

A Review of At Our Best: Building Youth–Adult Partnerships in Out-of-School Time Settings

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In the unpredictable world in which we find ourselves living, filled with protests, discrimination, political division, and so much unrest, we are seeing more youth step up to share their voices. The youth in the United States are speaking out for what they believe and calling out the injustices they see in a way that is unique to them. In these unprecedented times, the young people of our country are organizing and calling for action, their voices heard through protests, school walkouts, and their platforms on social media. Zeldin, Christens, and Powers (2012) define youth–adult partnerships as a relationship that includes multiple youth and adult participants working together in a collective and democratic way. Zeldin et al. (2012) go on to say that youth–adult partnerships exist over a significant time, involve a shared workload, and work to promote social justice. Understanding the unique qualities of these partnerships and identifying the factors that make these partnerships most effective is critical in supporting our youth and impacting change. *At Our Best: Building Youth-Adult Partnerships in Out-of-School Time Settings*, edited by Gretchen Brion-Meisels, Jessica Tseming Fei, and Deepa Sriya Vasudevan, is an excellent resource for practitioners, policymakers, researchers, and program coordinators. This book brings a diverse combination of perspectives on the complexities of these relationships and will help to build a more informed understanding of what is needed to best support and foster these relationships.

In *At Our Best*, the authors highlight the incredible possibilities that exist when youth and adults build partnerships that are meaningful, collaborative, and recognize not the age of one another but the strengths each brings to the table. This text provides a lens through which to analyze the traditional

youth–adult partnerships that often lack balance in the roles held by those involved. Most importantly, it explores the possibilities that can emerge when youth–adult relationships form through mutual respect with each member of the relationship taking on the roles of teacher and learner.

In this collection of writings, *At Our Best* includes research, personal essays, and theoretical and empirical studies that are written by authors both young and old. Each chapter provides a unique analysis of youth–adult relationships in out-of-school time (OST). *At Our Best* describes in an honest and vulnerable way what it means to build youth–adult relationships that can effectively move the world we live in toward justice, equality, and all that we hope it can be.

Organized into five sections, *At Our Best* begins by focusing on the foundation of partnerships, helping the reader truly understand the dynamics that dictate the unique relationships formed between youth and adults. It goes on to dive deeply into both relational practices and organizational practices of youth–adult relationships. Section four focuses on the complex role of adults, exploring the desire to help, the barriers that exist in these relationships, and opportunities that can be provided for growth. Finally, *At Our Best* looks toward the future to imagine a world where OST provides an environment that more freely promotes youth–adult relationships. It discusses opportunities that might work to build a better world, as well as support the well-being and growth for all involved in the relationship.

The first section of this book takes a close look at the foundations of youth–adult partnerships in OST. This section begins with research which examines the way trust is built within youth–adult partnerships in OST. Including this as one of the first articles within this text underscores the importance of building trust within youth–adult partnerships in OST. The results of this research emphasizes the impact that trusting relationships have on the work of youth and their experience in programs. Section one also includes the close examination of tensions that occur in youth–adult partnerships in OST, specifically focusing on community-based youth organizations. Understanding the risks included with funding choices for community-based organizations that could challenge the purpose and structure of these organizations is critical to the success of these relationships and is examined in this section. Furthermore, the tensions that come from the “savior mentality” brought by some of the adults working in these community-based organizations is also explored. This challenge prevents authentic relationships between youth and adults from forming and must be understood. The first section of this text not only presents critical elements required in building strong foundations for youth–adult partnerships in OST, but also allows the reader to begin to see the intricacies of youth–adult partnership.

Section two opens with a poem that shows the power of a youth–adult partnership and the impact it can have on the youth involved. This poem is followed by a discussion between two adults, Deb and Marcy, who worked together as a part of the Maine Youth Action Network. They end their conversation quoting Maya Angelou, with Marcy saying, “You have shown me who you really are, and I have you. It has changed both of us for the better, don’t you think?” (p. 97). For me, this statement seemed to be the essence of this section of the book. It underscores the importance of authentic relationships that are built on trust, built on seeing the real person and pushing both the youth and adult to reach the goals they set out to achieve. The section concludes with the examination of both the risks and possibilities that may arise in youth–adult partnerships. It goes on to remind the reader that these are some of the most complex and delicate relationships. These relationships are essential for connection, for support, and of course growth, and so must be closely nurtured and reflected on to ensure that a balance of power, trust, and support exists.

The third section of *At Our Best* highlights the way youth–adult partnerships in OST are organized. The first article in this section is an examination of the Youth in Action (YIA) program located in Providence, Rhode Island. This article takes an in-depth look at the way the program is organized, the goals they set, and the way those goals are assessed. Continued analysis of their program’s goals, the needs of the youth involved, staff development, and regular reflection all seem to be key factors in the success they have seen. This article is followed by a narrative describing the personal experiences of one youth in a summer program for girls. The two perspectives provided by these articles allows the reader to understand important aspects of the organization of youth programs through two vastly different lenses, that of the organization as a whole and through the eyes of a youth participant in the organization. Throughout this section the idea of scalability was discussed and questioned. Can these community-based youth programs find success in a scalable way? While the scalability of these programs is still yet to be determined, specific aspects of these programs such as the approach used and practices implemented can be tools of change for practitioners and educators in the field today.

In section four, the text goes on to explore the complex role that adults play in this relationship, the challenges that can emerge, and the opportunities that can come with equitable and trusting youth–adult relationships. One article in section four discusses the importance of seeing the hope of accomplishing the goals the youth–adult partnerships have set out to reach and understanding that these may be attainable. The discussion of hope and the possibilities of reaching the goals set was an idea that really tugged at me as a reader. These discussions reinforced the importance of fostering youth–adult partnerships

because of the immense possibilities that these partnerships can bring to the people involved. This section went on to discuss that while challenges will come within these partnerships, maintaining the vision of the partnership and refocusing on the goals can help those involved find ways to overcome the hurdles faced.

The final section of the text looks ahead to what the future may hold for youth–adult relationships in OST. It analyzes the impact these partnerships could potentially have on our communities if they are nurtured and developed in a way that is empowering for all members involved. The compilation of research, poetry, and personal essays help us, as readers, to not only explore the challenges that can come with youth–adult partnerships, but also present a sense of hope in what incredible impact these partnerships can have on our world if nurtured and supported appropriately.

In conclusion, the ideas presented in *At Our Best* provide a critical examination of youth–adult partnerships through a variety of texts and diverse viewpoints. The combination of quality research and heartfelt essays create space where practitioners, researchers, and program coordinators can come together to better understand the intricacies of youth–adult relationships. *At Our Best* helps us explore ways to best support and grow these relationships in our own programs and communities. Trust and equality are a theme threaded through each section of this text, emphasizing the important role that both the youth and adult bring to the table in these partnerships. *At Our Best* is a unique and powerful resource for policymakers, practitioners, and researchers to reflect on the roles they play, understand the factors needed to support these relationships, and acknowledge the power of youth–adult partnerships in OST.

References

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