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Pathways to Youth Empowerment and Community Connectedness: A Study of Youth-Adult Partnership in Malaysian After-School, Co-Curricular Programs

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Abstract

After-school programs are prevalent across the world, but there is a paucity of research that examines quality within the "black box" of programs at the point of service. Grounded in current theory, this research examined hypothesized pathways between the experience of youth-adult partnership (youth voice in decision-making; supportive adult relationships), the mediators of program safety and engagement, and the developmental outcomes of youth empowerment (leadership competence, policy control) and community connectedness (community connections, school attachment). Surveys were administered to 207 ethnically diverse (47.3% female; 63.3% Malay) youth, age 15 to 16, attending after-school co-curricular programs in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia. Results showed that youth voice in program decision-making predicted both indicators of youth empowerment. Neither youth voice nor supportive adult relationships was directly associated with community connectedness, however. Program engagement mediated the associations between youth-adult partnership and empowerment. In contrast, program safety mediated the associations between youth-adult partnership and community connectedness. The findings indicate that the two core components of youth-adult partnership -- youth voice and supportive adult relationships -- may operate through different, yet complementary, pathways of program quality to predict developmental outcomes. Implications for future research are highlighted. For reasons of youth development and youth rights, the immediate challenge is to create opportunities for youth to speak on issues of program concern and to elevate those adults who are able and willing to help youth exercise their voice.

Introduction

When implemented in a quality manner, organized youth programs - including community programs and school-based extra and co-curricular activities - become contexts that promote a diverse array of social and academic benefits for youth (Carnegie Council on Adolescent Development 1992; Durlak and Weissberg 2007). Such programs, it is theorized, become influential settings for development because they provide opportunities for youth to have a voice in decision making, to work on projects that have relevance to them, to take leadership on progressively challenging tasks from the initiation to the completion of projects, and quite often, demand a sharing of power and reciprocity with adult staff and volunteers (Benson, Scales, Hamilton and Sesma 2006; Zeldin, Larson, Camino and O'Connor 2005). The focus on youth voice and intergenerational partnership has a global emphasis. There is an emerging consensus that, when youth take on roles traditionally reserved for adults within organizations and programs, the result is a greater sense of belonging, attachment and agency with regard to their ability to make a difference in their own lives and of those around them (Flanagan, Stoppa, Syversten and Stout 2010; Kasumagic 2008; Rogoff 2003).

Literature reviews on after-school and community-based youth programs note that program effectiveness varies greatly across programs, even among those with similar goals and expected outcomes (Granger 2008). Reviewers theorize that this uneven pattern of results is due to differences in the nature of youth experience and youth-adult relationships within programs (Granger 2008; Li and Julian 2012). Unfortunately, there is a dearth of research that looks within the "black box" of programs. There is insufficient knowledge about potential relationships between program quality and youth outcomes. When quality is measured at the point of service, extant studies often focus on indicators such as staff-youth ratios and the frequency and duration of youth participation (Granger 2008; Roth, Malone and Brooks-Gunn 2010; Shernoff 2010; Yohalem and Wilson-Ahlstrom 2010). It is important to broaden scholarship to also examine how young people subjectively perceive their program experiences as this may be the strongest predictor of youth outcomes (Larson and Angus 2011; Shernoff 2010; Bronfenbrenner 1979). The more nuanced aspects of quality, such as the nature of youth-adult relationships, program

engagement and perceptions of safety may be especially influential (Hirsch 2005; Dawes and Larson 2011). Program effectiveness may be most strongly determined by the extent to which youth-adult relationships are characterized by reciprocity, adult scaffolding of experience, and a shifting of decision making power over time to favour the young person (Bronfenbrenner 1979; Li and Julian 2012; Vygotsky 1978).

Building from this scholarship, the present study explores the pathways through which youth's experiences within programs are linked to their developmental outcomes. The study was conducted in Malaysian after-school settings. We predict that youth who perceive that they are in strong youth-adult partnerships -- that is, they have a voice in decision making and receive supportive guidance from adults -- will report higher levels of personal empowerment as well as a stronger sense of connectedness with the people and places around them. We do not expect, however, that the experiences of youth voice and supportive adult relationships represent the only paths to positive outcomes. Consistent with theory and available research, we predict that youth's sense of safety and level of engagement are also important, and will have indirect effects on the outcome measures.

Youth-Adult Partnership in Program Settings

Conceptualized as a developmental process and as a community practice, youth-adult partnership involves youth and adults (e.g., program staff, volunteers, residents) working together on issues of organizational improvement through governance, planning and evaluation. Youth-adult partnership is witnessed, on a day-to-day basis, through active youth participation in creating project agendas, setting objectives, choosing activities, and mentoring peers. What differentiates youth-adult partnership most clearly from other types of practices, however, is its emphasis on building both emotional and instrumental relationships among youth and adults. Indeed, it is the value on plurality and reciprocity, in a task-oriented context of common concern and purpose, that leads analysts to theorize it as a core practice for positive youth development, health, and empowerment (Camino 2000; Serido, Borden and Perkins 2011; Li and Jullian 2012; Wong, Zimmerman and Parker 2010; Zeldin, Christens and Powers 2013).

Youth workers and educators conceptualize youth-adult partnership as having two components: youth voice in decision making and supportive adult relationships (Mitra 2008; O'Donoghue and Strobel 2007; Zeldin et al. 2014). Scholars are increasingly using this conceptualization to ground research in diverse settings including schools, community-based youth programs, after-school programs, and youth activism groups. Within this body of research, it is theorized that youth voice and supportive adults are two sides of the same coin. While youth voice in decision making may be the most visible and influential component of the practice, it may be the relationships with supportive adults that are most critical in helping youth to exercise their own voice in collective decision making and action (Camino, 2005; Serido et al., 2011). Youth tend to agree with the scholars. When asked about their programs, young people most often emphasize youth voice and power as being the most meaningful aspects of their participation (Blanchet-Cohen and Brunson 2012; Evans 2007). At the same time, the emotional support and personal guidance provided by adults does not go unnoticed by the young people. Youth often identify supportive adult relationships as being one of the most critical elements of their program experience (Evans 2007; Kirshner 2009; Zeldin 2004).

