J Youth Adolescence
DOI 10.1007/s10964-013-0027-1

EMPIRICAL RESEARCH

Youth–Adult Partnership: Exploring Contributions to Empowerment, Agency and Community Connections in Malaysian Youth Programs

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Received: 3 July 2013 / Accepted: 2 October 2013
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Abstract Youth–adult partnership (Y–AP) has emerged as a key practice for enacting two features of effective developmental settings: supportive adult relationships and support for efficacy and mattering. Previous studies have shown that when youth, supported by adults, actively participate in organizational and community decision-making they are likely to show greater confidence and agency, empowerment and critical consciousness, and community connections. Most of the extant research on Y–AP is limited to qualitative studies and the identification of organizational best practices. Almost all research focuses on Western sociocultural settings. To address these gaps, 299 youth, age 15 to 24, were sampled from established afterschool and community programs in Malaysia to explore the contribution of Y–AP (operationalized as having two components: youth voice in decision-making and supportive adult relationships) to empowerment, agency and community connections. As hypothesized, hierarchical regressions indicated that program quality (Y–AP, safe environment and program engagement) contributed to agency, empowerment and community connections beyond the contribution of family, school and religion. Additionally, the Y–AP measures contributed substantially more variance than the other measures of program quality on each outcome. Interaction effects indicated differences by age for empowerment and agency but not for community connections. The primary findings in this inquiry replicate those found in previous interview and observational-oriented studies. The data suggests fertile ground for future research while demonstrating that Y–AP may be an effective practice for positive youth development outside of Western settings.

Keywords Adolescents · Youth–adult partnership · Positive youth development · Community connections · Personal agency · Psychological empowerment

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Introduction

Positive youth development has, since the early 1990s, become a dominant approach for youth policy and community practice in the United States. Concurrently, theory and research has sought to identify the contexts and developmental processes that underlie this approach. The National Research Council & Institute of Medicine (2002) synthesized this broad array of scholarship to identify the "features of positive developmental settings" which promote youth competence, confidence, and connections. Two features are the focus of the present study. The first is "supportive relationships," specifically those relationships with non-familial adults (e.g., youth workers, mentors) in community programs and voluntary associations that are characterized by trust, respect, and reciprocity. The second feature of positive developmental settings that orients this study is "support for efficacy and mattering," specifically those social transactions that are characterized by youth being active, instrumental agents in their social ecologies.

Published online: 12 October 2013

Other reviews mirror the National Research Council synthesis. There is a strong consensus that positive youth development is promoted when young people participate in collective decision-making, especially when their voice is listened to and respected by the adults with whom they interact (see Benson et al. 2006; Damon 2004; Lerner 2004; Zeldin and Price 1995).

The heightened focus on youth voice and supportive non-familial adults is not limited to the United States. The United Nations Convention on Rights of the Child, ratified in 1989 by all members except the United States and Somalia, is illustrative. Article 12 declares that all young people have the right to be heard on all matters affecting them, including policy matters. It further asserts that all children are capable of expressing a legitimate view and that their views have the right to be taken seriously in accordance with their age and maturity. Adult support is critical. Explicit in the Convention is that adults need to learn to work more closely in collaboration with young people to help them articulate their lives, to develop strategies for change, and to exercise their rights (Landsdown 2001). The Convention has long been a catalyst for policy and program changes in many regions of the world (World Urban Forum 2006). It is noteworthy, perhaps, that we have been unable to locate any advocacy, research, or policy-oriented documents that speak extensively to the youth participation expectations of the Rights of the Child as they apply to countries in Southeast Asia.

Within the field of positive youth development, youth-adult partnership (Y–AP) has become a construct for synthesizing the above themes. Conceptualized as both a developmental process and as a community practice, Y–AP involves people of differing ages working collaboratively, over time, on matters of importance. Y–AP emphasizes mutuality and reciprocity among youth and adults with a goal-oriented focus on shared decision-making and reflective learning (Camino 2000). These core components, according to a review by Wong et al. (2010), make Y–AP an "optimal" type of youth–adult relationship because the "shared control" is ideal for empowering young people (p. 109). Building from Bronfenbrenner (1979), other researchers conclude that Y–AP is an influential "developmental relationship" because it shifts power in favor of the developing person while continuing to provide the scaffolding, empathy, and open dialogue that allows youth to benefit from the higher degree of control (Camino 2005; Hamilton and Hamilton 2005; Li and Jullian 2012). In brief, Y–AP exerts its influence not simply because youth have authentic opportunities to participate in decision-making forums, but equally important, because the young people are recognized and cared for by adults with institutional power (Larson et al. 2005; Zeldin et al. 2013).

