# YOUTH-ADULT PARTNERSHIP:
# A NEW WAY FORWARD FOR GREATER MUSLIM YOUTH PARTICIPATION IN SCHOOLS AND COMMUNITIES

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## Abstract

*Young people in Muslim majority countries are a valuable asset and investing in them can bring tremendous social and economic benefits. They also face many challenges that undermine their ability to develop and contribute to society. To make the most of the opportunity, these countries must find ways to increase the human and social capital of their respective youth populations. Youth participation in formal and non-formal educational settings such as schools and community programs has been identified as an effective approach to enhancing young people's experiences. Building on initial findings from Malaysia, the current paper puts forth the concept of youth-adult partnership (Y-AP) as a strategy for schools. Y-AP has been shown to enhance personal agency, empowerment and connection to community, three attributes that are critical for Muslim youth to play more substantive roles in national development. The paper further attempts to frame Y-AP within an Islamic socio-historical lens, drawing on examples from the Prophet Muhammad SAW and the early Muslim community to show how developmental relationships were central to the social and educational culture within the Prophet's community.*
*Keywords: young people; youth participation; youth-adult partnership (Y-AP)*

## Abstrak

Para pemuda di negara-negara mayoritas Muslim adalah aset berharga dan sekaligus investasi karena dapat membawa manfaat sosial dan ekonomi yang luar biasa. Namun mereka juga menghadapi banyak tantangan yang melemahkan kemampuan mereka untuk mengembangkan dan memberikan kontribusi kepada masyarakat. Untuk membuat kesempatan yang luas bagi para pemuda, negara-negara Muslim harus mencari cara untuk meningkatkan modal manusia dan sosial dari populasi pemuda yang ada. Partisipasi pemuda dalam pendidikan formal dan non-formal merupakan pendekatan yang efektif untuk meningkatkan pengalaman para pemuda. Sebagaimana pengalaman di Malaysia, yang menempatkan pemuda dalam kemitraan pemuda-dewasa (Y-AP) sebagai strategi untuk sekolah. Y-AP dapat meningkatkan agen pribadi, pemberdayaan, dan koneksi ke masyarakat, tiga atribut yang penting bagi pemuda Muslim untuk memainkan peran yang lebih substantif dalam pembangunan nasional. Artikel ini mencoba untuk membingkai realitas sosio-historis Y-AP dalam perspektif Islam, dengan mencermati keteladanan Nabi Muhammad SAW pada masyarakat Muslim awal guna menunjukkan bagaimana hubungan antara perkembangan sosial budaya dan pendidikan dalam kehidupan masyarakat pada masa Nabi. .
**Kata kunci:** pemuda; partisipasi pemuda; kemitraan pemuda-dewasa (Y-AP)

## A. Introduction

Nearly 50% of the developing world population is youth and children.[1] Historically, youth bulges have been associated with revolutions, political activism and warfare.[2] Large populations of disengaged, undervalued youth have often been the source of great civil unrest. To avoid repeating this history, the present youth bulge challenging many developing nations is driving new calls for more structured and meaningful participation by young people in activities associated with learning, nation building and civic development.[3] Participation in the form of decision-making, planning, mutual consultation and self-directed learning in schools, after-school programs, community youth associations and non-governmental organizations can facilitate the acquisition of critical competencies that youth need to thrive as individuals and citizens.[4]

Nowhere is the youth bulge of greater concern than in Muslim-majority countries. The recent uprisings in the Middle East, commonly known as the 'Arab Spring', were predominantly youth-led, with formal and informal youth movements playing a major role in the events that continue to reshape the region.[5] These events showed how central youth participation has become to contemporary Muslim societies, and why greater effort to formalize participation within formal youth-serving and educational structures is now needed more than ever. Youth participation can take the form of rebellion when youth-serving institutions and organizations lack the capacity to effect positive change and achieve their goals. In these cases, participation becomes a destabilizing force in a society. The Arab Spring showed the world that young people are a powerful force in society that can be harnessed for nation and community building, rather than rebellion and destruction.

Scholars have pointed out that the value of youth participation –when structured, supported and done well– lies in its contribution to social justice, youth development and nation building.[6] Together, these goals reflect principles germane to civil society where all members are valued, have useful roles to play, are realizing individual potentials, and are working in cooperation toward common goals. Indeed, research has shown that across cultures, youth voice on behalf of self and others is an important precursor to competence, identity formation and social trust.[7] A significant body of research conducted primarily in Western countries has linked youth participation to several outcomes of relevance to developing nations such as greater social and leadership competence, psychological empowerment, and improved relationships with adults and peers within the communities where youth live.[8]

Among the different forms that youth participation can take,[9] there is growing consensus among youth researchers and practitioners that meaningful youth participation begins with relationships that are developmental in nature, where young people are nurtured to play a central role in their own learning and development. Young people engage when learning is tied to active participation in discovery and inquiry, when they are challenged to fact find, interpret and make sense of phenomena.[10] Developmental relationships are tailored for this. They differ entirely from 'prescriptive relationships', which are often the norm in youth program and school settings. Prescriptive relationships tend to be adult-dictated, so that adults –without input from the youth—make the majority of decisions. In such relationships, control lies almost entirely with the adults so that the relationship takes on a rigid and inflexible quality. In these relationships, shifting power in favor of the youth rarely

1    World Bank, *World Development Indicators (WDI), 2010*. Retrieved from: http://data.worldbank.org/sites/default/files/section2.pdf

2    Hart, D., Atkins, R., Markey, P., and Youniss, J., Youth bulges in communities the effects of age structure on adolescent civic knowledge and civic participation. *Psychological Science, 15*(9), 2004), p. 591-597.

