



Youth-Adult Partnership: The Keystone to Transformation

by Helen Beattie and Martha Rich

FIVE YEARS AGO, THE STATE OF VERMONT MANDATED AMBITIOUS LEARNER-CENTERED REFORMS: all high schools would establish flexible pathways toward proficiency-based graduation. Every student would have an annual personal learning plan (PLP), developed by the student with guidance from teachers and parents. And, the PLP would define goals and strategies, laying out each individual learner's path to demonstrated proficiency—and a diploma. To this day, these requirements offer the promise of transformation across the public system.

In this historically decentralized state, schools have responded in varied ways. We have seen **places** where personalized learning plans develop as an engaging and meaningful experience, constructed together by learners and caring adult guides. These PLPs are dynamic; they're frequently reviewed and updated as new interests and goals emerge. Youth count on adult partners to help make adjustments to the PLPs as interests and passions change and to explore alternative pathways to their desired goals—say, working on a goat farm or writing a novella to meet a similar standard for graduation.

When students have the freedom to explore topics of personal interest, the adults become co-learners as students lead them into new domains. Ultimately, **this partnership** allows adults to gain rich insights into learners' lives resulting in a **deep-seated relationship** built on mutual respect and trust.

On the other hand, we have also heard a school administrator declare: "We set aside the second Tuesday in September to do PLPs" using a series of computerized questionnaires. Then, they are essentially done with this state-mandated task for the year.

"Personalization," in cases like this, appear to both students and teachers as another irrelevant adult-driven exercise, carried out through the traditional student-teacher power dynamic of command and compliance.



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PARTNERSHIP AS AN ESSENTIAL ELEMENT IN LEARNING AND SCHOOL TRANSFORMATION

As Alison Cook Sather has remarked, “There is something fundamentally amiss about building and rebuilding an entire system without consulting at any point those it is designed to serve.” (Cook- Sather, 2009)

Youth-adult collaboration is, in fact, an essential factor in educational transformation. Authentic youth-adult partnerships in learning are equitable, respectful, trusting, cross-generational relationships characterized by shared power, voice, and responsibility. Shifting the traditional student-teacher relationship to this context of partnership is a powerful strategy in building a robust learner-centered practice.

This shift is the keystone—the critical piece that ensures the fundamental stability of the structure, keeping all the supporting components in place—to a robustly transformed system. Without genuine youth-adult partnership, the change process can be reduced to perfunctory compliance or tokenism, and lacking structural integrity, it will quickly return to the status quo.

At [Unleashing the Power of Partnership \(UP\) for Learning](#), a Vermont non-profit organization focused on promoting youth-adult partnership for the past ten years, we’ve seen how easily promising reforms can fall apart.

We’ve also seen evidence of transformation.

We’ve learned that once youth and adults enter into authentic partnership, their sense of agency and capacity as change agents alters. They develop a fresh mindset that sparks a culture shift and drives a new kind of action. The power struggles inherent in traditional student-teacher relationships drain a school’s capacity for learning. Partnership replaces that dynamic with synergy and collective power.

One natural obstacle to this culture shift is the prevailing mental model about the proper relationship of young people and adults in learning environments. Partnership can seem an alien and unsettling concept across generations.

The traditional system, with its emphasis on a sheltered and prescribed preparation for distant adulthood, has fostered the belief high school students—not to mention middle and elementary students—are too young and immature to be agents of their own learning. Students have been schooled to expect and accept passive roles as learners, either mastering how to play the “game of school” or feeling marginalized. In fact, the idea of shared responsibility for learning can make young people very **uncomfortable** at first.

For their part, teachers defend their professional authority and expertise—increasingly devalued and eroded in contemporary society—along with their deep dedication to students’ best interests. From this perspective, the idea that students and teachers can work in a reciprocal balance, sharing both responsibility and power, seems fanciful, counterproductive, and even threatening.

Of course, educators bring a wealth of professional expertise to their work. Young people, though, have their own expertise, an insider’s perspective on the learning experience that adults cannot fully fathom—unless they ask and listen well.