Other research explores the developmental outcomes that result from Y–AP. Syntheses of this research have been conducted from diverse perspectives including developmental psychology, community psychology, social justice, youth activism, and civic engagement (see O'Donoghue et al. 2002; Sherrod et al. 2002; Zeldin et al. 2005; Kim and Sherman 2006; Kirshner 2007; Wong et al. 2010; Linds et al. 2010; Flanagan and Christens 2011). Despite the different orientations and guiding frameworks, each review highlights the benefits to youth. When youth, supported by adults, actively participate in organizational and community decision-making they are likely to show greater confidence and agency (Dworkin et al. 2003; Larson and Hansen 2005; Mitra 2004), empowerment and critical consciousness (Ginwright et al. 2006; Christens and Peterson 2012; Zimmerman et al. 1999) and community connections (Evans 2007; Jarrett et al. 2005; Youniss et al. 1997). These positive outcomes are not automatic, of course. When adults carelessly implement the practice or when organizational structures fail to support authentic collaboration, Y–AP may have marginal or even detrimental effects on youth (Ferreira et al. 2012; Zeldin et al. 2008).

The Current Study

It is noteworthy that the vast majority of the extant research is qualitative, aimed at analytic description, hypothesis generation, and the identification of best practices in youth programs. This body of work has been vital for theory development and in certain cases, influencing policies and programs in the United States (Zeldin et al. 2013). At the same time, there is a need to expand the research base to include more quantitative studies, particularly those that explore the associations between Y–AP and developmental outcomes. Such research would complement the rich qualitative empirical foundation that now exists. It would also provide additional support to "justify" the practice of Y–AP to skeptical policy makers who might question the motivation and competence of youth to participate in collective decision-making.

Also noteworthy is that the preponderance of existing research is limited to Western sociocultural settings (predominantly, but not exclusively, to the United States). While other countries may not have the conceptual frameworks and empirical foundations that characterize youth policy and programs in the United States, this does not mean that they are not struggling with similar issues of how to engage youth in their own development and how to overcome the marginalization of young people from organizational and community decision-making (Arnett 2002; Meucci and Schwab 1997). Much can be gained from cross-national inquiries in terms of challenging prevailing assumptions, teasing out emic from etic perspectives of best practice, and differentiating between universal

and cultural-specific developmental processes. Cross-national studies may be particularly important for the study and practice of Y–AP, especially in those places where cultural and political realities are far different than Westerns societies, such as in countries that may invest in youth development but hold radically different expectations regarding societal roles for youth and for their relationships with adults (Schlegel and Barry 1991).

The current study addresses these gaps by using quantitative measures to explore and replicate associations previously found qualitatively between Y–AP and key youth development outcomes. Malaysia was chosen as the context for this study because it has recently made significant policy commitments to youth development infrastructure and programming, while concurrently, seeking to maintain the integrity of the more traditional socialization agents of family, religious communities and schools. Our focus on agency, empowerment, and community connections reflects the policy priorities of Malaysia as well as the centrality of these outcomes to positive youth development and youth–adult partnership.

Study Context: Malaysian Policy and Positive Youth Development

Malaysia is a developing nation in Southeast Asia with approximately 27 million residents. Following their independence from Great Britain in 1957, Malaysians conceptualized youth as future business and government leaders, and socialized them in ways to help Malaysia exceed global economic and technological standards. 50 years of economic progress, rapid modernization and intense global competition have changed the way young people are viewed in Malaysia, however. The acceptance of young people as developing persons who are needed as contributors to society in the present has begun to take hold (Krauss et al. 2012; Kwan Meng 2012). This transition, which remains dynamic and gradual, received a major boost in 2004 through the launching of the National Youth Development Action Plan. The plan outlines 11 focus areas emphasizing social, entrepreneur, and leadership development, and the building of a delivery system with a heightened emphasis on creating more opportunities for youth and adults to work together on issues of shared concern (Tenth Malaysia Plan 2010). The plan has contributed to significant new investments in afterschool and community-based youth programs, which are seen as central to progress in the focus areas. This investment, in turn, has resulted in a far greater role for nonfamilial adults (e.g., youth program staff, coaches, community religious leaders, tutors, and volunteers) in the lives of young people (Krauss et al. 2012). Adolescents 15 to 18 years old receive afterschool programming that is generally organized around three main themes: service, sports and recreation, and interest based activities (e.g., art, music, journalism). For 19 to 24 year olds, programs are designed to meet the unique needs of emerging adults through service, leadership development, spiritual development, entrepreneurship, and competitive athletics (Kwan Meng 2012).

Three attributes of positive youth development—personal efficacy, empowerment, and community connections—have become cross-cutting priorities for the Youth Development Action Plan. It is believed that a common emphasis on these attributes will not only prepare Malaysian youth for productive roles in the country's economy, but will also allow youth to take on active roles in community development, social justice issues, and global citizenship (Ahmad et al. 2012; Hamzah 2005; Krauss et al. 2013; Nga 2009). Recent studies underscore the need for attention to these priorities. For example, the most recent Malaysian Youth Index (Malaysian Institute for Research in Youth Development 2011), a bi-annual survey, reported a sense of empowerment index score of 55.8 (out of 100), suggesting that contemporary Malaysian youth lack a strong sense of influence in their organizations, communities and daily lives. Another nationwide study evaluating the effectiveness of the Malaysian National Youth Development Policy reported that only 9 % of young people felt involved in the design and planning of activities in their respective youth programs. Further, 10 % of youth felt strongly that adults perceive them as recipients of, rather than partners in, community development efforts. Given this pattern of findings, it is not surprising that only 15 % of youth felt as though they were actively involved in finding solutions to issues relating to them (Hamzah et al. 2011).