3    United Nations Development Programme, *UNDP Youth Strategy 2014-2017: Empowered Youth, Sustainable Future* (New York: NY, 2015), Retrieved from: http://www.undp.org/content/dam/undp/library/Democratic%20Governance/Youth/UNDP_Youth-Strategy-2014-17_Web.pdf

4    DFID–CSO Youth Working Group, *Youth Participation in Development: A Guide for Development Agencies and Policy Makers*, 2010, Retrieved from: http://restlessdevelopment.org/file/youth-participation-in-development-pdf

5    Cole, J., *The new Arabs (New York–London–Toronto–New Delhi*, 2014).

6    Zeldin, S., Krauss, S.E., Collura, J., Lucchesi, M. and Sulaiman, A.H., Conceptualizing and measuring youth–adult partnership in community programs: a cross national study. (*American Journal of Community Psychology*, 54(3-4), 2014), p. 337–347.

7    Arnett (2002, Flanagan, Martinez, and Cumsille (2010), Peterson (2000).

8    Christens and Peterson (2012), Evans (2007), Krauss, et al. (2014), Larson and Angus (2011), Mitra (2004), Zeldin (2004), Zimmerman, Ramirez-Valles, and Maton (1999).

9    Wong, N. T., Zimmerman, M. A., and Parker, E. A., A typology of youth participation and empowerment for child and adolescent health promotion. (*American Journal of Community Psychology, 46*, 2010), p. 100–114.

10    Larson and Rusk (2010), Rogoff (2003).

occurs, and the relationship often declines over time as the adult remains inflexible and insistent on his or her plans for the relationship.[11] Young people become demotivated, discouraged and disinterested –a debilitating outcome now prevalent through many of the modern world's public education systems.

Recently, researchers have identified 'youth-adult partnership' (Y-AP) as an optimal form of developmental relationship. Y-AP is characterized by youth and adults collaborating in group decision making activities such as visioning, program planning, evaluation and continuous program improvement.[12] Y-AP is further characterized by adults providing supportive guidance and platforms for youth to have 'voice' in the decision making process,[13] resulting in a spirit of collective action. In this way, partnership occurs through mutual decision-making and shared teaching, learning, and reflection by youth and adults.[14] As a youth development strategy, evidence suggests that Y-AP is an effective approach to achieving greater agency, leadership competence, empowerment and community connectedness among youth.[15]

Developing Muslim majority countries like Malaysia, Indonesia and others continue to struggle to meet the developmental needs of their sizable youth populations. As young Muslims in these countries transition into adulthood, many have difficulty finding learning experiences relevant to their present lives and future aspirations. Research in most of these countries has reported low levels of youth civic engagement, particularly during the secondary school years.[16] The rhetoric from policy makers for youth to become 'partners in development' seldom matches the quality of opportunities afforded youth to make meaningful contributions to their communities.

Current educational and youth development initiatives seem insufficient at best, with almost daily calls for educational reform and more effective programming that is relevant, engaging and culturally aligned with the values and way of life of Islam.

## B. Aim of the Current Paper

Using recent empirical findings from Muslim-majority Malaysia as a starting point, the current paper aims to position Y-AP as a promising new strategy for schools, youth and community programs in Muslim-majority countries to achieve more effective structured youth participation. In so doing, I first set out to establish the importance of agency, empowerment and connection to community as three critical attributes needed by Muslim youth to play more substantive roles in the development of their respective countries. I then draw on the work of Li and Julian (2012) to posit developmental relationships as the active ingredient to healthy and robust youth participation and development settings. After introducing Y-AP as an optimal form of developmental relationship, I present recent study findings from Malaysia where Y-AP has been associated with greater agency, empowerment and connectedness among youth in school and community settings. Lastly, I attempt to frame Y-AP within an Islamic socio-historical lens, drawing on examples from the Prophet Muhammad SAW and the early Muslim community to show how developmental relationships were central to the culture of education and development within the Prophet's community. In so doing, I hope to illustrate how developmental relationships such as Y-AP represent a contemporary form of traditional educational principles that continue to be relevant in Muslim-majority countries today.

11    Li, J., and Jullian, M., Developmental relationships as the active in-gredient: A unifying working hypothesis of "what works" across intervention set-tings (*American Journal of Orthopsychiatry, 82*, 2012), p. 157-186.

12    Zeldin et al. (2014), *op.cit.*

13    Zeldin, S., Krauss, S. E., Kim, T., Collura, J., and Abdullah, H. (2015). Pathways to Youth Empowerment and Community Connectedness: A Study of Youth-Adult Partnership in Malaysian After-School, Co-Curricular Pro-grams (*Journal of youth and adolescence*, 2015), p. 1-14.

14    Camino, L., Youth-adult partnerships: Entering new territory in community work and research (*Applied Developmental Science, 4*(1), 2000), p. 11–20.

