> questions & answers

Interview with

Michelle Seligson

For the past 20 years, Michelle Seligson has played a critical role in highlighting the importance of the out-of-school hours and in building the policy, program, and research base that helped bring the field into its current stage of dramatic expansion. She founded the National Institute on Out-of-School Time (NIOST) and was its director until last year when she began the Building Relational Practices in Out-Of-School Environments Project at the Center for Research on Women at Wellesley College. As director of this group, she conducts research on the quality of relationships in after school care. We asked Micchelle about the history of the out-of-school time field, the challenges currently facing the field, and the role evaluation and research have played and might continue to play in supporting this field.

Q *Please describe the evolution of the out-of-school time field.*

A The field has broad roots across many community institutions and agencies. It really began with the settlement houses in the late 1800s. In addition to playing an important role in helping children and families assimilate into American culture, the settlement houses used after-school to create a space for kids who were often caring for their younger siblings or who were left on their own. So the beginnings of out-of-school time grew out of the social work field, and emphasized social and emotional development.

> *Policy-makers most often* want to know whether reading and math scores have improved because of after school programs - they're not asking whether children in these programs are going to be good citizens or are learning to get along with one another. We must work with them to shape appropriate expectations for these programs.

During World War II, the government stepped in to fund after-school programs, many of which were 24-hour programs in public schools; these programs even made meals available for moms who were factory workers, to take home when they picked up their kids. This government involvement ended after the war, when many women left the out-of-home workforce.

During the Women's Movement and women's return to the labor force, families started to become more comfortable with paid child care. Beginning in the 1960s, the mandate for preschool and early childhood education really took off. Head Start had a huge influence on early childhood programs for middle class kids as well as disadvantaged children because it highlighted the value of early childhood education across the board. By the seventies, after school programs really began emerging. Many of them were started by parent groups, PTAs, or civic organizations, and they were run by everyone — schools, YMCAs, churches, the League of Women Voters. Most of them provided care after school, during the summers and school vacations, and on holidays. Almost all of these programs were financed by parent fees, with some welfare money available for poorer families.

In the seventies and eighties, the development of the model that we now recognize as a school-age child care program started taking a more defined shape, mostly as a hybrid of early childhood education, recreation, and child care. Relatively recently, there has been a shift toward thinking about out-of-school time programs as supports for education and academic achievement. While the question about whether — and how — out-of-school time programs influence students' academic achievement has long been asked, the recent increase in money for these programs has renewed a focus on the question of results. Education departments and school districts have long said that they will not take money out of their education budgets for after school programs. But now the money is there due to initiatives such as the 21st Century Community Learning Centers, which is in line with concern about academic results.

Q *How have research and evaluation supported the development of the out-of-school time field?*

A It has been very slow in coming. NIOST wrote a book called *The School-Age Child Care Policy Report* in 1983 in which we tried to show — using data from a handful of studies — that school-age child care programs make a difference. However, most research at that time was focused on how child care did not hurt children whose mothers were working. Eventually, however, the research community started taking an interest in this topic because it was a growing field. This was coincident with the High Scope/Perry Preschool study that had such an impact on state early childhood policy. People were developing programs and starting to evaluate them, and our research on program practices and on policy was extremely important in helping people get a handle on after-school programs. NIOST acted as the repository and disseminator of that research because we knew that it was a very central part of making the case for supporting these programs.

NIOST's research had two effects on legislation that I think are particularly significant. The first was the Dependent Care Block Grant, which was the first legislation that provided money earmarked for school-age child care beginning in 1984. At the same time, after school programs could not obtain tax exempt status because the IRS held they were not "educational" or "charitable" — categories that allowed other organizations to be tax exempt. Our research helped document what these programs really were doing and in the early 1980s the IRS changed their statutes to grant them tax exempt status.

Things like that would never have emerged without the kind of research that we did early on describing what programs are doing, what they look like, what their issues are, and the policy context. We learn a lot about the viability of expecting programs to produce certain outcomes for children from what the programs look like and what they are struggling with. We need to consider what programs themselves consider desirable child outcomes when we build our expectations of what after school programs are to achieve.