While the terms "empowerment" and "agency" are sometimes used interchangeably to describe individuals' perceived sense of control, important theoretical distinctions between the two constructs exist. Empowerment is theorized as being specific to the sociopolitical domain and refers to beliefs about one's abilities to influence social and political systems (Ozer and Schotland 2011). In contrast, psychological agency refers to beliefs about one's abilities in nonsocial environments, such as intellectual or artistic skills (Zimmerman and Zahniser 1991), and the ability to set goals and organize one's actions to achieve them (Bandura 2006; Larson and Angus 2011). In addition, psychological empowerment is connected to a multi-level framework that addresses groups exercising power to gain control (Christens 2012). This is an important difference from agency, which is conceptualized as individuals' control over their environment. An understanding of these theoretical differences is reflected in our selected measures. These differences are also central to Malaysian policy. The development of agency is seen as critical. It is agency that

will provide youth with the motivation to contribute to their economic success, and in so doing, the country's economic sustainability. Malaysia is also beginning to embrace empowerment. Especially within the youth sector, more people are aware that youth need to develop a sense of empowerment to participate in civic change efforts in order to help Malaysia mature as a democratic society. Finally, a strong sense of connection to the communities and people where youth live is seen as vital to preserving the collectivist values and economic growth that are central to Malaysian culture and social harmony (Ramli 2005).

Hypotheses

Grounded in the current context of Malaysian youth policy and contemporary research on positive youth development, the current study explores the contribution of afterschool and community programs on youth and emerging adults. While families and religious institutions remain the cornerstone of socialization and human development in Malaysia, youth programs and their adult staff are taking on a greater role in the lives of young people. Consequently, Hypothesis 1 predicts that the quality of youth programs will be associated with positive developmental outcomes above and beyond the contributions of traditional socialization agents and supports. Hypothesis 2 looks more closely at program quality. It predicts that the core elements of youth–adult partnership—youth voice in decision-making and supportive adult relationships—will contribute more variance to the outcomes than the other two indicators of program quality, safe environment and program engagement. Finally, our analysis explores the potential influence of age on associations among indicators of program quality and developmental outcomes. No hypotheses were made given the paucity of prior research on this issue in the United States and Malaysia.

Methods

Participants and Procedures

The study sample included 299 youth development program participants from six youth programs in the greater Kuala Lumpur region. The programs selected for the study met four criteria. First, all participating programs were developmental in design. They focused on skills and competency building in health, spirituality, arts, communication, civic engagement and physical health. Second, the programs were 'center-based' (i.e. fixed location). Third, all of the programs were headed by adult program staff who were consistently involved with the programs to allow for relationship-building over time. Adult–youth ratios in the programs varied from 8-to-1 to 20-to-1. Finally, all of the programs were comprised of youth between the ages of 15 to 24. Programs for 15 to 18 year-olds were more structured and focused on specific types of activities, such as development of communication skills, martial arts or music. The programs targeting 19 to 24 year-olds incorporated more opportunities for leadership, were loosely structured and geared towards community engagement and service. Approximately 56 % of the respondents were between 15 and 18 years old and their reported mean family income was RM3,376 (approximately USD1,090 per month). This was below the national average monthly household income (RM4,356) for urban families, indicating that the sample was predominantly comprised of middle to lower middle-class urban youth (Department of Statistics Malaysia 2007). The sample was split between males (54.5 %) and females (45.5 %) and was comprised primarily of Malay (55.5 %) and Chinese (41.5 %) young people.

All of the measures used in this study were created and validated with largely Western populations. To translate the measures into Malay language and ensure that the items were culturally appropriate for the study sample, two steps were followed. First, a team of eight Malaysian researchers reviewed the measures and translated them into Malay, taking into consideration not only the culture of the target population but also their age. Certain items on the original scales were revised to reflect language consistent with Malaysian culture. For example, the item "My community or school leaders would pay attention to me if I gave them my opinion" was revised to "My community or school leaders would listen to me", to reflect the discomfort Malaysian youth would feel 'giving adult leaders their opinion', as opposed to 'being listened to.' Such revisions reflect the less confrontational nature of Malaysian culture and communication styles. All items were then reverse translated to ensure consistency and accuracy. After the researchers reached agreement on the wording, a pilot test was conducted with 30 young people to test the clarity of the survey items. No further modifications were required. On the final survey, all items were presented in both Malay and English.

