

Youth–Adult Partnership and Youth Civic Development: Cross-National Analyses for Scholars and Field Professionals

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Abstract

Across the world, community-based youth organizations are engaging youth as partners with adults to promote youth civic development. A sample of 528 youth from the United States, Portugal, and Malaysia were surveyed to explore associations between youth–adult partnership (youth voice in decision making; supportive adult relationships) and two key aspects of civic development (youth empowerment; community connections). Multi-level modeling, regression, and profile analysis were used to compare patterns of association across the three national samples. Results indicate that youth are most likely to achieve positive outcomes when they experience the freedom to make decisions, while experiencing trust and power sharing from adults. The results were consistent across the three national samples, suggesting that the influence of partnership may transcend cultures and contexts. Future scholarship should aim to support field professionals in building organizational structures and opportunities that encourage shared dialogue, program planning, and purposeful action among youth and adults.

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Introduction

When youth engage in activities of shared importance with adults, the processes of collective decision making and purposeful action provide a solid foundation for the youth's own development as well as for others in the setting (Camino, 2000; Rogoff, 2003; Zeldin, 2004). The growing recognition that youth are influential agents of youth and community development has led, in part, to a global emphasis on "youth participation" in decision making and collective leadership (Adams & Oshima, 2014; Kasumagic, 2008; United States Agency for International Development [USAID], 2012). Youth participation is currently practiced in diverse settings: state and local government, community-based youth organizations, community coalitions, schools, after-school programs, and issue-based advocacy groups. Within these settings, young people take on decision-making roles in program governance, planning, and design. They take on roles in key functions such as training, communications, organizing, research, and evaluation (Camino & Zeldin, 2002; Christens & Dolan, 2011; Mitra, 2009; Libby, Rosen, & Sedonaen, 2005).

Among the different types of youth participation, youth-adult partnership (Y-AP) may be the most optimal for adolescent health and empowerment, according to a recent synthesis of the literature (Wong, Zimmerman, & Parker, 2010). This is because Y-AP elevates youth voice in decision making (YVDM) as a central component of the practice, while foregrounding the importance of relationships with supportive adults who are able to help youth exercise their voice (Serido, Borden, & Perkins, 2011). When these two components of Y-AP are present, youth and adults collaborate as intergenerational partners, with interactions grounded in the principles of reciprocity, co-learning, and shared control (Camino, 2005). Indeed, it is this unique constellation of role, activity, and values that leads analysts to conclude that Y-AP is an essential ingredient for community interventions (Li & Jullian, 2012), an influential strategy of school reform (Mitra, 2009) and a core developmental experience for youth and civic development (Zeldin, Christens, & Powers, 2013).

World-wide, community-based youth programs are increasingly seen as having the greatest potential for intergenerational partnerships in the service of youth civic development and the revitalization of civil society (Magnuson & Baizerman, 2007; Nga & King, 2006). At their best, community organizations

provide free spaces where youth can imagine possibilities, debate options, and take on responsible roles. Their focus on experiential and place-based education complements traditional pedagogies of formal schooling. Their focus on citizenship and relationships with non-familial adults complements the traditional roles of families (Flanagan, Martinez, & Cumsille, 2010; Halpern, 2002). A comprehensive review of community-based youth organizations concluded that their developmental potential stems from young people having “a hand in designing and implementing” their programs and from caring adults who encourage youth to “express their voices toward the achievement of common goals” (Carnegie Corporation of New York, 1994, p. 12).

We consider this study to be exploratory in the sense that it is a first in using a cross-national examination of youth voice and adult support in relation to domains of civic development. The present study utilizes data from the United States (North America), Portugal (Europe), and Malaysia (Southeast Asia). It asks the question, “Do specific social interactions among youth and adults (defined as “Y-APs”) hold as consistent predictors of young people’s sense of place, and feelings of agency within their community, regardless of their nationality, gender, and parent’s education?” In the spirit of exploration and theory building, we conducted three separate analyses: a multi-level model, ordinary least squares (OLS) regressions, and a profile analysis for each country. These analyses, when viewed together, allow us to locate common patterns across countries while creating a foundation for future research and policy development.

Y-AP and Youth Civic Development

There is a growing body of research, largely qualitative, indicating that youth participation in community organizations contributes significantly to youth civic development. Specifically, this research consistently finds that youth voice, when supported by caring adults, promotes a sense of agency, confidence, and empowerment (Christens & Dolan, 2011; Dworkin, Larson, & Hansen, 2003; Larson & Angus, 2011; Morsillo & Prilleltensky, 2007; Ginwright, Noguera, & Cammarota, 2006; Kirshner, 2007; White & Wyn, 1998), as well as community connections and a sense of connectedness (Evans, 2007; Jarrett, Sullivan, & Watkins, 2005; Krauss et al., 2014; Whitlock, 2007). Y-AP may be particularly important to youth from economically or resource-poor areas (Torres-Fleming, Valdes, & Pillai, 2010). The emphasis of youth–adult interactions shifts from a focus on youths’ troubles or marginality to a primary focus on the achievement of a common goal for a shared outcome (Blanchet-Cohen, Manolson, & Shaw, 2014). Youth appreciate being viewed as competent persons and treated “matter-of-factly” with high expectations by

adults, and consequently, they often thrive developmentally (Camino, 2000; Halpern, 2005; Hamilton, Hamilton, Bianchi, & Bran, 2013).