For us, our work in Vermont has affirmed that young people have the wisdom, creativity, and capacity for genuine partnership and that both youth and adults benefit from that relationship. When **youth work closely with adults** toward shared goals, they

“The future is not some place we are going to, but one we are creating. The paths are not to be found, but made, and the activity of making them ... changes both the maker and the destination.”

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gain skills and confidence for lifelong learning and civic engagement. When adults work closely with youth as partners, the opportunity to learn from students' insights and unique perspectives often renews a professional sense of purpose and moves teaching and school transformation efforts toward more **learner-centered modes**.

With this evidence in front of us, our mission at UP for Learning is to shift the youth-adult relationship from one of command and compliance to one of partnership. When done well, this will increase youth agency—ensuring all young people have opportunities, support, knowledge, and skills to pursue active roles in their learning, their lives, and their community. "Five of these effects stand out for us, supported by our own action research and experience in 88% of high schools and 37% of middle schools in Vermont over the past decade. We are sharing these persuasive reasons for anyone to use in creating a compelling case for youth-adult partnership being key and core to **transforming or reforming** education."

1. Youth-adult partnership improves academic success

In a proposal for increased democracy in schooling, a group of students suggested: "If students feel some ownership in the school where they learn, we might have better attendance, fewer suspensions, and more respect for keeping our building clean. Also, having a choice in how we are taught might make most students more enthusiastic about learning." (Forum for Youth Investment, Tolman & Pittman, 2001)

Research has borne out these predictions. A comprehensive review of findings on achievement motivation, school engagement, and student voice concluded that "fostering student voice—empowering youth to express their opinions and influence their educational experiences so that they feel they have a stake in the outcomes—is one of the most powerful tools schools have to increase learning." (Toshalis & Nakkula, 2012) As a result, "capitaliz[ing] on the power of self-determination can substantially increase achievement," even among struggling students and those in marginalized populations. It is also linked to expanded classroom participation, better reflection skills, and decreased behavior problems.

2. Youth-adult partnership renews hope

Like self-determination, hopefulness is a significant factor in school performance. Hope drives high school attendance, credits earned, GPA, and retention in college. In fact, it is a more robust predictor of college success than high school GPA, SAT and ACT scores. (Gallup Student Poll Overview 2012-13, Snyder, Shorey et. al. 2002)

Research shows that a lack of hope leads to alienation and disengagement, reducing attendance, self-concept, academic achievement, and high school completion. (Mitra & Gross, 2009) Youth-adult partnership provides a context and support structure to promote **hope** and its positive effects. As Paolo Freire (1998) put it: "Hope is something shared between teachers and students...[when] we can learn together, teach together, be curiously impatient together, produce something together, and resist together the obstacles that prevent the flowering of our joy."

3. Youth-adult partnership promotes ownership, which sparks motivation

Learners who feel a sense of control and ownership, with the ability to set goals and make choices, tend to be more engaged and enthusiastic. A survey of 56,877 students found that "students who believe they have a voice in school are seven times more likely to be academically motivated" than students who do not have that belief. (Quaglia & Corso, 2014)

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This is a strong argument for the kind of partnership that puts learners at the center with skilled and supportive adult guidance. As Alison Cook-Sather asserts, both youth and adults have roles to play: “Students must have an active role in their learning if that learning is going to be meaningful and lasting, and such an active role should include having input into how their learning is facilitated. It is the right of the students, and it is the responsibility of adults to ensure that right is guaranteed.” (Cook-Sather, 2008)

“It has been my experience that if most members of a school community perceive that they have limited input into what transpires in that community, the motivation to teach and to learn will be compromised.” (Robert Brooks)

4. Youth-adult partnership is a right and part of being a citizen in a democracy

The right to an active role in learning has implications beyond the learner’s personal explorations and achievements. It also speaks to a foundational premise of our nation’s public school system—the goal of developing an informed citizenry equipped to participate in civic life.

As Carl Glickman (1993) noted, “If the central goal of schools were to prepare students to engage productively in a democracy, then students would be working on the concerns of their immediate and future life and on the concerns of their immediate and extended communities.”