Approval to carry out the study was sought from each program sampled. Malaysian public university ethical regulations do not require formal review board approval for 'non-sensitive' social science survey research. Accordingly, approval from the individual programs was sufficient to carry out the sampling. The researchers met with each program director. Following a review of the survey and a discussion of the study purpose, the respective directors were given the opportunity to recommend changes to any questions. No changes were recommended. The respondents were encouraged to answer all questions on the survey, but were also

reminded that their participation was voluntary and that they were free to decline to respond to any question that they were not comfortable answering. At each program, the research team members administered the surveys to the respondents in groups, who then completed the questionnaires within 45 min to 1 h. All program participants that were present on the day of the scheduled data collection were sampled. As attendance monitoring procedures differed across the six programs included in the study it was not possible to assess comparable participation rates. However, the researchers were assured by the program directors that, on average, at least 90 % of program participants were present on the day of data collection.

Measures

Outcome Measures

Consistent with the literature on youth–adult partnership (Y–AP) and the current emphasis of the Malaysian youth sector, the outcomes of empowerment, psychological agency, and community connections were selected to ground this inquiry.

Empowerment Empowerment was assessed using an 8-item adaptation of the Sociopolitical Control Scale for Youth (Peterson et al. 2011). Statements were rated using a 5-point Likert-type scale ranging from *Strongly Disagree* to *Strongly Agree* and represent two components: leadership competence (three items, e.g., "I would rather have a leadership role when I'm involved in a group project", "I like to work on solving a problem myself rather than wait and see if someone else will deal with it") and policy control (five items, e.g., "My opinion is important because it could someday make a difference in my community or school", "Youth like me can really understand what's going on with my community and school"). Consistent with previous studies which used this measure as an outcome variable with youth (Christens and Peterson 2012), the full scale was used for analysis. Among this study's participants, the mean score was 3.56 ($SD = .45$, $\alpha = .68$).

Psychological Agency Psychological agency was measured using a 9-item sub-scale adapted from the Boston University Empowerment Scale (Rogers et al. 1997). Statements (e.g. "I generally accomplish what I set out to do", "I have a positive attitude about myself", "Most problems can be solved by taking action") were rated using a 5-point Likert-type scale ranging from *Strongly Disagree* to *Strongly Agree*. Among this study's participants, the mean score was 3.71 ($SD = .43$, $\alpha = .70$).

Community Connections This measure was conceptualized as a young person's connection to community members, including peers and nonfamilial adults. Two components, therefore, represent this measure: (a) peer connections and (b) adult connections. Peer connections was measured using three items (e.g. "My friends are there when I need them", "My friends care about me") rated on a 5-point Likert-type scale ranging from *Never True* to *Always True* (Armsden and Greenberg 1987). Adult connections was measured using four items (e.g. "There are adults I can ask for help when I need it", "Outside of my home and school there is an adult who believes I will be a success") rated on a 5-point Likert scale ranging from *Strongly Disagree* to *Strongly Agree* (Whitlock 2006). Confirmatory factor analysis verified that these 7 items appropriately represent one construct (CFI = .982; RMSEA = .056). For CFI, values greater than .95 indicate acceptable model fit while for RMSEA, values less than .08 are recommended as a criterion of acceptable fit (Kaplan 2009). Among this study's participants, the mean score was 3.80 ($SD = .58$, $\alpha = .76$).

Socialization Contexts

Given the lack of research in the Malaysian and Far Eastern literature on the youth outcomes described above, we assessed traditional aspects of family and schools as settings of socialization. Given that religion is a central socialization agent in Malaysia, we also included a measure of that construct.

Family Parental monitoring was measured using a 4-item scale derived from the Teen Assessment Project survey (Small and Kerns 1993). Participants responded to items such as, "My parents/guardians know where I am after school" and "My parents/guardians know who my friends are" using a 5-point Likert-type scale ranging from *Never* to *Always*. Among this study's participants, the mean score was 3.76 ($SD = .85$, $\alpha = .74$). The second aspect of family assessed in this study was family cohesion, which was measured using a 4-item scale derived from the Moos Family Environment Scale (1974). Statements (e.g., "My family can easily think of things to do together;" "My family members feel very close to each other") were rated using a 4–point Likert-type scale ranging from *Not True* to *Always True*. Among this study's participants, the mean score was 3.32 ($SD = .63$, $\alpha = .84$).

School School connectedness was measured using a 5-item scale developed by McNeely et al. (2002). Statements (e.g., "I feel I am a part of my school;" "I feel safe at my school") were rated using a 5-point Likert-type scale ranging from *Strongly Disagree* to *Strongly Agree*. Among this study's participants, the mean score was 3.78 ($SD = .66$, $\alpha = .77$). The second aspect measured was

school engagement. This was assessed using a 5-item scale adapted from Cochran et al. (1994). Statements (e.g. "My school work is meaningful to my life", "My courses at school are interesting") were rated using a 5-point Likert-type scale ranging from *Strongly Disagree* to *Strongly Agree*. Among this study's participants, the mean score was 3.98 ($SD = .66$, $\alpha = .78$).

Religious Community Involvement Two items measuring religious community involvement were included in the analysis. Respondents were asked how much time they spent (a) attending religious services, and (b) participating in a religious youth group. Responses were rated using a 6-point scale ranging from *Never* to *Daily*. The mean score for the study participants was 2.82 ($SD = 1.21$, $r = .75$, $p < .01$).