Youth Voice, Supportive Adults and Youth Development

The importance of youth voice in decision making has a rich theoretical and empirical history stemming back to John Dewey (1938) and the National Commission on Resources for Youth (1972). The complementary experience of supportive adult relationships, those characterized by shared learning, respect, and scaffolding, has also been highlighted over time in both school and community settings (Hamilton1980; National Task Force on Citizen Education 1977). Building from this foundation of scholarship, there is a growing body of research indicating that youth voice in decision making, when supported by caring adults, promotes a sense of agency, confidence, and empowerment (Blanchet-Cohen and Brunson 2012; Chinman and Linney 1998; Dworkin, Larson and Hansen 2003; Morsillo and Prilleltensky 2007; Christens and Dolan 2011; Kirshner 2007; White and Wyn 1998). Quantitative studies have found that youth voice and supportive adult relationships work together to promote a sense of

agency and empowerment (Krauss et al. 2014), while also fostering a wide range of skills valued by the

program participants (Serido et al. 2011). Qualitative research within youth programs similarly found that

adult staff who challenged young people to express their voice and to make choices were most likely to

promote youth agency and strategic thinking (Larson and Angus 2011). O'Donoghue and Strobel (2007)

report that, in activism-oriented programs, adult support provided an emotional context for youth voice in

decision making and that acting together, these two components of youth-adult partnership maximized

youth agency and empowerment.

Research also indicates a link between youth voice and supportive adults with indices of

community connectedness. Several empirical investigations found that active and collective-oriented

youth participation on behalf of self and others contributes positively to feelings of community

attachment, membership, civic identity, and social trust (Flanagan et al. 2010; Jarret, Sullivan and

Watkins 2005; Youniss, McLellan and Yates 1997). Relationships with peers and adults within organized

groups, combined with purposeful shared activity, also appears to contribute to group solidarity and an

appreciation of differences among diverse persons (Kirshner 2009; Watkins, Larson and Sullivan 2007).

In a mixed-method study, Whitlock (2007) found that when youth had meaningful opportunities to

exercise influence, and when they perceived they held power in decision making, they were most likely to

report a strong sense of community connectedness. Similarly, Evans (2007) and Zeldin (2004) found that,

when youth feel valued and perceive a high degree of respect from the adults with whom they partner,

youth gain a sense of connectedness and a stronger identity as influential community members.

Program Safety and Engagement as Possible Mediators

There is relatively little scholarly attention given to the factors that might mediate the partnership

experience and positive youth outcomes. As we considered extant theory and research, however, program

safety and engagement emerged as possible mediators of youth voice and supportive adults on our

indicators of youth development. Research and theory indicate that, when young people feel safe and are

engaged, they are more likely to fully reap the developmental and educational benefits of after-school

programming (Dawes and Larson 2011; Hirsch 2005; Roth et al. 2010; Vandell et al. 2005). This may be, in part, because when youth feel safe and engaged in program activities, they are also more likely to maintain regular attendance and active participation in community programs (Ginwright 2007; Deschenes et al. 2010; Strobel, Kirshner, O'Donoghue and McLaughlin 2008). Given this scholarship, we created a theoretical path model that situates safety and engagement as mediators of experiences with youth-adult partnership and positive youth development. As discussed below, there is sufficient evidence to predict that the ongoing experience of youth voice and supportive adults would maximize a psychological sense of safety and engagement among young people, and that development could be influenced through these pathways.

Feelings of safety and comfort provide, according to theory and research, a foundation for the provision of influential developmental experiences and are also found to contribute to feelings of efficacy, belonging, and connectedness (Carnegie Council on Adolescent Development 1992; Jennings, Parra-Medina, Hilfinger-Messias and McLoughlin 2006; McLaughlin, Irby and Langman 1994). Adult staff and volunteers are central in creating feelings of safety. In an ethnographic study of community-based programs, for example, Hirsch (2005) found that effective programming occurred when the organizations were perceived as relaxed and inviting "home-places," and furthermore, youth attributed their feelings of safety to the supportive interactions they had with adults. Other research indicates that after-school programs offer places for meeting and hanging out with friends, and that when adults provide safety and structure in these places, youth gain new skills and a sense of belonging (Anderson-Butcher, Newsome and Ferrari 2003; Perkins et al. 2007). Studies by Strobel et al (2008) and Whitlock (2007) emphasize the influence of self-directed activity, voice, and purpose. These studies indicate that safety and trust arise not only from adult caring and nurturance, but also when youth perceive that the adults are providing choices for their involvement and when the choices are perceived as being meaningful and important.