15    Krauss et al. (2014), Zeldin et al. (2015).

16    Etra, Prakash, Graham and Perold (2008), Malaysian Institute for Research in Youth Development (2011).

## C. Muslim Youth as Active Participants in National Development: The Critical Attributes of Agency, Empowerment and Community Connectedness

Many Muslim countries are facing youth population bulges. Of the twenty-seven largest youth-bulge societies in the world, thirteen are Muslim.[17] Although a potential boon for a young nation, without highly functional educational, economic and social systems and structures, population bulges can become destructive. Large populations of young people left to their own devices without proper support, opportunities and guidance can quickly turn into violent unrest, protest, and revolt, rather than system-sustaining civic activity.[18] Boredom, frustration, lack of skills, no sense or hope for the future, and the belief that their lives have no purpose or meaning are ingredients for youth-led civil unrest. Large populations of idle youth such as those found in the Muslim world are also prone to virulent strands of religion as an alternative force for social mobility.[19]

How to mobilize a large youth population for growth, well-being and nation building? Many developing nations acknowledge youth as important contributors to economic and social growth. The UNDP Youth Strategy 2014-2017 report (2014) has identified: (1) increased economic empowerment, (2) enhanced youth civic engagement and participation in decision-making and political processes and institutions, and (3) strengthened youth engagement in resilience building as its three main thrusts. These three goals correlate with a clear need for youth participation in economic development, decision-making in civic bodies and initiatives, and for building resilience and sustainable development.

Limited evidence suggests that Muslim-majority developing countries share these concerns.[20] In Malaysia, for example, the attributes of personal efficacy, empowerment, and community connections have become cross-cutting priorities, as evidenced in the country's Youth Development Action Plan and recently tabled National Youth Policy. It is believed that a common emphasis on the above three attributes will not only prepare Malaysian youth for productive economic roles, but will also allow youth to participate meaningfully in community development, social justice issues, and global citizenship.[21] As a developmental outcome, agency provides youth with the motivation and efficacy to contribute to the country's economic success and sustainability by relieving the burden of an over-burdened public sector. Countries like Malaysia are also beginning to embrace youth empowerment, with more people becoming aware that youth need to develop a sense of empowerment to have the confidence, courage and capacity to participate in civic change efforts in order to help their country mature as a more democratic society. Finally, a strong sense of connection to the real communities and people where youth live –including families, non-familial adults and peers– is seen as vital to preserving the collectivist values and cooperative culture that are central to most Muslim-dominated countries.[22]

Research consistently links meaningful youth participation with the development of agency, empowerment, and community connectedness.[23] The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child asserts that all young people have the right to express their views freely, be heard in all matters affecting them, and have their views taken seriously in accordance with their age and maturity.[24] Youth participation is also seen as a strategy for youth development and effective citizenry. Scholars assert that, across cultures, youth voice on behalf of self and others is an important precursor to competence, identity formation and social trust.[25] Lastly, involving young people contributes directly to nation

17 Beehner, L., *The Effects of "Youth Bulge" on Civil Conflicts* (Washington: Council on Foreign Relations, 2007).

18 Hart, D., Atkins, R., Markey, P., and Youniss, J., Youth bulges in communities the effects of age structure on adolescent civic knowledge and civic participation (*Psychological Science*, 15(9), 2004), p. 591-597.

19 Beehner, *op.cit*

20 UNDP, *op.cit*

21 Ahmad et al. (2012), Hamzah (2005), Krauss et al. (2014), Nga (2009).

22 Ramli, R. (2005). Malaysian youth: From government policies to grassroots aspirations. In F. Gale and S. Fahey Karcher (Eds.), *Youth in transition: The challenges of generational change in Asia* (Bangkok: Regional Unit for Social and Human Sciences in Asia and the Pacific, UNESCO, 2005), p. 171–183

23 Christens and Peterson (2012), Evans (2007), Krauss et al. (2013), Larson and Angus (2011), Mitra (2004), Zeldin (2004), Zimmerman et al. (1999).

24 Lansdown, G., *Promoting children's participation in democratic decision-making* (Florence, Italy: UNICEF Innocenti Research Center, 2001).

25 Arnett (2002), Flanagan et al. (2010), Peterson (2000).

building by fortifying community institutions, building instrumental and relationship-oriented networks, and affording young people opportunities to share their experience and insight.[26] For Muslim youth to be capable participants in the positive development of their respective nations, the attributes of personal agency, empowerment and connections to community are critical. Research shows that participation is an effective vehicle to achieve these outcomes. So how best to facilitate participation? One way this can be achieved is through developmental relationships.

### D. What are Developmental Relationships?

Human relationships are the critical ingredient of learning and human development. According to the National Scientific Council on the Developing Child,[27] healthy development "depends on the quality and reliability of a child's relationships with the important people in his or her life, both within and outside the family." A human partner is uniquely qualified to provide experiences that are individualized to a child's unique personality style and that build on his or her own interests, capabilities, and initiative; that shape the child's self-awareness and stimulate the growth of his or her heart and mind. By being an 'active ingredient,' relationships become the means through which critical learning processes occur and through which young people acquire knowledge about the world, themselves and others.

The importance of relationships on learning and development continues throughout the lifespan. Relationships not only are of central importance to early cognitive, social, and personality development, but also have lasting influence on long-term outcomes, including social skills, emotion regulation, conscience development, trust in others, and general psychological well-being.[28]

Developmental relationships help young people attain the psychological and social skills that are essential for success in education and in life.[29] Young people can form these relationships with their parents and family members, friends and peers, staff members in their schools and youth programs, and with caring adults in their neighborhoods and communities.