Y-AP is conceptualized as a holistic practice, and accordingly, scholars generally agree that positive outcomes are most likely to be facilitated when youth and adults achieve a balance in terms of voice, power, and competency (Wong et al., 2010; Zeldin et al., 2013). For example, O'Donoghue and Strobel (2007) report that, in activism-oriented programs, adult support provided an emotional context for youth voice, and that together, these two components of Y-AP maximized youth agency and empowerment. They conclude that:

adults helped youth recognize their power by providing feedback about what was possible and about their work and potential . . . youth came to the program with little sense of their own power, but honest feedback from adults bolstered their sense of efficacy. (p. 478)

Even in relationship-focused programs, such as mentoring, YVDM is a fundamental developmental experience contributing to efficacy and community connection (Li & Jullian, 2012).

It remains plausible that the two components of Y-AP may operate differently in relation to youth outcomes. Larson et al. (2005), for example, theorize that youth-directed decision making is likely to influence youth in different ways than adult-directed decision making, and that the relative importance of youth voice and adult support will depend on the context and the developmental outcomes being assessed. Unfortunately, there is scant comparative research designed to explore these claims. That which exists is inconclusive. Some studies highlight the influence of youth voice and the opportunity to make choices in community programs (Blanchet-Cohen et al., 2014; Christens & Dolan, 2011; Evans, 2007) whereas other studies foreground the influence of supportive adults who are able to guide young people through decision-making processes (Camino, 2005; Serido et al., 2011; Whitlock, 2007). Other studies suggest disparate influences. Larson and Angus (2011) report that adults who emphasized youth voice and choice were most likely to promote strategic thinking and agency among participants in community organizations, whereas the more "directive" adults were most likely to promote personal effort and discipline among young people. In a study of Malaysian youth programs, youth voice predicted empowerment and agency, whereas supportive adult relationships (SAR) were more strongly associated with community connectedness (Krauss et al., 2014). This study further unpacks the relationship between youth voice and adult support, by simultaneously examining their significance in predicting indicators of civic development.

Study Purpose

This article examines Y-AP, as operationalized through the components of “YVDM” and “SAR,” in community-based youth programs and from a cross-national perspective. It explores associations between Y-AP and two central indicators of youth civic development: empowerment and community connections. Our first purpose is to use survey methods to replicate the extant, largely qualitative, body of research on Y-AP. Our second purpose is to explore if the associations between Y-AP and youth civic development generalize to countries outside the United States, where the vast majority of studies have been conducted. Although we recognize that different cultural ecologies (i.e., socio-cultural norms, historical context, and political institutions) are likely to influence the trajectory of youths’ civic development over time, the aim of this study is not to understand Y-AP as a cultural phenomenon. Rather, we build from the perspective of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child that YVDM is a basic right for all young people, regardless of the settings in which they live. We explore the claim that youth voice on issues of importance promotes the empowerment and connections of young people (R. Hart & Schwab, 1997; Lansdown, 2001). Furthermore, and again consistent with the United Nations Convention, our interest lies in testing the claim that when adults act as partners supporting young people in exercising their voices, positive developmental outcomes are likely to occur (Serido et al., 2011; Wong et al., 2010).

In this study, “country” is used as the context of the study, rather than as the object of inquiry. The purpose of this analytic approach is to explore commonalities across countries, as opposed to identifying differences (Kohn, 1987). Using nation as context is a powerful strategy for theory building and for exploring the validity of interpretations made through single-nation studies, particularly when research seeks to understand youths’ self-related cognition and perceived control of their environments (Grob, Little, Wanner, & Wearing, 1996). Following this tradition, our primary intent is in testing the generalizability of findings about how certain social interactions—those characterized holistically as “youth–adult partnership”—impinge on youths’ self-perceptions of their place within communities. We are particularly interested in whether the two dimensions of Y-AP have different influences on empowerment and community connections.

Stepping back from replication and theoretical concerns, our third purpose is to spark scholarly reflection on the utilization of research. Like many others, we have struggled in our own practice to create the conditions through which community practitioners choose to use research data, to make it their own, in ways that enhance their programming. There is

often a mismatch in expectations. Field professionals prefer descriptive data that are grounded in taxonomies of youth and their program experiences. Scholars typically offer regression coefficients that do not easily translate to the daily realities and language of practitioners. To create a better match, we have begun to use analyses strategies that are grounded in “youth profiles” (see O’Donoghue & Strobel, 2007; Zimmerman & Zahniser, 1991). This approach has helped field professionals understand and use the analyses. Data-based reflections and discussions have become deeper. It is unknown, however, whether the descriptive “profile” methodology yields similar findings to the more powerful multivariate approaches. In this study, therefore, we conduct two parallel analyses to test cross-method validation of the association between Y-AP and youth civic development.

Method

Participants and Procedures

The study sample was youth participating in community-based programs in Malaysia, Portugal, and the United States. All programs emphasized positive youth development; that is, they sought to create environments that provided constructive and encouraging relationships with adults and peers, while providing opportunities for youth to build their competencies through shared, purpose-driven activities and academic support (Perkins, Borden, Keith, & Villarruel, 2003). In the United States, participants were recruited from two community programs operating in a mid-sized city. Both programs’ target populations were low-income, African American youth from predominantly urban neighborhoods. In Malaysia, participants were drawn from four community youth programs located within an urban setting. The programs offered a comparable array of services, but tended to be culturally specific. Two of the programs served primarily Malay youth whereas two focused on ethnic Chinese young people. In Portugal, participants were members of a national youth development organization who were attending a regional retreat outside of a large city. Participants were primarily from small to mid-sized cities. The sample consisted of 647 surveys. Surveys with missing or incomplete data on variables of interest, including all covariates, were excluded from the analysis ($N = 121$). Thus, the sample consisted of 526 participants.

Each site followed the research and ethical standards required by their respective countries when administering surveys. In the United States and Portugal, per institutional review board (IRB) requirements, letters of

support from each participating program were collected. Parental consent and youth assent forms were then signed and collected prior to young people participating in the study. In Malaysia, the lead institution did not require ethics approval for non-sensitive social science research, but approval to conduct the study was gained from each participating program director. Youth participants within each program were allowed to choose whether to participate. Research team members, following standard protocols, administered the questionnaires. In all settings, young people were encouraged to answer all questions on the survey, but were also reminded that their participation was voluntary and they were not required to answer any question that made them feel uncomfortable.