Program engagement is integral to the formation of positive youth outcomes including competence, leadership, and empowerment (Shernoff 2010; Vandell et al. 2005). And while there is scant research on the program elements that spark engagement (Dawes and Larson 2011), theory indicates that

both youth voice and supportive adult relationships contribute directly to engagement (Csikszentmihalyi

1990). When youth participate on their own terms and have a voice in decisions, the experience is

engaging, producing heightened enjoyment, intrinsic motivation, flow, and initiative (Csikszentmihalyi

and Klieiber 1991; Hansen, Larson and Dworkin 2003). Research further indicates that, over time, these

conditions lead youth to gain a sense of mastery and confidence in their ability to successfully complete

tasks. It may also lead to internalization of program goals, resulting in a sense of ownership and

connectedness (Dawes and Larson 2011). Strong relationships with adults are also fundamental to

program engagement. A recent study of thirty out-of-school programs found that youth were most

engaged when they experienced staff as being caring and competent (Greene, Lee, Constance and Hynes

2013). Analyses of program participants over time found that adults promote engagement by fostering a

welcoming group climate, challenging young people to exceed their own expectations and by providing

instrumental support for getting the job done (Dawes and Larson 2011; Pearce and Larson 2006). Evans'

(2007) analysis similarly identifies adult coaching, high expectations, and sharing of power as being

influential in promoting engagement. Camino's (2005) analysis confirms the importance of voice and

shared activity with adults. Across a variety of community initiatives, youth's engagement was enhanced

when they participated in decision making. Importantly, the youth became more engaged as they

discovered that they shared interests, concerns, and priorities with the adults with whom they were

partnering.

Study Context: After-School Programs in Malaysia

In Malaysia, co-curricular programs are a core strategy for building youth leadership skills and

competencies (Hamzah 2005; Nga and King 2006). As in other parts of the world, Malaysia has yet to

achieve the desired potential for strong relationships among youth and non-familial adults. This is borne

out by persistently low youth empowerment scores on national indices (e.g., Malaysian Institute for

Research in Youth Development 2011) and growing indications that youth are increasingly disconnected

from their communities (Hamzah et al. 2011). Connectedness is also an issue of growing concern. Recent

studies report lower rates of youth participation in civic engagement as well as declining youth

perceptions about support from neighborhoods and non-familial adults (Abdullah et al. 2014). These

trends are of concern to Malaysian policy makers. They run counter to the inherently collectivist culture

of Malaysia, comprised of strong communal values and social trust (Ndubisi, Khoo-Lattimore, Yang and

Capel 2011). Consequently, the National Youth Development Action Plan and the National Education

Blueprint prioritize empowerment and connectedness to prepare youth for productive economic and

leadership roles, as well as for participation in community development, social issues, and global

citizenship alongside adults (Ahmad, Rahim, Pawanteh and Ahmad 2012; Hamzah 2005; Nga 2009).

Malaysian co-curricular programs are offered on an after-school basis and are aimed at

complementing the formal school curriculum by providing developmental and leadership opportunities

for students. The programs are mandated for all schools by the national education policy, thus providing

equal opportunity for student participation. The programs include a variety of developmental experiences

through activities focused on skills and competency building in the broad areas of health, spirituality, arts,

communication, civic engagement and physical health. Of particular relevance to the current study, these

co-curricular programs are designed in ways that allow adolescents to explore and express their identity

by encouraging them to choose their activities and the roles within them. The student-centered nature of

most of the programs also provides ample opportunity for students to take on active leadership roles by,

for example, organizing environmental awareness or healthy lifestyle programs for their schools and

communities.

Most co-curricular programs in Malaysia also emphasize the elements of engagement with peers

and community adults. Projects and activities are designed in ways to provide adolescents access to

social networks, activities, resources, and equipment that would be otherwise unavailable to them

including close, less formal relationships with adult facilitators. All programs are facilitated by a teacher,

school alum, or adult community member. The facilitators are consistently involved with the program

throughout the school year to allow for relationship-building over time. This combination of

developmental programming combined with personal and extended relationships with adults provided an appropriate backdrop for the current study.

The Current Study

Youth-adult partnership is an innovative practice that has attracted the attention of psychologists and field professionals worldwide (Wong et al. 2010; Zeldin et al. 2013). Building from the theoretical attention and empirical research focused on youth-adult partnership -- specifically the components of youth voice and supportive adult relationships -- the present study extends this earlier work by using survey methods to examine the influence of the practice on youth development. It further extends previous inquiry by researching Y-AP in a non-western country, Malaysia, which has demonstrated a commitment to youth development in the after-school hours.

To conduct the study, we specified a path model that situates youth-adult partnership (youth voice, supportive adult relationships) as a program experience, or predictor, that will have direct effects on youth empowerment (leadership competence, policy control) and community connectedness (community connection, school attachment). The model further situates program engagement and safety as being psychological mechanisms that are hypothesized to mediate the relationship between the youth-adult partnership predictors and youth empowerment and community connectedness.

After six months of program participation, we believed that the pathways between the two components of youth-adult partnership would be significantly established. Consistent with extant theory and research, it was expected that youth voice and supportive adults would have direct effects on different aspects of positive youth development. We hypothesized that the two components of youth-adult partnership -- youth voice and supportive adult relationships -- will be directly associated with youth empowerment (leadership competence and policy control) (Hypothesis 1). And, the two components of youth-adult partnership -- youth voice and supportive adult relationships -- will be directly associated with community connectedness (school attachment and community connections) (Hypothesis 2).

While the experiences of youth voice and supportive adult relationships are predicted to have direct effects on positive youth development, extant theory and research suggests the mediating influences of program engagement and program safety on these associations. We further hypothesized, therefore, that program engagement will mediate the association between the two components of youth-adult partnership and youth empowerment (i.e. leadership competence and policy control) (Hypothesis 3). And, program safety will mediate the association between the two components of youth-adult partnership and community connectedness (school attachment and community connections) (Hypothesis 4).

Methods

Participants and Procedures

Data were collected from Form 4 (Grade 11) students at three schools in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia. After a thorough review of the survey questionnaire and our proposed methods, approval to carry out the study was granted from the Malaysian Ministry of Education and the individual schools, consistent with Malaysian policy. The three schools included in the study were selected based on their extensive offering of co-curricular programs, which fell into the categories: sports (e.g., soccer, badminton, rugby), uniform groups (e.g., scouts, cadets, fire brigade), and clubs (e.g., arts, music, religion, languages, debate). The three schools require students to join one of each type of program weekly on an after-school basis where they rotate their attendance (i.e. change every three weeks).