What makes a relationship developmental? What sets a development relationship apart from other forms of human interaction? Li and Julian posit that developmental relationships are characterized by "reciprocal human interactions that embody an enduring emotional attachment, progressively more complex patterns of joint activity, and a balance of power that gradually shifts from the developed person in favour of the developing person".[30] As a way to conceptualize developmental relationships into definable categories, Li and Julian base their definition on the work of Bronfenbrenner, who extended the notion of relationships beyond mere emotional attachment. From this work, Li and Julian identified four core elements to development relationships –attachment, progressive complexity, reciprocity, and balance of power. Human interactions that befit this definition can be found in even the most fundamental of learning and developmental settings, interwoven as interdependent aspects of a singular experience. The authors give the following illustration:

Picture the familiar scene of an infant who is learning to walk in the presence of a parent. What enables the child to take each leap of faith is often the outstretched arms of the parent with whom the infant already has an enduring emotional attachment. The process that leads from crawling to walking is a series of progressively more complex developments in muscle growth, control, and coordination.[31] To scaffold such development, the parent intuitively adjusts the level of support, from holding up the infant's body, to just hands, to offering emotional encouragement at a safe

26    Zeldin et al. (2015), *op.cit*
27    National Scientific Council on the Developing Child, *Young children develop in an environment of relationships* (Working Paper No. 1, 2004), Retrieved from: http://www.developingchild.net p. 1
28    Thompson, R. A., The development of the person: Social understanding, relationships, conscience, self. In W. Damon and R. M. Lerner (Eds.), N. Eisenberg (Vol. Ed.). *Handbook of child psychology. Social, emotional, and personality development* Vol. 3, 6th ed (New York, NY: Wiley, 2006), p. 24–98

29    Search Institute, *Developmental Relationships: A New Strategy for Search Institute and a New Emphasis for Youth Development and Education* (2015), Retrieved from: http://www.search-institute.org/sites/default/files/a/Developmental_Relationships-A_New_Strategy_for_Search_Institute.pdf
30    Li and Julian (2012), *op.cit*, p. 157.
31    Smith and Thelen (2003), Spencer et al. (2006).

distance. Throughout the learning process, the physical and emotional interactions are joint and reciprocal. Over time, the power or control of the walking process shifts gradually toward the child, who advances from being prodded and encouraged to take the first wobbling steps or recover from a fall, to leading the adult into a giggling game of chase.[32]

From the example of the child learning how to walk, the four elements of the developmental relationship are evident, yet subtle. Emotional attachment forms the basis that provides the necessary trust and confidence in the adult, without coercion. Young people likewise want to be with adults that they have formed emotional connections with –those that are natural, positive, and appropriate for the context. On going frequent and joint activities between the adult and young person allows for further emotional bonding along with adult gauging of progress and competence, resulting in adjusting levels of support according to the young person's progress. Also known as scaffolding and fading, this process allows an adult to remove support gradually as the young person becomes more competent and confident in his or her abilities. As the activity advances, the young person engages in more complex tasks with greater confidence, thereby reducing the need for adult support and gradually shifting the balance of power to the young person.[33] At this point, the young person is more or less an independent actor within his or her environment, capable of being a competent participant in whatever activities are being carried out. The process results in real learning and independence through a transfer of knowledge and skill that is self-directed, motivational and empowering.

## E. Youth-Adult Partnership (Y-AP): Empowering Developmental Relationships

Effective developmental relationships require caring, nurturing relationships between adults and youth coupled with authentic opportunities for youth to make independent decisions, act on those decisions, and have the freedom to make and correct their mistakes. Adults do not dictate youth decisions and behaviour, but rather facilitate and guide through a process of scaffolding and fading, such as, for example, by allowing time and opportunity for students in school to make mistakes and then engage the entire class in diagnosing and correcting the mistakes.[34] Rather than controlling and dictating the learning process, the adults –through mutual relationships of trust– facilitate decision-making and discovery by allowing the youth to arrive at the destination on their own. This combination of trusting, nurturing emotional bonds between youth and adults, coupled with adult support of youth voice in the decision-making process have been conceptualized as the key elements of youth-adult partnership (Y-AP).[35]

Youth–adult partnership works along the lines of *youth voice in decision-making* as a central component of the practice, combined with *caring relationships with adults* who recognise the value in helping youth exercise their voice.[36] When these two components are present, youth and adults collaborate as intergenerational partners, with interactions grounded in the principles of reciprocity, co-learning and shared control.[37] Whether in school, community programs, or other types of youth activities, Y-AP emphasizes guided and supported youth participation as a way to help youth realize their rights and roles as citizens, and promote personal development through the process of attaining substantive knowledge and practical skills via experiential learning.[38]

Developmental relationships in the form of Y-AP resonate with generational approaches to understanding contemporary youth. Adults have traditionally formed relationships with youth for the purpose of protecting, counseling, and instructing young people.[39] Over the past 20 years, however, with the integration of youth

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[32]     Li and Julian (2012), *op.cit*, p. 158 (emphasis added).
[33]     Li and Julian, (2012), *op.cit.*

