

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

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Abstract

Gretchen Brion-Meilsels, Jessica Tseming Fei, and Deepa Sriya Vasduevan's At Our Best: Building Youth–Adult Partnerships in Out-of-School Time Settings brings together the work of over 50 youth and adults to build a youth–adult partnership praxis centered around ideas of trust, problem-solving methodologies, democratic participation, and collective action. The book, focusing on youth–adult partnerships for the purpose of social change, explores a set of field-expanding questions such as, "What do youth–adult partnerships look like in practice?" and "What are the relational and organizational practices that enable youth–adult partnerships to exist?" In addition to youth workers and youth development organizations, other groups of adults would benefit from reading the chapters' rich exploration of dilemmas and strategies, such as funders, K-12 educators, and evaluators. Ultimately, this book honors young people and youth workers as important actors in social change and elevates the importance of their joint efforts. The deep relationship between youth work and a strong democracy clearly emerges, challenging us all to be "at our best."

Key words: youth–adult partnership, social justice

- A portrait of a young woman with stars in her eyes
- A poem attributing an adult who created space so that a young actor felt visible
- A story about an art teacher who helped a student discover and express pride for her culture
- A testimony about a program that fostered healing by empowering young people to take a stand against injustice
- A call to adults to keep their expectations high so as to not diminish youth magic



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These expressions of youth voice are interspersed throughout Gretchen Brion-Meisels, Jessica Tseming Fei, and Deepa Sriya Vasudevan's inspirational, *At Our Best: Building Youth–Adult Partnerships in Out-of-School Time Settings* (2020). This book brings together the work of over 50 youth and adults to build youth–adult partnership praxis. Mirroring the youth–adult partnership model advanced in the text, these stories, poems, and pieces of art create powerful, reflective pauses for the reader in between chapters of empirical research, case studies, and theory development. The book explores a set of field-expanding questions:

- *What do youth–adult partnerships look like in practice?*
- *What are the relational and organizational practices that enable youth–adult partnerships to exist?*
- *By making these practices visible, does it move the field forward?*

The book's purpose is to describe the power and possibility inherent in youth–adult partnerships, identify a set of practices that enable these partnerships to exist, and grapple with the inherent tensions in this work.

The authors argue that youth–adult partnerships are a necessary component of developing high-quality out-of-school time (OST) programs. The book's focus is youth–adult partnerships for the purpose of social change. Therefore, the authors are speaking to a particular set of OST programs: those in which staff and youth are working together to change dominant systems like schooling, policing, higher education access, and other arenas in which structural oppression create disproportionate burdens and barriers for specific populations of young people. This set of OST programs intentionally amplifies the voices of young people who hold intersecting and minoritized identities based on race, gender, sexual orientation, disability, residence in resource-constrained neighborhoods, and immigrant/refugee status.

This book builds on the work of Roger Hart (1992) and Shep Zeldin and colleagues (2012) and deepens our understanding about *how* to work toward the top rung of the youth–adult partnership ladder that fosters healing and where young people initiate and share decision-making with adults (Hart, 1992). Zeldin et al.'s definitive work on youth–adult partnerships is formative. The authors of *At Our Best* then add conceptual depth, arguing that youth–adult partnerships must be strengths-based, committed to cultural humility, partnership-oriented, and praxis-oriented. Adults scaffold and help young people develop critical analysis tools. The authors describe the features of settings conducive to effective youth–adult partnerships as being nurturing, creating space and time to build trust, infused with joy and fun, and having an explicit commitment to address institutional equality. These practices and features are

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particularly relevant given the intended populations of youth and the aim of individual and collective transformation.

With the “why” and the “what” of youth–adult partnerships firmly established in the first chapter, the real focus of *At Our Best* is on the “how.” This is not done in a decontextualized, checklist format. Rather, four core principles of youth–adult partnerships—trust, problem-solving methodologies, democratic participation, and collective action—are derived through rich chapters organized into four sections: Foundations of Partnership, Relational Practices, Organizational Practices, and The Complex Role of Adults. One of the most powerful aspects of this book is its in-depth analyses and honest reflections. For example, Chapter 2 empirically analyzes the foundational concept of trust. Chapter 6 is a beautiful auto-ethnographical exchange between two youth workers about a time when one of them was in the role of youth and the other in the role of staff. Chapter 9 is an insightful exploration of the challenges and possibilities inherent in collaborative research. Chapter 13 offers learning derived from a discussion of dilemmas and honest reflections about how to rectify the situation when things go wrong.

It is important to point out that this book was written before the COVID-19 pandemic. Today, most young people are suffering significant losses. In-person school participation is severely restricted. Sports and other group recreation opportunities are few and far between. Most OST programming has had to shift to virtual spaces. Young people’s isolation is exacerbating underlying mental health conditions and trauma, with hospitalizations and suicides appearing to be on the rise (Leeb et al., 2020; Singh et al., 2020). Countless decisions are being made about youth at a time when young people have lost access to spaces to have a voice. The need for young people to connect and organize is as urgent as ever. Youth workers and youth-serving organizations can gain inspiration and practices from *At Our Best* during this most challenging of times. Section 5, entitled “Looking Forward,” should be studied for ways to adapt practices to our current socially distanced reality.

At Our Best reveals the transformation adults undergo as they work through the challenges and tensions of adultism and move away from power over youth to forge genuine partnerships with young people. Adult transformation in turn is connected to organizational transformation, which amplifies the potential for youth-inspired social change. Specific groups of adults can do better by young people by engaging with the themes of this book.

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- Funders will gain deeper understanding on where to focus investment. They will learn about the time-intensive nature of relational work and collaborative research that is at the core of youth–adult partnerships.
- K-12 educators’ practices can be enhanced by reading about where and how young people are motivated and determined to engage in critical analysis, and the types of learning that are possible in the context of a partnership. They can be inspired by the accounts of adults learning alongside young people.
- Evaluators will have the material needed to rethink the importance of quantifiable outcomes and to develop robust process measures relevant to authentic youth–adult partnerships.

Ultimately, this book honors young people and youth workers as important actors in social change and elevates the importance of their joint efforts. The deep relationship between youth work and a strong democracy clearly emerges, challenging us all to be “at our best.”

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