In 2015, however, 50% of Vermont students reported not feeling valued by their community ([Youth Risk Behavior Survey](#)). A 2013 national survey showed that fewer students reported having voice as high school seniors (37%) than when entering middle school (61%). “In other words, the more our students mature, the less opportunity they have to offer their opinions and participate as leaders in meaningful ways.” (Quaglia & Corso, 2014)

Our own work at UP for Learning has shown that youth-adult partnership can counter this trend, affirming young people’s rightful role as valued and responsible citizens while positioning them as active contributors.

One Vermont student who participated in our Communicating School Redesign initiative described her experience: “I can make a difference. That was my biggest ‘takeaway.’ This was huge for me. I’ve always grown up with, ‘little girls are supposed to be seen, not heard.’ Because of this, I have always felt silenced. I was scared to make a stand and make a change. However, after this course, I learned I can make a difference. My voice is heard and it matters. Not only does my voice matter now, but it will matter later, too. Knowing how powerful my voice can be, I will no longer be afraid to use it. I will stand up for what I believe in. I will make a change. I will be an advocate for everyone else who feels their voice isn’t heard.”

5. Youth-adult partnership meets the basic human need for agency

We all have a desire to be known, be valued, and have a sense of purpose. We crave to be heard, and we want to belong. All people—youth and adults—aspire to make intentional choices about the course of their own lives and find purpose through their efforts on behalf of others.

“Young people want to feel that they are part of a community...when they feel they belong, they feel more competent, more motivated, have more positive attitudes about school, and are more invested in learning.” ([How Students Thrive: Positive Youth Development in Practice, Springpoint, 2016](#))

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From our work in schools and communities, informed by key findings in neuroscience and human development, we have come to believe that change-agent capacity is shaped by four factors:

1. mindset about personal power to influence change and the power of community;
2. skills to reflect, plan, implement, and communicate goals in the context of systems;
3. experience to make decisions, collaborate, find purpose, and make change; and
4. an environment of youth-adult collaboration, including access to resources and community partnership.

Quaglia & Corso (2014) summarize the value of youth agency this way: “Schools that instill in students the confidence to act in support of their dreams are fulfilling the deepest purpose of schools: to help each and every student become the best possible version of him- or herself.”

The same is true for adult agency. In a transformed education system, both adults and youth should be able to fulfill their highest potential.

YOUTH-ADULT PARTNERSHIP: SETTING THE KEYSTONE TO TRANSFORMATION

Even with the five outcomes above as strong incentives for a transformative culture shift, creating and sustaining authentic youth-adult partnership is no easy task. Few members of either generation have experienced this shift in context.

We know the change can feel risky and foreign, triggering fears, hidden assumptions, and confusion for both generations. In our work, we have developed learning experiences and materials to help youth-adult teams build the complex skills of partnership. They benefit from working together on authentic tasks; developing a common vocabulary; building trust and shared reliance; and frequent practice with high-quality dialogue, planning, and reflection.

Our reflective tool, [Taking the Pulse of Partnership](#), provides a rubric to describe and assess the evolving process of youth-adult collaboration, helping teams set that keystone firmly as the educational culture takes on new forms.

We have seen repeatedly that when young people have clear purpose and agency, adults too, rise to the occasion. Intergenerational partnership calls us all to be our best selves, and we all change and grow in this process.

At UP for Learning, we envision a time when all youth will take responsibility for their own learning, collaborating with adults who support shared exploration. We also envision young people as full partners in school redesign.

Along the way, we hope to hear more adults say: “We need the students in on this; we can’t decide this without them.” And we need more young people saying: “Of course we’re taking charge of our education. Why wouldn’t we?”

Helen Beattie is the Executive Director and Founder of Vermont-based UP for Learning (Unleashing the Power of Partnership for Learning) and co-founder of Youth and Adults Transforming Schools Together (YATST). As a licensed School Psychologist and Educational Consultant, she has specialized in strategies to build school cultures in which youth are both engaged and empowered as learners and change agents.

Martha Rich was the school leader at Thetford Academy (TA), Vermont for 21 years, where she worked to build a culture of trust in students. Youth-adult partnerships at TA led to nationally recognized programs in service learning, student participation in strategic planning and policy making, championship robotics teams, and new graduation standards that encourage students to take charge of their own education. As a national facilitator with the School Reform Initiative, Martha has helped TA and other schools develop strong professional communities based on shared responsibility for learning.