[34]     Brown, Collins, and Duguid (1989), Collins, Brown, and Newman (1990), Li and Julian (2012).
[35]     Zeldin et al. (2014), *op.cit.*
[36]     Serido, Borden and Perkins (2011), Zeldin, Christens and Powers (2013).
[37]     Camino, L., Pitfalls and promising practices of youth–adult partnerships: An evaluator's reflections (*Journal of Community Psychology*, *33*, 2005), p. 75-85.
[38]     Checkoway, B., *What is youth participation?* (Children and youth services review, *33*(2), 2011), p. 340-345.
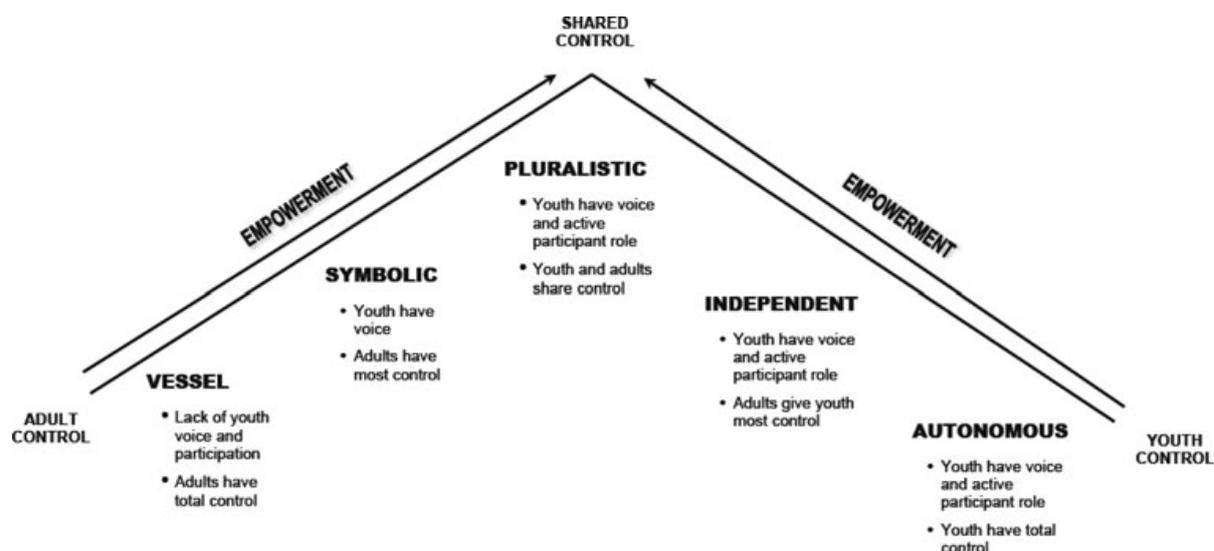[39]     Hine (1999), Hollingshead (1949).

Figure 1. The TYPE Pyramid

and community development perspectives into youth programming, the rationale for establishing strong intergenerational relationships has broadened. Analysts now focus on relationships as a foundation from which youth can be active agents in their own development, the development of others, and the development of community.[40] Youth programmers, teachers, mentors, coaches, youth workers, religious teachers and community adults can all play these partnering roles with youth. Through their typology of youth-adult relationships (Figure 1),[41] conclude that Y-AP is optimal because the "shared control between youth and adults provides a social arrangement that may be ideal for both empowering youth and community development".[42]

In schools and communities, Y-AP is shown to contribute to school engagement, school attachment and civic engagement, outcomes strongly related to academic achievement.[43] Youth participation in school decision making increases student voice in schools and offers a way to re-engage students who may be disengaged from the school community.[44]

Young people can engage with teachers in initiatives either inside or outside of the classroom to do this, such as working together to address student apathy with academic subjects or coming together to agree on ground rules for the school. Participation also can increase youth attachment to schools, which in turn has been shown to correlate with improved academic outcomes.[45] When Y-AP is used to engage young people in community projects, civic development increases, extending young people's beliefs that they can make a difference in their lives and the lives of others.[46] Student voice initiatives also help young people to develop important civic competencies including greater tolerance for, and relationships with others, respectfully and effectively questioning authority, and engaging in public speaking.[47]

### F. Y-AP in Malaysia: What the Research Says So Far

Li and Julian's conceptualization of developmental relationships provides a framework for understanding how effective youth participation starts with individual youth-adult relationships reflecting a process of enabling and empowerment. Young people become agents of their own development with the right amount of support from adults who understand what young people need in their given learning and social environments over time. Evidence exists to show that youth

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40    Krauss, Zeldin and Dahalan (2015), Zeldin, Larson, Camino and O'Connor (2005).

41    Wong et al. (2010), *op.cit.*

42    Zeldin et al. (2013), *op.cit.* p. 109.

43    Mitra, D. L., *Strengthening student voice initiatives in high schools: An examination of the supports needed for school-based youth-adult partnerships* (Youth and Society, *40*, 2009), p. 311-335.

44    Fielding (2001), Levin (2000).

45    Mitra, D. L., *The significance of students: Can increasing "student voice" in schools lead to gains in youth development* (Teachers College Record, 106(4), 2004), p. 651–688.

46    Eccles and Gootman (2002), Kirshner, Strobel and Fernandez (2003), Mitra (2004).

47    Mitra (2009), *op.cit.*

participation, when supported by formal policy and practice structures, can become an important aid to youth and nation building within both formal and non-formal educational settings. Theoretically, this makes sense. But what do the most recent research findings in actual Muslim countries tell us about its efficacy? To answer this question, we now turn our attention to what we have learned from research in Malaysia on Y-AP in both school and out-of-school youth programs.