Youth Program Quality

Program quality was assessed using four measures: safe environment, program engagement, youth voice in decision-making, and supportive adult relationships.

Safe Environment The measure of safe environment focuses on youth's feelings of emotional and psychological safety during program participation. The emotional safety rubric on the Youth Program Quality Assessment provided a basis for the construction of this measure (Forum for Youth Development 2012). Four statements were rated using a 5-point Likert-type scale from *Strongly Disagree* to *Strongly Agree* (e.g., "I feel safe when I'm in this center", "This center makes me feel welcome"). Among this study's participants, the mean score was 4.16 ($SD = .69$, $\alpha = .84$).

Program Engagement The measure of program engagement was adapted from Vandell et al.'s (2005) study of engagement in afterschool programs. This measure assesses young people's level of engagement in program activities, understood as the simultaneous experience of concentration, interest and enjoyment. Five statements were rated using a 5-point Likert-type scale ranging from *Strongly Disagree* to *Strongly Agree* (e.g., "I enjoy most everything I do in this center", "The programs offered in this center are important to my life"). Among this study's participants, the mean score was 4.06 ($SD = .63$, $\alpha = .87$).

Youth Voice in Decision-Making The measure of youth voice in decision-making was adapted from the Youth and Adult Leaders for Program Excellence assessment tool (Camino et al. 2006). In contrast to measures of empowerment and agency, which assess young people's beliefs in their abilities, the measure of youth voice in decision-making assesses youth's actual experiences with active decision-making in programmatic contexts. Five statements were rated using a 5-point Likert-type scale from *Strongly Disagree* to *Strongly Agree* (e.g., "In this center, I am encouraged to express my ideas and opinions", "I get to make decisions about the things I want to do", "I have a say in planning programs at this center"). Among this study's participants, the mean score was 3.72 ($SD = .60$, $\alpha = .81$).

Supportive Adult Relationships The measure of supportive adult relationships was adapted from the YALPE assessment tool (Camino et al. 2006). In contrast to the measure of community connections, which assesses the general availability of adults in the lives of young people, supportive adult relationships speaks to the reciprocal relationships that exist between youth and nonfamilial adults within the context of programmatic and community settings. Since the current study sample was drawn from youth programs, specifically, wording for the supportive adult relationships items focused on staff and adults "in this center." Six statements were rated using a 5-point Likert-type scale from *Strongly Disagree* to *Strongly Agree* (e.g., "Youth and staff trust each other in this center", "Youth and adults learn a lot from working together in this center", "In this center, it is clear that youth and staff respect each other"). Among this study's participants, the mean score was 4.02 ($SD = .65$, $\alpha = .88$).

Results

Preliminary analyses were conducted to ensure no violation of the assumptions of normality, linearity and homoscedasticity for all of the test measures. To ensure independence of the measures, bivariate correlations were conducted (Table 1). Although moderate correlations were found between the four program quality measures, VIF scores from the regression analyses indicated no violation of multicollinearity for any of the test measures.

To assess the associations between program quality and positive youth outcomes (empowerment, agency, and community connections) we used hierarchical linear regression (Tables 2, 3, 4). Interactions of the socialization context and program quality measures with age group (adolescents vs. emerging adults) were also carried out to explore differences in association between the adolescent and emerging adult groups for each of the three outcome measures.

Empowerment was first regressed on the independent variables both with and without program quality and youth–adult partnership (Y–AP) (Table 2). In all three models, age, school connectedness and religious community involvement

Table 1 Correlation coefficients of the test variables

Variable	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12
1. Empowerment	*											
2. Agency	.39**	*										
3. Community connections	.31**	.39**	*									
4. Parental monitoring	.16**	.21**	.27**	*								
5. Family cohesion	15**	.17**	.28**	.46**	*							
6. Religious community involvement	.28**	.19**	.19**	.03	.19**	*						
7. School connectedness	.20**	.26**	.26**	.21**	.26**	.17**	*					
8. School engagement	.19**	.25**	.21**	.19**	.22**	.18**	.56**	*				
9. Safe environment	28**	.25**	.22**	.11	.12*	.19**	.15*	.18**	*			
10. Program engagement	.36**	.26**	.29**	.16**	.27**	.16**	.19**	.25**	.58**	*		
11. Youth voice in decision-making	.42**	.38**	.32**	.16**	.18**	.19**	.09	.11	.61**	.57**	*	
12. Supportive adult relationships	.34**	.31**	.34**	.18**	.23**	.08	.12*	.15**	.62**	.68**	.62**	*

Pearson two-tailed correlations (* $p < .05$; ** $p < .01$)