In preparing the measures for the study, we undertook several steps to ensure semantic equivalence across languages, conceptual equivalence across cultures, and normative equivalence across societies (Behling & Law, 2000). The initial version of the survey was shared with the respective research team from each country for feedback and modifications regarding cultural relevancy. It was then translated into Malay and Portuguese. Research teams in each country conducted reverse translation processes to ensure consistency and accuracy. Finally, the survey was piloted in each country and final modifications were made.

Measures

Y-AP

Based on previous syntheses of Y-AP scholarship (Wong et al., 2010) and considering past research on empowering relationships across generations (Rappaport, 1981), we conceptualized Y-AP as the practice of youth and adults working together for a common purpose in a collective, pluralistic fashion. Y-AP was operationalized as having two dimensions—YVDM and SAR—and was measured using a recently created scale by Zeldin, Krauss, Collura, Lucchesi, and Sulaiman (2014) that demonstrated strong factorial, discriminant, and concurrent validity.

YVDM. The measure of YVDM assesses youth's actual experiences with active decision making in programmatic contexts. Four 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"). Composite scores were generated from four items to generate an overall mean score for the measure.

SAR. The measure of SAR speaks to the reciprocal relationships that exist between youth and non-familial adults within the context of programmatic and community settings. Five 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”). Composite scores represent a mean of the five items.

Outcome Measures

Community connections. Community connections was conceptualized in the current study as a young person’s sense of connection to peers and non-familial adults. Because of youths’ psychological drive to integrate themselves into larger communities and civic worlds, community connections has been found to be associated with an array of health and developmental outcomes (Baumeister & Leary, 1995; Flanagan, Bowes, Jonsson, Csapo, & Sheblanova, 1998). Peer connections was measured using three items (e.g., “My friends care about me”) rated on a 6-point Likert-type scale from *never true* to *always true* (Armsden & Greenberg, 1987). Adult connections was measured using four items (e.g., “There is at least one adult outside my home or school who I really admire,” “There are adults I can ask for help when I need it”) rated on a 5-point Likert-type scale from *strongly disagree* to *strongly agree* (Whitlock, 2007). Confirmatory factor analysis verified that these seven items appropriately represent one construct (comparative fit index [CFI] = .982; root mean square error of approximation [RMSEA] = .056).

Empowerment. Specific to the sociopolitical domain, empowerment generally refers to beliefs about one’s abilities to influence social and political systems (Zimmerman, 2000). Youth empowerment has been found to predict civic outcomes such as neighborhood attachment and community participation, and is also associated with lower scores on youth development indices of hopelessness and alienation, and substance use (Christens & Peterson, 2012; Peterson, Peterson, Agre, Christens, & Morton, 2011). Due to different cultural conceptualizations of empowerment among the countries represented in the current study, eight items from the Sociopolitical Control Scale for Youth (Peterson et al., 2011) were mutually selected and adapted. The resulting adaptation comprised three items assessing leadership competence (e.g., “I would rather have a leadership role when I’m involved in a group project,” “I find it easy to talk in front

of a group”) and five items measuring policy control (e.g., “Youth like me can really understand what’s going on in my community,” “My opinion is important because it could someday make a difference in my community or school”). Confirmatory factor analysis verified that the eight items appropriately represent one construct (CFI = .924; RMSEA = .069). Items were rated on a 5-point Likert-type scale ranging from *strongly disagree* to *strongly agree*.

Covariates

Gender. Participant’s gender was included in all analyses. Gender was dummy coded (*male* = 1, *female* = 2).

Mother’s education level. The educational attainment of a participant’s mother was included as a covariate in all models as a proxy for socio-economic status. Mother’s education was coded (*unknown* = 1, *some high school or less* = 2, *high school graduate* = 3, *college graduate or higher* = 4).

Analytic Strategy

Our premise is that participation in youth programs becomes a powerful developmental experience when youth are engaged in partnerships with adults. Consistent with past qualitative research, our expectation was that youth civic development would be positively associated with youth perceiving that they have the opportunity to fully participate in decision making and that adults respect and act on their ideas. We further expected that these positive associations would be apparent across the three countries.

To begin the analysis, preliminary tests for normality, linearity, heteroskedasticity, and homogeneity of variance were conducted on all measures. No violations of assumptions were recorded. We first examined the full sample of participants, conducting an OLS multiple regression. As a result of differences between countries, we decided to perform a multi-level model regression analysis to control for country effects. The multi-level model explored the relative contributions of youth voice and supportive adult relations to empowerment and community connections. The approach was selected to account for the nested nature of the data set, and to assess country-level influences on empowerment and community connections.

The method was determined to be appropriate by assessing the two-level model compared with a single-level model using a likelihood ratio test. The data were analyzed with STATA using a multi-level mixed-effect model

framework. Country, gender, and mother's education were included in the analyses as covariates.

Next, we used cross-sectional analysis exploring within-nation models using an OLS regression to examine patterns of association among countries. Last, we conducted parallel analyses using a split-half profile methodology. This strategy has been used to explore associations between youth–adult relationships, community experiences, and a range of civic outcomes (O'Donoghue & Strobel, 2007; Peterson et al., 2011; Speer, 2000; Zimmerman & Zahniser, 1991). Four profile groups were created based on youths' relative mean scores on YVDM and SAR (see below for details on profile composition). We first examined the whole sample, via multivariate analysis of variance (MANCOVA), to explore how the profiles were associated with the two outcomes. We completed the analysis by assessing patterns of association within and across the three countries.