Recruited youth were surveyed twice, with a six month interval between data collection points. The current analysis focuses on the second time point (Time 2), to ensure that all students had sufficient time to experience a variety of program activities prior to completing the survey. We used the initial status (Time 1) data for the youth-adult partnership predictors and outcome measures as controls to test all relationships at Time 2. A total of 357 students participated in the initial survey, and 207 students responded to the second survey. The decrease in participation at Time 2 was due to the fact that data collection was carried out during the schools' final exam period. Many students use the after-school hours

during this time of year to study for finals, which can result in decreased attendance in co-curricular programs. This was evidenced by the fact that the sample size decrease at Time 2 was comparable across the three schools. Sample characteristics between the analytic and missing samples were also comparable. Chi-square and T-test results showed no significant difference in gender composition (χ^2 = .564, $p > .05$) or parental education levels ($t = 1.368$, $p > .05$), respectively, between the analytic and missing samples. Furthermore, we found no significant differences in the predictors of youth voice ($t = 1.765$, $p > .05$) or supportive adult relationships ($t = .363$, $p > .05$).

The mean age of the respondents at Time 2 was 15.27 years and 47.3% of students were female. Ethnically, the sample closely mirrored Malaysia's general population as 63.3% of the respondents were Malay, 22.2% Chinese, 9.7% Indian, and 4.8% other ethnicities. During data collection the students were encouraged to answer all questions on the survey, but were also reminded that their participation was voluntary. They were not required to answer any question that made them feel uncomfortable.

We used survey items developed in the U.S, and translated the wordings from English to Malay. The initial version of the survey was shared among the Malaysian researchers for feedback and modifications regarding cultural relevancy. We then used reserved translation processes to ensure semantic, conceptual, and normative equivalence (see Behling and Law 2000). The survey was then piloted in two Malaysia after-school programs, after which, final modifications were made.

The questionnaire was administered by research team members following standard protocols set by the schools. All students were administered the survey in their classrooms within a two-week period of each other. An exception was one of the schools at Time 2, where data collection was delayed an additional two weeks due to scheduling conflicts.

Measures

The measures used in this study are described below. Table 1 provides descriptive statistics.

Youth empowerment

Empowerment was assessed using two measures: leadership competence and policy control. Both

measures are revised subscales of the Sociopolitical Control Scale for Youth (Peterson et al. 2011). The

revised scales have been validated in Malaysia (Christens, Krauss and Zeldin *in press*).

Leadership competence. To assess leadership competence, study participants responded to four statements

(e.g., "I am often a leader in groups", "I would rather have a leadership role when I'm involved in a group

project) that were rated using a 5-point Likert-type scale ranging from *Strongly Disagree* to *Strongly*

Agree. Among the study participants, the mean score at Time 1 was 3.30 (SD = .73; α = .74) and 3.43 (SD

= .79; α = .79) at Time 2.

Policy control. To assess policy control, study participants responded to four statements (e.g., "My

friends and I can really understand what's going on with my community or school", "I am able to

participate in community or school decision making) that were rated using a 5-point Likert-type scale

ranging from *Strongly Disagree* to *Strongly Agree*. Among the study participants, the mean score at Time

1 was 3.20 (SD = .62; α = .68) and 3.45 (SD = .73; α = .78) at Time 2.

Community connectedness

Connectedness was assessed using two measures: school attachment and community connections. Both

measures were previously used in a study on Malaysian youth where they displayed acceptable reliability

(Krauss et al. 2014).

School attachment. School attachment was measured using a 5-item scale developed by McNeely,

Nonnemaker and Blum (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 at Time 1 was 3.80 (*SD* = .70, α = .79), and 3.92 (*SD* =

.74, α = .87) at Time 2.

Community connections. This measure was conceptualized as a young person's connection to community members, including: (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). Among this study's participants, the mean score at Time 1 was 3.82 ($SD = .62$, $\alpha = .75$), and 3.97 ($SD = .65$, $\alpha = .85$) at Time 2.

Youth-adult partnership

Youth-adult partnership was assessed using two measures: youth voice in decision making and supportive adult relationships. The measures were previously validated with samples of young people in the United States, Malaysia and Portugal (Zeldin et al. 2014).

Youth voice in decision making. The measure of youth voice in decision making (Zeldin et al. 2014) assesses youth's actual experiences with active decision-making in programmatic contexts. To assess youth voice, study participants responded to four statements (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") that were rated using a 5-point Likert-type scale from *Strongly Disagree* to *Strongly Agree* Among the study participants, the mean score at Time 1 was 3.51 ($SD = .79$, $\alpha = .83$) and 3.79 ($SD = .88$, $\alpha = .91$) at Time 2.

Supportive adult relationships. The measure of supportive adult relationships (Zeldin et al. 2014) speaks to the reciprocal relationships that exist between youth and nonfamilial adults within the context of programmatic and community settings. To assess supportive adult relationships, study participants

responded to five statements (e.g., "Youth and staff trust each other in this center", "Youth and adults learn a lot from working together in this center") that were rated using a 5-point Likert-type scale from *Strongly Disagree* to *Strongly Agree*. Among the study participants, the mean score at Time 1 was 3.78 (*SD* = .65, α = .85) and 3.97 (*SD* = .69, α = .89) at Time 2.

Program quality mediators

Program quality was assessed using two measures: program engagement and safe environment. Both measures were previously used in a study on Malaysian youth where they displayed acceptable reliability (Krauss et al. 2014).

Program engagement. The measure of program engagement was adapted from Vandell et al.'s (2005) study of engagement in after-school programs. This measure assesses young people's level of engagement in program activities, understood as the simultaneous experience of concentration, interest and enjoyment. To assess program engagement, study participants responded to five statements (e.g., "I enjoy most everything I do in this center", "The programs offered in this center are important to my life") that were rated using a 5-point Likert-type scale ranging from *Strongly Disagree* to *Strongly Agree.* Among this study's participants, the mean score (at Time 2) was 3.98 (SD = .74, α = .89).