Table 2 Standardized beta coefficients for empowerment

Variable	Empowerment		
	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3
Demographics			
Gender	.08	.06	.05
Age	.13*	.17**	.16**
Ethnic–Malay	−.31	−.29	−.20
Ethnic–Chinese	−.08	−.13	−.09
Contexts			
Parental monitoring	.06	.05	.04
Family cohesion	.04	−.01	−.02
Religious community involvement	.27***	.20**	.18**
School connectedness	.16*	.15*	.14*
School engagement	.06	−.00	.02
Youth Program Quality			
Safe environment	–	.06	−.06
Program engagement	–	.26***	.15
Youth voice in decision-making	–	–	.23**
Supportive adult relationships	–	–	.09
$\Delta R2$	.19***	.08***	.04**
Total $R2$	.19***	.27***	.30***

* $p < .05$; ** $p < .01$; *** $p < .001$

Table 3 Standardized beta coefficients for psychological agency

Variable	Agency		
	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3
Demographics			
Gender	−.02	−.04	−.06
Age	.20**	.23***	.22***
Ethnic–Malay	−.30	−.30	−.19
Ethnic–Chinese	−.20	−.25	−.20
Contexts			
Parental monitoring	.12	.11	.09
Family cohesion	.04	.01	−.00
Religious community involvement	.10	.05	.03
School connectedness	.18**	.16*	.16*
School engagement	.10	.06	.08
Youth Program Quality			
Safe environment	–	.13*	−.03
Program engagement	–	.11	−.05
Youth voice in decision- making	–	–	.27***
Supportive adult relationships	–	–	.16*
$\Delta R2$	.18***	.04**	.06***
Total $R2$	.18***	.22***	.28***

* $p < .05$; ** $p < .01$; *** $p < .001$

were significantly associated with empowerment. In Model 2, when the safe environment and program engagement variables were included in the equation, program engagement predicted empowerment. In Model 3, when the two proxies for Y–AP (youth voice and supportive adult relationships) were included, youth voice was significant, while program engagement was not. This suggests that program engagement is an important factor in facilitating empowerment when young people are given voice in decision-making. Therefore, both hypotheses 1 and 2 were supported by program quality predicting empowerment beyond the context measures and the contribution of Y–AP, in the form of youth voice, was greater than the other aspects of program quality.

The analyses of the second outcome, agency, indicated a similar analytic pattern as empowerment (Table 3). Across all three models, age and school connectedness were significantly associated with agency. In Model 2 safe environment predicted agency. In Model 3, after the Y–AP measures were added to the model, both youth voice in

Table 4 Standardized beta coefficients for community connections

Variable	Community connections		
	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3
Demographics			
Gender	.17**	.15**	.15**
Age	.20***	.23***	.23***
Ethnic–Malay	.10	.11	.16
Ethnic–Chinese	.31	.28	.29
Contexts			
Parental monitoring	.11	.11	.10
Family cohesion	.17**	.14*	.12*
Religious community involvement	.12*	.08	.08
School connectedness	.23***	.22**	.22**
School engagement	.01	−.03	−.02
Youth Program Quality			
Safe environment	–	.05	−.06
Program engagement	–	.16*	.03
Youth voice in decision-making	–	–	.08
Supportive adult relationships	–	–	.22**
$\Delta R2$	.26***	.03**	.03**
Total $R2$	.26***	.30***	.32***

* $p < .05$; ** $p < .01$; *** $p < .001$

decision-making and supportive adult relationships predicted agency, while safe environment did not. This suggests that sense of safety predicts agency when young people are given voice in decision-making and have positive relationships with adults in the program. Therefore, both hypotheses 1 and 2 were supported. A sense of program safety predicted agency above that of the context measures and the contribution of Y–AP, in the form of youth voice and supportive adult relationships, had more predictive power than the other measures of program quality.

The results for community connections also indicate a similar analytic pattern to the first two outcomes with the additional contribution of family cohesion (Table 4). In all three models, gender, age, school connectedness, and family cohesion were significantly associated with community connectedness. In Model 2, program engagement predicted community connections while in Model 3, supportive adult relationships predicted community connections, but program engagement did not. This suggests that young people's sense of engagement in programs is associated with connections to community when young people have positive relationships with program adults. Therefore, both hypotheses 1 and 2 were again supported. Program quality in the form of program engagement predicted community connections above the context measures and the contribution of Y–AP, in the form of supportive adult relationships, had more predictive power than the other measures of program quality.

To explore differences in our set of predictors by age, interactions for the socialization context and program quality factors indicated effects for empowerment and agency. Specifically, a significant negative effect was seen between supportive adult relationships and age ($\beta = -.21$, $p = .019$) for the outcome measure empowerment, signifying that the supportive adult relationships' effect on empowerment decreased with age. For the agency outcome measure, a significant positive effect resulted between religious community involvement ($\beta = .14$, $p = .019$) and age, as well as school engagement ($\beta = .20$, $p = .002$) and age, meaning that both the religious community involvement and school engagement effects on agency increased with age. In addition, a weak negative effect was seen between safe environment and age ($\beta = -.15$, $p = .049$), indicating that the safe environment effect on agency decreased with age. Finally, for community connections, interactions revealed no significant differences by age, suggesting that the family setting measures, school connectedness and supportive adult relationships are significant for both adolescents and emerging adults.

