to contribute to the society. Other scholars found that leadership opportunities for students with disabilities are important to refine the school learning environment (Klisz, 2014), improve academic achievements of the school and students (Imada, Doyle, Brock, & Goddard, 2002), and enhance collaboration between schools (Chapman et al., 2011) which would ultimately lead to a healthier and more diverse community.

School leaders and teachers have a strong influence to support the participation and create leadership opportunities for students with disabilities remains (Adams et al., 2017; Cheng & Loh, 2011; Gotshall & Stefanou, 2011). School teachers who are encouraging and supportive of students with disabilities are crucial in implementing policies (Imada et al., 2002) and training programs (Klisz, 2014) for their leadership development. Therefore, this paper aims to explore the leadership opportunities in co-curriculum activities for students with disabilities through the efforts of a school senior assistant in special education and the special education teachers in a Malaysian secondary school.

This study contributes to the existing literature on leadership opportunities for students with disabilities by providing empirical evidence leading to new knowledge and a better understanding of the types of leadership development and opportunities for students with disabilities. Moreover, the study has value added via its contextual originality being the first study that is empirically conducted in the Malaysian context. Thus, it contributes to the scarce body of literature on leadership opportunities for students with disabilities, generally in the Asian region.

This paper is organised into four sections. First, we outline the theoretical framework underpinning student leadership. We then discuss the literature on opportunities for student leadership in co-curriculum activities. Next, the methodology section is presented, followed by the findings of this study. Subsequently, we discuss the findings, implications, limitations, and suggestions for future studies.
Theoretical Perspectives

Leadership Development for Students with Disabilities

The potentiality to develop leadership for students with disabilities is through the facilitation of school teachers (Garrels & Arvidsson, 2019), parents (Ismail, Ismail, & Aun, 2019) and their able peers (Emam & Alkharusi, 2018). Vygotsky (1978) defined this facilitation process as the Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD). The ZPD is supported in two ways: the first way is to indicate the actual problem-solving capabilities of the students, and the second way is to better comprehend the potential capabilities of the students (Dey, Panda, & Banerjee, 2014; Garrels & Arvidsson, 2019; Vygotsky, 1978). Vygotsky (1978) believed that both the first way to support the development and the second way to support the potential capabilities of the students’ development are essential to reason about their future achievements. When these two supports are constantly provided, students are able to develop the skills that allow them to work independently (Eun, 2017).

Wood, Bruner, and Ross (1976) defined ‘scaffolding’ as helping students achieve and complete the tasks that is beyond their capabilities at the time of assignment, on condition that guidance is provided by school teachers and parents who assign the tasks. It is commonly practised in two techniques known as ‘cognitive scaffolding’ and ‘motivational scaffolding’. Nordlof (2014) described ‘cognitive scaffolding’ as a technique to help students to explore problems by helping students to simplify problems, giving them hints, ‘pumping’ the students through interrogating open-ended questions and prompting the students. Practising the technique is vital to extend student’s cognitive development and their independence (Dey et al., 2014). As for the ‘motivational scaffolding’ technique, Mackiewicz and Thompson (2013) proclaimed that keeping the students motivated while learning required some amiable expressions, the teachers should attempt praising the students, demonstrating empathy as well as having an optimistic mind on the possibilities of students to succeed. When ‘Motivational scaffolding’ is appropriately used, it is effective to build a supportive learning environment for the students (Nordlof, 2014).

Scholars have studied how ZPD and scaffolding are effective in the context of classroom teaching (Roth, 2012), cognitive development (Dey et al., 2014), social interaction (Roth & Lee, 2007; Van Der Veer & Valsiner, 1991) and writing skills development (Nordlof, 2014). Therefore, the concept of Vygotsky’s (1978) ‘ZPD’ with Wood et al.’s (1976) ‘scaffolding’ is deemed to be an ideal approach to help students with disabilities to develop their leadership skills (Nordlof, 2014) to lead in co-curriculum activities (Emam & Alkharusi, 2018) and maximise their leadership potential (Garrels & Arvidsson, 2019; Gindis, 1995). In order to understand how ZPD and ‘scaffolding’ are helpful to students with disabilities, Price (2011) argues that opportunities should be given to educational professionals to express their views and thoughts because their feedback would be useful for policymakers and school leaders to cater and address to these students’ needs.