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). To assess supportive adult relationships, study participants responded to four statements (e.g., "I feel safe when I'm in this center", "This center makes me feel welcome") that were rated using a 5-point Likert-type scale from *Strongly Disagree* to *Strongly Agree.* Among this study's participants, the mean score (at Time 2) was 4.22 (SD = .63, α = .80).

Table 1 about here

Analytic Strategy

To test our hypotheses, we conducted a series of four path analyses. Path analysis allowed us to examine direct associations between the youth-adult partnership predictors and youth development outcome variables as well as the indirect associations between youth-adult partnership and the outcomes via the two program quality mediators. For each outcome, program quality (program engagement and program safety) was situated as a mediator through which youth-adult partnership experience influenced youth development.

To examine the direct and indirect associations between youth-adult partnership and the outcome variables, we controlled for participant's initial status with both predictors (youth voice, supportive adult relationships) and each outcome variable. To do so, we included youth voice and supportive adult relationships as well as the four outcome measures (leadership competence, policy control, school attachment and community connections) measured at Time 1 as control variables in our analytic model.

All models were estimated with maximum likelihood estimation with robust standard errors (MLR) using Mplus 7.1 software (Muthén and Muthén, 1998-2012). Three goodness-of-fit indices were used to evaluate model fit for our path models: the Comparative Fit Index (CFI), the Root Mean Square Error of Approximation (RMSEA), and the Standardized Root Mean Square Residual (SRMR). The rule of thumb for CFI is that values greater than .95 indicate a good model fit, and RMSEA values and SRMR values less than .08 are considered a fair fit (Brown 2006). Path analysis results are displayed in Figures 1 through 4. Standardized Beta values are shown for all significant paths in the models.

Results

Path analysis was used to examine the direct associations between the Y-AP predictors (youth voice and supportive adult relationships) and each of the four youth development outcome variables (leadership competence, policy control, community connections, school attachment). We also examined the indirect associations (via program engagement and program safety) between the Y-AP predictors and the outcomes. In all models, both Y-AP predictors at T2 were positively associated with both mediating variables (program engagement and program safety) ($p < .001$ for all paths). All outcome variables at T1 were positively associated with their status at T2 ($p < .001$ for all outcome variables).

Youth Empowerment

Leadership Competence. The goodness of fit indices show that the model fits the data well (RMSEA = .039; CFI = .994; SRMR = .037). Youth voice at T2 was positively related to leadership competence at T2 ($p < .01$) while supportive adult relationships was not. Program engagement was positively related to leadership competence at T2 ($p < .05$), whereas program safety was not significantly related. As hypothesized, both youth voice at T2 and supportive adult relationships at T2 had indirect positive relationships with leadership competence at T2 via program engagement ($\beta = .056$, $p < .05$; $\beta = .105$, $p < .05$, respectively).

Policy Control. The goodness of fit indices indicate that the model fits the data well (RMSEA = .054, CFI = .988, and SRMR = .048). As with leadership competence, youth voice at T2 was positively related to policy control at T2 ($p < .001$) while supportive adult relationships at T2 was not. Program engagement was positively related to policy control at T2 ($p < .05$), whereas program safety was not significantly related. Both youth voice at T2 and supportive adult relationships at T2 had indirect positive relationships with policy control at T2 via program engagement ($\beta = .060$, $p < .05$; $\beta = .111$, $p < .05$, respectively).

Diagram 1 about here

Diagram 2 about here

Community Connectedness

School Attachment. The path model for school attachment also fit the data well (RMSEA = .068, CFI =

.979, and SRMR = .061). Contrary to our hypothesis, neither youth voice at T2 nor supportive adult

relationships at T2 were significantly associated with school attachment. However, both youth voice at T2

and supportive adult relationships at T2 had indirect positive relationships with school attachment at T2

via program safety (β = .094, p < .001; β = .154, p < .01, respectively). Program safety was positively

related to school attachment at T2 (p < .001), whereas program engagement was not significantly related.

Community Connections. Overall, the goodness of fit indices show that our model for community

connections fit the data fairly well. Although the RMSEA slightly exceeded the fair fit criteria (.096), CFI

indicated a good model fit (.962), and SRMR showed a fair fit (.069). As with school attachment, neither

youth voice at T2 nor supportive adult relationships at T2 were significantly related to community

connections at T2. However, as with school attachment, both youth voice at T2 and supportive adult

relationships at T2 had indirect positive relationships with community connections by way of program

safety (β = .089, p < .01; β = .144, p < .01, respectively). Program safety was positively related to school

attachment at T2 (p < .01), whereas program engagement was not significantly related.

Diagram 3 about here

Diagram 4 about here

Discussion

At the close of the 20th century, scholars sought to make the theoretical case that structured activities during out-of-school hours were critical spaces that promoted the socio-emotional and civic development of young people (Carnegie Council on Adolescent Development 1994; Halpern 2002). A decade later, after-school programs have gained a foothold within communities, but policy support and consistent funding remains elusive. Within this context, scholars have begun to build an empirical case for the effectiveness of after-school programs. Granger (2010), after reviewing the extant literature, argues that it is most critical to answer the question: what are the elements of quality that make after-school programs effective? One of the most promising lines of inquiry is to examine linkages between staff-youth interactions and developmental outcomes (Granger, 2010; Larson and Angus 2011; Li and Jullian 2012).