Discussion

Despite the growth in studies on youth–adult partnership (Y–AP) in the West, almost all research to date has focused on the developmental influence of Y–AP in organizational and community contexts. We know little about how Y–AP, as it occurs in afterschool programs, complements the contribution of other socialization influences, such as the family, school, and religious communities. Additionally, this study is the first to examine the influence of Y–AP in a non-Western country. While the vast majority of research on Y–AP has been qualitative, this study is also distinct in its use of survey methodology. The current study, therefore, extends the existing research base in three ways: it examines how Y–AP complements the contribution of other socialization factors, its context is Malaysia, and quantitative rather than qualitative methods are used.

We put forth two hypotheses at the outset. First, we predicted that the quality of afterschool programs would be associated with positive developmental outcomes above and beyond the contributions of traditional socialization agents. We also predicted that the core elements of youth–adult partnership—youth voice in decision-making and supportive adult relationships—would contribute more variance to the outcomes than the two other indicators of program quality, specifically, safe environment and program engagement. Lastly, we set out to explore the

influence of age on associations among the indicators of program quality and developmental outcomes.

Both hypotheses received consistent empirical support from the pattern of data across the outcomes of empowerment, agency, and community connections. Regarding Hypothesis 1, adding the four program quality measures into the models contributed a significant amount of variance to each of the outcome variables. Regarding Hypothesis 2, the contributions of youth voice and supportive adult relations dwarfed the influence of safe environment and program engagement. Specifically, regarding empowerment and community connections, program engagement contributed significantly, over and beyond the measures of socialization context. When the Y–AP measures were included in the model, however, the contribution of engagement was reduced to non-significant levels. Regarding agency, safe environment contributed significantly to the initial model, but this association disappeared when the Y–AP measures were included. These findings suggest that the key elements of youth–adult partnership—youth voice and supportive adult relationships—are critical components of program quality.

Implications for Theory and Future Research

The two components of Y–AP operated somewhat differently across the outcome measures. Youth voice in decision-making was a significant predictor for empowerment and agency. This makes sense, theoretically. Youth voice is almost always conceptualized as an active and instrumental behavior through which young people become intentional producers of their own development. When a young person acts affirmatively in their environment over a sustained period of time, one would expect that empowerment and agency would be enhanced (Evans 2007; Larson et al. 2004; Maton and Salem 1995). Qualitative literature on the impact of youth having voice in organizations has been shown to produce enhanced confidence to achieve personal goals (Larson and Hansen 2005; Mitra 2004; Zeldin 2004), engagement with their environments (Wong et al. 2010), and the development of self-management abilities to function effectively in the world around them (Halpern 2005; Larson et al. 2005). Supportive adult relationships were significantly associated with agency, albeit not at the level of youth voice. In contrast, supportive adult relationships, not youth voice, most strongly predicted community connections. In other words, those young people who experienced supportive adults in their programs were most likely to report having extensive and positive adult and peer connections. This association is consistent with theory and past research. Increasingly, it is understood that the opportunities for youth to act affirmatively on their environments is extremely difficult without positive adult relationships and intentional adult scaffolding (Camino 2005; Kirshner 2007). Youth development is promoted (Li and Jullian 2012) and youth program effectiveness enhanced (Hirsch 2005) when such relationships and scaffolding are available.

We are not suggesting, of course, that Y–AP supplements the role and influence of traditional socialization agents and contexts, especially in settings like Malaysia. On the contrary, our findings show that religious community involvement significantly predicted empowerment, which makes theoretical sense. Religion has long been the strongest institutional force for empowerment in Malaysia where it is currently exemplified by, among others, the popularity of religious-based student and youth organizations and even political parties such as Parti Islam Se-Malaysia (PAS), which boast influential youth affiliates. We also note that school connectedness is a consistent predictor across the variables. The importance of school connectedness is well documented in the Western literature as a powerful influence on positive youth development (Li et al. 2010; Osterman 2000). In Malaysia, schools provide academic as well as religious and afterschool programs. It is quite understandable therefore, that connectedness to school would contribute much to Malaysian students' overall personal development.

The contribution of religious community involvement and school engagement to agency for the emerging adult group is an intriguing finding. It may be that cultural forces are in play; although religion plays a central role in Malaysian society in general, research indicates that it becomes a more salient part of identity as people get older (Krauss et al. 2013; Zainab et al. 2012). Furthermore, emerging adulthood as a period of life has been characterized by self-exploration of numerous domains, including spirituality (Arnett 2000; Barry and Nelson 2005). It might be expected, therefore, that religious community involvement would be significant as a predictor of agency and empowerment for emerging adults, but not adolescents. These findings lend credibility to the idea that religious community involvement provides experiences that are not only socially but also spiritually empowering for emerging adults, making their contribution unique from other types of programs. As religion is arguably more central to the lives of emerging adults in Malaysia than in many other countries, caution must be urged in generalizing the findings beyond a local context.

