



# Empowerment-based non-formal education for Arab youth: A pilot randomized trial

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## ABSTRACT

Youth empowerment has grown globally as an intervention strategy in social services for improving adolescent outcomes. This pilot study assessed the short-term effects of youth empowerment programming on developmental assets and behavioral difficulties for out-of-school youth in Jordan. Participants included 127 youth, with mean age of 15.91 years ( $SD = 1.62$ ). Youths were randomly assigned to either an empowerment-based non-formal education program or to a waitlist comparison. Data were collected at baseline and at 4-month follow-up. No significant intervention effects were found for developmental assets (e.g., self-efficacy or social skills). Higher level of empowerment, however, in program implementation appeared related to more positive outcomes. Analyses did show a significant, positive intervention effect on conduct problems ( $p = 0.02$ ;  $d = 0.57$ ); effects were mostly attributable to changes in the younger (13–15) age group. Implications for practice and research are discussed.

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## 1. Introduction

### 1.1. Objective

Governments, funders, and organizations around the world increasingly promote youth empowerment—strength-based, participatory programming that engages young people in decision-making—as a strategy for improving adolescent wellbeing. The urgency for developing and evaluating interventions like youth empowerment programs for adolescents is reflected in both risk and opportunity. On one hand, adolescence marks a vulnerable period for many young people in which emotions and risk-taking tendencies are amplified and poor habits and choices can have long-term consequences (Call et al., 2002; Rutter, 2001; Steinberg, 2008). At the same time, adolescence is an age of opportunity for strengthening young people's developmental assets (Dahl, 2004). Developmental assets, such as self-efficacy, social supports, and social skills, are positive qualities and connections that help young people thrive and avoid unhealthy risks (Kia-Keating, Dowdy, Morgan, & Noam, 2011).

Despite the popularity of involving young people in the processes that affect their lives and communities, however, little is known about the impacts that empowerment programming has on youth outcomes from rigorous evaluative research (Gray & Hayes, 2008; Zeldin, McDaniel, Topitzes, & Callvert, 2000). A recent systematic review showed that only two studies employing experimental or quasi-experimental designs have assessed intervention effects of

youth empowerment programs outside of formal education in the United States (U.S.), and none were identified from other countries (Morton & Montgomery, 2011). Results from the two studies were mixed, with most outcomes showing no effects, but one study showed effects on social and coping skills (Olson-Merichko, 2006), and the other on problem behaviors (Berg, Coman, & Schensul, 2009).

This article reports on a pilot experimental study of an empowerment-based non-formal education program for out-of-school youth in the Hashemite Kingdom of Jordan. The primary hypothesis tested by this trial is: *Participatory, community-based programming that engages adolescents in decision-making and positive group processes facilitates mastery and social experiences that improve participants' sense of self-efficacy, social skills, positive connections, and prosocial behaviors and reduce psychosocial difficulties*. Furthermore, to generate hypotheses for future research, exploratory analysis examines whether outcomes differentiate according to participants' age group, the level of empowerment participants perceive in a program site, and participants' attendance level.

### 1.2. Cross-cultural applications of youth empowerment

The vast majority of peer-reviewed research on youth empowerment, and child development in general, has come from what some cultural psychologists describe as Western, educated, industrialized, rich, and democratic (WEIRD) societies (Arnett, 2008; Hart, 2008; Henrich, Heine, & Norenzayan, 2010). The implications for youth empowerment in preparing young people to succeed could be considerable in a Middle East context, where young people constitute the largest proportion of society (50–65% aged 24 and under), and, yet, working-age youths also have the highest unemployment rates (25–

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40%) (Fuller, 2003). The region, however, lacks rigorous evaluation to inform whether, how, and when to apply empowerment-based programming to the needs of Arab adolescents.

Increased attention to youth empowerment in the Middle East, and a limited amount of qualitative research suggesting positive responsiveness among Arab youths to participatory programming, gives some indication that youth empowerment programs could be relevant for the region (Hammad & Bakri, 2007; Thompson & Arsalan, 2007). Cross-sectional research by Dwairy et al. (2006), however, suggests that Arab youths respond more favorably to controlling parenting styles than do Caucasian youths in the West, and researchers have documented particularly authoritarian organizational behavior, including in schools, in Arab communities (Dwairy, 1998; Neuman, Reiche, & Abu Saad, 1988). Differences in how Arab versus Western youths and adults relate to each other reinforce the necessity for study of youth empowerment programs in Arab contexts.