Student Leadership Opportunities

Co-curricular activities provide opportunities for students with disabilities to develop their acumen and personal capabilities as future leaders (Adams et al., 2018) as well as enhance their personal growth and social status (Klisz, 2014). Leadership opportunities for students with disabilities are no longer optional but essential (Black et al., 2014). Enhancing
opportunities for students with disabilities to participate and lead in co-curriculum activities allows students with disabilities to possess more leadership skills and experience positive secondary school experiences (Klisz, 2014). However, a negative perception of the community towards providing opportunities and access to these students still exists (Fritsch, Rasmussen, & Chazdon, 2018). Leithwood, Patten, and Jantzi (2010) claimed that successful school leadership has a direct influence on student achievement. Hallinger and Murphy (1986) highlighted that a successful school requires a supportive community group. The community and the school leaders (Day, Gu, & Sammons, 2016; Roth & Lee, 2007), teachers (Lipscombe, Grice, Tindall-Ford, & De-Nobile, 2020; Wahlstrom & Louis, 2008) and parents (Adams et al., 2018; Garrels & Arvidsson, 2019; Lee & Low, 2013) needs to recognise the importance of leadership opportunities for students with disabilities to provide more opportunities to these students (Carter et al., 2011; Klisz, 2014). When the community does not believe in the growth and potential of students with disabilities, available opportunities to lead in the school are limited (Fitzgerald, 2009; Pivik, McComas, & Laflamme, 2002).

Lieberman, Arndt, and Daggett (2007) studied that designing an integrated program to enhance the leadership opportunities for students with disabilities in co-curriculum activities is essential to allow these students to practice their leadership skills. Fritsch et al. (2018) designed the bridging community leadership program to provide student leadership development and empower students with disabilities to make an impact in the community. The program helped school leaders to reengineer the school’s co-curricular and make student leadership development programs more practical and applicable.

In Malaysia, Adams et al. (2017) conducted a study based on a program introduced by the Ministry of Education called the ‘Buddy Support System’ to integrate abled students and students with disabilities through sports in co-curriculum activities (Kulasagar, 2013). Findings indicate that both parents and teachers expressed their positivity towards the program. They had high confidence in the program as positive signs were seen in students with disabilities, such as higher acceptance from their peers, frequent interactions with others and more confidence in daily activities. King et al. (2003) observed that students with physical disabilities who formed friendships and relationships with others during co-curriculum activities eventually developed their leadership skills.

Students with disabilities require strong support from school leaders, teachers, peers and parents (Hancock, Dyk, & Jones, 2012; Klisz, 2014) on opportunities to lead in co-curriculum activities (Rosch & Nelson, 2018). However, Solish, Perry, and Minnes (2010) reported that students with disabilities are typically inactive in co-curriculum activities. This phenomenon is common in many schools. Furthermore, the literature on leadership opportunities for students with disabilities is scarce (Adams et al., 2017). Therefore, we aim to explore the leadership opportunities in co-curriculum activities for students with disabilities in a Malaysian secondary school.

**Methodology**

This study employed a qualitative approach to explore the perceptions of the senior assistant in special education and the special education teachers on leadership opportunities for students with disabilities in co-curriculum activities. Phenomenological case study was utilised to explore the lived experiences (Ferm Almqvist & Christophersen,
of the senior assistant and teachers in providing leadership opportunities for students with disabilities.

Massaro, Dumay, and Bagnoli (2019) claimed that lack of transparency in case study findings could cause distrust to the readers. Therefore, trustworthiness is tested on the perspectives of the senior assistant in special education and the special education teachers to minimise the preconceptions and sufficient attention is given to the interviewees to ensure the trustworthiness of this study.

**Interviews and Sampling**

A set of open-ended questions was crafted in the interview guide to explore the perceptions of the senior assistant in special education and the special education teachers on the leadership opportunities for students with disabilities in co-curriculum activities. A pilot test was conducted with an experienced school senior assistant in special education and a special education teacher as a trial run to refine the interview protocol and to prepare for the actual data collection process (Creswell & Poth, 2017; Yin, 2017).