Results

Descriptive Results

A total of 526 young people participated in the study. Broken down by country, 23% came from the United States, 23% came from Portugal, and 53% came from Malaysia. Regarding demographics, the average age of participants was 17.8 years. A total of 59.5% of participants reported being between the ages of 11 and 18 years, and 40.5% were between the ages of 19 and 24.¹ This sample was both racially and ethnically diverse. For instance, 55.2% identified as Asian, 25.3% as Latino/a, 14.2% as Black/African American, and 2.33% as Caucasian. The majority of the sample identified religiously as Christian (38.2%), followed by Muslim (28.7%) and Buddhist (17.1%).

There were demographic differences between countries. For instance, U.S. and Portuguese samples noted their religious affiliation as predominantly Christian (89% in Portugal, and 48% in the United States), whereas the Malaysia sample was more diverse consisting of youth participants who identified as Muslims (49%), Buddhists (30%), and Christians (12%). The Portuguese sample was more ethnically homogeneous, with 88% identifying as Portuguese, compared with the U.S. (69% Black/African American; 12% White) and Malaysian samples (53% Malay; 43% Chinese). Sample heterogeneity is a strength in cross-national studies and in studies of youth voice given that the focus is on exploring commonalities across contexts and demographic groups (Kohn, 1987; Ozer & Schotland, 2011).

Covariates. In regard to the covariates, the sample was equally split between males (50%) and females (50%). For parent's education, mothers of participants had higher levels of education in the United States (35% completing at least 2 years of college) compared with Malaysia and Portugal where 22% and 18%, respectively, had formal education beyond high school.

Y-AP measures. In regard to youth voice, the mean score for the total sample was 3.86 ($SD = 0.65$, $\alpha = .82$). Mean scores for youth voice by country were as follows: United States, 3.93 ($SD = 0.71$, $\alpha = .83$); Portugal, 4.19 ($SD = 0.58$, $\alpha = .84$); and Malaysia, 3.67 ($SD = 0.58$, $\alpha = .78$). For adult support, the mean score for the total sample was 4.02 ($SD = 0.66$, $\alpha = .87$) whereas mean scores for adult support by country were as follows: United States, 3.99 ($SD = 0.74$, $\alpha = .90$); Portugal, 4.17 ($SD = 0.56$, $\alpha = .86$); and Malaysia, 3.97 ($SD = 0.66$, $\alpha = .87$).

Outcome measures. Study participants had an overall empowerment mean score of 3.58 ($SD = 0.54$, $\alpha = .71$). Empowerment means for each country were as follows: United States, 3.71 ($SD = 0.63$, $\alpha = .79$); Portugal, 3.72 ($SD = 0.51$, $\alpha = .70$); and Malaysia, 3.40 ($SD = 0.48$, $\alpha = .62$). In this study, participants' overall community connections mean score was 3.94 ($SD = 0.55$, $\alpha = .77$). Mean scores for community connections by country were as follows: United States, 4.01 ($SD = 0.57$, $\alpha = .77$); Portugal, 4.20 ($SD = 0.43$, $\alpha = .66$); and Malaysia, 3.77 ($SD = 0.55$, $\alpha = .75$).

Multi-Level Linear Regression Analysis

Consecutive two-level random intercept models were used to estimate the association of youth voice and supportive adults on empowerment at two levels: between-country and within-country between-youth. Country was included at Level 2 (random effects), and all models were examined using the maximum likelihood estimation. The equations used for the general model are presented below:

$$\text{Model 1 (with intercept): Empowerment}_{ij} = \beta_{00} + u_{oj} + \varepsilon_{ij},$$

Model 2 (with Y-AP predictors):

$$\begin{aligned} \text{Empowerment}_{ij} = & \beta_{00} + \beta_{10} \text{supportive adult relationships}_{ij} + \\ & \beta_{20} \text{youth voice in decision making}_{ij} \\ & + u_{1j} \text{supportive adult relationships}_{ij} + \\ & u_{2j} \text{youth voice in decision making}_{ij} + u_{oj} + \varepsilon_{ij}, \end{aligned}$$

Model 3 (with covariates and Y-AP predictors):

$$\begin{aligned} \text{Empowerment}_{ij} = & \beta_0 + \beta_{10} \text{ supportive adult relationships}_{ij} + \\ & \beta_{20} \text{ youth voice in decision making}_{ij} + \beta_{30} \text{ female}_{ij} + \\ & \beta_{40} \text{ some high school or less}_{ij} + \beta_{50} \text{ high school graduate}_{ij} \\ & + \beta_{60} \text{ college graduate or higher}_{ij} + \\ & u_{1j} \text{ supportive adult relationships}_{ij} + \\ & u_{2j} \text{ youth voice in decision making}_{ij} \\ & + u_{3j} \text{ female}_{ij} + u_{4j} \text{ some high school or less}_{ij} + \\ & u_{5j} \text{ high school graduate}_{ij} + \\ & u_{6j} \text{ college graduate or higher}_{ij} + u_{oj} + \varepsilon_{ij}. \end{aligned}$$

Model 1 was the unconditional mean model for empowerment. The between-country variance was estimated to be .01 and the within-country between-youth variance was estimated to be .28. The intra-class correlation signified that 4% of the variance regarding sense of empowerment among youth in this sample was due to differences between countries. Notably, the intra-class correlation coefficient (i.e., ICC) for empowerment was below .05. Yet, a likelihood ratio test was also conducted that estimated the fit of this model compared with a single-level model. The resulting likelihood ratio (17.61, $\chi^2 = .000$) indicated significant country effects on empowerment, thus supporting the use of a multi-level model. Furthermore, researchers stressed the importance of not ruling out a multi-level model—solely based on the magnitude of the ICC (see Bliese & Hanges, 2004).