### 1.3. Theory

Youth empowerment involves a collective, democratic, and prosocial process of engagement through which young people participate in program decision-making (Cargo, Grams, Ottoson, Ward, & Green, 2003; Jennings, Parra-Medina, Messias, & McLoughlin, 2006). Informed by ecological and social learning theories (Bandura, 1977; Bronfenbrenner, 1979), youth empowerment assumes that adolescents' agency is shaped, in part, through social exchanges beyond the family that reward or sanction young people's behavior. As such, youth empowerment programs aim to facilitate social settings and interactions between youths and adults that encourage young people's contributions. Researchers have produced several models to differentiate levels of youth participation according to degrees of shared control between youths and adults in programs (e.g., Hart, 1992; Shier, 2001; Treseder, 1997). Wong, Zimmerman, and Parker's (2010) Typology of Youth Participation and Empowerment features the role of supportive adults most prominently given evidence for the important contributions of non-familial adults to positive youth development (Roth, Brooks-Gunn, Murray, & Foster, 1998).

Empowerment theory is strength-based and concerned predominantly with development of people's social and emotional assets rather than fixing perceived weaknesses (Zimmerman, 2000). Enhancement of self-efficacy is a particularly prominent objective for youth empowerment programs. By engaging young people as valued contributors, empowering programs aim to improve young people's beliefs in their own abilities to achieve tasks and overcome obstacles (Jennings et al., 2006; Wong et al., 2010). Higher perceptions of self-efficacy have been shown to predict higher work performance and lower levels of mental health and behavioral problems among young people (Bandura, Pastorellia, Barbaranelli, & Caprara, 1999; Stajkovic & Luthans, 1998; Taylor, 2000).

Although youth empowerment is strength-based, it could still be an effective means for reducing psychosocial difficulties such as conduct problems. Youth empowerment emphasizes strong, trust-based relationships between youths and adults and youths and their peers around positive group norms. Social control theory (Hirschi, 1969) suggests that such attachments could mitigate deviant behaviors. Moreover, youth empowerment programs may engage youths in positive, structured activities that divert them from deleterious involvements and peer groups.

## 2. Methods

### 2.1. Intervention

This study evaluated the effects of youth empowerment implemented through Questscope non-formal education (QS NFE). Ahmad and Coombs (1975) defined non-formal education broadly as “any

organized educational activity outside the formal education system...that is intended to serve identifiable learning clientele and learning objectives.” The works of Paulo Freire, a Brazilian educational theorist, often influence the methodology of empowerment-based non-formal education models—including QS NFE—and youth empowerment literature in general (Mohajer & Earnest, 2009; Wallerstein, Sanchez-Merki, & Verlade, 2005; Wong et al., 2010). Freire (1972, 2005) described a ‘pedagogy’ through which ‘facilitators of empowerment’ help marginalized people experience a transformative process involving the development of awareness of one’s relationship to and ability to affect change in his or her life and environment. This participatory basis for non-formal education has generated high interest in developing contexts like Jordan.

Questscope non-formal education is the product of a unique partnership between a non-governmental organization, Questscope for Social Development in the Middle East, and the Jordan Ministry of Education. QS NFE serves out-of-school youth typically in low-income communities. The two-year program consists of three eight-month education cycles based on participatory methodology. Graduates receive a tenth-grade alternative certificate that enables them to participate in vocational training and receive government business loans. QS NFE operates in 40 schools and 17 community-based organizations spanning eight governorates in Jordan and has enrolled over 7000 youth since 2004.

Programming takes place five days per week outside of traditional school hours for two to three hour sessions. The Ministry of Education and Questscope determined that participants should attend at least two sessions per week in order to receive adequate exposure to social and educational activities. Each center's facilitators and participants determine regular session times. The flexible timing enables accessibility for out-of-school youths with work or family commitments, and it provides an exclusive environment for QS NFE to develop its own program culture while utilizing school facilities.

A team of four trained adult facilitators delivers each QS NFE session. All four facilitators focus on youth development and each specializes in a different academic subject. QS NFE is a group-based intervention, though facilitators aim to provide individualized attention to young people during session time. Educationally, each session includes dialog-based learning activities (e.g., related to literacy, math, science, religion, and English) oriented around an educational curriculum designed jointly by the Ministry of Education and Questscope. Socially, all sessions include recreational or cultural activities (e.g., sports, crafts, and performances), and some sessions include vocational activities (e.g., cooking or computer classes, visiting vocational training centers). The format and ordering of these activities, and the choice of learning discussion topics and social activities, during each session is left flexible for the youths and facilitators to determine. The facilitators are trained to facilitate democratic group decision-making processes. The methodology stipulates that youths are actively engaged in program decision-making via regular involvement in processes such as determining program guidelines, deciding learning topics and activities, and planning cultural and community events.

As a participatory, setting-level intervention, the day-to-day activities of QS NFE are intentionally not highly structured or manualized. With such interventions, evaluation researchers recommend that implementation fidelity focus more on the delivery and quality of key social processes fundamental to the theory of change rather than documented procedures (Hawe, Shiell, & Riley, 2004; Smith & Akiva, 2008). In the case of QS NFE, the main process elements that should be consistently present in program settings include: youth participation in decision-making, adult support, asset-building activities, and a prosocial environment. The training of adult facilitators, however, is structured. The QS NFE model provides up to 85 h, comprised of three levels, of manual-based training to recruited teachers from formal education to prepare them for delivering the program

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