Purposive sampling was employed in this study to ensure a specific set of criteria were met (Bryman, 2012). The interviews were conducted at a Malaysian public mainstream secondary school that offers Special Education Integration Programme (SEIP) with exemplary achievements in sports at a national and international level for students with disabilities. The school’s senior assistant in special education and four special education teachers participated in the interviews. Table 1 demonstrates the summary of the interviewees’ demographic background.

To ensure the highest standard of research ethics (Yin, 2017), this study has obtained permission to conduct the research from the Malaysian Ministry of Education (MoE). Next, consent was obtained from the school principal, senior assistant in special education and the special education teachers to participate in this study. The interviewees agreed to the interviews, which lasted at an average of 50 minutes with the medium of Malay language, as most interviewees find that the language is more helpful in expressing their perceptions. Consent was also obtained to audio record the interviews.

**Data Analysis**

The process of data analysis involves equating and organising data, conducting preliminary read-throughs of the database, coding and organising themes and forming the representation of the data interpretation (Creswell & Poth, 2017). Researchers could potentially face challenges when analysing texts and various forms of data (Denzin, 2017). Despite the complicated process, ethical issues, such as protection of participants

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Interviewee</th>
<th>Years of teaching experience in current school</th>
<th>Highest Academic Qualification</th>
<th>Gender</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>SA</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>Master’s Degree</td>
<td>Male</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>T1</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>Bachelor’s Degree</td>
<td>Female</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>T2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>Bachelor’s Degree</td>
<td>Female</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>T3</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>Bachelor’s Degree</td>
<td>Female</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>T4</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>Master’s Degree</td>
<td>Male</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 1. Profile of the interviewees.
from harm and disclosure of comprehensive findings, must be considered in the data analysis (Creswell & Poth, 2017; Denzin, 2017).

In this study, information that might harm interviewees is not disclosed to conform to ethical issues. Hence, this study has developed a set of labels to represent each interviewee (Creswell & Poth, 2017; Wolcott, 1990). Table 2 indicates the representation of each interviewee.

The interview data were transcribed and later verified with the interviewees through an agreed communication channel, Whatsapp Messenger. A thematic analysis approach was selected to analyse the data in this study. A constant comparative analysis (Glaser & Strauss, 1965) was utilised to generate codes and form key themes. Next, all code labels were reviewed again and reduced by merging similar or overlapping codes.

Finally, a qualitative data analysis software ATLAS.ti™ was utilised to code the finalised sets of codes and generate emergent themes. To achieve the trustworthiness of the findings, accepted standards for this research design were ensured to be in line with the analysis process followed by an inquiry audit, which was conducted to establish dependability (Lincoln & Guba, 2000).

### Findings

This section begins with contextual findings, followed by the thematic findings derived from the data on the leadership opportunities in co-curriculum for students with disabilities: leading as a group leader; positions in societies and uniform bodies; and, performing tasks and responsibilities.

The remainder of the article will explore the relevant issues derived from the inductive data analysis and selected indicative quotes from the interviewees will be presented to corroborate the findings.

### Contextual Insights

The school in which the case study was conducted established the Special Education Integration Programme (SEIP) in year 2009. Currently, it has around 1400 students for both the SEIP and mainstream programs and 13 special education teachers including the school senior assistant in special education.

The school places extra emphasis on sports such as equestrian and golf. According to the SA, the school has a motto of ‘Be the best, beat the rest.’ The students are constantly encouraged and engaged to achieve great success in co-curriculum activities, especially sports based on their capabilities, interests and willingness. The school also practices outdoor sports activities that are uncommon in other schools. The school managed to

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Interviewees</th>
<th>Labels</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Senior Assistant in Special Education</td>
<td>SA</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Special Education Teacher 1</td>
<td>T1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Special Education Teacher 2</td>
<td>T2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Special Education Teacher 3</td>
<td>T3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Special Education Teacher 4</td>
<td>T4</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 2. Interviewees Labels.
sign a Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) with a sports club in Klang Valley to ensure the students with disabilities are provided with the opportunity to be engaged in sports activities and appropriate facilities. Other than that, golf is another sport activity with the collaboration with a public university.