This study was designed to explore program quality in after-school programs, with an analytic focus on two core components of youth-adult partnership -- youth voice in decision making and supportive adult relationships -- and their hypothesized associations with youth empowerment and community connectedness. There is a small but growing body of research, largely qualitative, indicating that the experience of youth-adult partnership promotes such outcomes (Wong et al. 2010; Zeldin et al. 2013). Key issues remain, however. Foremost, it is unknown if the components of youth-adult partnership work jointly or independently to facilitate youth civic development. Additionally, the extant literature contains sparse data on the pathways through which adult-youth interactions facilitate youth development. Building from extant theory and research, this study conceptualized program safety and engagement as mediators in the analytic models. Finally, we note that the vast majority of scholarship on after-school programming is situated within Western cultures. To broaden this area of inquiry, the present study was conducted in Malaysian after-school programs.

Study results provide unique insight into program quality at the point of service within after-school programs. Youth voice in decision making and program engagement had direct and mediating influences, respectively, on youth empowerment. In contrast, supportive adult relationships and safety formed a significant pathway for the two components of community connectedness. This pattern of results has a strong conceptual logic when one considers that the holistic experience of youth-adult partnership contains both instrumental (voice and purposeful action) and relational (adult respect and guidance) components. After six months of program attendance, the active processes of voice and program engagement became most strongly associated with the agency-oriented concepts of youth empowerment. In contrast, the more nurturing and relational components of supportive adults and feelings of safety became most strongly associated with community connectedness.

Pathways to Youth Empowerment and Community Connectedness

On both measures of empowerment -- leadership competence and policy control -- the predicted model fit the data well. Of the two components of youth-adult partnership, however, it is noteworthy that the significant direct association was with youth voice in decision making, but not supportive adult relationships. This corroborates previous research indicating that the experience of exercising youth voice and acting affirmatively on proximal environments can have a powerful influence on leadership competencies (Jennings et al. 2006; Mitra 2004; Zeldin 2004) and on youth's beliefs about their ability to influence social systems (Ozer and Schotland 2011; Maton and Salem 1995). These findings are consistent with a prior Malaysian study which found that youth voice significantly contributes to leadership competence and policy control over and beyond the contributions of supportive adult relationships and the influences of family, school and religion (Krauss et al. 2014). This is not to suggest that relationships with program staff and resident volunteers are not important for youth civic development. These data demonstrate that supportive adult relationships had indirect effects on measures of empowerment through program engagement. It appears, therefore, that adults are critical to youth empowerment in multiple ways. Most important is that adults organize program activities in ways that

facilitate youth voice. Concurrently, and consistent with past research, the present path models indicate that empowerment is also enhanced indirectly, when adults partner with youth in ways that facilitate youth's psychological engagement and motivation in program activities (Hansen et al. 2003; McLaughlin et al. 1994; Strobel et al. 2008).

The pathways to community connectedness were different than those to youth empowerment, but are equally intriguing. On both measures of community connectedness -- community connections and school attachment -- the predicted model fit the data well. Counter to our hypotheses, and to previous studies in Malaysia (Krauss et al. 2014), however, neither youth voice nor supportive adult relationships had direct links to measures of community connectedness. What stands out is the significant role of program safety, a construct that has rarely been included in previous quantitative studies of after-school programs. In both models of community connectedness, program safety mediated the associations between youth voice and supportive adult relationships. While interpretations must be speculative, this pattern of results is consistent with past qualitative research suggesting that youth directed activity coupled with adult guidance engenders feelings of safety (Hirsch 2005; Perkins et al. 2007; Whitlock 2007). These feelings of safety may then provide the foundation for youth to establish emotional connections with members of the communities in which they live.

Implications for Further Research

Scholarship on youth-adult partnership, particularly youth voice in decision making, has become established in many industrialized countries such as the United States, Canada, the United Kingdom and Australia. The current study suggests that the experience of youth-adult partnership may also be powerful in countries that are transitioning into industrialized status, such as Malaysia. Research seeking to replicate the present findings is certainly warranted. That said, several methodological limitations should be pondered when making generalizations from these results. Foremost, the study sample is urban, with all students living in the greater Kuala Lumpur metropolitan area. A substantial number of students did not take the survey during the second administration, likely because of conflicts with final exam

preparation. While the pattern of results from this inquiry are largely consistent with past inquiries and accumulated knowledge, it will be important for future studies to employ longitudinal and mixed method strategies to test causal associations.

We note also our reliance on youth's reports of their program experience, rather than the use of direct observation. It most certainly is true that social situations perceived as real are real in their consequences (Rosa and Tudge 2013), but observations of quality within the "black box" of programs are still important (Hirsch 2005). In this study, we infer that youth had a voice in decision making because the youth reported that their voices were valued. In future studies, important insight could be gleaned by additionally observing the extent to which young people actively participated in planning, leading, and implementing program activities. Similarly, our assessments of adult relationships are based on youth perceptions. This study did not collect information on the adults involved in the programs. We do know the full extent to which the adults, both paid staff and resident volunteers, received training for their roles, nor do we know how this training translated into practice. Future research could profitably examine whether paid staff and resident volunteers have different influences on youth development.

Conclusion

Industrialization isolates youth from non-familial adults in almost all spheres of society, but especially in forums of decision making, and this context impedes positive youth and civic development (Hine 1999; White and Wyn 1998). As Malaysia transitions into a more industrialized society and assumes "developed" status, there is a growing sense that youth and adults are increasingly becoming segregated and less connected to community life. Increases in reported conflict between youth and adults within homes, schools and communities, coupled with greater political alienation and apathy have contributed to the sense that both empowerment and community connectedness are declining among young people (Malaysian Institute for Research in Youth Development 2011; Lim 2014). This study points to the potential of after-school, co-curricular programs to help assuage this trend. Coupled with the existing body of related research, it suggests that the quality of youth-adult partnerships within these

programs is intimately related to psychological engagement and safety and that together, these elements

of quality contribute to positive youth outcomes. This study further suggests an alternative approach to

improving programs and policies in Malaysia. Rather than solely focusing on the youth outcomes to be

promoted, it may be equally important to emphasize the developmental relationships that are to be

produced within the programs. Policies that create structures for youth-adult partnership are likely to help

Malaysian youth thrive in the present and the future.