In Model 2, the independent variables SAR and YVDM were entered into the model. The three goodness-of-fit measures (i.e., deviance = 709.56, Akaike information criterion [AIC] = 719.56, Bayesian information criterion [BIC] = 740.89) indicated that Model 2 was preferable to Model 1 (i.e., deviance = 830.46, AIC = 836.37, BIC = 849.28). Notably, SAR had a significant fixed effect ($\beta = .10$, $p < .05$) on empowerment, as well as YVDM ($\beta = .31$, $p < .00$). Between-country variance was estimated as .00, suggesting little variance between countries. At the youth level, there was an estimated variance of .22 between-youth within each country. Model 2 also indicated that after accounting for the effect of SAR and YVDM, only 1.2% of the variance could be explained due to differences between countries.

Last, Model 3 included the addition of alternative explanatory variables (i.e., gender and mother's education). In regard to gender, males were the reference group. In addition, for mother's education, youth who did not know their mothers' education (i.e., checking the *unknown* response option) were

the reference group. Model 3 was the best fitting model in regard to two out of three goodness-of-fit measures (i.e., deviance = 701.42; AIC = 719.44). Notably, the last measure (i.e., BIC) was slightly higher, 757.82, as compared with Model 2. Furthermore, Model 3 indicated that after accounting for the effect of the covariates, 1.5% of the variance could be explained by differences between countries, as a slight increase of 0.03% from Model 2. Last, partial *F* tests illustrated that youth who indicated an awareness and/or comfort in reporting their mother's education were more likely to rate higher in their sense of empowerment compared with youth who did not.

Following an identical process, three models were estimated with community connections as the dependent variable. Model 1 was the unconditional mean model for community connections. The between-country variance was estimated to be .03 and the within-country between-youth variance was estimated to be .28. The intra-class correlation signified that approximately 9.08% of the variance regarding community connections among youth in this sample was due to differences between countries. In Model 2, SAR were significantly ($\beta = .13, p < .01$) associated with community connections, as well as YVDM ($\beta = .28, p < .00$). The intra-class correlation variance reduced from 9.08% in Model 1 to a notable drop of 4.15% in Model 2. All three measures of goodness of fit also improved in Model 2 (i.e., deviance = 726.46, AIC = 736.48, BIC = 757.81) compared with the unconditional model (i.e., deviance = 843.14, AIC = 849.16, BIC = 861.95).

Last, Model 3 consisted of the addition of alternative explanatory variables (i.e., gender and mother's education). It is noteworthy, that the model estimated females to rate higher in community connections compared with males ($\beta = .15, p < .01$). Furthermore, mother's education obtainment of some college education or higher (i.e., a proxy for income) was a significant predictor ($\beta = .16, p < .05$). To test for potential differences between dummy categories, partial *F* tests between each category determined that a mother's education (of college or higher) was significantly and positively associated with community connections. Model 3 was the best fitting model as indicated by all three goodness-of-fit measures (i.e., deviance = 709.52, AIC = 727.54, BIC = 765.93). The intra-class correlation variation explained by country, after including the covariates in the model, reduced to 3.5% (Table 1).

We next explored analytic patterns within the three countries. Using a single-level OLS regression, we first regressed empowerment on SAR, YVDM, gender (i.e., male as reference group), and mother's education (i.e., unknown as reference group) for each country independently. In both the United States and Malaysia, YVDM was the strongest predictor of empowerment ($\beta = .33, p < .001$). Neither YVDM nor SAR were significant predictors of empowerment in Portugal. However, the coefficients for SAR ($\beta = .14$)

Table 1. Multi-Level Model Predicting Empowerment and Community Connections From SAR and Youth Voice (Level 1, $n = 526$, Level 2, $n = 3$).

	Empowerment			Community connections		
	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3
Constant	3.63 (.07) ^{***}	2.01 (.14) ^{***}	1.91 (.15) ^{***}	4.00 (.10) ^{***}	2.36 (.16) ^{***}	2.20 (.16) ^{***}
Fixed effects						
SAR		0.10 (.04) [*]	0.10 (.04) [*]		0.13 (.04) ^{**}	0.14 (.04) ^{**}
YVDM		0.31 (.04) ^{***}	0.31 (.04) ^{***}		0.28 (.05) ^{***}	0.27 (.05) ^{***}
Gender						
Male			—			—
Female			-0.04 (.04)			0.15 (.04) ^{**}
Mother's education						
Unknown			—			—
Some high school or less			0.11 (.06) [*]			0.10 (.06)
High school graduate			0.19 (.08) [*]			0.08 (.08)
College graduate or higher			0.16 (.07) [*]			0.16 (.07) [*]
Random effects						
var(Country level)	0.01 (.01)	0.00 (.00)	0.00 (.00)	0.03 (.02)	0.01 (.01)	0.01 (.01)
var(Student level)	0.28 (.02)	0.22 (.01)	0.22 (.01)	0.28 (.02)	0.23 (.01)	0.22 (.01)
Goodness of fit						
Deviance	830.46	709.56	701.42	843.14	726.46	709.52
AIC	836.48	719.56	719.44	849.16	736.48	727.54
BIC	849.28	740.89	757.82	861.95	757.81	765.93
ICC variance explained by county	4.00%	1.20%	1.50%	9.08%	4.15%	3.50%

Note. Standard errors are given in parentheses. Estimation method: maximum likelihood. SAR = supportive adult relationships; YVDM = youth voice in decision making; AIC = Akaike information criterion; BIC = Bayesian information criterion; ICC = intra-class correlation coefficient.
^{*} $p < .05$. ^{**} $p < .01$. ^{***} $p < .001$.

and YVDM ($\beta = .15$) indicate positive associations with empowerment that are consistent with the results from the U.S. and Malaysia samples. Next, we conducted within-country regressions for community connections. Across all three countries, YVDM had a significant positive effect on community connections (United States: $\beta = .26, p < .01$; Malaysia: $\beta = .23, p < .01$; Portugal: $\beta = .29, p < .01$). Results for the U.S. sample also showed a significant positive effect for SAR ($\beta = .24, p < .01$) that was not observed for Portugal or Malaysia. No associations were found with mother's education. In Malaysia, females had significantly higher community connections scores than males ($\beta = .19, p < .01$) (Table 2).