The students with disabilities in this school have produced several outstanding athletes. These students have been given the opportunities to be trained to be a professional athlete in special sport games before graduation. The capable students with disabilities in this school had the leadership opportunities to lead and compete in sports. Some significant international achievements of these students are representing Malaysia to participate in the Special Olympics World Games, leading the Malaysian contingent, and winning several Gold medals in the events.

**Leading as a Group Leader**

The themes are generated based on the perceptions of the interviewees. Developing the leadership of students with disabilities does not only involve the macro scale efforts from the Government and the Ministry, it also involves practical implementations from specialised teachers. According to the SA, he concurred that leadership opportunities are available to students with disabilities through appointing the students as a group leader in the school co-curriculum activities:

...we would undoubtedly elect leaders for teams. And at every turn, they’re always different ones so they all get a taste of what it would be like. (SA)

This is similar to the teaching experience from T1, T2, and T3 where opportunities are available to the students with disabilities through appointing them as a group leader:

...the leader will give orders and head the team (group). (T1)

We will put them into groups according to the lanes, and in the groups, one student will be the leader. So, the student leader will be in charge of the group ... (T2)

Well during activities, we will put them into small groups. And in that small groups, the students will get a chance to become the leader of the group. (T3)

Most interviewees elaborated how students are provided opportunities to develop their leadership skills through leading groups. However, T3 and T4 further reiterate that the support of the Government and Ministry would provide more effective leadership opportunities to students with disabilities in developing and harnessing their leadership skills:

I would like to say that the ministry of education has done very well in supporting the co-curriculum activities and leadership skills in students with disabilities. We should push more on the effectiveness and these students will unlock better capabilities thus becoming a better part of society. (T3)

The ministry could probably implement programmes that involve teachers guiding their students on how to improve their leadership skills ... (T4)

One important message T4 shared was the teachers’ involvement in guiding the students to improve their leadership skills based on the support of the Government
and Ministry. It is a de facto recognition that the influence from a well-trained and qualified teacher contributes to the leadership opportunities and development for students with disabilities in co-curriculum activities.

**Positions in Societies and Uniform Bodies**

The school also attempts to involve students with disabilities in co-curriculum activities, such as societies and uniform bodies. To provide accessible leadership opportunities, a hierarchy of positions was assigned to assist the students to be a leader. The SA shared that the leadership opportunities are accessible to students with disabilities when participating in the school society and uniform body activities:

For instance, Scouts has a chain of hierarchy for positions like a president and a secretary, so by giving them a chance at leading through these positions … (SA)

Organising activities and appointing students to take up the leadership positions in the uniform bodies and societies provides opportunities for the teachers to develop the leadership skills of the students. T2 and T4 provided more insights on how the school manoeuvres on providing more leadership opportunities for students with disabilities within their capabilities through assigning positions in co-curriculum activities:

By giving them a lot of activities. Activities that require them to solve problem(s) together with the people in their group … (T2)

For scouts, we have a yearly camping for them, in which will be organised by the school. So, for this kind of activities, for example 3 days 2 nights camping, we will try to develop the leadership skills of the students by appointing them to become leaders … (T4)

The SA also shared other ways to provide more leadership opportunities in co-curriculum activities such as associating with Non-Governmental Organisations (NGOs) and corporates. It was found effective when resources for the activities are sponsored from the NGOs and corporates:

The NGOs would be of great help … Thus, within this situation, we opted to acquire sponsorships from NGOs and corporates … (SA)

**Performing Tasks and Responsibilities**

Students with disabilities are also provided with opportunities to performing tasks and responsibilities. For example, SA thought that:

… it’s a must for us to assign groups amongst the students. One thing that this brings is a sense of responsibility amongst them, whereby they feel the need to look out for each other. (SA)

Leadership opportunities for students with disabilities in co-curriculum activities are provided but are more important for the students to experience and be trained to carry out tasks and responsibilities; T1, T3 and T4 claimed that tasks and responsibilities performing are an opportunity to develop the leadership among the students with disabilities:
So we have trained the students to identify and carry out their respective tasks. (T1)

... remind them of their responsibilities while carrying out the activities. (T3)

... giving them responsibilities to take up ... When we provide them with responsibilities, they will do it. So that is how their responsibilities as leaders could be developed. (T4)