## G. Y-AP in Malaysian afterschool and community programs

Recent study findings in Malaysia point to Y-AP's potential to enhance youth development outcomes in both community-based and afterschool programs. In the first study, the practice of youth voice and supportive adult relationships (Y-AP) within six community-based youth development programs made a positive contribution to psychological empowerment, agency, and community connections. Moreover, the analysis showed that the contribution of *youth voice* and *supportive adult relationships* to the three outcomes was greater than that of family cohesion, religious community involvement and school attachment.[48] A second, follow-up study on Y-AP in secondary co-curricular or afterschool programs showed that the Y-AP element of *supportive adult relationships* contributed to social trust while *youth voice* contributed to leadership competence. Social trust and leadership are important for keeping youth 'connected' to society and community (avoiding alienation), and in providing them with the critical skills needed to be successful leaders.[49] Both study findings are significant given Malaysia's concerns with youth community disengagement and reported low empowerment scores on national indeces.[50]

## H. Y-AP in action: The Gaya Island Case Study

To compliment the two quantitative studies, the author and two co-researchers carried out an exploratory qualitative case study of Y-AP. The study was conducted with the Gaya Island Youth and Sports Association (BESUGA), based in Gaya Island, Sabah.[51] Gaya Island is home to 10,000 low-income residents of traditional fishing villages that span the coast of the eastern and southern shores of the Island. The residents of Gaya Island, being of predominantly Bajau Muslim decent, face systematic marginalisation and neglect due to their presumed status as illegal immigrants. This enduring stigma has left Gaya and its residents with few basic services and infrastructure despite the majority having been in Sabah for several generations.

We used Y-AP as a theoretical lens to share the story of how the youth association, BESUGA, became an agent of social change through an inclusive approach to working across three generations of residents (youth, emerging adults and adults) to provide community-based sports and education programs to the young people and residents of Gaya Island. Of most relevance to the Y-AP framework is how BESUGA spearheaded a campaign with adult residents, leaders and diverse stakeholders to bring water and electricity infrastructures to their island for the first time in its history. By creating an informal coalition of youth and adult entities to promote their cause, they lobbied their local government representative to approve the installation of water and electricity to the villages of Gaya Island.

In the study, we identified three ways that the Association used Y-AP to achieve its objectives and brought change and development to their community. First was as a community program provider where the youth leaders of the Association worked closely with the adult residents in the villages to provide youth development and community education programs to youth and adult residents. These included sports tournaments, cultural events, community education programs (e.g.,

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48   Krauss, S. E., Collura, J., Zeldin, S., Ortega, A., Abdullah, H., and Sulaiman, A. H, *Youth-adult partnership: Exploring contributions to empowerment, agency and community connections in Malaysian youth programs* (Journal of Youth and Adolescence, 43, 2014), p. 1550-1562.
49   Zeldin et al. (2015), *op.cit.*
50   Malaysian Institute for Research in Youth Development (2011, 2015).
51   Krauss et al. (2015), *op.cit*

environmental awareness, education) and classes in sewing, computers, languages and others. Second, was the use of Y-AP as an organizing tool to bring together a diverse group of stakeholders to lobby the government for water and electricity. In so doing, the Association was able to enlist support from local university leaders, the state electric company officials, community leaders, and state representatives. And third was BESUGA's role as a community educator, working with adults to educate the community about the new water and electricity services they received. This required working with the state electric company, the village heads (*ketua kampong*) and the adult residents. We concluded by showing how BESUGA was able to transform from a traditional youth Association and provider of youth and sports programs to a community intermediary organization through the formation of youth–adult partnerships.[52]
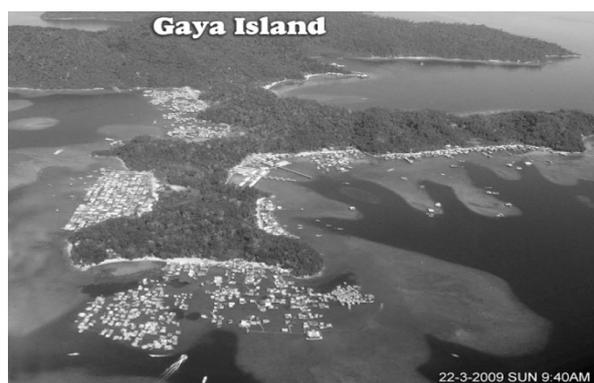


Figure 2. The Fishing Villages of Gaya Island, Sabah

## I. Y-AP and Islam: Using the Past to Navigate the Future

Initial empirical findings from Malaysia indicate that Y-AP is a promising strategy for effective youth participation toward achieving the desired goal of national development. As youth participation continues to be a theme for Muslim countries moving forward, it is worthwhile to explore the consistency of youth participation, and Y-AP in particular, with Islam. In an attempt to challenge Y-AP as something 'Western,' and therefore foreign, locating Y-AP and youth participation within the Islamic

sociocultural tradition can help lead to a richer understanding of its applicability within Muslim youth development spheres. Muslims are more apt to endorse a belief or practice if they know that it was germane to the life of the Prophet and the early Muslim community. This exercise can therefore assist Muslim youth practitioners and policy makers to value the practice of Y-AP, knowing that during the lifetime of the Prophet Muhammad, intergenerational partnership and youth voice were critical ingredients to the early community's success religiously, politically and socially.

The following section is based on predominantly *hadith* and *Seerah* literature. It aims to highlight some of the ways that youth participation was deeply embedded into the psychology and practices of the Prophet's community. Admittedly, it is an uncritical look at youth participation and Y-AP in early Islam, and relies almost entirely on early Islamic literature and sources.

## J. The Prophet's Y-AP: The Centrality of the Young Companions to the Success of Early Islam

Many of the most notable Companions of the Prophet Muhammad were young people who were responsible for defending and spreading the teachings of Islam in the early period. If it were not for the inherent inclusivity of Islam, as exemplified and practiced by the Prophet himself, the religion would have been without some of its greatest personalities who went on to become great leaders, scholars, warriors and statesmen. The Prophet facilitated this by his approach to education and support –a style conceptually at par with a developmental relationship approach. He accomplished this first and foremost through the socioemotional bond that he established through acts of kindness, care and generosity. At the same time, he educated his followers by participating with them in the diverse experiences that came with founding a new religion and spiritual community, making their learning experiential, progressively complex and holistic. He also made an effort to engage with his followers as partners, making

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52    Krauss et al. (2015), *op.cit*

reciprocity and mutual consultation core ingredients of his approach. Finally, through his own demise and subsequent maturation of his Companions, he demonstrated an at times controversial knack for turning over power to young people and entrusting them as independent, capable leaders.