Age differences further revealed significant associations between supportive adult relations and empowerment, and safe environment and agency, respectively, for the adolescent group. Although speculative, work conducted in the US might provide some clues about these associations. Flanagan and Christens (2011) reported that among youth from marginalized communities, cumulative disadvantage

over time including the lack of opportunities to practice civic skills has been found to depress civic incorporation and civic action later in life. In the Malaysian context, we suspect the role of culture is similar and equally salient. Outside of positive developmental settings, adolescents in Malaysia are afforded fewer genuine experiences for leadership, decision-making and opportunities to exercise agency than emerging adults (Hamzah et al. 2002). The support from adult staff and safety that adolescents experience in youth programs, therefore, is likely to contribute more to agency and empowerment than for older youth. This resonates with related studies suggesting that participatory opportunities in more traditional, patriarchal Eastern cultures may be more valued by younger adolescents (Morton and Montgomery 2012).

Although gender was not a predictor for empowerment or agency, being female was associated with community connections. We are unsure how to interpret this result. The current literature offers mixed results. Female adolescents have been found to be more positively inclined to become involved in their community (Child Trends 2013; Miller 1994) and this may lead to stronger community connections. However, Whitlock (2007) found no gender differences in her study on community connectedness. In contrast, Chiessi et al. (2010) found adolescent males to have higher levels of community belonging. The current findings may be cultural. Current university enrolment figures in Malaysia indicate that nearly 70 % of students are female. Male disengagement at the primary and secondary school levels has been pointed to as a possible reason for the decline in male students' academic achievement and subsequent educational advancement (Majzub and Rais 2010). The findings on community connections presented here, therefore, might speak to a more general pattern of disengagement from public institutions among Malaysian male students.

The patterns of results observed in this inquiry are consistent with past theory and research. At the same time, confidence is limited by several constraints. First, causality cannot be inferred due to the cross-sectional nature of the data. Second, the samples in this inquiry were limited to programs in and around a major urban center. Programming in rural communities may be quite different especially to the extent of youth involvement in program decision-making. Third, the sample was limited to Malay and Chinese youth, and omitted representation from Indian and other racial groups. Future research in Malaysia should include a broader representation of the youth population. Fourth, our findings are limited to Malaysia. Although the measures were reviewed and adapted by Malaysian researchers and pilot tested, the item content of the measures may have influenced the results in unknown ways. Lastly, shared method variance may have increased the magnitude of the associations. While the findings that the two components of Y–AP were associated in different ways with each of the outcomes may minimize this concern, the associations among the relationship-oriented variables deserve additional study.

Implications for Policy

The findings support current trends toward policies and programs in the United States that involve youth and adults in shared action for a common purpose (Wong et al. 2010; Zeldin et al. 2013). The results can also help sustain the emerging movement in Malaysia toward more effective positive youth development programming. Along these lines, we believe that sufficient support exists to direct local policy discussions toward the importance of broadening socialization settings—through Y–AP—to enhance youth developmental outcomes. While objections to Y–AP might be found among certain quarters of Malaysian society on the basis that it challenges traditional, hierarchical youth–adult relationships, historically, policy makers have widely supported new ways of preparing Malaysian youth for the challenges of development. On the surface, the notion of adults handing over decision-making power to young people introduces elements that may be deemed too foreign, Western or culturally misplaced. In practice, however, youth–adult cooperation is part and parcel of Malaysian society, and often takes the form of youth and adults engaging in informal community work through their respective religious and cultural institutions. In these more informal structures partnership occurs quite naturally, in contrast to formal organizational settings that rely on stricter age and social status hierarchies. If Y–AP is understood and implemented in a way that emphasizes and builds on commonalities with Malaysian values and culture, the authors feel that significant potential exists to uplift the country's youth sector through Y–AP.

Conclusion

This study demonstrates the utility of crafting hypotheses that are grounded in developmental theory as well as real world policy contexts. As in the United States, Malaysian policy makers are seeking data that speaks to their early commitments to engage young people in key decision-making forums. Ultimately, however, the focus on survey research demands its qualitative companion to explain the findings in greater depth for the purposes of practice. The current findings provide a clear rationale for future case study and other mixed-methods to capture not only the developmental outcomes, but also the cultural nuances of Y–AP as they play out within the diverse landscape of

non-Western contexts. At the international level, few attempts have been made to examine program quality, particularly that which includes Y–AP, in a cross-national context. Much could be learned by comparing diverse cultural contexts. Research in the United States could provide an empirical foundation for such inquiry. Therefore, we propose expanding research on Y–AP to additional countries through existing international youth development networks such as the Commonwealth Youth Program, the Committee for ASEAN Youth Cooperation and others.

Acknowledgments The authors would like to thank Brian Christens (University of Wisconsin-Madison) for his valuable feedback during the writing process. This study was supported by Universiti Putra Malaysia's Research University Grant Scheme (Vote No. 9315100).

Author's Contributions SK conceived of the study, participated in its design and coordination, performed statistical analysis and drafted the manuscript; JC and SZ conceived of the study, participated in its design and coordination, developed the measures and drafted the manuscript; AO and HA participated in the design and interpretation of the data; AHS participated in the design of the study and performed statistical analysis. All authors read and approved the final manuscript.

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