Profile Analysis

We used mean-splits to create four groups. "Full Partners" consists of individuals with high scores on YVDM and SAR. "High Voice" consists of individuals with high scores on YVDM and low scores on SAR. "High Support" comprised of individuals with high scores on SAR but low scores on YVDM. "Low Y-AP" includes individuals with low scores on both Y-AP dimensions. Combining the three countries, 42% of the full sample was classified as Full Partners, 9% as High Voice, 4% as High Support, and 34% as Low Y-AP. Participants from the United States (48%) had the highest percentage of participants classified as Full Partners, followed by Malaysia (41%), and Portugal (39%). The distribution of Low-Y-AP youth was consistent across countries (United States 35%, Portugal 36%, Malaysia 33%). Chi-square tests found no significant association between Y-AP profile and country, $\chi^2(6) = 8.50, p = .203$, indicating that the heterogeneity of the sample did not influence the distribution of the Y-AP profiles.

Figure 1 depicts the mean scores for the entire sample for each outcome variable by profile group. Moving from Full Partners to Low Y-AP, the figure reveals a consistent downward trend in empowerment and community connections. To explore these trends, MANCOVA was used to test the effects of Y-AP profile on community connections and empowerment for the full sample. After controlling for gender, mother's education, and country, a statistically significant difference was found between the profile group and the dependent variables (Wilks' $\lambda = .73$), $F(6, 1030) = 28.71, p < .001$. The results showed significant main effects for each dependent variable, indicating differences in levels of empowerment and community connections for each profile group. Overall, participants classified as Full Partners scored consistently higher on each outcome measure (empowerment: $M = 3.83, SE = .03$; community connections: $M = 4.17, SE = .03$); compared with participants in the other three profile groups.

Table 2. OLS Regressions for Youth Voice and Supportive Adult Relationships on Empowerment and Connections by Country.

	Empowerment						Connections					
	United States		Malaysia		Portugal		United States		Malaysia		Portugal	
	β	SE	β	SE	β	SE	β	SE	β	SE	β	SE
Gender												
Male	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—
Female	-.07	.10	.03	.05	-.16	.08	.13	.08	.19**	.06	.07	.07
Mother's education												
Unknown	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—
Some high school or less	.36	.12	.03	.07	.01	.15	.16	.11	.14	.08	—	—
High school graduate	.23	.14	.18	.10	—	—	.02	.12	.19	.12	—	—
College graduate or higher	.23	.16	.14	.09	.07	.18	2.0	.14	.22*	.11	-.09	.14
Supportive adults	.14	.10	.07	.05	.14	.10	.24***	.09	.09	.06	.12	.08
Youth voice	.33**	.10	.33***	.06	.15	.10	.26**	.09	.23***	.07	.29**	.08
Constant	1.63	.33	1.86	.18	2.52	.39	1.83	.29	2.29	.21	2.54	.31
F (df)	(6, 114) = 7.88***		(6, 272) = 15.05***		(5, 120) = 3.57***		(6, 114) = 10.17***		(6, 272) = 9.74***		(5, 120) = 8.29***	
R ²	.29		.25		.12		.34		.17		.25	
Adjusted R ²	.25		.23		.09		.31		.15		.22	

Note. OLS = ordinary least squares.

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

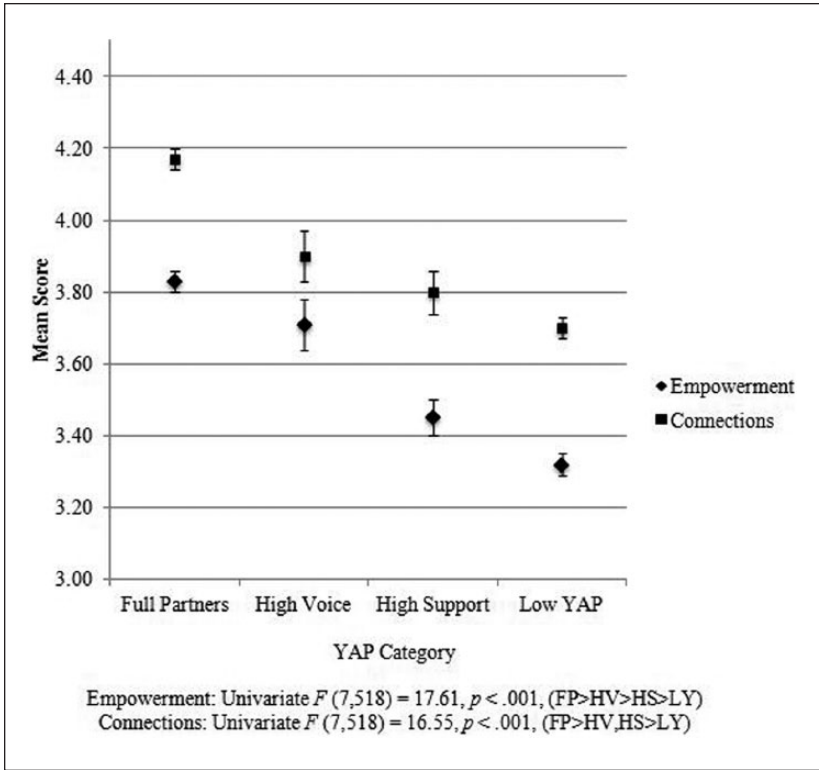


Figure 1. Predicted means by Y-AP category—Full sample.
Note. Y-AP = youth–adult partnership.