In the same way that many of the Muslim-majority countries are today mired in the work of nation building, the Prophet's work –first in Mecca, then in Medina—entailed not only the spreading and teaching of Islam, but also the creation of a new form of Arabian society. To succeed at this monumental nation building endeavor, the Prophet enlisted the support and efforts of everyone that supported him. He relied on all members of his community, old and young alike, to play their roles in aiding the establishment of their new religion and society. The young companions, in particular, played a major role in the struggles that defined the earliest days of Islam. The Prophet honored young people throughout his 23-year mission with several hadith that capture the unique spiritual qualities of youth that attracted them to Islam at a time when few others were:

*"I recommend you good young people because their hearts are softer. Allah sent me with honesty and tolerance. Young people supported me but old people opposed me."*

When most people think of the Prophet's life and his Companions, mature and elderly people often come to mind. However, when we look at the first Muslims close to the Prophet, we see that most of them were young. Indeed, the Prophet received a large part of his support from youth who comprised the social segment that was open to new things, idealist and energetic. While several of the first Muslims were around 50 years-old and others were above 35, the remaining majority were all under 30. This group included the likes of Ali b. Abi Talib (age 10), Abdullah b. Umar and Ubayda b. al-Jarrah (age 13), Uqba b. Amir (age 14), Jabir b. Abdullah and Zayd b. Haritha (age 15), Abdullah b. Mes'ud, Habbab b. Aret and Zubayr b. Awwam (age 16), Talha b. Ubaydullah, Abdurrahman b. Awf, Arkam b. Abi'l-Arkam,

Sa'd b. Abi Wakkas and Asma binti Abu Bakr (age 17), Muaz b. Jabel and Mus'ab b. Umayr (age 18), Abu Musa al-Ash'ari (age 19), Jafer b. Abi Talib (age 22), Osman b. Huwayris, Osman b. Affan, Abu Ubayda, Abu Hurayra and Umar (ages 25-31).[53]

There are many examples in the *Seerah* literature that accentuate the vast responsibilities these young people took on as early followers of the Prophet Muhammad, including roles as teachers, administrators, soldiers and even military leaders. Early examples of a 'youth movement' can even be found in the annals of Medina's history. It was reported by Anas b. Malik that there were 70 youth from the Ansar who called themselves the "Qurra." In the evenings this group would disperse into various districts of Medina and form lesson groups. They would lead the people in prayer and return to the Prophet's mosque in the morning.[54] These examples portray young people as full participants in the early Muslim community. The following cases further demonstrate Y-AP in the early period by way of a fully supportive leader and teacher in the form of the Prophet Muhammad who deeply valued –and often relied on– the voices of his young followers.

### 1. Usama bin Zayd

One of the most well-known stories of youth-adult partnership in the lifetime of the Prophet was the episode of the Prophet's appointment of Usama bin Zayd –at the age of 17– to lead his army to Palestine. Usama was known as "*Hibbu Rasulullah*," or a youth loved and befriended by the Prophet. Shortly before his death, the Prophet appointed Usama to be commander of the Muslim army. Due to this appointment, some of the older members of the community began to indicate their criticism, anxiety and displeasure. Hearing their criticisms, the Prophet gave a sermon in response emphasizing his love for Usama (and his late father, Zayd), and reiterated to the community that he found Usama worthy of this duty in the hope that they too would wish Usama well and obey his commands.[55] Despite the relative backlash of naming such a young person to

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53    Erul (2010).
54    *Ibid.*
55    *Ibid.*

lead the largest army of Arabia at the time, the Prophet was determined to set a new precedent. Affairs would be decided by merit alone, not by lineage, tribal affiliation or age.[56]

### 2. Muaz bin Jabel

Another example of the Prophet's practice of Y-AP was in his support for his young Companions in their roles as leaders, such as the example of Muaz bin Jabel. Born in 605 A.D. in Medina, Muaz became a Muslim at the second Aqaba oath and became very close to the Prophet. After the conquest of Mecca, the Prophet appointed him as his deputy. In the year 9 H, after returning from the Tabuq Campaign, the Prophet also appointed him governor of Yemen. Upon his appointment, the Prophet made recommendations to Muaz as to how he should govern and call people to Islam. Muaz was only 27 years old at the time.[57]

### K. The young Companions of the Battle of Uhud

A poignant example of Y-AP and the inclusive nature of the Prophet's community was from the famous Battle of Uhud. During the war council meeting prior to the battle, the Prophet and his Companions were deliberating on a strategy to fight the Mekkan Quraish. There was disagreement among the older and younger groups of Companions, with the elders advocating to stay within the city of Medina, and to fight the Quraish inside the city. Upon hearing their suggestion, the Prophet initially agreed to remain in the city and did not favor meeting the enemy outside the city. However, a group of young Companions who had missed the opportunity of engaging the enemy at Badr were more enthusiastic. They were reported to have said, "O Prophet of Allah, let us go forth and smite our foes, otherwise they would think that we fear to leave the city and face them." Although initially reluctant, eventually the Prophet went into his house and put on his coat of armour. The young men who had been keen on meeting the enemy outside the city began to have second thoughts. They admonished

themselves for their over-eagerness in light of the Prophet's reluctance. Realizing their hastiness, they begged the Prophet to follow his first counsel out of fear that they may have been mistaken in persuading him against his will. "If you wish to remain inside the city", they said, "We will not oppose you".[58] Despite their retraction, the Prophet remained determined to meet the enemy outside of the city and sided with his young Companions.