These recommendations also hold true for the United States. We fully recognize that our

suggestions mirror past recommendations. Put simply, there is an imperative for policies and practices

that prioritize youth-adult relationships and for intergenerational partnerships acting on behalf of the

common good (Bronfenbrenner 1979; Granger 2010; Li and Jullian 2012; Zeldin, Petrokubi and McNeil

2008). Indeed, youth voice in decision making, in the context of supportive adult relationships, has long

been viewed as fundamental developmental experiences contributing to youth empowerment and

community connectedness (Dewey 1938; Rogoff 2003). This perspective has also been codified in the

United Nations Rights of the Child (Lansdown 2001). For reasons of youth development and youth rights,

therefore, the challenge remains the same: to create opportunities for youth to speak on issues of

community concern and to elevate those adults who are able and willing to help youth exercise their

voice. For scholars, there is a continued imperative to continuously push our understanding from theory,

to research, to quality implementation. Toward this end, a most critical task is policy education and

mobilization. Be it within community organizations or the larger arenas of public policy, the critical task

is to promote policies that prioritize authentic youth voice and which offer incentives and training for

adults to partner with young people.

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Table

Table 1: Descriptive Statistics

	Min	Max	M	SD	α
Youth voice in decision making (T1)	1.00	5.00	3.51	0.79	0.83
Youth voice in decision making (T2)	1.00	5.00	3.79	0.88	0.91
Supportive adult relationships (T1)	1.60	5.00	3.78	0.65	0.85
Supportive adult relationships (T2)	1.00	5.00	3.97	0.69	0.89
Program engagement (T2)	1.00	5.00	3.98	0.74	0.89
Program safety (T2)	1.00	5.00	4.22	0.63	0.80
Leadership competence (T1)	1.25	5.00	3.30	0.73	0.74
Leadership competence (T2)[a]	1.00	5.00	3.43	0.79	0.79
Policy control (T1)	1.00	5.00	3.20	0.62	0.68
Policy control (T2)[a]	1.00	5.00	3.45	0.73	0.77
School attachment (T1)	1.00	5.00	3.80	0.70	0.79
School attachment (T2)[a]	1.00	5.00	3.92	0.74	0.87
Community connections (T1)	2.00	5.00	3.82	0.62	0.75
Community connections (T2)[a]	1.71	5.00	3.97	0.65	0.85

[a]Outcome variables
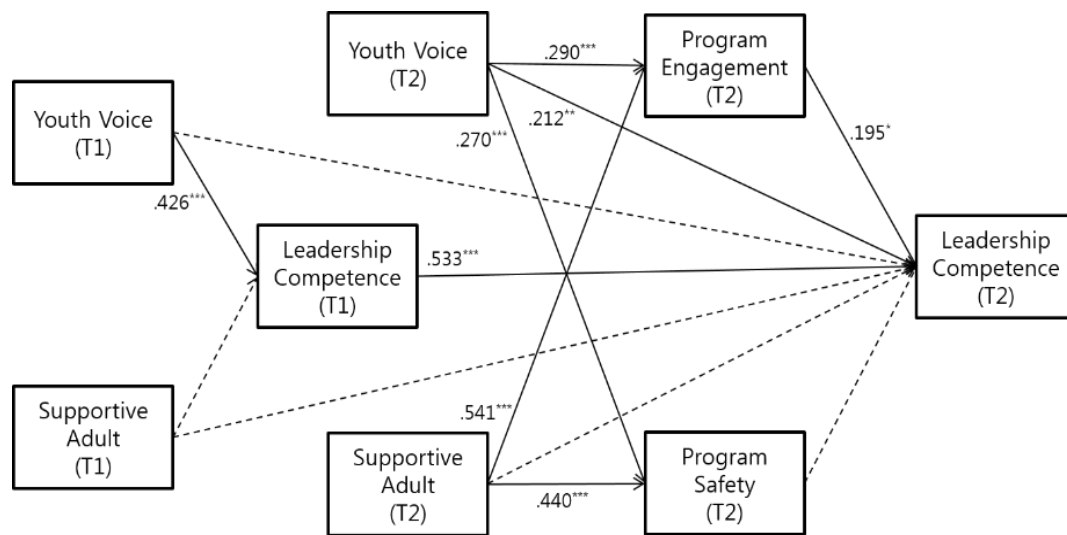
Figure 1: Path Model for Leadership Competence
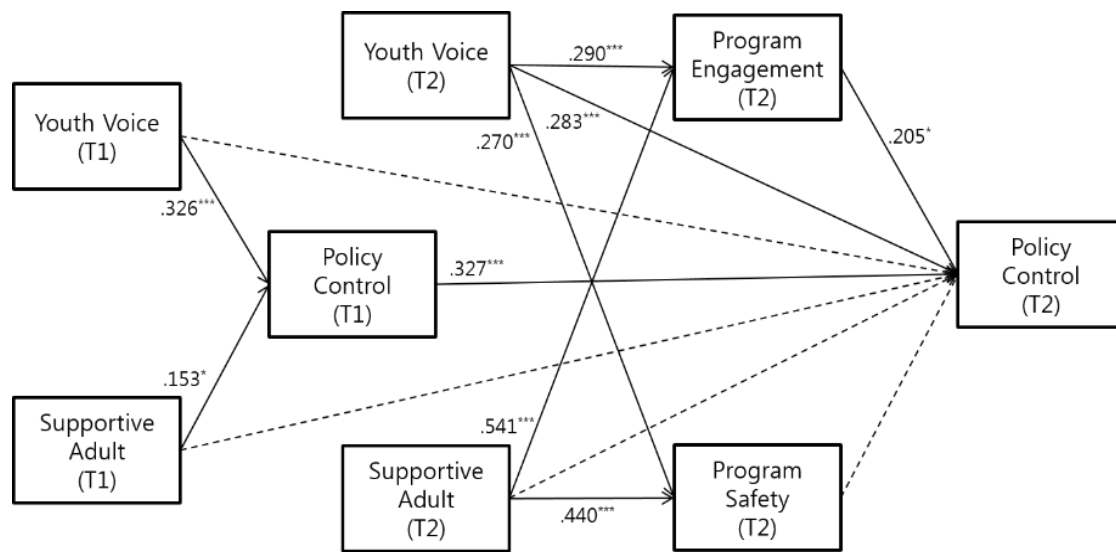*Note*: dotted line indicates a non-significant path; $^{*}p < .05,$ $^{**}p < .01,$ $^{***}p < .001$