However, supervising and assisting the students with disabilities while they are leading in co-curriculum activities is a key factor to develop their leadership skills. SA noted the teachers’ supervision of students when they are leading in co-curriculum activities will help polish their leadership skills. T2 and T3 also added that the students with disabilities who lead in co-curriculum activities will often be assisted by the teachers. The intention of the supervision and assistance is to assist them to lead in co-curriculum activities in their own style without limiting them through instructions. Other than providing leadership opportunities to students to perform tasks and responsibilities, T2 reckoned that living skills are also part of the leadership process:

Well, other than the students’ leadership skills, in my opinion, is to cultivate their living skills. (T2)

T4 also perceived that training the students with living skills could complement their leadership skills to overcome daily challenges:

... they lack normality in certain areas, but we have to train them to function like normal people so that they could progress in their everyday lives. (T4)

T2 and T4 has outlined the needs for students with disabilities to be equipped with good living skills. Without cultivating the living skills required to be a leader, the students might not be able to overcome and deal with problems in the future.

It is also worth noting that without the support from parents, the students could face extra challenges to perform the tasks and responsibilities assigned by the school:

... parents will still have this negative outlook on things, so it limits the students’ chances of experiencing things that they had never experienced before because their fear overpowers their positivity in sharing the experience with their kids. (SA)

T4 also highlighted that the effort from school teachers is insufficient to cultivate students’ leadership in tasks and responsibilities:

Parents should involve their children with various kinds of programmes that are organised outside of schools, instead of just school programmes ... This should be highlighted, because some parents are still embarrassed to bring them out in the public. (T4)

Parents play the most compelling role for their children’s holistic growth including their leadership skills. Therefore, the lack of support from parents would intangibly shape into an obstacle. Moreover, the SA, T3 and T4 raised their concerns that the community has yet to understand the importance of leadership among students with disabilities, and the support from the community is yet to be seen significantly:

What we have to emphasise on when it comes to this (improving the leadership of the students with disabilities), is providing them (students with disabilities) our sole trust. With empowerment and guidance, there’s no doubt they (students with disabilities) will be able to do anything they feel like they want to do. (SA)


... there are certain ways to treat and educate students with disabilities and if society does not understand how this works, there will always be a stigma that students with disabilities can’t be helped, or teaching them the right way is abusive ... I just hope they understand better and assist us in this matter so more things can be done for these children (students with disabilities) ... (T3)

In order to polish leadership skills amongst these students with disabilities, all of the society including those who aren’t teachers and parents, should express support to these students (students with disabilities) as that will result in them delivering their best in terms of their potential performances. (T4)

Doubtlessly, the readiness of the community to witness and understand the importance of leadership development opportunities for students with disabilities still requires time. Therefore, moving towards a more inclusive society will require the community to express their support towards students with disabilities potential and development.

Discussion

The perceptions of the school senior assistant and special education teachers in this school have contributed to a new facet of leadership studies for students with disabilities. Despite the highly encouraged leadership opportunities within the school, the overall response from the interviewees has unanimously pointed out that the challenge of leadership opportunities is beyond the clinching of the school authority. Students with disabilities are encouraged to lead where the opportunities to develop their leadership exist. On the contrary, it is unlikely to be the same when they are at home or out of the school. Therefore, the efforts of the school to cultivate their leadership holistically as a part of the society are highly challenged.

The leadership skills for these students could be enhanced through formal and informal programs or co-curriculum activities (Carter et al., 2011), it could also be developed and educated (Coffey & Lavery, 2017). In this school, students with disabilities have opportunities to lead as a group leader in co-curriculum activities such as scouts. Uniform bodies have a chain of hierarchy such as troop leaders and group leaders. Furthermore, the school organises an annual camping for these students to experience becoming a leader, this is a pivotal process to harness their leadership skills.

Next, there are also numerous opportunities for students with disabilities to lead in other co-curriculum clubs and societies, such as a president, secretary, and group leader. Based on the leadership opportunities mentioned, students with disabilities who have been appointed as a leader in respective positions are certain to have the opportunities to foster and develop their leadership through these co-curriculum activities (Carter et al., 2011).