Univariate analysis of variance (ANOVA) results confirmed that Y-AP profile group had a significant main effect, $F(7, 518) = 17.61, p < .001$, on empowerment. Post hoc pairwise comparisons using both Duncan and Tukey methods confirmed that participants classified as Full Partners were higher in empowerment than the other groups. The empowerment scores for the High Voice group were higher than those in the High Support and Low Y-AP groups, suggesting that YVDM has a powerful and unique association with empowerment. The High Support group had higher scores than the Low Y-AP group, providing evidence that SAR may generate empowering outcomes for young people.

The profile group also showed a significant main effect on community connections, $F(7, 518) = 16.55, p < .001$. Connections scores for the Full

Partner category were higher than all other groups. The High Voice and High Support categories had higher connections scores than those in the Low Y-AP group, but the two groups were not significantly different from one another. These results indicate that YVDM and SAR have similar or complementary associations with community connections.

Following the full sample analysis, a series of univariate ANOVAs were conducted to explore the analytic pattern within each country (Table 3). Post hoc Duncan and Tukey analyses were used to determine differences between categories. In all three countries, Full Partners consistently scored higher than other Y-AP categories for empowerment. In each country, High Voice and Full Partners were not statistically distinct. This suggests that YVDM has a particularly strong association with empowerment. Notably, in Portugal, post hoc tests found no statistically significant differences between the Full Partners, High Voice, and High Support categories.

A similar analytic pattern was also evident within each country for community connections. In each country, Full Partners scored highest on community connections. With the exception of Malaysia, post hoc Duncan and Tukey tests revealed that the Full Partners category was statistically distinct from the other three Y-AP categories. In all countries, the High Voice and High Support categories showed similar connections scores with no significant differences between them.

Discussion

Regarding the first purpose of the study, the present survey-based inquiry replicates previous qualitative research: Y-AP is a strong predictor of youth empowerment and community connections. Considering the full sample, via multi-level modeling, both YVDM and SAR predicted both outcomes beyond the contributions of country, gender, and mother's education. In both multi-level models, the coefficient for youth voice was larger than that of adult support in regard to empowerment and community connections. Furthermore, the profile results substantiates previous findings that supportive adults provide the necessary emotional context through which youth voice may exert its influence on positive youth development (O'Donoghue & Strobel, 2007; Serido et al., 2011). Young people categorized as Full Partners, those who we considered as Y-AP exemplars, scored significantly higher than their peers who felt only a sense of voice or support. Together, these results indicate that Y-AP is a holistic construct. Voice and adult support are both related to youth civic development, with youth voice appearing to be the most influential, especially with regard to empowerment.

Table 3. Y-AP Profile Group Means by Country.

	Empowerment		Connections	
	<i>M</i>	<i>SE</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SE</i>
United States				
Full Partners	4.04	0.07	4.36	0.06
High Voice	3.69	0.19	3.87	0.17
High Support	3.61	0.15	3.89	0.13
Low Y-AP	3.30	0.08	3.59	0.07
Univariate Difference	$F(7, 113) = 6.83^{***}$ (FP, HV > HS > LY)		$F(7, 113) = 9.00^{***}$ (FP > HV, HS > LY)	
Portugal				
Full Partners	3.88	0.07	4.43	0.05
High Voice	3.87	0.12	4.11	0.10
High Support	3.66	0.13	4.08	0.10
Low Y-AP	3.51	0.07	4.02	0.06
Univariate Difference	$F(6, 119) = 3.17^{**}$ (FP, HV, HS > LY)		$F(6, 119) = 4.71^{**}$ (FP > HV, HS, LY)	
Malaysia				
Full Partners	3.70	0.04	3.96	0.04
High Voice	3.61	0.09	3.79	0.10
High Support	3.35	0.06	3.69	0.07
Low Y-AP	3.22	0.04	3.59	0.05
Univariate Difference	$F(7, 271) = 11.25^{***}$ (FP, HV > HS, LY)		$F(7, 271) = 6.77^{***}$ (FP > HS, LY)	

Note. Y-AP = youth–adult partnership.

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

The second purpose of this study, following the nation as context paradigm, was to explore the generality of findings across countries. From this vantage point, the associations between Y-AP and youth civic development are remarkably similar across the three countries. The influence of Y-AP appears to transcend place. The regression analyses, for example, show a similar pattern across the United States and Malaysia on the measure of empowerment, with the contribution of youth voice being significantly greater than that of SAR. Portugal is the exception, with both components only approaching significance. Regarding community connections, Malaysia and Portugal show a similar pattern with youth voice accounting for a significant amount of variance. In the United States, youth voice was significant, but so were SAR. The profile analysis also shows more similarity than

discrepancy across nations. Within each of the three countries, youth with the Full Partner and High Voice profiles consistently reported higher levels of empowerment and community connections as compared with youth with the other profiles; that is, those young people who experienced high voice in decision making accompanied by a high level of adult support were most likely, in the main, to demonstrate the most positive outcomes.

In conclusion, the two parallel analyses converge to demonstrate a strong link between Y-AP and two key indicators of youth civic development. Regardless of country, youth were most likely to feel empowered and connected when they considered themselves to be partners with adults in community organizations. The cross-national consistencies are especially noteworthy given the distinctive cultures, histories, and political systems in the three countries. The regression and profile analyses also converge to suggest that youth voice may be most influential in promoting youth civic development. The role of SAR cannot be dismissed, however. SAR may have an independent or mediating role as suggested by the regression analysis, or they may serve as a complementary influence on youth outcomes, as indicated by the profile analysis.