Figure 2: Path Model for Policy Control
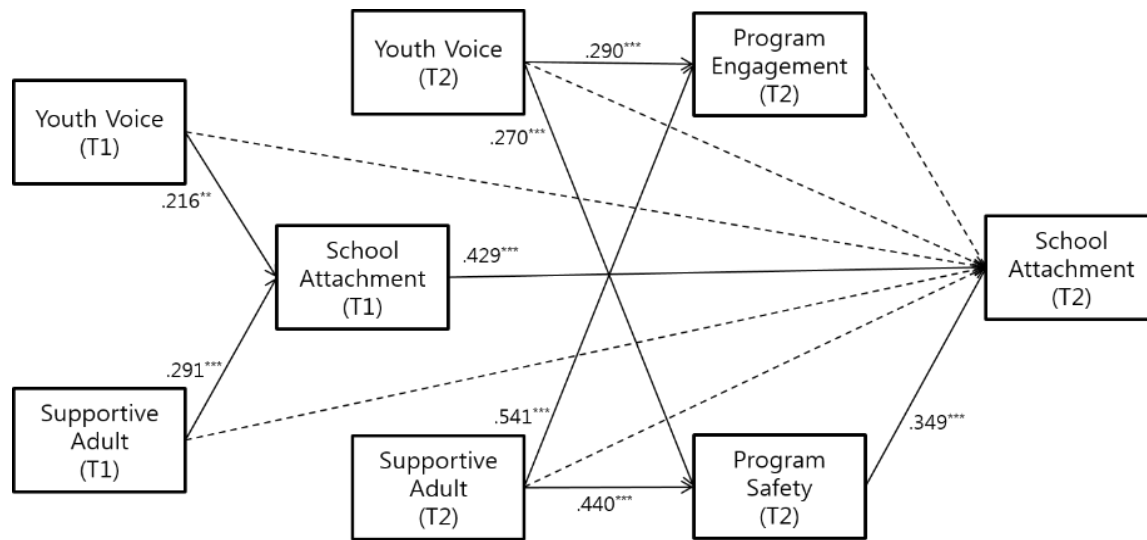*Note*: dotted line indicates a non-significant path; $^*p < .05$, $^{**}p < .01$, $^{***}p < .001$

Figure 3: Path Model for School Attachment
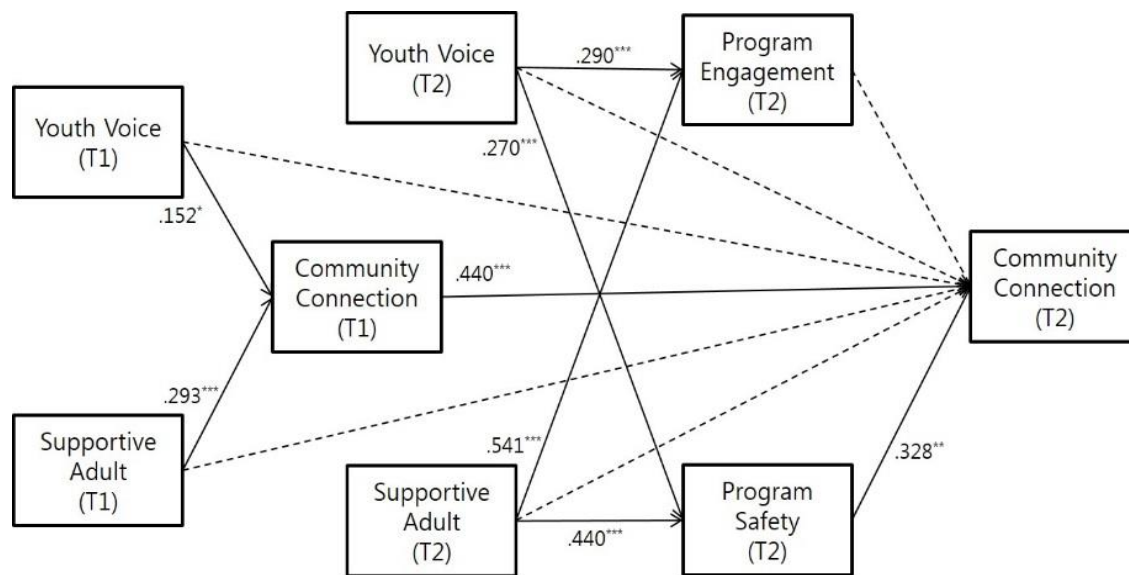*Note*: dotted line indicates a non-significant path; $^*p < .05$, $^{**}p < .01$, $^{***}p < .001$

Figure 4: Path Model for Community Connections
Note: dotted line indicates a non-significant path; $^*p < .05$, $^{**}p < .01$, $^{***}p < .001$

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Author's contributions:

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