Q *What role do you think developmental research and program evaluation can play in the next ten years?*

A The studies that should be conducted are ones that look at the whole ecology of the program — the quality, the activities, etc. — not just at educational outcomes. The definition of desired outcomes should be broad so that one does not look only at test scores, but also the social and emotional development of the child, which is tantamount to doing well in school and in life. Different models and approaches should also be evaluated, because there isn't only one approach in terms of content.

There are only a few studies on outcomes because out-of-school time programs that have been around for ten, 15, or 20 years have not been studied. We have no idea if kids are doing well in school or in life because they attended those earlier programs. In the current policy climate, we are assuming these programs can make a huge positive impact on children's achievement, and therefore narrowing the agenda to academic learning rather than care. I think that out-of-school time programs are about both care and learning, as are early childhood programs.

A lot of research is now showing that social/emotional development and caring adults are the most important variables in a child's learning, whatever the content or context of the program. Examining this is the focus of my current work. I began to realize from the beginning of my involvement in this field that I viewed programs as places where children could relate to adults and to each other in ways they were not able to do in school, and as places where they could feel safe emotionally as well as physically. We know from the literature on social/emotional learning and emotional intelligence that the quality of these relationships is essential. The research on "bringing oneself to work" — knowing yourself, your communication style, your ability to work with issues of diversity and authority — parallels the research that children learn only in socially, emotionally, and relationally healthy environments. Therefore, I decided to do my next round of research on this topic in order to support and contribute to the development of programs that effectively promote an array of developmental and educational outcomes that build on the caregivers' connection and relatedness to the children.

We are working on some experiential learning workshops with five programs this year and another five next year. We are listening to and learning from these programs. Rather than trying to impose a model, we are trying to evolve a model with them. We are also tracking the parallel work that is going on in the corporate world as companies realize that the people they hire have to learn how to be more empathic, more flexible, and better able to understand differences. And this all comes from a better sense of oneself.

Q *What do you think are the primary challenges facing the field in the next five years?*

A I think the biggest challenge is the one that faces all caregiving and teaching institutions, and that is, who is going to do the work, and what are the incentives for them to do it? We have an increasingly distressed population of children. If we ask people to work in these caregiving roles and don't pay them sufficiently and place little significance on the value of their job for our society, then we are going to have trouble attracting people who are of high quality. Are teachers, who have already worked a full day and are more expensive, going to do it? If you have child care workers doing it, then you have to compensate them and you have to train them. One interesting staffing model recruits and hires staff who can bridge the in-school program in the morning and the after-school program in the afternoon. As public school employees, these staff earn higher salaries, receive benefits and potentially more professional status. That model is beginning to emerge, and I think it holds considerable promise.

Another challenge facing the field is the current overt emphasis on academic skills, which can easily slip into worksheets and drill if one does not understand that recreation can be educational. For example, a child can learn a lot about science through a cooking project. I am concerned that the quality of programs will be compromised by having too heavy an academic agenda, because it's the method of teaching and discovery that really benefit the children. We need to be careful about the trend toward seeing after school programs as "homework only" centers, especially given the current emphasis on high stakes testing.

Q *What is necessary to make better links between policy, research/evaluation and practice, particularly if these links are to benefit local programs?*

A There are many overlapping networks and organizations and there needs to be some sort of congress of all of them, with a shared information base. There is a good deal of data on how to achieve good developmental results for children. But the people who are making policy — both youth development and after school program policy — need to be reached by the research as well. The information is not presently getting out there. There needs to be a formal approach to doing this, ideally government in partnership with existing advocacy groups. It is important not to reinvent the wheel but rather to bring the work that has been done into the sphere of influence and decision making.

Finally, we need to work with policy-makers to shape appropriate expectations for these programs. The question that the policy-makers often want to have answered is whether reading and math scores have improved. They are not asking whether the children in these programs are going to be good citizens or whether they are learning about how to get along with each other in a democracy. Those, I think, are also very critical questions of substantial national concern. ■

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