This well-known example of the Prophet's manner in facilitating collective decision-making includes the core elements of Y-AP. First, the Prophet's supporting the youth in voicing their views alongside the community elders. Second, the Prophet's siding with the youth despite the elders' objections. Third, teaching the youth that once a decision is made, it should be followed through on. And lastly, modelling the value of collective decision-making as a core principle of community action.

### 1. Aisha binti Abu Bakr

The inclusive nature of life in Medina did not only include the young men. As a young woman and wife of the Prophet, Aisha binti Abu Bakr learned religious sciences from the Prophet himself. Because they shared a house that was right next to the community mosque, Aisha benefited from the Prophet's teachings night and day. Listening to his teachings and conversations, she immediately asked and learned anything she did not understand, was curious about or did not know.

Due to her proximity to the Prophet and the intimacy they shared as husband and wife, Aisha eventually became a distinguished teacher. Not only reporting the *Sunnah* and commenting on it, she also put forth a methodology of scholastic criticism to ensure the correct understanding of matters facing the early community after the Prophet's death. Due to her strong memory, she gave unequalled service in the transmission of *hadith* and *Sunnah* to later generations. With the 2210 *hadiths* she reported, she is fourth in rank among the seven Sahaba who reported the most hadiths. Furthermore, she was instrumental in expanding female

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56    *Ibid.*
57    *Ibid.*

58    Anonymous, *The Battle of Uhud.* (Questions on Islam website, 2012), Retrieved from: http://www.questionsonislam.com/article/battle-uhud

scholarship in the early Islamic period, as at least one fourth of her students were female. Considered the greatest female Muslim scholar, Aisha has the most distinguished place among the many representatives of the Islamic scholastic tradition. Not only a transmitter of *hadith*, at the same time she was a commentator on the *Qur'an*, an expert on canon law and a preacher. She possessed deep knowledge in the fields of Arabian history, Ansab (genealogy), poetry and medicine.

Although often an object of criticism by orientalists, Aisha's young age at the time of her marriage to the Prophet had great benefit to her development as a scholar and person. The combination of Aisha's piety, age and proximity to the Prophet, as well as the special love he had for her, allowed for a unique kind of developmental relationship that saw Aisha eventually develop into one of the great authorities of Islam and sources of knowledge and wisdom for the entire Muslim community.[59]

## L. Conclusion

As both a conclusion to the current paper and starting point for making youth participation and empowerment through Y-AP a reality in the Muslim world, I propose the following directions for research and practice:

1. Youth and adult relationships and interactions must intensify by ensuring greater adult involvement in youth programs and educational initiatives. This can be integrated into related policies and/or addressed at the level of practice.

2. Adults must also learn and understand how they can support youth voice and participation. Y-AP is grounded in both youth voice AND adult support, therefore, getting adults to fully understand the importance of their partnering with youth as mentors, coaches, guides and other, is half the battle. Y-AP can occur in any place where youth and adults interact and have the opportunity to work together on common issues or activities.

3. Youth must understand and appreciate the importance of working with adults, and realize that little can be achieved without them! Both parties must appreciate the idea that nation building requires effort from all sectors of society, young and old, and to create civil society, people have to work together. It can't happen any other way. Along these lines, the concepts of *ummah* (community), *tawhid* (oneness of God) and *jama'ah* (congregation) in Islam can be useful as rallying points.

4. Issues of power have to be addressed at the outset. One of the greatest challenges to Y-AP in practice is power. It requires adults to share it, and youth to use it respectfully and responsibly. Different organizations deal with issues of power differently. For Muslim organizations and communities, especially those in countries where few are afforded any power, it can be a great challenge to persuade adults to share power with other adults, let alone youth! The emphasis should be on the well-being of the community at-large, both now and for the future. Y-AP is one strategy to help organizations and communities get there by ensuring that the young people are engaged both now and for the future.

5. There must be a basic understand of youth development processes. Although positive youth development (PYD) is well-known globally, there are still many countries that have yet to be exposed to it. Strategies like Y-AP are an outgrowth of the PYD philosophy that when you provide the right supports and opportunities for tapping youth strengths, great things can happen. Therefore, youth and adults alike should understand what supports, opportunities and services young people need in themselves and their communities to thrive.

6. Community relationships and networks can be mobilized to make up for the lack of resources available in lower income settings. As evidenced by

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59    Erul, B., *Young Sahaba in the Prophet's circle* (2010)Retrieved from: http://www.lastprophet.info/young-sahaba-in-the-prophet-s-circle

the youth association in Gaya Island, intergenerational partnerships and networks with community institutions, businesses and organizations can be a powerful support for youth development initiatives.

7. One must not leave out the role of developmental relationships within families. Families form the foundation of society. Families can be great models for positive youth development and Y-AP. For adults, practicing developmental relationships in the home is a great way to start.

8. There must be a greater commitment toward institutionalizing the principles of civil society in Muslim countries by returning to the teachings of the Prophet SAW, who used – among others – intergenerational partnerships to build an inclusive, empowered society. This must be combined with insights and relevant examples of contemporary scholarship and research-based practice.

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