Implications for Future Research

Past research consistently indicates that purposeful activity, in the context of reciprocal and respectful relationships, is an active ingredient or a causal mechanism for youth and civic development across a wide variety of community settings and interventions (Cattaneo & Chapman, 2010; Duke, Skay, Pettingell, & Borowsky, 2009; Jarrett et al., 2005; Li & Jullian, 2012; Zimmerman, 2000). Building from that scholarship, this study provides strong evidence that youth voice in collective decision making and supportive relationships with adults work simultaneously for maximum benefit to promote empowerment and community connections. Young people are most likely to flourish when they experience the freedom to make decisions and carry them out, while concurrently, experiencing trust and power sharing from the adults with whom they are interacting. This pattern of results was witnessed across three diverse national samples, thus adding confidence to our conclusion. It also suggests that the influence of Y-AP operates across extremely diverse contexts. That said, longitudinal analyses, qualitative and quantitative, are now a priority for the field in terms of further exploring the directionality of influence. It will also be important for researchers to grapple with the measurement of participation. Most research assesses participation through the perceptions of the young people and the adults with whom they interact (Ferreira, Azevedo, & Menezes, 2012; Grob et al., 1996), reflecting

the view that social situations perceived as real are real in their consequences (Bandura, 2006; Rosa & Tudge, 2013). Future research could be strengthened by including measures of participation breadth, intensity, and duration (Durlak, Mahoney, Behnert, & Parente, 2010; Rose-Krasnor, Busseri, Willoughby, & Chalmers, 2006).

The cross-national perspective of this study opens up, literally, a world for future inquiry. Replication in additional countries and community settings is warranted. Of particular importance will be a focus on economic status. In this study, YVDM and SAR were far more influential than family income (as assessed by the proxy of mother's education) in both the regression and profile analyses. If this finding were to be replicated in future studies, Y-AP could be implemented as an integral strategy in the building of a "leadership pipeline" for vulnerable young people from historically marginalized or economically poor communities (Ginwright, 2011; Torres-Fleming et al., 2010). Further research is also necessary to examine the potential influences of the "social addresses" of youth, such as family structure, age, gender, and religion. In this study, Malaysian youth felt less empowered than youth in other countries, and especially among the boys, the Malaysian youth had less community connections. These findings are consistent with recent Malaysian policy studies of their youth (Malaysian Institute for Research in Youth Development, 2011). Future research is necessary to replicate this finding, and equally important, to explore the structures and cultural regularities that may underlie these cross-national differences.

Future Scholarship in Support of Field Professionals

Youth, across the world, remain isolated from forums of program, and organizational and community decision making (Lansdown, 2001). Within this global context, the present study confirms previous scholarship on the benefits of youth voice (Freire, 1970; Wong et al., 2010). Most importantly, it highlights the role of adults not simply as enablers of youth voice, but more affirmatively as potential partners in deliberation and problem solving. The sustainability of desirable outcomes is unlikely to arise from one age group or the other seeking to direct the course of change. Rather, it stems from shared activity, reciprocal learning, and a sharing of power. Everybody is needed and everybody has a potential role in the processes of change. It is also clear that societal traditions, structural forces, community conditions, and age-related stereotypes limit the opportunities for youth to engage in collective leadership, especially those young people from the most vulnerable populations. Disparities can escalate (D. Hart & Atkins, 2002; White & Wyn, 1998; Zeldin & Topitzes, 2002). Li and Jullian (2012) cogently argue that

helping field professionals confront these obstacles, with the goal being to promote developmental relationships, such as Y-AP, should be the focal point of future policy and practice. This poses a daunting challenge to scholars because government and foundation funders often emphasize the measurement of outcomes rather than relational quality. Fortunately, there are many who are pushing against these constraints (Zeldin, Petrokubi, & MacNeil, 2008). Promising strategies include youth participatory action research (Jacquez, Vaughn, & Wagner, 2013), cross-age learning communities (Mitra, 2009), program self-assessment processes (Wu, Weiss, Kornbluh, & Roddy, 2014), shared meaning making and action planning (Zeldin & Collura, 2010), and training curriculum in the context of evidence-based programming (Zimmerman, Stewart, Morrel-Samuels, & Reischl, 2011). Research examining the efficacy of these strategies to positively influence youth–adult relationships would greatly benefit the global movement toward intergenerational partnerships.

An emphasis on data visualization will be particularly important for scholars as they seek to support field professionals through research-based strategies. Through trial and error, we have learned that professionals respond productively to data arrays that are organized around “Y-AP profiles” (such as that presented in Figure 1). As do scholars, field professionals seek to categorize phenomenon and people to make sense of the world. Profiles make the research accessible and bring statistical analyses to life. They allow people of differing age and experience to fully engage in purpose-driven deliberation and problem solving. Most certainly, profile methodologies based on mean splits have explanatory limitations and a potential loss of information as compared with strategies of multi-level regression. For those scholars who are seeking to strengthen Y-AP through translational and action-oriented research, however, it is useful to consider the tradeoffs between powerful analyses and data utilization. The power of profile methodologies stem from their face validity and practicality. They are easily understood and can thus be utilized not only by field professionals, but also, equally important, by the young people with whom they partner.

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Note

1. The wide age range reflects the differences in national definitions of "youth" and youth programming. In the United States, for example, youth development programs tend to focus on younger adolescents, with fewer offerings for older youth (Halpern, 2002). In Malaysia and Portugal, where the legal and cultural definition of youth extends beyond age 30, young people are more likely to participate in community programs with increasing age (Nga & King, 2006), a trend that is seen globally in countries where expectations for taking on civic roles occurs at later ages than in the United States (Kassimir & Flanagan, 2010).

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