Performing tasks and responsibilities is another form of leadership that is given to the students with disabilities in this school as mentioned by both senior assistant and the teachers. Through performing tasks and responsibilities, students with disabilities could develop their leadership skills holistically (Rosch & Nelson, 2018). It is worth noting that when students are performing tasks and responsibilities, the sense of responsibility and self-efficacy are intangibly developed, they would learn the importance of looking out for others around them (Murphy & Johnson, 2016). Carrying out different tasks and responsibilities at different age groups is helpful to develop new leadership skills (Murphy &
Johnson, 2011), especially when leadership opportunities for students with disabilities are highly encouraged in this school. Therefore, it could be acknowledged that making students with disabilities to perform tasks and responsibilities in co-curriculum activities are opportunities for them to develop their leadership skills (Adams et al., 2017; Imada et al., 2002).

A challenge to the leadership of students with disabilities found in this study is that it is dependent on the encouragement of the parents and the community (Coffey & Lavery, 2017; Hancock et al., 2012). While some parents are fearful of allowing their children to experience leadership roles, the community discrimination and lack of awareness towards the development of students with disabilities still exist. In order to provide more opportunities for students with disabilities to experience leadership in co-curriculum activities, Adams et al. (2017) studied that increasing the awareness through educating the community is vital. In a supportive school environment, offering training programs to students aids their leadership development (Carter et al., 2011). In this school, the effort to provide leadership opportunities to students with disabilities is highly visible. Students are mostly given opportunities to experience co-curriculum leadership roles to lead as a group leader, which is very likely to empower them as leaders to make a difference in the society and workplace in their future career. It is also noted that when students have the opportunities to lead as a group leader, they make significant contribution not only limited to their parents and community, but impacting the society through changing the doubtful perception of some parents and the community (Coffey & Lavery, 2017).

While the limited support from certain parents and community is acknowledged, support from the Government, Ministry of Education and the media industry is required as well. The Government and Ministry of Education could allocate more resources to support and enhance the leadership development of students with disabilities in co-curriculum activities through training more special education teachers. Improving the leadership development of students with disabilities requires a responsive involvement (Murphy & Johnson, 2011), especially the media. When the local media, such as television programs, movies and shows, are actively featuring the leadership of students with disabilities, awareness can be raised. The awareness through media is an important element in leadership development of students with disabilities, as the lack of input among the public shows limited awareness of students with disabilities. The media industries could help by providing more information and education to the community, especially demonstrating the achievements of people with disabilities that would further denote the importance of developing the leadership skills of students with disabilities.

Limitations

This study provided preliminary findings based on the semi-structured interviews with the school’s senior assistant in special education and four special education teachers to uncover the leadership opportunities for students with disabilities in co-curriculum activities. However, few limitations existed throughout the process of conducting the study.

First, interviews with students with disabilities and their parents can determine the effectiveness of leadership opportunism afforded to them in the school. This study did not explore the perceptions of these students due to the nature and objective of the study.
Therefore, future studies could explore the perspectives of students with disabilities and their parents on the leadership opportunities afforded to them and its effectiveness in cultivating their leadership skills.

Second, this qualitative case study does not intend or attempt to generalise the findings. The school, chosen as a case study, has a unique contextual ground in Malaysia. The school places extra emphasis on sports and its students are constantly encouraged and engaged to achieve great success in co-curriculum activities. Hence, other schools do not have such unique contextual ground in order to generalise the findings.

**Conclusion**

In conclusion, it is learnt that students with disabilities highly require the accessibility of leadership opportunities in co-curriculum activities. Findings revealed that certain parents are unable to foresee and accept the fact that these students have the capabilities and potential to lead extraordinarily as a leader in co-curriculum activities. With both lessons mentioned, it is worth outlining that students with disabilities are highly influenced by the reaction and support from the community and parents. The findings have also revealed that teachers and school leaders are likely to encounter difficult challenges in changing the perceptions of the community to students with disabilities and convince the parents to believe in the leadership development of their children. Nevertheless, developing leadership of students with disabilities does seem plausible, on condition that all walks of society are prepared to embrace the notion of inclusive society (Nikolić, Cvijetić, Branković, Đordić, & Johnstone, 2019) and pay attention to providing more leadership opportunities to these students.

**Disclosure Statement**

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

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